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CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE AMAZON THROUGH THE VOICES OF WOMEN DEFENDERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Colombia

Index

Introduction

In a country marked by a profound legacy of violence, women organizing their communities to protect human rights and the environment are fundamental pillars to build lasting peace. However, Colombia is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be an environmental and human rights defender, and fear for their own safety is widespread.[1] This was the main message that the Igarapé Institute heard from women in rural areas of the Colombian Amazon who were interviewed as part of this project. This text aims to analyze their experiences, challenges, and accomplishments as defenders of their territories and protagonists in the fight against climate change. These women confronted various actors, including the government, mining and fossil fuel companies, and agribusinesses, in their mission to protect their homes.

Due to increasing deforestation, it is believed that the Amazon is approaching a critical tipping point. Beyond this threshold, further degradation of this valuable ecosystem could accelerate global climate change.[2] Where climate risks and environmental degradation occur, conditions threatening peace and security are also exacerbated.[3] In Colombia, the Amazon Institute of Scientific Research - SINCHI has identified at least 27 environmental macro-conflicts (active at the time of the report in April 2024) related to discrepancies or controversies among different actors. The conflicts mainly centered on access, distribution, management, use, and/or valuation of nature and its contributions in a specific space and time.[4]

Women and women's organizations working in the Amazon play a crucial role in mitigating climate change. However, there is little attention and scarce economic support for women-led initiatives that protect the Amazon biome. Not to mention the fact that these women are subject to multiple and often invisible forms of violence due to their activism, together with the permanent risks associated with organized crime and as heirs of the long-standing armed conflict. The study was motivated by the need to amplify the voices of Colombian defenders, who are essential to combatting the unfolding climate crisis. The role of these defenders in their territories often went unnoticed or underestimated by those around them. This analysis reveals the following significant findings:

- People living in the Amazon have a spiritual and social connection with the biome. As a result, the presence of legal and illegal extractive industries in the region can cause environmental damage while also harming Colombian communities spiritually and socially. A defender interviewed for the project mentioned how her access to natural areas that were important to her, and other Indigenous members of the community was restricted in the region of Putumayo. This limitation impacted their ability to connect with the territory, which she and others consider as part of their identity. As some members of the communities join these industries, they threaten to tear the fabric of the community by dissolving social cohesion as adults and young people are trained to work long hours in them, contributing to dissociating these individuals from the communities, their spiritual connection to the territory, and worst, leading to increased levels of interpersonal violence.
- Women and women's organizations working in the Amazon play an important role in mitigating climate change. However, the women who participated in this project view activities with climate impacts as simply part of their routine life, serving to enhance their livelihoods and protect their family and territory. Some recognized that climate change affects their areas or will affect them in the future, but most were motivated by local concerns rather than global desires to mitigate climate change through their actions.
- The enduring presence of armed groups, including the military, organized crime groups, and insurgent groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Force of Colombia (FARC), left a lasting impact in rural Colombia, where the violence was intense and frequent. Nearly all the women interviewed had a story of a friend, family member, or acquaintance disappearing or being killed during the armed conflict in the country. Many mentioned how this period profoundly impacted their development as an activist and working towards building peace in the countryside was an objective for several women.
- Although the peace agreement (after 2016) effectively reduced confrontations with insurgent groups, threats, and vulnerabilities still exist in the territory even after significant transformations. In many ways, women defenders challenge traditional gender roles and assume a political agency. As a result, they often face threats from acquaintances, particularly males. As a result, several were hesitant to identify themselves as human rights and environmental defenders publicly. This hesitation was particularly true when they were in community gatherings with men and women instead of women-centered groups.

In this investigation, we adopted a participatory methodology centered on focus groups and in-depth interviews with key informants. These fundamental activities of our investigation were carried out in collaboration with two local defenders who operated in Caquetá, Guaviare, Meta, and Putumayo departments. In total, we conducted five focus groups and nine interviews.

The study is structured in four parts. The first part provides an overview of the key conflict dynamics in the departments of the Colombian Amazon where the research took place. The second part details the methodology used in this study. The third portion covers the challenges identified by the defenders interviewed and/or who participated in the focus groups. The fourth part offers recommendations that will strengthen territorial protection and improve the conditions of Colombian women, recognizing their importance in defense of the environment and human rights and their role in combating global climate change.

The Colombian Amazon

Colombia, one of the most biodiverse countries on the planet, encompasses everything from tropical rainforests and deserts to vast savannas and mountain ecosystems.[5] The country is also the stage for a wide range of environmental crimes, which were exacerbated following the formal end of the armed conflict with the FARC in 2016: "Land grabbing and extensive livestock farming have become two of the major threats to the forests and often coexist, taking advantage of the great legal uncertainty regarding land in the Amazon, the region that has contributed 58% of the country's deforestation in the last 21 years."[6]

The southeastern region of Colombia is part of the Amazon basin, and its lush jungles have historically been outside the control of the state, serving as a refuge and domain for non-state armed groups. Environmental damage has diverse manifestations and increasingly penetrates more remote parts of the Colombian Amazon. In addition to logging, one of the main activities causing damage is illegal mining, mainly for gold, concentrated in alluvial deposits and developing along many of Colombia's waterways. Illegal mining spreads harsh substances like mercury and has also been associated with greater social and health problems. In fact, alluvial gold mining in the country is on the rise.[7] The nature of the ecological damage and drives worsening the problem vary across the region.

Figure 1. Main drivers of deforestation in Colombia's amazon region

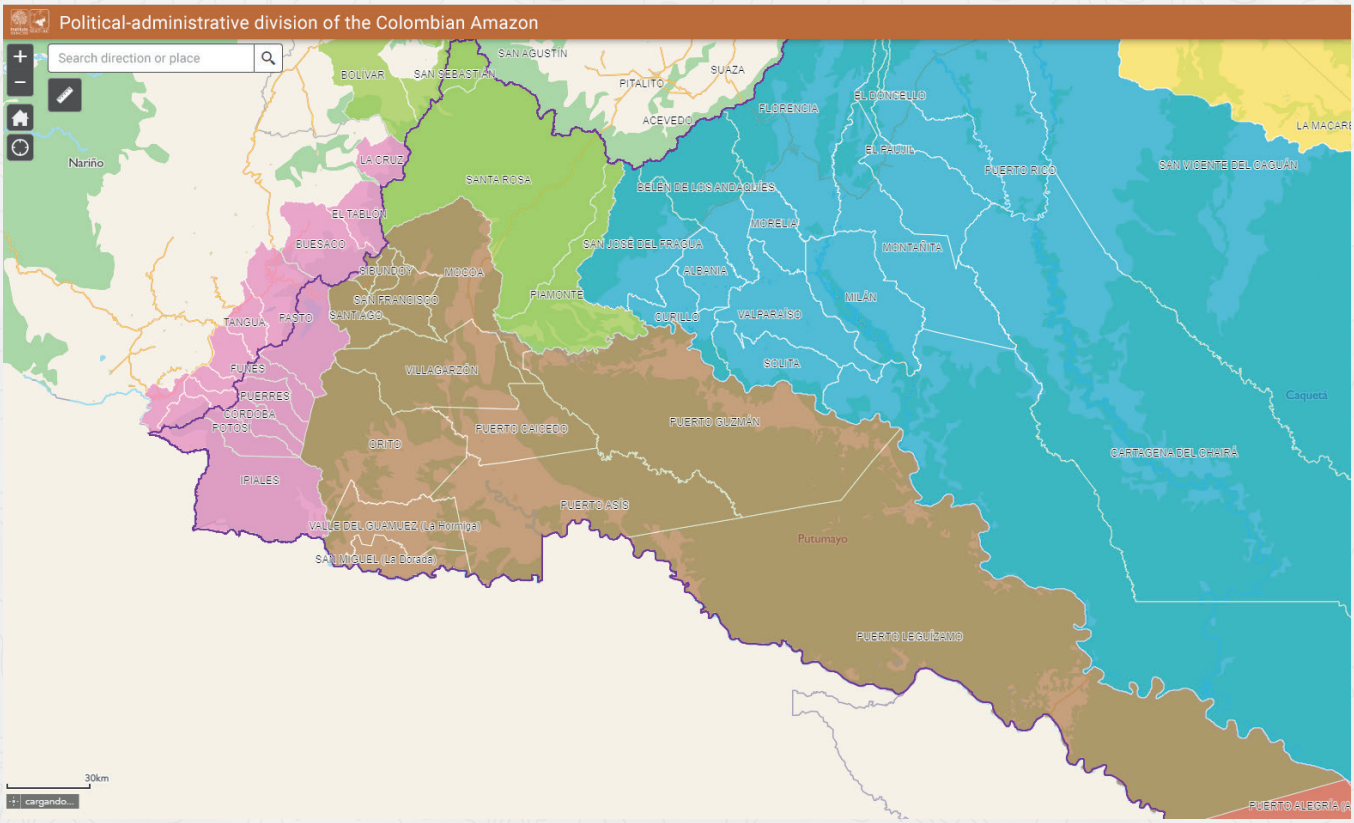
Source: InSight Crime and Igarapé Institute 2021.[8]

For this study, five areas of interest were considered: Putumayo (including subregions of Cauca and Nariño), Guaviare, Caquetá, the Amazonian regions of Meta, and a cluster of deep Amazon zones within the departments of Amazonas, Vaupés, Guainía, and Vichada. Focus groups were conducted in Putumayo, Guaviare, Meta, and Caquetá. These departments were selected because they feature a convergence of deforestation hotspots, environmental crime drivers (such as extensive livestock farming, mining, and the presence of illicit crop cultivation), illegal armed groups, and active women defender groups. Each of the areas of interest is described in greater detail below.

Putumayo: Drug Trafficking and Lingering Conflict Dynamics

This section covers the entire territory of the Putumayo department and some territorial portions of the municipalities of the Cauca and Nariño departments, all of which are located in the Colombian Amazon (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Amazonian region of Putumayo, east of Nariño and south of Cauca



Source: Sinchi - SIAT-AC Sistema de Información Ambiental Territorial de la Amazonia Colombiana. In pink, are the sections of municipalities of Nariño, in yellow are the sections of municipalities of Cauca, and in brown the state of Putumayo.

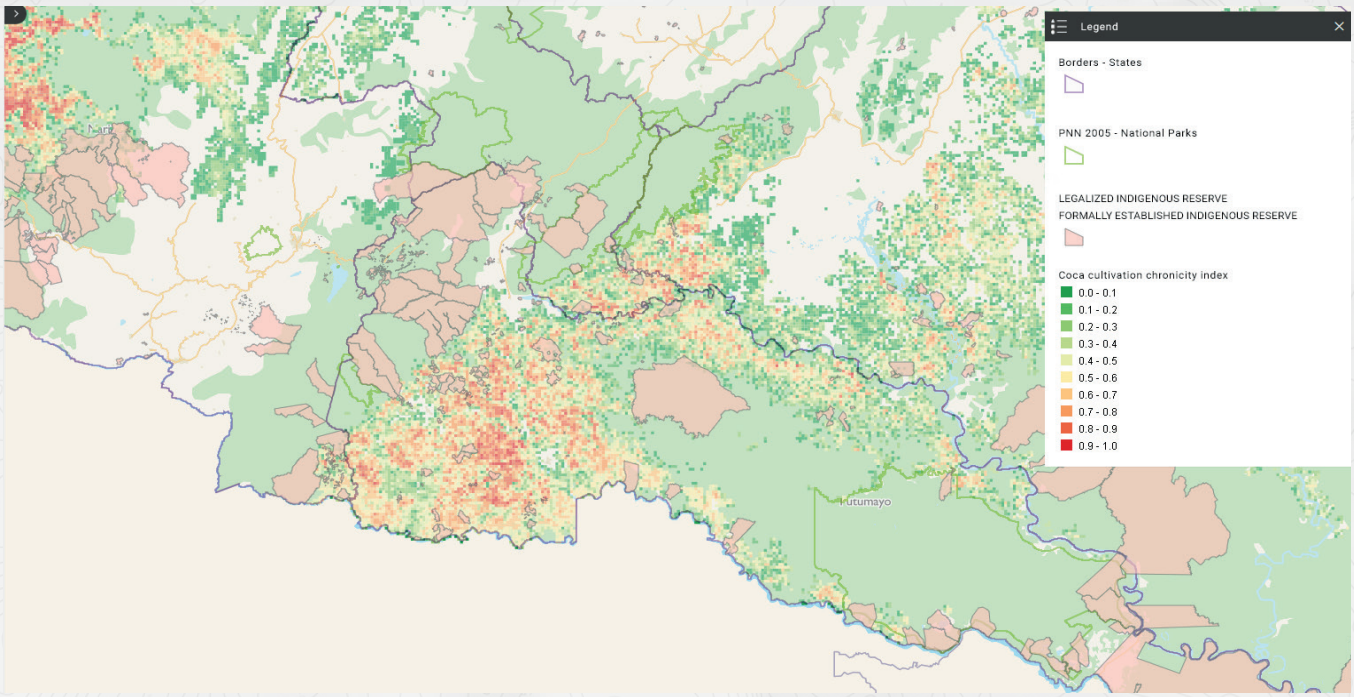
In pink, are the sections of municipalities of Nariño, in yellow are the sections of municipalities of Cauca, and in brown the state of Putumayo.

The System of Information on Violence Events in the Colombian Armed Conflict (SIEVCAC) from the National Center for Historical Memory[9] reported nearly 11,000 conflict events and almost 12,000 deaths from the early 1980s to 2021.[10] Putumayo ranks as the third Amazonian state in terms of the number of conflicts, following Meta and Caquetá. The region hosted one Transitional Zone of Normalization (ZVTN), from the Spanish term Zonas Veredales de Transición y Normalización,[11] in the municipality of Puerto Asis, Putumayo.

The region has overlapping legal and illegal activities, which are major sources of environmental pressures and conflict, particularly related to legal and illegal mining activity and hydrocarbon exploitation. These are the primary sources of several socio-environmental conflicts. One example of a conflict driven by these factors includes the dispute over copper mining and other minerals in the upper Mocoa River basin.[12] Several national and international companies are conducting exploratory activities in the area but are encountering strong opposition from local communities and municipal authorities. Other examples include water pollution from oil and glyphosate in the Puerto Vega-Teteyé corridor,[13] and illegal mining in the Macizo Colombiano region, including the south region of Cauca and north of Nariño.[14]

The region is also characterized by a very high concentration of drug cultivation near indigenous reserves and protected areas. Putumayo has experienced acute levels of violence after the peace accord, mostly due to groups with ties to former guerrillas and connections with criminal organizations linked to drug trafficking and illegal mining.[15]

Figure 3. Coca cultivation, protected areas, and indigenous reserves in Putumayo



Source: Map created using Colombia en Mapas platform,[16] including the UNODC Index of chronicity of coca cultivation, which indicates the persistence of coca crops in the territory in relation to interdiction strategies in the Putumayo region and surrounding departments.

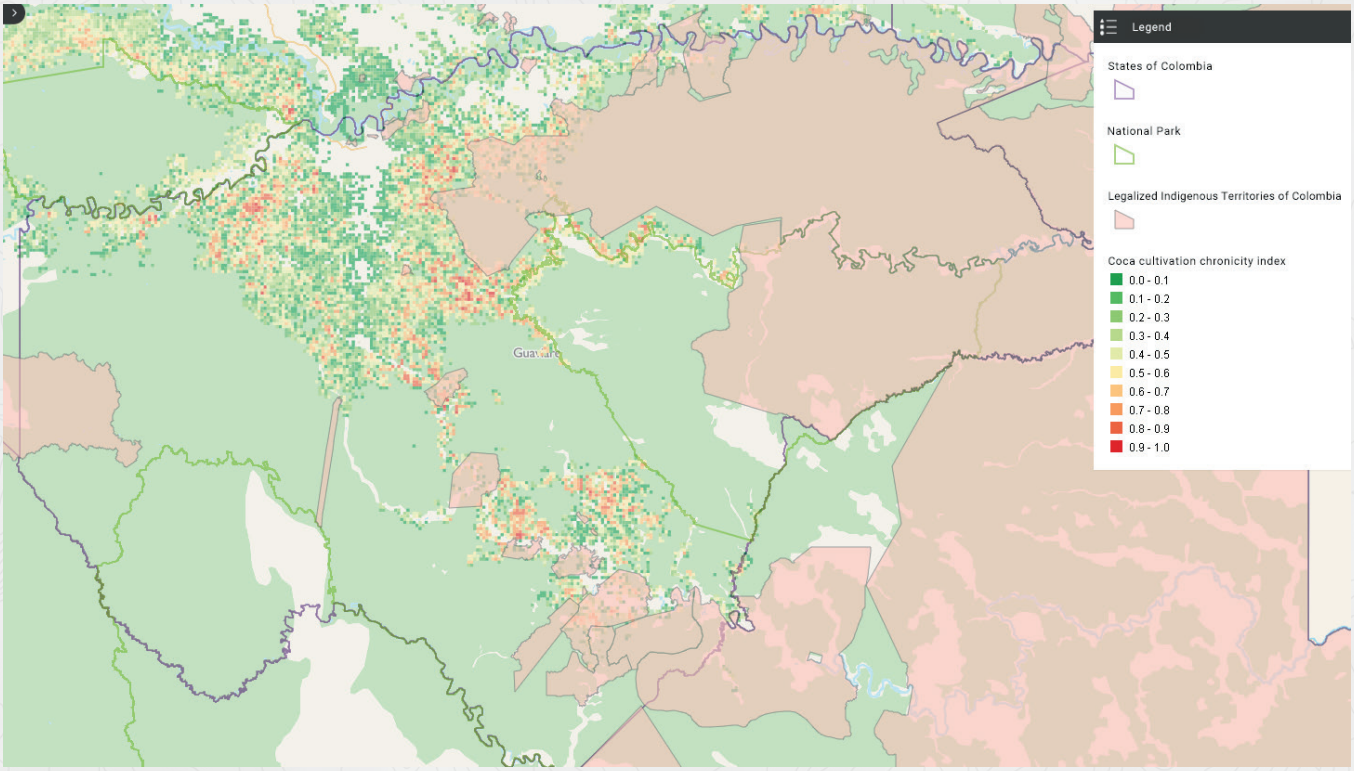
Putumayo experiences high levels of violence, presenting the highest of political violence against women in the Amazon region (20 attacks in 2017-2023), according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).[17] The non-profit organization Somos Defensores reports that eight women were killed from 2004 to mid-2021 due to their work in defense of the environment and human rights.[18] The convergence of these varied socioeconomic conflicts and the vulnerabilities of women defenders were reasons for selecting Putumayo as one of this report's key areas of research. These killings were mainly due to their advocacy for voluntarily substituting illegal crops with other agricultural products during the post-conflict period, their activism on issues related to oil exploitation in the Amazon, and their efforts to advance women's rights.

Guaviare: Disputes Over Indigenous Lands and Protected Areas

Guaviare experienced a moderate level of an armed conflict impact (over 4,000 events and 4,800 fatalities reported between 1969 and 2023)19 and hosted two normalization zones within the framework of the peace agreement (in the municipalities of El Retorno and San José del Guaviare).

The department houses two important protected areas: the Reserva Nacional Natural Nukak and the Serranía de Chiribiquete (shared with the Caquetá department). Also, the department is on the southern border of the Parque Nacional Natural Sierra de la Macarena. There are several socio-economic conflicts related to the occupation of such protected areas, including at the Reserva Nacional Natural Nukak; the indigenous populations of Yaguara II in the municipality of Calamar;[20] and the conflict in one of the most deforested regions in Colombia, Chiribiquete National Park.[21]

Figure 4. Coca cultivation, protected areas, and indigenous reserves, Guaviare



Source: Map created using Colombia en Mapas platform[22], including the UNODC Index of chronicity of coca cultivation, which indicates the persistence of coca crops in the territory in relation to interdiction strategies in the Guaviare region and surrounding departments.

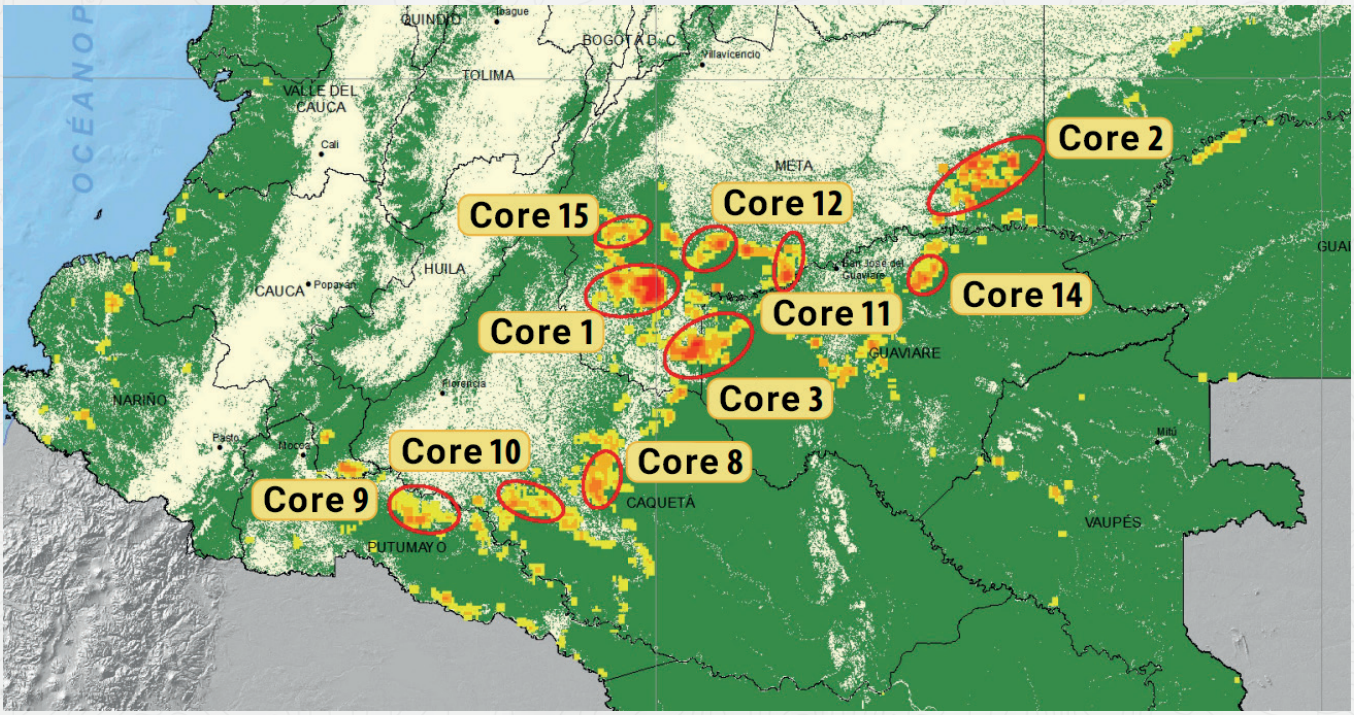
Even though victimization reports from various sources show lower vulnerability in Guaviare compared to other regions like Putumayo or Meta, women defenders in Guaviare are still at risk due to the previously mentioned environmental conflicts. This region was selected as one of the study's focal points due to its proximity to various groups of women defenders. Luckily, there are no reports of murdered women in databases such as Somos Defensores (2004-21), Indepaz (2020-22), or Tierra de Residentes (2014-21).

Meta: The Gateway to Deforestation in the Amazon

Meta is the most affected department in the Colombian armed conflict in the Amazonian region, with a reported 17,554 conflict events according to the Observatory of Memory and Conflict of the National Center for Historical Memory, with cases spanning1958 to 2023.[23] Considering only the nine municipalities of Meta located in the Amazon region, the count is 8,755 conflict events and 10,241 victims killed as a result. The department housed three Transitional Veredal Zones of Normalization (ZVTN), n the municipalities of Mesetas, Vista Hermosa, and Macarena.

Meta region has experienced major deforestation risks in past years. Figure 5 shows the concentration of risk alerts in the area as of early 2022, and features several hotspots: hotspot 1 (National Park Tinigua, La Macarena due to extensive livestock farming and agriculture), hotspot 2 (Mapiripan, burnings, and unplanned road expansion), hotspot 3 (limits with Guaviare with burnings and unplanned road expansion), hotspots 11-12 (National Park La Macarena, extensive livestock farming and agriculture), hotspot 15 (La Uribe, extensive livestock farming and agriculture plus unplanned road expansion). Even so, recent reports highlight the significant advances in the reduction of deforestation across the region in 2023.[24]

Figure 5. Deforestation hotspots in the Amazon region, with a focus in Meta department (1st quarter of 2022)



Source: Sistema de Alertas Tempranas (IDEAM)[25]

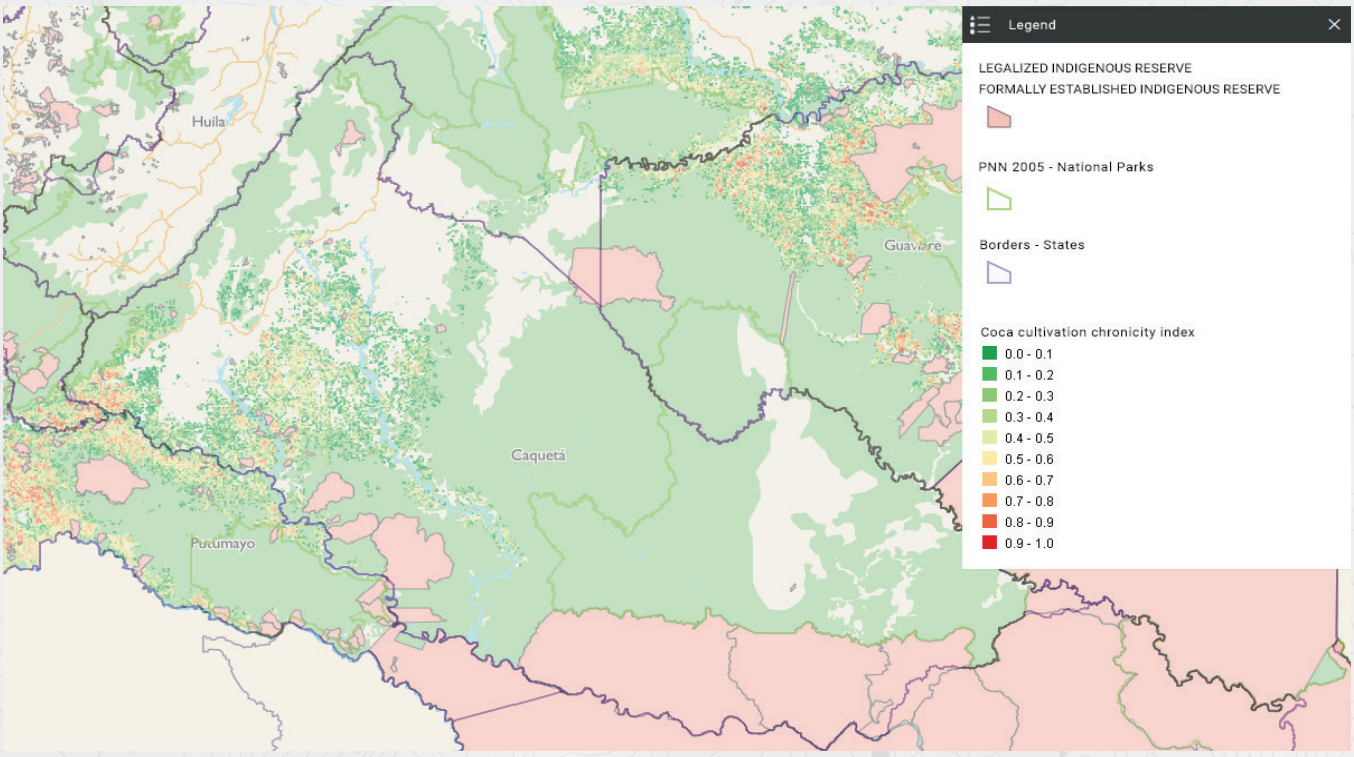
The Amazonian portion of Meta, as the northern limit of the Amazon region, reports seven conflicts reported by the Atlas of Socio-environmental Conflicts from SINCHI. In fact, the Somos Defensores database reports two women murdered, one in the municipality of Mapiripán in March 2018, a victim of FARC dissidents,[26] and one in La Macarena in 2021 due to her activism after the peace accords.[27]

Caquetá: Trauma and Violence History Deriving from the Armed Conflict

The department has the largest city in the region, Florencia, with a population of 177,000 and the highest urban concentration. It ranks as the department with the second-highest impact of armed conflict in the Amazon region, with a total of 13,839 violent events.[28] The department became widely known for hosting the 1998-2002 peace process with the FARC, during which 42 square kilometers were cleared as a condition demanded by the guerrilla group, marking a significant gain for the insurgent group in that period.[29]

According to the Atlas of Socio-environmental Conflicts from SINCHI[30], Caquetá houses at least five socio-environmental conflicts. These conflicts are related to unauthorized settlements by outsiders and territorial disputes within protected areas such as the National Parks Los Picachos, Chibiriquete, and Tinigua. These regions also face water source contamination due to poor residual management and illegal mining (Orteguaza and Caguán Rivers), hydrocarbon exploitation (Valparaíso and San Vicente del Caguán), and illegal mining (San José del Fragua). The main deforestation hotspot is reported in Solano, between the municipalities of Milán (veredas Platanillo, Las Palmeras, and El Tigre), Valparaíso (vereda Maticuru), and Solano (veredas El Porvenir, Vergel Sevilla, and Campo Bonito. The leading causes of deforestation include unsustainable extensive livestock practices, illicit crop cultivation, land grabbing for pasture, illegal logging, and poorly planned transportation infrastructure.

Figure 6. Coca cultivation, protected areas, and indigenous reserves: Caquetá



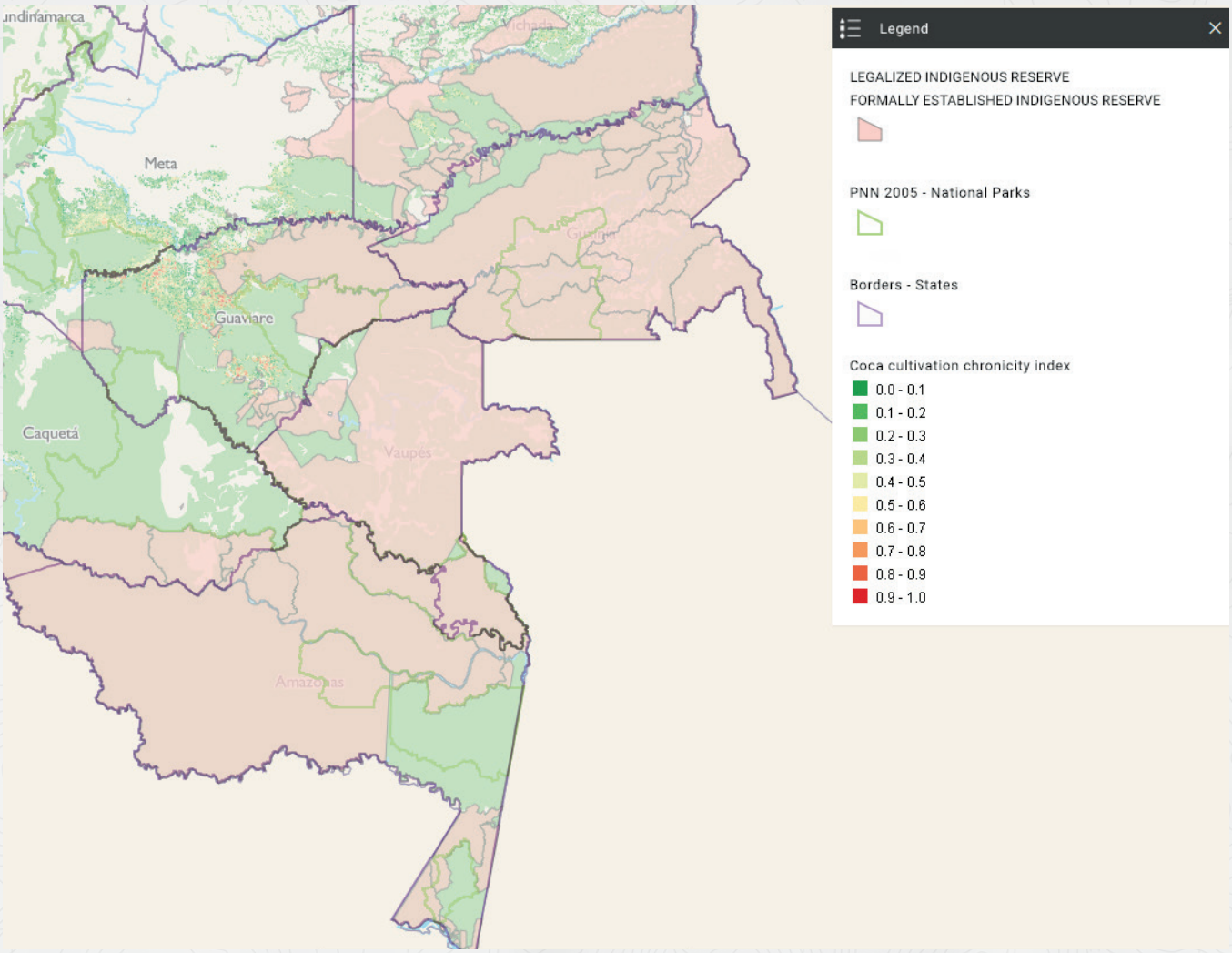
Source: Map developed using Colombia en Mapas platform[31], including the UNODC Index of chronicity of coca cultivation, which represents the persistence of coca crops in the territory in relation to interdiction strategies in the Caquetá region and surrounding departments.

In terms of violence against women defenders, Somos Defensores reported a murdered defender in Curillo, associated with the setbacks in the process of voluntary substitution of illicit crops. There is significant civilian violence activity in San Vicente del Caguán, according to ACLED data.[32]

The Deep Amazon: Amazonas, Vaupés, Guainía, and Vichada states

Even though this region does not experience the complex pressures of large infrastructure projects, widespread illegal mining, illicit drug cultivation, extensive livestock farming, and resulting deforestation as seen in other Amazonian regions, this area still has identifiable conflicts that dive women to engage in social and environmental activism. As shown in Figure 7, most of the vast territory of this subregion consists of protected national parks and indigenous lands, with minimal to no presence of drug cultivation.

Figure 7. Coca cultivation, protected areas, and indigenous reserves: Amazonas, Vaupés, Guainía, and Vichada



Source: Map created using the platform Colombia en Mapas.[33] Amazonas, Vaupés, Guainíam and Vichada departments.

Nevertheless, the Atlas of Socio-environmental Conflicts from SINCHI[34] reports socio-economic conflicts associated with the illegal mining of gold (Inírida, Atabapo, and Guainía rivers), contamination, and poor waste management (Rio Vaupés and Mitú city). Interestingly, the region reports the only conflict associated with the implementation of REDD+ projects in the Amazon region.[35] The region does not report victimization of women related to environmental and human rights activism, although it should be considered limited reporting and media coverage, as well as alert systems, should be taken into consideration in these territories.

Methodology

This research is based on a participatory approach centered on focus groups and in-depth interviews with key informants. The Igarapé team conducted a total of five focus groups in Colombia – Mocoa and Puerto Guzmán in Putumayo; San José del Guaviare in Guaviare; Mapiripán in Meta; Florencia in Caquetá. The focus groups were complemented with in-depth interviews, with a total of 12 interviews conducted across Colombia: seven in Putumayo, three in Caquetá, and two in Meta. The methodology for the focus groups utilized various Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques:

1. **Social and Territorial Mapping:** Each defender identified themselves, described the work they do, and outlined their territory, including their place of birth and current residence.
2. **Classification of Key Challenges:** Each defender was tasked with identifying at least three challenges they face. Later, they were requested to prioritize the main challenges.
3. **Classification of Solutions:** Each defender was asked to propose solutions and then prioritize these solutions based on their potential impact in the region.

The groups consisted of a diverse group of women defenders from specific territories, with efforts made towards ensuring diversity while avoiding biases. The research teams combined local defenders working with Igarapé researchers.

Challenges from the Defender's Points of View

Based on the in-depth interviews and focus groups, the defenders highlighted three main challenges:

1. **Legal and illegal industries inflict environmental, spiritual, and social harm:** the presence of legal and illegal extractive economies, including mining, mining, petroleum production, monoculture agricultural production, and logging, in the Amazon lead to environmental degradation. These economic activities alter natural areas and disrupt the social fabric of local communities. This ultimately deeply affects how community members connect to the territory and with each other.

2. **Legacy of violence, trauma, and activism:** the historical memory of the civil conflict in Colombia has contributed to generating organized social movements, particularly among women. However, it also spurs fear and trauma.

3. **Complicated gender dynamics:** the persistent patriarchal culture in the country influences elevated levels of violence against women, including femicides. At the same time, women's movements are strong, diverse and managed to build consensus to push for women-centered agendas.

Legal and Illegal Industries Inflict Environmental, Spiritual, and Social Harm

Extractive industries, including mining, petroleum production, monoculture agricultural production, and logging, generate major environmental problems affecting the defenders interviewed for this project. These industries not only degrade the land and nature to which local people have a profound connection but also the economic "opportunities" they present can destroy the rural economy. Furthermore, they may disrupt the communities' social fabric. Direct threats posed by these activities include contamination of water sources, air quality deterioration due to smoke from fires, and deforestation leading to habitat loss for native plants and animals that are vital to the community.

Extractive industries are especially threatening for the defenders, many of whom depend on small-scale agriculture – a livelihood that becomes more challenging or even impossible if the land is contaminated. Beyond the physical effects of extractive industries, many women also experience a deep personal connection to the land. The Indigenous women participating in this study expressed that their connection with the land is critical to their culture and that extractive activities threaten this bond by physically degrading the environment and restricting access to the land. One defender, who organizes community groups to explore the territory, mentioned how her access to the land has at times been restricted to certain hours:

> "At the moment, we can walk the land peacefully. But at other times, they have told us that we can't go out to complete a human rights or spiritual task. They impose schedules or restrictions on us that we don't agree with. So, in this aspect, we feel our rights are being violated as defenders of our Uma Kiwe [our mother]."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo Department

Regarding multinational mining companies and other industries advancing deforestation, the defenders who participated in the interviews and focus groups for this project highlighted their Failure to take responsibility for their actions. They argued that the government should take more care when giving permits to legal ventures. For instance, defenders report that in Mocoa (Putumayo), multinational mining corporations are favored to receive mining permits and do not do enough to address environmental emergencies when they arise. The petroleum industry also causes a great deal of harm to human health, prompting defenders for their communities at times to prevent their homes from becoming unlivable:

> "In 2012, there was an announcement about the expansion of petroleum projects in a corridor. This corridor included 54 residential streets, four municipalities, an Indigenous reservation, and two community boulevards. This corridor was connected by its wetlands and two strong rivers, the Putumayo River, and the San Miguel River. The announcement concerning the petroleum projects generated a big reaction among the local population, who questioned, 'What's going to happen to us?' According to one regulation, no one could live within five kilometers of a petroleum platform, necessitating relocation five kilometers away. The pressing question was, 'Where were we supposed to go?' After a year of effort to find a response to this question, the first answer was clear: they could not proceed with the project. The argument was basically the already high contamination levels from six existing platforms. So, what would have happened with the additional platforms they were going to install..."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo Department

The same defender who opposed the petroleum expansion projects mentioned previously also highlighted how these projects had the explicit backing of the Colombian government, and expressed her fear of retaliation from the private sector actors involved in these projects:

> "Since we are in a territory where extractive industrial projects were being developed under the Duque administration, especially as they gained momentum following the announcements made by the President of the Republic... there is a fight to defend the territory that puts us at risk, because it's common knowledge that, in Colombia, the private sector has embraced violence to advance their practices."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo Department

Beyond causing physical harm, these extractive economic activities pose a risk to the social fabric of communities. Defenders in Mocoa (Putumayo) mentioned that the youth are pursuing training to work in these industries to achieve self-sufficiency. This shift often leads to youth becoming less connected to the values of land preservation and appreciation of the territory's historical and cultural significance to the community. Over time, this erodes the community's social and spiritual health, as the younger generation stops cherishing and defending the land.

Legal business ventures are not the only contributors to harm. Illegal activities, such as the drug trade, also negatively impact the region. In Florencia (Caquetá), defenders claim that coca cultivation – the plant used to make cocaine – disrupts the social fabric of communities by drawing young people into the narcotics trade. Furthermore, coca monoculture has reduced food sovereignty, with farmers preferring coca cultivation over subsistence farming. The link between the production of coca for the drug market and the rise in drug availability and consumption within their communities, resulting in higher rates of addiction and further degradation of social cohesion was also highlighted. The drug trade escalates violence levels, with armed groups, military personnel, and cocaine producers frequently battling for control over coca cultivation and trade territories, endangering the lives of local inhabitants.[36]

Due to the economic needs of local communities, some community members do support extractive projects and harmful industries despite their adverse effects. Proponents of such projects emphasize the jobs provided by new agricultural companies or mining operations, minimizing the associated harms. Because they may have partial local support, defenders opposing these activities find themselves in a precarious position. While many of the aggressors were unknown to the defenders, some retaliation came from within their own communities.[37] A defender from Putumayo described experiencing stigmatization for her activism within her social circles and being pressured to resign from a community council:

> "This has caused many inconveniences in my life, affecting my social l, political, and leadership roles. Because I am a person who speaks out about what I see... I've felt excluded, and that my rights as a woman were infringed upon. I've felt bullied."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo Department

Becoming a Defender: The Legacy of Violence and Trauma

In Colombia, a harmful combination of general exploitation of the biodiversity by both legal and illegal actors coexists with a history of latent violent conflict. This situation is fueled by the involvement of paramilitary groups, narcotraffickers, guerrilla movements like the FARC, as well as the security forces of the Colombian government. The result is an ever-increasing number of civilians trapped in the midst of the conflicts. The memory of violence and loss lingers among local populations, causing trauma and shaping their worldview. However, the duality between fear of retaliation and active mobilization was strong among defenders. While the threat of violence incites action, the accompanying fear leads to caution.

The fact is that the overall level of violence in Colombia remains very high (even after the formal end of the armed conflict with the FARC after 2016), making it a particularly dangerous place for environmental and human rights defenders. In 2022, the country was reported by the NGO Global Witness to have the highest number of murders of land defenders globally with a total of 60 environmental and land defenders killed. Defenders who identify as Indigenous, Afro-descendant, small-scale farmers, and environmental activists have been specifically and viciously targeted.[38]

This bloody history weighs heavily in the minds of the women interviewed for this investigation. When discussing how they came to be defenders, many women described their experiences with violence as pivotal moments that inspired their advocacy for peace. Stories of family members or friends who were killed or disappeared during the period of civil war were common. They also noted how violence against the bodies of women, teenagers, and children is used as a warfare strategy. In one in-depth interview, a defender described this violence as a major driver for community mobilization:

> "Given the increase in military presence within rural communities, we saw the necessity to prepare ourselves to defend human rights, as we found ourselves caught between the military and the armed illegal groups."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo department

As a result, many were reluctant to publicly identify as defenders, fearing repercussions for their activism and preferring to keep a low profile. This created a tension between the desire to protect their communities and stay safe, manifesting in different ways among the women. One defender chooses to describe herself more as a "guardian" rather than a defender, and publicly, she identifies solely as a "communicator" to mitigate conflict and maintain her supporters' goodwill:

> "...I maintain good relations with everyone, and that gives me protection... There are moments when I feel at risk in unfamiliar places, but I don't feel at risk because of who I am but rather for existing. The risk lies in existing... I don't call myself as a human rights defender or a forest defender, and I think that's what keeps me safe. Labeling myself that way would corner me. I do pretty things, write stories, and do a lot of things, but I' avoid conflict with anyone, that's not what I want."
>
> – Defender from Caquetá department

There is a good reason for their caution. A significant number of defenders involved in this study experienced retaliation and violence due to their activism. They recounted incidents of physical attacks, threats, and psychological intimidation. Testimonies highlighting how these attacks generated fear and a call to action were commonplace. One defender was the victim of an assault, and although it was a traumatic experience, it also clarified her life's mission: to safeguard human rights and the environment. Another defender was so intimidated that she considered leaving the country, but ultimately decided to stay and continue her work.

At times, it was their family members, friends, and other community members who faced threats or were put in danger. Direct exposure to violence takes a major toll on women defenders, as does the psychological distress of witnessing the suffering of others in their communities:

> "I have participated in many pacifist marches in defense of human rights against gender-based violence because, sadly, women have been physically abused, and some have been killed... It's so hard to know that a friend, a neighbor, or an acquaintance is going through this. The best you can do is to help them, guide them, and explain to them. For instance, you can show them how to defend themselves; inform them of their rights; direct them to the appropriate office, or simply help guide them towards being able to stand up for themselves and enhance their resilience."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo department

Despite efforts to bring state resources closer to the territories of the peace agreements, the defenders also noted a distinct lack of institutional support when trying to report harassment and violence to the authorities:

> "In a country like Colombia, there is always a high risk. Risk concerning the quality and durability of our complaints, for the organizational capacity of the human rights defenders we've been building within territories. And particularly because in territories like ours, there's a unique combination of tactics and violence involving numerous legal and illegal armed groups, right?"
>
> – Defender from Putumayo Department

Complex Gender Dynamics

Being a leader and a woman can be challenging for defenders in Colombia. The prevailing culture of machismo also makes it easier for those in power to ignore violence against women, further complicating their access to justice when threatened for their activism. The rate of femicides in the region is particularly high compared to other parts of the country. Women defenders believe that the discourse surrounding femicides is deeply influenced by societal power dynamics and exemplifies the negative attitudes against women defenders across all age groups:

> "When we talk about femicides, for example... They say we are killed out of jealousy, because of problems with partners, because we cheat, because we wear skirts that are too short, or because we walk down the street late at night. No one ever says that we are killed because we are women, due to an increase in machismo, or even due to rising xenophobia against us. The government has been reluctant to recognize these cases, even in a country where the right of life is a fundamental right embedded in the constitution. They refuse to recognize that we are killed or disappear simply because we are women, that we are raped because we are women. And it's not just adult women, but also our girls, our teenagers, our young women. So, this is the general concept we have in discussion about women's issues."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo department

Femicides are the most extreme manifestation of gender dynamics and power in the country, but they are certainly not the only way these factors affect defenders. Several women shared their complicated relationship with their gender identity and their work. Some felt empowered by their societal role as women, while others felt that being a woman made them more vulnerable. The same defender mentioned previously talked about how organizations for human rights are still largely male-dominated, requiring her to assert her presence to be seen as an equal when working with them.

Gender dynamics are also present in the daily lives of defenders: they are expected to fulfill their traditional roles within the household and take care of their families, in accordance with Colombia's standard gender role for women. Several defenders mentioned that their advocacy work consumes time away from other commitments and family time, complicating their work on both fronts. One defender explained how the role of women in her society made her feel empowered, but with the next breath, mentioned feeling limited in the amount of time she had:

> "For us women, understanding our role offers us freedom of expression, enables us to participate, as we see ourselves and as we think it should be. It allows us, from within our culture, in our way of life, to participate even if they tell us no. You have only so many hours for work, for class, for life. For your life."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo department

Another complication these women face is the lack of governmental support, a recurring theme in the focus groups. Some discussed how government officials often speak of including women in their initiatives but do not meaningfully act to fulfill their promises. Even worse is that discussions about women's inclusion seldom translate into meaningful action to appoint more women to governmental positions or to include them in decision-making bodies.

One strategy used to undermine the efforts among networks of women defenders is to segregate them and portray their struggles as distinct from each other. Countering this narrative relies on the women defenders seeing the similarities of their struggles, risks, and successes, and understanding they have more in common than they realize:

> "They keep trying to divide us, that is, labeling the rural woman solely as rural woman, the Indigenous woman solely as Indigenous woman, the Afro-Colombian as just a Afro-Colombian, the woman from the city as merely a city woman. However, our situations are the same. The problems we face or those that remain here are the same, yet they focus on these labels... That is the discussion we are engaged in now."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo department

Even though their struggles may be the same, intersectional feminism means recognizing that defenders from different backgrounds begin their individual journeys from different starting points. Achieving success in their initiatives as environmental and human rights defenders requires mutual support and the establishment of strong networks with defenders across different backgrounds. It is clear that the women's movement in Colombia was deeply influenced by the country's history of conflict, motivating those affected by violence to create grassroots organizations for self-protection and to work towards a more peaceful future. These defenders have established solid networks to work together and have developed skills in achieving consensus among very diverse women's groups. This differentiates the women defenders active in Colombia from their counterparts in other Latin American countries.

Possible Solutions

Considering this context, defenders from all five focus groups highlighted the following recommendations:

Community Solidarity and Empowerment

One solution many women suggested to better protect themselves from environmental and human rights abuses is to enhance community solidarity and empowerment, especially among women's groups and in rural communities. The women recounted their greatest successes occurred when the community united, joining forces to combat specific threats and to protect one another.

> "We joined forces with other people from our street and nearby streets to prevent the construction of this extractive plant. The entire community came together for a single cause – to stop the construction. That was the start of the struggle, because after that people were conscious of the environmental problems and what they could do to change this in the future. It also marked the creation of Mapiripán's first and only association dedicated to the protection and conservation of natural resources... Since facing his problem, we have tackled other issues with many people from the municipality."
>
> – Defender from Mapiripán in the Guaviare Department

Collaborating through civil associations, as described by this defender, is essential for rural societies to halt environmental harm. An individual household affected by water pollution may have a hard time addressing the problem; however, a united community is much more challenging for polluting companies and governmental bodies, both local and national, to ignore.

To best facilitate the building of successful associations dedicated to human rights and the environment, rural communities should be provided with resources such as leadership training. Information on how to report environmental and human rights abuses to a relevant authority should also be made available in all the languages most spoken in rural towns. Regulators, as well as companies looking to improve their performance in environmental and human rights considerations, should connect with the existing leadership councils within the towns affected by their actions and hold regular listening sessions to ensure their concerns are being heard.

However, recognizing the Colombian context in which these women defenders operate, and the lack of resources provided by companies and the Colombian government, there is a role for non-governmental organizations to play in building the capacity of defender networks. In many situations, community groups know exactly what they need and what would be most useful in assisting them in their struggles for recognition. All they need are the financial and training resources to facilitate this work, and a platform for community organizations to connect with one another.

Environmental Education

Part of what equips a community to effectively address environmental damage is a solid understanding of the value of the natural areas surrounding them. Fostering a deep connection between the residents and the land they consider their home is another key strategy for building capacity. Several of the women interviewed spoke about the importance of activities like nature walks and education about the spiritual bond between Indigenous residents and the land. One defender, who is actively engaged in this work, recounted her experiences guiding community members in the explosion of the territory:

> "One of the experiences that I have had with the community is to do walks alongside the Indigenous guard, with the children, with the mothers, with the professors, the religious leaders, the political authorities... Teaching them about the plant's properties. This has been an accomplishment for me, it has been a victory in terms of knowledge sharing."
>
> – Defender from Putumayo Department

Others spoke about the need to provide education about the environmental impacts they and their neighbors might cause. When questioned about the essence of being a defender, one woman responded that one of the most important things that she does as a defender is to "create a consciousness among the people about the environmental harm we are causing, urging them to think about our children." Ensuring the community understands what environmental harms such as pollution, fires, deforestation, and monoculture mean for them, and how it affects them, was a recurring theme in interviews and focus groups. Many women highlighted that fostering environmental consciousness is an important aspect of their work. Moreover, protecting the local environment can also be a profitable venture; one defender interviewed mentioned running a business with other local women, recycling used cooking oils and fats from restaurants to produce soap, which is then sold in a store. This initiative not only prevents these oils from polluting the community landfill, thus avoiding potential water and soil contamination but also provides a source of income for the women involved.

While many Indigenous community members and *campesinos* are already aware of their connection to the environment, supporting women's groups in educating their communities and providing them with the tools to assess environmental harms represents another step forward. Providing communities with the expertise and equipment to environmental monitor in their area would be an excellent way to support the work of women defenders. One of the major difficulties communities affected by environmental harms face is to prove contamination or misconduct by an actor in their regions. They can combat this by generating, storing, and regularly analyzing data about their environment. Resources such as water quality testing kits, air quality monitors, and training to catalog flora and fauna should be made available. Empowering women defenders and their communities to better measure the environmental harms in their regions will allow them to more easily seek legal remedies and raise awareness about these issues.

Calling International Attention to Climate Change Mitigation

The discussions of the focus groups and the in-depth interviews revealed a notable omission: global climate change was scarcely mentioned. Only three of the women interviewed briefly mentioned the subject, and it was not a topic of focus group discussions. However, much of their work as defenders directly contributes to climate change mitigation. Their objective is to prevent additional deforestation and forest fires, thus protecting the Amazon's vegetation, a massive carbon sink. Preventing both legal and illegal mining activities fulfills the same function, positively impacting the global environment while also protecting local areas. These women did speak to the importance of protecting the environment, but their motivations were generally to improve family living conditions, secure economic livelihoods, safeguard community health, or preserve the land due to spiritual connections. None of them talked about the global impact of their work.

To draw international attention to these efforts, which at first glance seems local but has global implications, is another strategy that should be considered by actors who want to protect Colombian defenders. Local communities and women have a key role to play in helping countries to meet their climate mitigation and adaptation objectives. Integrating these groups into key decision-making bodies on environmental protection would significantly amplify their voices and their work. Additionally, many women defenders have skills in community organizing and communication, which could be leveraged to bring attention to their struggles on an international stage, especially when governments and companies damage the environment with impunity.

Historically, international pressure has catalyzed major societal changes, such as the end of apartheid in South Africa, the reunification of East and West Germany, and the halting advancement of nuclear weapons development in countries without nuclear capabilities. Amid increasing public pressure on governments to halt global climate change, spotlighting Amazon's local struggles to the international community could bolster the cause of environmental defenders.

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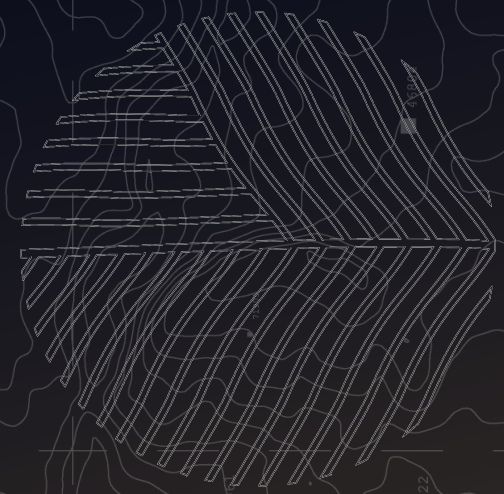

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