

PEACE AND SECURITY

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE, AND THE DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Perspectives from a regional working group on climate change, the environment, peace and security in Latin America

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The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Colombia office and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) convened experts and activists from 10 Latin American countries to form a working group on climate and environmental security.



The regional working group discussed the challenges of sustainable development and the rights of local communities and ethnic populations in the context of violence and insecurity affecting Latin America.



The group developed key messages in four thematic areas: governance; extractivism and land use change; environmental and climate justice; and the protection of nature and territories. It also identified key audiences for political advocacy on these issues.

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THE LATIN AMERICAN REGIONAL WORKING GROUP

The Latin American Regional Working Group was initiated by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Colombia office and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 2022. The working group comprises 20 climate and environmental experts from 10 Latin American countries.

This report presents the collective perspective of the working group on the pressing issues surrounding climate and environmental justice, as well as food security, that affect the region as a whole, but whose impact is most strongly felt at the local level.

The report is accompanied by a brief interview series of 4 working group members, addressing the challenges of environmental security in the region from their individual perspectives. The interviews are found on SIPRI's YouTube channel: [sipriorg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCs1p10g0000000000000000).

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INTRODUCTION

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is a region of unparalleled ecological diversity, encompassing tropical rainforests, arid deserts, and expansive coastlines, making it particularly susceptible to the far-reaching impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. Beyond its diverse and unique natural landscapes, Latin America faces a complex web of climatic and environmental challenges that transcend national borders. From the melting glaciers of the Andes Mountains, which threaten water security for millions, to deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, which jeopardizes biodiversity and global carbon sequestration, the region grapples with issues that have far-reaching implications for both local communities and the international community.

Projections for how climate change will affect Latin America indicate that temperatures are expected to increase across the region and rainfall patterns are expected to change.¹ Extreme events such as droughts and floods are also predicted to increase in frequency and intensity. In a region heavily dependent on agriculture, changes to temperature and precipitation patterns will have negative implications for food production and security. Crop yields are expected to decrease, increas-

ing food insecurity and malnutrition in the region. Furthermore, the projected degradation of forests from droughts and temperature increases is expected to reduce the availability of forest products. At the same time, Latin America is expected to meet part of the growing global demand for food, livestock and timber, which risks exacerbating environmental degradation linked to inadequate land management practices associated with the expansion of large-scale agriculture.²

Of particular concern is the way climate and environmental challenges intersect with social inequalities and political instability. This region endures various forms of violence, from armed conflicts to rampant criminal violence on par with armed conflicts. The region stands out as one of the world's most violent. According to UNODC figures from 2023, LAC accounts for 29% of global homicides, in a region with 8% of the world's population.³ The region is home to 8 of the 10 most homicidal countries and 15 of the most lethal countries. Seven of the top 10 cities by homicide rate are in LAC.⁴ LAC is also the region with the highest number of environmental conflicts and a hotspot for environmental crime.⁵ Many of these conflicts are linked to the legal and illegal extraction of natural resources, which often intersects with other criminal economies, such

1 Castellanos, E., M.F. Lemos, L. Astigarraga, N. Chacón, N. Cuvi, C. Huggel, L. Miranda, M. Moncassim Vale, J.P. Omotto, P.L. Peri, J.C. Postigo, L. Ramajo, L. Roco, and M. Rusticucci, 2022: Central and South America. In: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, pp. 1689–1816, doi:10.1017/9781009325844.014

2 UNEP 2016. *GEO-6 Regional Assessment for Latin America and the Caribbean*. United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi, Kenya.

3 Homicide Monitor, Igarape, <https://homicide.igarape.org.br/> (accessed 19 Oct. 2023).

4 Homicide Monitor, Igarape, <https://homicide.igarape.org.br/> (accessed 19 Oct. 2023).

5 Rettberg, Angelika. "Violence in Latin America today: varieties and impacts." *Revista de Estudios Sociales* (2020): 2-17.

as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and contraband smuggling.⁶

A multitude of nonstate armed groups, including gangs, cartels, smuggling networks, militias, and vigilante groups, are among the main perpetrators of this violence. According to some sources, mining companies at times voluntarily cooperate with illegal armed groups, who in exchange provide security against other groups.⁷ Consequently, Latin America is one of the most dangerous regions for environmental defenders, with 75 per cent of all global assassinations of human rights advocates that occurred between 2015 and 2019 taking place in LAC.⁸ In 2022, 20 per cent of assassinations of human rights defenders occurred in the Amazon region.⁹ Communities and environmental defenders in areas where extractive activities take place frequently have been subjected to gross human rights violations, with such attacks on the rise across LAC. In addition to killings, death threats, arbitrary arrests, sexual assaults, militarized policing, judicial harassment, intimidation, beatings, and other forms of violence are used to silence the complaints of local communities and thwart their attempts to use legal means of protest against extractive projects.¹⁰ Environmental defenders have also been

repressed and criminalized by the governments that should be protecting them.¹¹

Criminal violence, including environmental crime, is largely concentrated in rural areas with poor state presence and strong illicit economies and in the poor neighbourhoods of cities. As such, the main victims of violence are the socio-economically poor and disadvantaged, including ethnic minorities such as indigenous and afro-descendant populations, gender minorities, women, and subsistence farmers.¹² Around half of all homicide victims are between 15 and 29 years old. Violence against social leaders, including environmental and human rights defenders, also tends to disproportionately affect low-income people and ethnic minorities.¹³ Furthermore, current extractive violence is largely fed by the prejudices and legacy of earlier racial and class conflicts.¹⁴

While recognising important regional differences, state responses to criminal violence, including environmental crime, have been predominantly militarized. Latin American governments have gravitated to punitive populist “iron fist” (*mano dura*) approaches, which combine coercive law enforcement, deployment of military forces in domestic policing, mass detentions and increasingly severe punishments, often for electoral gains.¹⁵ The reli-

6 Kendra McSweeney, David J. Wrathall, Erik A. Nielsen, Zoe Pearson, *Grounding traffic: The cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, Geoforum, Volume 95, 2018, pp 122-132; <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/latin-america-wrestles-new-crime-wave>

7 OECD (2017), “Due diligence in Colombia’s gold supply chain: an overview”, <https://mneguidelines.oecd.org/Colombia-gold-supply-chain-overview.pdf>

8 Global Witness Annual Report 2021; Regional Human Development Report | Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean (New York: UNDP, 2021), www.latinamerica.undp.org/content/rblac/es/home/library/human_development/regional-human-development-report-2021.html

9 Global Witness (2023), *Standing Firm: the land and environmental defenders on the frontlines of the climate crisis*, September 2023, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/standing-firm/>

10 Global Witness. (2018). *At What Cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017*. Global Witness.

11 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “Criminalisation of the work of human rights defenders”, 2015, <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/criminalization2016.pdf>

12 Arjona, A. (2021). *The Effects of Violence on Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Research Agenda*. Background Paper for the United Nations Development Programme 2021 UNDP LAC Working Paper No. 12. Background Paper for the UNDP LAC Regional Human Development Report 2021.

13 Arjona, A. (2021). *The Effects of Violence on Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Research Agenda*. Background Paper for the United Nations Development Programme 2021 UNDP LAC Working Paper No. 12. Background Paper for the UNDP LAC Regional Human Development Report 2021.

14 McNeish, J.A., 2018. Resource extraction and conflict in Latin America. *Colombia Internacional*, (93), pp.3-16.

15 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/latin-america-wrestles-new-crime-wave>; <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/militarization-of-law-enforcement-evidence-from-latin-america/03EE3B407B>

ance on the military for domestic security is exacerbated by the inability or even unwillingness of civilian institutions to address several social, economic and security challenges, which justifies using the military as a stop-gap in support of ineffective civilian institutions.¹⁶

While these approaches to curbing organised crime in LAC countries have, at times, had positive effects, the impact tends to dissipate quickly.¹⁷ Organized crime has evolved to form networks of influence with local authorities and communities, using violent intimidation and financing electoral campaigns to gain power. This has resulted in a greater likelihood of authorities turning a blind eye or colluding with criminal activities. Moreover, the use of the military has been associated with human rights abuses against the civilian population.¹⁸

Detrimental feedback loops are formed, where heightened insecurity hinders the sustainable development of the countries in this region and has affected democratic governance, with poor governance being a main cause of violence and environmental and social injustice. Moreover, because violence tends to disproportionately affect populations already at a disadvantage, it can perpetuate and amplify distinct types of inequalities.

In response to the pressing issues of environmental degradation and the alarming violence, often directed at environmental defenders, in Latin America, a significant milestone was achieved with the enactment of the Escazú Agreement (the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean) in 2021. This legally binding international treaty has garnered support from 24 out of the 33 countries in the region and has been ratified by fifteen of them. The goal of the Escazú Agreement is to safeguard the rights of both present and future generations, ensuring their access to a healthy environment and facilitating sustainable development. The Agreement aims to achieve this through three principal objectives: 1) guaranteeing a right to access environmental information; 2) public participation in decision-making and access to justice related to environmental matters; and 3) creating and building capacity.¹⁹ Importantly, the Escazú Agreement is a recognition that the challenges facing the LAC region extend beyond national borders, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated regional and global efforts to address these multifaceted challenges.

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16 <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/its-not-the-1970s-again-for-latin-americas-militaries-heres-why/>

17 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/latin-america-wrestles-new-crime-wave>

18 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/report-americas/>; <https://www.wola.org/analysis/anti-democratic-trends-human-rights-abuses-covid-19-latin-america/>

19 ECLAC. Undated. 'Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean.' Available at <https://www.cepal.org/en/escazuagreement>

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THE LATIN AMERICAN REGIONAL WORKING GROUP

Against this backdrop, FES and SIPRI convened a regional working group of researchers, NGOs, and rights defenders to discuss these complex challenges. The report aims to generate a united regional voice to alert on the ways in which these dynamics of violence deepen environmental and climate injustices. It is structured along four themes that emerged as key concerns during working group discussions: governance, extractivism and land use change, environmental and climate justice, and the protection of nature and territories. Each theme entails a key message directed toward a target audience, along with broad recommendations for how to address the issues of concern.

The themes discussed strongly link to the perspectives on security held by the working group members. Understanding security in its entirety necessitates a comprehensive assessment of the political backdrop and the repercussions of security for diverse communities, particularly concerning power dynamics, beneficiaries, and the detrimental impact of security measures. Therefore, it is imperative to factor in the lived experiences and administration of tangible security measures by both individuals and groups as crucial determinants.

For the FES-SIPRI convened regional working group on climate change, the environment, peace and security, hereafter referred to as the regional working group, the notion of security carries a predominantly negative undertone. This perspective has been significantly shaped by a military security doctrine that historically emphasized state-centric approaches within the region. In accordance with this doctrine, security has been primarily associated with the accrual of power, with the state serving as the central point of reference. Linked to this, the regional working group highlighted how, in Latin America, climate change and environmental concerns

are incorporated into security discourse as a precursor to the declaration of states of emergency. This approach perpetuates a culture of secrecy and hinders accountability, extending the adverse consequences of this security paradigm.

Moreover, the regional working group has observed that these conventional security concepts, including those related to climate and the environment, tend to emanate from a Eurocentric or Westernized standpoint. These frameworks often overlook the subtleties and exclusions they generate within the Latin American context. This disproportionately affects marginalized groups who advocate for human and environmental rights but are frequently perceived as challenges to be overcome. In contrast to the traditional state-centric security paradigm, the regional working group advocates for a shift towards prioritizing climate and environmental *justice*. Their argument revolves around the idea that this perspective offers a more comprehensive and interconnected understanding of the intricate relationship between nature and culture, emphasizing the imperative of a harmonious coexistence of all life forms. This approach recognizes the intricate interplay between human well-being, ecological health, and social inclusion while underscoring that the dominant economic development model in the region (discussed below) is a fundamental cause of environmental injustice. It accentuates the collective and community-based agency of individuals and firmly opposes the commodification of both life and the environment.

The profound climate and environmental injustices experienced in Latin America call for a critical examination of economic development paradigms. Numerous governments in the region currently adhere to an extractive development model, heavily reliant on the exploita-

tion of non-renewable resources to achieve economic growth and development. While there was no consensus about what should replace this model, the working group highlighted fundamental guiding principles for a new approach to economic development.

Foremost among these is the imperative to protect the needs and rights of the communities most adversely impacted by existing models, particularly Indigenous, Afro-descendant and farming communities. Development models must acknowledge the constraints of our natural environment and value traditional knowledge while recognizing the diversity of lifestyles. Therefore, the recognition and embrace of concepts like territorial autonomy and the self-determination of peoples are paramount. These should be implemented democratically to ensure that resource management occurs in collaboration with communities and respects their way of life.

While there were diverse opinions within the group regarding the role of the private sector and international trade, unanimous agreement prevailed on the need to challenge the unsustainable accumulation of wealth. This entails demanding accountability from companies, governments, and markets, and fundamentally transforming the relationship between corporations and governments with respect to the natural world. In alignment with this, the model should empower countries in the Global South to bolster their decision-making capacity during their transition processes.

Incorporating these principles will foster a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development model – one that prioritizes planetary care and resource stewardship, offers opportunities for human well-being, respects the richness of cultural diversity, and safeguards the environment for both current and future generations.

3

GOVERNANCE

DEFINITION OF GOVERNANCE

“Governance refers to a series of (inter)actions between state and non-state actors to formulate and implement social, economic, and institutional policies and reforms related to the access and/or exercise of power, with the objective of improving the governability of democratic political systems.”²⁰

Environmental justice requires a strong democratic context and guarantees of human and environmental rights based on strong, transparent, and participatory institutions. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, however, face significant challenges in delivering these rights. Latin America and the Caribbean rank as the world’s third most democratic region with 78% of its 23 countries embracing democracy. However, democratic erosion, including attacks on freedoms, electoral authorities, and constitutional checks on power, is a growing concern.²¹

Furthermore, the region is the second most unequal in the world.²² Inequality encompasses multidimensional disparities, including income, gender, ethnicity, and geography, leading to exclusion of marginalized groups. Public investment in the region is low, at around 1.6% of GDP in 2017, which is approximately half of the average investment in OECD countries, thus perpetuating

disparities in access to and the quality of public services and deepening inequalities.²³

These inequalities reinforce policymaking in favour of vested interests over the public good.²⁴ Many political leaders and parties in the region exploit public administration to create clientelist networks for electoral gains. This practice erodes public trust and undermines the effectiveness of governance. Combined with high levels of corruption, these factors have ignited feelings of citizen discontent and frustration.²⁵ Consequently, trust in government, a cornerstone of social cohesion and effective reforms, has seen a decline. Social accountability, driven by transparency and access to information, is vital to rebuild trust.

The persistently high levels of violence further diminish trust in both the government and the state. Violence against human rights activists and violence by agents of the state have been identified as among the forms of violence particularly harmful to governability, i.e., the quality of governance, and are major concerns in LAC.²⁶ The lack of accountability in prosecuting these violent crimes intensifies public distrust and anger toward state

20 Governance, democracy and development in Latin America and the Caribbean May 2022. UNDP, IDEA.

21 Governance, democracy and development in Latin America and the Caribbean May 2022. UNDP, IDEA.

22 UNDP, Regional Human Development Report 2021 Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021.

23 OECD (2020), *Government at a Glance: Latin America and the Caribbean 2020*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/13130fbb-en>

24 OECD (2020), *Government at a Glance: Latin America and the Caribbean 2020*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/13130fbb-en>

25 Governance, democracy and development in Latin America and the Caribbean May 2022. UNDP, IDEA.

26 Governance, democracy and development in Latin America and the Caribbean May 2022. UNDP, IDEA.

institutions, especially when blatant violations of the right to life and personal security occur.

Organized crime is prevalent throughout the region, with some areas witnessing criminal organizations completely supplanting the state's presence and functions.²⁷ These groups offer limited social support to the population and claim to protect them from other criminal gangs, all in exchange for various extortion payments reminiscent of taxes. This situation represents a profound breakdown in governance in these areas. Additionally, organized crime poses a significant threat to the institutions upholding the rule of law, as it tends to infiltrate political parties, bureaucracies, democratic decision-making bodies, and law enforcement agencies. This, in turn, perpetuates a culture of impunity.

3.1 REGIONAL VOICE

The aforementioned dynamics were predominant concerns of the regional working group. The group particularly emphasised how the absence of effective governance in the region perpetuates an extractive development model, which, in turn, exacerbates the governance crisis. The group raised concern over several governance-related factors that contribute to the promotion of this extractive development model at the expense of local populations. These include the capture of state institutions by elite interests, the limited capacity of the state beyond its security and military functions, economies overly reliant on the export of raw materials, the disregard or delegitimization of local governance structures, and the undermining of the autonomy and self-determination of Indigenous communities by corporate interests that prioritize their own gains over the welfare of local communities and Indigenous populations.

Moreover, the prevalent use of state force to suppress socio-environmental conflicts often results in environmental concerns being overshadowed by the rhetoric of public order, national security, and secrecy. Consequently, governments in the region become incapable of fulfill-

ing their essential roles, including upholding the rule of law, safeguarding people's rights, preventing violence, and preserving the environment. The far-reaching consequences of these challenges encompass the absence of adequate public services in indigenous territories, legal and illegal exploitation of natural resources, rampant deforestation, the proliferation of illicit economies, an inability to conduct comprehensive investigations targeting illegal networks and their financial backers, and targeted violence against environmental defenders.

Compounding these issues is the absence of regional policy coordination to collectively address these shared problems, which are common to a large majority of countries in Latin America.

3.2 KEY MESSAGE

Democratic leadership must be strengthened to incorporate a clear and comprehensive vision of environmental justice. This strengthening should encompass state actors, civil society, and social movements alike and would thereby enable the development of robust multi-stakeholder governance capabilities and enhance their potential to influence violence prevention and environmental protection.

3.3 TARGET AUDIENCE

The working group identified various bodies and organizations, including United Cities and Local Governments (CGLU), the Association of Latin American Electoral Bodies, NGOs or international funders that train community leaders and trade unions.

3.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve the vision articulated in the key message, the following actions are recommended, directed at a regional and national audience. It is important to note that the group's recommendations provide a general direction and are not meant to be specifically tailored to each identified audience.

²⁷ Governance, democracy and development in Latin America and the Caribbean May 2022. UNDP, IDEA.

1. Strengthen leadership in Indigenous territories, Afro-descendent communities, and among peasant communities through increasing access to financing, creating national and regional coordination platforms, and establishing and implementing effective protection mechanisms to guarantee the life and safety of environmental defenders.
2. States should ensure and increase the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in decision-making on matters affecting their territories, and respect collective property rights and the self-determination of peoples in their territories.
3. Regional organizations, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), should actively promote the demilitarization of approaches to handling socio-environmental conflicts. They must also prioritize the removal of environmental matters from the realm of national security and secrecy.
4. National governments in the regions should establish clear guidelines for the roles and responsibilities of the armed forces to ensure the safety and well-being of all citizens.
5. When armed forces' intervention is deemed indispensable as a last resort, ensure strict control of the use of force, implementing measures for accountability and submission to justice to ensure actions align with the law and the best interests of the people.
6. Latin American States should operationalize the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, incorporating them into or creating National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights. This must be done in a participatory and inclusive manner, while harmonizing legislation and administrative procedures to monitor and guarantee the implementation of these principles and act in accordance when they are breached.
7. Establish a multi-stakeholder working group on business and human rights at the national level, in dialogue and cooperation with the United Nations.

4

EXTRACTIVISM AND LAND USE CHANGE

Natural resources play a pivotal role in the economies of LAC countries. This has led governments in the region to adopt an extractive development model, heavily reliant on the exploitation of non-renewable resources, in pursuit of economic growth and development.²⁸ Many LAC governments actively encourage foreign investment in the extractive sector to drive their development agendas.²⁹

The region boasts substantial reserves of metals and minerals, making it a significant player on the global resource stage. For example, it is home to approximately 60% of the world's lithium deposits. Brazil ranks third in global iron ore production, whereas Mexico and Peru are among the top ten gold producers globally.³⁰ Moreover, Latin America holds around 20% of global oil reserves and 4% of gas reserves.³¹

In addition to hydrocarbons, minerals, and metals, the LAC region holds a third of the world's fresh water resources, and more than a quarter of the world's medium-

to high-potential farmland.³² An outcome of this is that the region accounts for 13% of the global production of agricultural and fish commodities and 17% of the net export value of the products.³³ Between 2015 to 2017, primary resource exports, including agriculture, constituted 37% of total exports in the region, significantly surpassing the global average of 9%.³⁴

Resource production is expected to increase due to the substantial investment in large-scale mining projects, and the adoption of unconventional extraction techniques like deep-water drilling and shale exploration.³⁵ Furthermore, as the world moves toward a clean technology-based future, coupled with the need to strengthen energy security in Europe and other parts of the world, Latin America's commodities will be highly sought.³⁶ In

28 Arsel, M., Hogenboom, B. and Pellegrini, L., 2016. The extractive imperative in Latin America. *The extractive industries and society*, 3(4), pp.880-887; McNeish, J.A., 2018. Resource extraction and conflict in Latin America. *Colombia Internacional*, (93), pp. 3-16.

29 OECD (2022), *Responsible Business Conduct in the Extractive and Minerals Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

30 OECD (2022), *Responsible Business Conduct in the Extractive and Minerals Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

31 OECD (2022), *Responsible Business Conduct in the Extractive and Minerals Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

32 Zeigler, M.; Truitt Nakata, G. *The next global breadbasket: How Latin America can feed the world: A Call to Action for Addressing Challenges & Developing Solutions*; Inter-American Development Bank: Washington, DC, USA, 2014.

33 OECD/FAO (2022), *OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2022-2031*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

34 ECLAC (2018), Mining Ministries of the Americas Meet in Peru to Address the Sector's Challenges and Opportunities with regard to Sustainable Development, <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/mining-ministries-americas-meet-peru-address-sectors-challenges-and-opportunities>

35 OECD (2022), *Responsible Business Conduct in the Extractive and Minerals Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean*, OECD Publishing, Paris

36 Cardenas, M., *Here's how Latin America can help tackle the global food, energy and climate crisis*, World Economic Forum, January 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/latin-america-s-unique-opportunity>; Nem Singh, J. 2021. "Mining Our Way out of the Climate Change Conundrum? The Power of a Social Justice Perspective." *Latin America's Environmental Policies in Global Perspective*. Washington, DC: The Wilson Center.

addition, agricultural and fish production is projected to expand by 14% over the next decade, with intensification expected to play a critical role in this increase.³⁷

While economic growth linked to resource extraction has to a degree contributed to a reduction in overall poverty rates, inequality, and unemployment, it has also brought significant adverse environmental, social and cultural impacts.³⁸ According to the FAO, Latin America and the Caribbean account for 14% of global land degradation, which is largely due to inadequate natural resource management.³⁹ The expansion of extractive and agricultural frontiers has been rapid, exerting pressure on critical ecosystems like headwaters, the Amazon forest, high-level plateaus, glaciers, and high Andean lakes, among others.⁴⁰

Two primary production systems - cattle (for beef and leather) and soy (for grain and oil) - are responsible for most deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions resulting from agricultural expansion and land use changes in South America.⁴¹ Extractive megaprojects, such as mining, have significantly impacted the availability and

quality of water.⁴² This, in turn, affects the general access of the population to water and sanitation services.⁴³

Afro-descendants and Indigenous Peoples are often disproportionately affected by extractive activities, with an estimated 19% of Indigenous territories in Latin America affected by legal or illegal mining.⁴⁴ While many countries in Latin America recognize the rights and land usage of Indigenous Peoples, the situation is more complex for Afro-descendant communities, with varying degrees of collective rights recognition across the region.⁴⁵ The situation is even more challenging for small-scale or subsistence farmers, who seldom have any constitutional rights to land. Even where protection mechanisms exist, implementation remains a challenge. Extractive activities frequently encroach on Indigenous and Afro-descendant collective land without local community consent, leading to conflict over land tenure, collective rights, and expropriation.

4.1 REGIONAL VOICE

Detrimental implications of extractivism and land use change were among the most pressing concerns raised by the regional working group as the fundamental source of environmental injustice. The group particularly noted the negative consequences that Indigenous, rural, Afro-descendant, and urban populations experience as a product of the development model imposed on the Latin American region to satisfy the consumption, lifestyle, and accumulation of wealth in what the working

37 OECD/FAO (2022), *OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2022-2031*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

38 UNDP, *Regional Human Development Report 2021 Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2021; Smart, S., 2020. The political economy of Latin American conflicts over mining extractivism. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 7(2), pp. 767-779; Global Witness. (2018). *At What Cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017*. Global Witness.

39 FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, "South America consolidates its regional soil partnership", <https://www.fao.org/americas/noticias/ver/en/c/279599/>

40 Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America-OCMAL (Spanish acronym); "Conflictos mineros en América Latina: extracción, saqueo y agresión. Estado de situación en 2014. (Mining Conflicts in Latin America: Extraction, Pillage and Aggression. State of the Situation in 2014). 2015.

41 Vasconcelos, A. *Uncovering the deforestation and climate risks of Chinese and EU soy and beef imports from South America*. Washington: Wilson Center, 2022.

42 OECD (2022), *Responsible Business Conduct in the Extractive and Minerals Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

43 UN General Assembly (2019), *Human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation*. Note by the Secretary-General., <https://undocs.org/A/74/197>

44 OECD (2022), *Responsible Business Conduct in the Extractive and Minerals Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean*, OECD Publishing, Paris; The World Bank. 2015. *Indigenous Latin America in the Twenty-First Century*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

45 OECD (2022), *Responsible Business Conduct in the Extractive and Minerals Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

group referred to as “the Global North”. This development model emphasizes the unequal use of nature as a common good, imposes a burden of environmental liabilities on local communities, and promotes the degradation of biodiversity and territorial dispossession. More specifically, it emphasizes and encourages extracting hydrocarbons (fossil fuels and natural gas, among others); agro-industrial monocultures that cause the loss of food security and food sovereignty; the use of agrochemicals that increase the disease burden; deforestation for livestock and oil palm production; minerals and metals mining that destroys freshwater sources and pollutes the soil with toxic metals such as mercury; building mega-infrastructure such as hydroelectric dams; and integration efforts such as the IIRSA Plan and the Central American Electrical Integration Electrical Interconnection System (SIEPAC).

Group members raised two examples illustrative of these dynamics. The first is the case of Guapinol, Tocoa, in Honduras. Group members explained that according to their knowledge, community members in Guapinol were not consulted prior the government granting a mining concession in Carlos Escaleras National Park. While the community exercised its right to demonstrate, state authorities and armed private forces repressed the community, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries. The second example raised was the case of the Inter-Oceanic Corridor in Mexico. The Inter-Oceanic Corridor is a large megaproject being implemented in Oaxaca. It aims to connect the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico through a series of industrial parks along a 200-kilometre stretch. Group members explained that the construction of this project has displaced communities, thus threatening their social and cultural heritage, and harming the region’s biodiversity. Despite community resistance, the project has continued.

As noted previously, extractivism benefits from corruption and exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities, pitting economic elites against Indigenous, rural, Afro-descendant, and urban peoples. Furthermore, the group raised concerns that the green energy transition of the “Global North” will increase displacements and socio-environmental degradation, as the private sector does not apply criteria of good governance and overlooks the conse-

quences of their operations in the territories, often contributing to the disintegration of the social fabric.

4.2 KEY MESSAGE

The current economic model – as opposed to local traditional practices – extracts resources from the land without considering the consequences. This unsustainable practice not only monopolizes sources of life and sacrifices biodiversity, but also dispossesses territories and eliminates cultural diversity, ultimately threatening the livelihoods of its people. It is important to understand and promote alternative development methods that reflect the worldviews of diverse peoples and their territories.

4.3 TARGET AUDIENCE

The working group identified several audiences, including local authorities in the territories where extraction takes place, trade unions, national and international journalists’ associations, international justice systems such as the IACHR, the European Union, civil society of the “Global North”, and critical shareholders of corporations.

4.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve the vision articulated in the key message, the following actions are recommended, directed at a regional and national audience. It is important to note that the group’s recommendations provide a general direction and are not meant to be specifically tailored to each identified audience.

1. Call upon the IACHR to hold a thematic hearing on the relationship between extractivism and violations of the rights of Indigenous, peasant, Afro-descendant, and urban communities.
2. Encourage the IACHR to prepare and/or update regional reports, scenarios, and forecasts for Latin America and the Caribbean on the impacts of extractivism on human rights and people’s livelihoods.
3. Use the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO Convention 169) and the Organization of American

States' American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to advocate for the rights of Indigenous communities and hold states and companies accountable.

4. Advocate for allowing Special Rapporteurs, such as the IACHR's Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and the Environment, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the OAS Rapporteur on Human Rights

Defenders and Justice Operators, and the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights to engage in fact-finding and investigating violations.

5. Given the importance of access to information for environmental leaders and defenders, Latin American states must ratify and implement the Escazú Agreement to hold the private sector and state-owned companies accountable.

5

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Environmental justice is a multifaceted concept linking environmental and social disparities. This concept has been applied diversely, serving as a rallying cry in campaigns, a subject of academic research, a guiding policy principle, and a foundation for political movements. It encompasses both a discourse for policymaking and a catalyst for social change while also functioning as an analytical tool for understanding the uneven distribution of socio-environmental vulnerabilities stemming from environmental changes.⁴⁶

Climate justice is an important aspect of environmental justice. It emphasizes, among others, the link between carbon emissions, global warming, and the unequal distribution of harm. Climate justice connects environmental concerns to the critique of global capitalism, noting that the burdens of climate change are unequally shared among nations and different socioeconomic strata. Climate justice brings to the forefront the links between production patterns, the lifestyle of affluent elites in both the North and South, and the distribution of climate-induced vulnerabilities.⁴⁷ Latin America is not a major global greenhouse gas emitter, contributing to less than 7% of global emissions.⁴⁸ However, due to its reliance on natural resources, geography, and high lev-

els of inequality and poverty, the LAC region is among the most vulnerable to climate change, with 13 of the world's 50 most affected countries located there.⁴⁹

The quest for environmental and climate justice has brought together a diverse array of individuals, communities, and entities, such as grassroots movements, Indigenous populations, small farmers, landless workers, environmentalists, and scientists.⁵⁰ This broad coalition recognizes the profound connection between historical patterns of social inequality, ethnic discrimination, environmental conflicts, and the region's integration into the global economy.⁵¹

To address environmental and climate injustice, it is essential to ensure the provision of environmental information in a prompt and efficient manner, enabling participation in environmental decision-making, and facilitating access to legal remedies for enforcing environmental laws and addressing environmental harm. These interrelated rights are enshrined in Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration and play a crucial role in tackling environmental issues that affect marginalized groups in a disproportionate manner. These rights also ensure that the interests of these groups are duly considered, aligning with the 2030 Agenda's pledge to embrace diversity

46 Rasmussen, M.B. and Pinho, P.F., 2016. Debates: Environmental Justice and Climate Change in Latin America. In *Lasa Forum* (Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 8-38).

47 Rasmussen, M.B. and Pinho, P.F., 2016. Debates: Environmental Justice and Climate Change in Latin America. In *Lasa Forum* (Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 8-38).

48 Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Access to information, participation and justice in environmental matters in Latin America and the Caribbean: towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (LC/TS.2017/83), Santiago, 2018.

49 UNDP, "Climate, peace and security in Latin America and the Caribbean" https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-08/guidance_note_climate_peace_security_in_lac.pdf

50 Rasmussen, M.B. and Pinho, P.F., 2016. Debates: Environmental Justice and Climate Change in Latin America. In *Lasa Forum* (Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 8-38).

51 Rasmussen, M.B. and Pinho, P.F., 2016. Debates: Environmental Justice and Climate Change in Latin America. In *Lasa Forum* (Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 8-38).

and inclusivity.⁵² Furthermore, the effective exercise of the rights of access to information, public participation, and justice in environmental matters is an essential element in good governance of natural resources in the region and can help to forestall and prevent conflicts.⁵³

5.1 REGIONAL VOICE

The unequal access to common goods and the detrimental consequences thereof, the uneven impact of climate change and the cost of the green transition of the “Global North” borne by highly vulnerable communities in Latin America, were key concerns voiced by the group. One example raised was the increased demand for new technology as part of the green transition, which has increased the demand for strategic minerals such as lithium. In the provinces of Chubut, Río Negro, Neuquén, Catamarca, and Jujuy in Argentina, Indigenous peoples, social movements, and trade unions have demonstrated against lithium exploitation. Group members explained that such demonstrators have been repressed, criminalized, and met with violence for their actions.

Furthermore, the group highlighted that the carbon-centric rhetoric around climate change mitigation, which focuses on measuring the success of climate and environmental justice through reduced carbon emissions, needs to be revised. Instead, the ecological transition narrative should go beyond mere decarbonization, integrating the local impacts of extreme weather events, such as storms and droughts, and the local costs of the ecological transition for countries and local communities in the Global South. It was also noted that the energy transition can generate new forms of injustice by

encouraging the extraction of rare minerals needed for new technologies.

To tackle these environmental injustices, the group argued that a good starting point would be effectively applying legal frameworks for the protection of human rights in accordance with international standards and ensuring their effective compliance.

5.2 KEY MESSAGE

To attain truth, justice, comprehensive reparation, and guarantee against the recurrence of environmental injustices faced in Latin America, it is crucial that all stakeholders – including foreign companies and governments – acknowledge, comply with, and update legal frameworks to incorporate new criminal offences and criteria for regulation and reparation, implemented by the Latin American states in collaboration with the communities and peoples of Latin America. Companies should be compelled to switch from voluntary measures to mandatory measures, such as those part of the Escazú Agreement. The Escazú Agreement provides a framework to monitor and hold companies legally accountable for the consequences of their operations. Companies should be mandated to implement measures to reduce their impact (for example, provide information about their operations and ensure traceability of their products and supply chains).

5.3 TARGET AUDIENCE

The working group identified many audiences, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to a Healthy Environment, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights, CEPAL, the Support Committee for the Implementation and Compliance of the Escazú Agreement, and international financial institutions.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve the vision articulated in the key message, the following actions are recommended, directed at a regional and national audience. It is important to note that the group’s recommendations provide a general di-

52 Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Access to information, participation and justice in environmental matters in Latin America and the Caribbean: towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (LC/TS.2017/83), Santiago, 2018.

53 Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Access to information, participation and justice in environmental matters in Latin America and the Caribbean: towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (LC/TS.2017/83), Santiago, 2018.

rection and are not meant to be specifically tailored to each identified audience.

1. Bring the discussion on financing megaprojects that affect natural assets and resources and environmental justice to the boards and complaint mechanisms of the international financial institutions that have investments in Latin America, such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration. This will ensure that the appropriate fora are utilized to address these important issues and promote fairness in the allocation of resources.
2. Call for the signing, ratification, and implementation of the Escazú Agreement by all countries in the region and report violations to the Committee to Support the Implementation and Compliance with the Escazú Agreement.
3. Regional organizations should pressure countries to expand or strengthen corporate oversight, control and sanction mechanisms, such as the European Union's Supply Chain Due Diligence Act and the Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights.
4. Expedite environmental justice and climate justice cases at the national and international levels, as it generates jurisprudence and institutional recommendations at the State level.

6

PROTECTION OF NATURE AND TERRITORIES

The LAC region boasts rich biodiversity, hosting approximately 60% of the world's terrestrial life.⁵⁴ Within this region lie six of the planet's most biodiverse countries: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. Notably, the Amazon rainforest in this area is the world's most biodiverse habitat. South America houses over 40% of Earth's biodiversity and more than a quarter of its forests. LAC also contains the world's most extensive wetlands, which are vital for clean drinking water, agricultural and energy needs, flood control, erosion prevention, sediment transport, and storm protection. Furthermore, they play a significant role in preserving cultural traditions.

As already noted, the LAC region faces escalating pressures on biodiversity, including land degradation, climate change, pollution, and unsustainable resource use. Between 1970 and 2018, there was a 94% average regional decline in monitored wildlife populations, the greatest of all regional declines globally.⁵⁵ While deforestation rates in South America have slowed, they remain among the world's highest.⁵⁶

Latin America heavily relies on protected areas as the primary tool for biodiversity conservation. As of 2014, 28% of Central America and 25% of South America

were covered by terrestrial protection, which is the highest percentage in the world. This percentage is significantly larger than that of OECD countries, which is only 15%.⁵⁷ In addition, the percentage also exceeds the international target of 17% under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity.

6.1 REGIONAL VOICE

The group emphasized the biodiversity of the region, including agro-biodiversity,⁵⁸ arguing that nature and the environment, and the peoples safeguarding these areas, must be protected and cared for. As the unfolding climate and ecological crises threaten the enjoyment of human rights, such as the right to a healthy environment, it is urgent to address these issues for three reasons: 1) nature has intrinsic value that deserves to be cared for; 2) people are eco-dependent and a healthy environment allows them to live in dignity; and 3) biodiversity allows the development of culture and food sovereignty.

The preservation of nature, however, should not simply focus on creating natural parks or protected areas, which in some cases restrict access, as such a solution was perceived to be insufficient and at times unfair. Even if in certain places protected areas are the only mechanism available to Indigenous communities to defend their territories, they often impede people from using or accessing ecosystem services or related to nature. Furthermore, the current development model is at odds

54 The State of Biodiversity in Latin America and The Caribbean: A mid-term review of progress towards the Aichi biodiversity targets, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), May 2016.

55 WWF (2022) Living Planet Report 2022 – Building a nature-positive society. Almond, R.E.A., Grooten, M., Juffe Bignoli, D. & Petersen, T. (Eds). WWF, Gland, Switzerland.

56 OECD, 2018. Biodiversity conservation and sustainable use in Latin America: Evidence from environmental performance reviews.

57 OECD, 2018. Biodiversity conservation and sustainable use in Latin America: Evidence from environmental performance reviews.

58 Understood as biological diversity in its intersection with cultural diversity for the feeding of peoples.

with caring for nature, as it prioritizes short-term economic gains and political interests that promote natural resource exploitation through extractive industries, such as mining, and intensive agriculture and livestock rearing that requires deforestation and the use of pesticides.

In most cases, marginalized minorities who are displaced are those who protected and cared for their territories. However, the protection of nature should not fall solely on them, or on environmental and human rights defenders. It is a social problem and leaving it solely in defenders' hands puts them at risk. Protecting nature and territories must be conducted from the perspective of good governance, environmental justice, and the sovereignty of the peoples. Otherwise, it risks exacerbating existing inequalities and creating new ones.

6.2 KEY MESSAGE

The well-being of people and communities, as well as the economy, rely on nature to thrive, and over time, destroying nature will be more costly than preserving it. Protecting nature can generate greater wellbeing. As people become more environmentally conscious, they will demand greater care for the environment. Unequal and unjust socio-environmental and economic practices will intensify social conflicts and entail considerable financial costs in the medium and long term.

6.3 TARGET AUDIENCE

The working group identified many audiences, including local authorities, environmentally oriented NGOs and civil society, and private sector companies that already engage in environmentally-friendly practices and produce and sell environmentally-friendly products.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve the vision articulated in the key message, the following actions are recommended, directed at a regional and national audience. It is important to note that the group's recommendations provide a general direction and are not meant to be specifically tailored to each identified audience.

1. Request a public hearing with national conservation and natural resource management agencies to discuss a more holistic approach to protecting nature in all its aspects. This would include incorporating local traditional knowledge and accounting for millenary models of production, which have sustainably maintained biodiversity. A more holistic approach to protecting nature would free defenders from the responsibility and risks to which they are exposed.
2. Create stronger legislation that would establish fair mechanisms for mitigation, reparations and compensation for damage to nature. Such legislation should also prevent the further destruction of nature.

7

CONCLUSION

The challenges facing Latin America are numerous and severe. The degradation of the environment in the region, which has its origins in the extractivist model and inadequate governance, aggravates the problems of inequality and violence.

Given the transnational nature of these problems and their commonality among the nations in the region, addressing them effectively demands a concerted and collaborative regional approach.

Representing a regional voice, researchers, NGOs, and rights defenders emphasized that poor governance is a predominant concern and that the model of governance gives precedence to extractive development at the expense of local populations. The group also articulated that this extractive development model promotes natural resource extraction and land use change, which burdens local communities, promotes the degradation of biodiversity, and dispossesses local communities of their territories. Furthermore, group members articulated that this model promotes environmental and climate injustices, emphasizing that the green transition is aimed at

the “Global North” and will take place at the expense of the Global South.

Across these themes, group members identified a range of key messages aimed at a range of target audiences. What they all share is a call to regional organizations to assess and monitor the scale of violations, and to penalize violators. They also call for implementing existing legal frameworks, such as the Escazú Agreement, that are aimed at environmental protection.

Since group members perceive the current development model to be problematic for present times and for the future, they articulated a vision for an alternative development model. This alternative would require a change in humans’ relationship with the environment and a shift away from extractive economies. It would recognize and allow for other ways of living and knowing, correct existing inequalities, and function within the limits of nature. It would also hold parties—such as governments and the extractive private sector—that are responsible for degrading the environment and perpetrating injustices accountable. In this way, justice becomes possible.

ABOUT THE FES – SIPRI REGIONAL DIALOGUES

This report represents the third edition in a series of regional climate security dialogues. These dialogues have been organized by SIPRI in collaboration with the regional offices of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in order to explore ways of more effectively incorporating climate change-related risks into peace and security processes within conflict-prone regions and to establish a unified regional perspective and voice on the challenges at hand.

Each regional working group conducts up to four dialogues, which facilitate exchanges among its members, as well as various stakeholders and experts, including political decision-makers. The overarching goal is to stimulate fresh perspectives on regional, continental, global, and collective opportunities for action to comprehensively address and mitigate climate-related security risks.

Additionally, a series of brief video interviews complements this effort, providing insights into the diversity of views and serving as entry points into the complexities of each region. For previous reports and video series from the working groups in the Horn of Africa (<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/16301.pdf>) and West Africa (<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/fes-reportclimate-a4-03.pdf>), please refer to the provided links.

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ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE AND THE DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Perspectives from a regional working group on climate change, the environment, peace and security in Latin America



KEY MESSAGE 1

Democratic leadership must be strengthened to incorporate a clear and comprehensive vision of environmental justice. This strengthening should encompass state actors, civil society, and social movements alike and would thereby enable the development of robust multi-stakeholder governance capabilities and enhance their potential to influence violence prevention and environmental protection.



KEY MESSAGE 2

The current economic model – as opposed to local traditional practices – extracts resources from the land without considering the consequences. This unsustainable practice not only monopolizes sources of life and sacrifices biodiversity, but also dispossesses territories and eliminates cultural diversity, ultimately threatening the livelihoods of its people. It is important to understand and promote alternative development methods that reflect the worldviews of diverse peoples and their territories.



KEY MESSAGE 3

To attain truth, justice, comprehensive reparation, and guarantee against the recurrence of environmental injustices faced in Latin America, it is crucial that all stakeholders – including foreign companies and governments – acknowledge, comply with, and update legal frameworks to incorporate new criminal offences and criteria for regulation and reparation, implemented by the Latin American states in collaboration with the communities and peoples of Latin America. Companies should be compelled to switch from voluntary measures to mandatory measures, such as those part of the Escazú Agreement. The Escazú Agreement provides a framework to monitor and hold companies legally accountable for the consequences of their operations. Companies should be mandated to implement measures to reduce their impact (for example, provide information about their operations and ensure traceability of their products and supply chains).



KEY MESSAGE 4

The well-being of people and communities, as well as the economy, rely on nature to thrive, and over time, destroying nature will be more costly than preserving it. Protecting nature can generate greater wellbeing. As people become more environmentally conscious, they will demand greater care for the environment. Unequal and unjust socio-environmental and economic practices will intensify social conflicts and entail considerable financial costs in the medium and long term.