



Cartagena Declaration

An urgent demand to stop the violence against Indigenous People, Local Communities and Environmental Defenders in Amazonia

Background

The brutal murder of the defender of indigenous rights Bruno Pereira and the environmental journalist Dom Phillips in the Brazilian Amazonia in June 2022 was widely disseminated in global media outlets. This tragedy could be a prelude to even worse things to come: the violence against Indigenous People and Local Communities (IPLCs) and especially against environmental defenders may be strengthened and amplified in the near future as a consequence of the alignment of illegal resource extraction—for instance through fisheries, mining, logging—and drug trafficking. Illegal activities have spread almost across the entire Amazonia as of 2022, and drug trafficking has been increasing substantially, especially in Brazil, Peru and Colombia. The huge network of Amazonian rivers and seasonally flooded wetland areas provide numerous routes for the movement of illegal goods, with state control increasingly absent or intentionally dismantled. The coordination of illegal resource extraction and drug trafficking results in an ever increasing risk for IPLCs, social leaders, environmental defenders, and conservationists in general.

The problem

Violence against IPLCs and environmental defenders is a pressing global concern. Between 2002 and 2017, 1558 people in 50 countries were killed for speaking out in defense of their lands. More recently, just in the seven years since the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, about four environmental defenders have been killed every week worldwide. These killings are on the rise. The highest number of deaths of environmental defenders is concentrated in tropical countries, areas of great cultural and biological richness. IPLCs represent more than a third of the killings, despite accounting for only 5% of the world population.

The exact number of deaths for environmental defence is difficult to estimate, since systematic monitoring is limited or non-existent in many places. However, even considering what are undoubtedly underestimations, the numbers are extremely alarming. In 2020, a terrible year, 227 people worldwide lost their lives defending the environment. Colombia alone accounted for 65 of those deaths. Colombia is an emblematic case, because one of the key strategies of the Peace Agreement between the government and guerrillas is to support local farmers and ex-combatants in the transition from cultivating coca to legal crops. These assistance programmes have increased threats from criminal



and paramilitary organisations against the participating communities, and notably against environmental activists inside of them. A third of the recent attacks in Colombia targeted Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, and almost half were against small-scale farmers. Beyond Colombia, this is a huge problem in countries sharing Amazonian borders, including Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. Violence against IPLCs and environmental defenders is closely connected with the climate crisis, and governments are failing to prevent it. Therefore, a coordinated transboundary effort with strong international pressure is necessary to tackle this complex problem within the Amazonian countries.

Further, the problem is not restricted to Colombia or Latin America - the killing of environmental defenders is a global problem that requires global solutions. The drivers of violence against IPLCs and environmental defenders are complex and often related to conflict over natural resources and land, especially in relation to mining and agribusiness. In 2020, 71% of the murders of environmental defenders worldwide were related to people working to defend forests from deforestation and industrial development.

Many threats and attacks against IPLCs and environmental defenders occur after community voices contest the benefits of private sector and government development projects for people and the environment. The rights of IPLCs are very often not respected in large infrastructure projects or private sector projects that commonly employ an extractive economic model, prioritising profit over people and environment. This approach alters tropical ecosystems and socio-cultural dynamics, often irreversibly. In some regions, it also perpetuates the killing of environmental defenders. Governments have been neglecting this largely hidden violence and are failing to protect human rights, in many cases directly placing rural people at risk through the expansion of mining and mega-infrastructure projects, and in other cases remaining complacent as controversial businesses generate negative social and environmental impacts. Therefore, it is imperative to summon global attention to pressure large companies that have products in their supply-chains from areas where IPLC and environmental defenders are killed for speaking out for nature. The rising number of deaths is related to corruption of governments, lack of inspections, weak governance and public safety, and increasingly illegal activities emerging in rural territories. These complex social-environmental contexts put the lives and wellbeing of IPLC as well as the integrity of forests, waterways and biodiversity at increasing risk.

The participants from more than 59 countries who attended the meeting of the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ATBC) held in Cartagena, Colombia from 10-15 July, 2022, organised under the main theme of “Conserving Tropical Biodiversity and Achieving Socio-Ecological Resilience in the Anthropocene: Opportunities and Challenges”, collectively call for an immediate stop of the violence against IPLCs and environmental defenders.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen Indigenous peoples' and local communities' sovereignty of their territories*



There is an increasing body of evidence showing that engagement of IPLCs is the most effective strategy to protect natural environments. IPLCs should be legitimized by law and supported by national and local governments to have basic conditions to protect their territories from intrusion. In addition, it is important for scientists, conservation practitioners, NGOs, and other conservation stakeholders to amplify IPLCs voices and place IPLC agendas in the spotlight and strengthen the official agencies responsible for sustaining their social rights.

- 2. Increase and strengthen the oversight and enforcement in Amazonian remote areas, increasing official infrastructure, human resources and implementing technologies for real-time monitoring of illegal activities*

Governments must strengthen protection of the Amazon Basin and its diverse ecosystems and people. We highlight the need for an increase in human resources that monitor conservation landscapes for illegal activities and partner closely with IPLCs. The surveillance of remote areas can be facilitated by the use of new technologies, including drones and real-time acoustic and satellite monitoring.

- 3. Increase global pressure against companies that source products from illegal activities*

The global community can play an important role by pressuring large companies to not use products in their supply chains, adopting high-level traceability systems, and consumers to reject products that involve illegal or unsustainable activities that harm biodiversity and IPLCs.

- 4. Develop transboundary public policies to suppress drug trafficking by large powerful groups*

Although imperative, the establishment of transboundary environmental management is challenging, due to the trade-off between political, environmental, economic and social aspirations between countries. Low governance capacity, heterogeneity of natural systems, and distinct socio-cultural background are also some factors contributing to the inefficiency of existing policies. However, drug trafficking spans multiple scales and jurisdictions, demanding integrated efforts to reduce the violence risks against IPLC. In September 2019, signatories of the Leticia Pact—Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, Guyana and Suriname—committed to establish mechanisms for regional cooperation and exchange of information to combat illegal activities that undermine the conservation of the Amazon. It is urgent that these regional cooperation mechanisms are put into effect immediately.

- 5. Strengthen sustainable value-chains of biodiversity goods as an alternative to illegal activities*

Sustainable biodiversity value chains have been helping align biodiversity protection and local wellbeing in rural Amazonia. Those activities can be an incentive to local communities to not enter into illegal or unsustainable activities including mining and logging. They can also bring opportunities to enhance local surveillance, including training, economic incentives and infrastructure.

6. *Strengthen the implementation and management of Protected Areas and other effective conservation management areas (OECMs)*

Protected areas (PA) and other arrangements that go beyond formally declared protected areas represent the main tool to ensure biological and cultural diversity protection worldwide. However, protected areas in Amazonia are strongly under-implemented and often plagued by shortages of funding and human resources. Higher investment in terms of funds, equipment and training in PA can help to increase the local governance, which is important to strengthen the support to IPLC and environmental defenders.

7. *Strengthening the inclusion of science in public policy and decision making*

Science can promote deep evaluation on value chains, creating maps of violence incidence and elucidating the main actors and their role in all scales, from producers to consumers.