A look at violence and conflict over Indigenous lands in nine Latin American countries

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Mongabay Series: Endangered Environmentalists, Indigenous Peoples and Conservation

- *Indigenous people make up a third of the total number of environmental defenders killed across the globe, despite being a total of 4% of the world's population, according to a report by Global Witness. The most critical situation is in Colombia, where 117 Indigenous people have been murdered between 2012 and 2020.*
- *Conflicts over extractive industries and territorial invasions are a major cause of violence against Indigenous communities. Between 2017 and 2021, there were 2,109 cases of communities affected by extractive industries and their associated activities in Peru, Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras.*
- *Mongabay Latam interviewed 12 Indigenous leaders from nine countries across Latin America and spoke to them about the threats they face and the murders occurring in the region.*

For years, Ruth Alipaz has been fighting against the Chepete-El Bala hydroelectric project. The project involves the construction of two reservoirs that together would flood at least 66,200 hectares (163,500 acres) of land and displace more than 5,000 people, the majority of them Indigenous communities.

"They came to my village to threaten me because of my opposition to mining companies," said Alipaz, a leader of the Indigenous community of San José de Uchupiamonas, in Bolivia. "They asked me: 'What are you going to do when they come for you and blow your head off with dynamite? Let's see if you'll carry on resisting then'."

Ruth Alipaz Cuqui, an Indigenous leader from Bolivia. Image courtesy of Flor Ruíz.

Threats are a part of everyday life for Indigenous leaders in Latin America. They are part of a growing wave of violence that has, in recent years, left a shocking number of bodies in its wake: between 2012 and 2020, 363 male and female activists from Indigenous communities were murdered.

“In all our reports, Indigenous people make up, on average, one third of the total number of murdered environmental defenders on a global scale, a tremendously high figure considering only 4% of the world’s population are Indigenous peoples,” says Marina Comandulli, a campaign officer for Global Witness, a human rights non-governmental organization.

The most critical situation is in Colombia, where 117 Indigenous people have been murdered in the aforementioned period – the highest figure on the South American continent.

“Nobody dares to speak out over what is happening in Indigenous territories because of the threats they receive. It’s a very grave humanitarian situation,” says Fany Kuiru Castro, a leader from the Witoto people of the Colombian Amazon and a coordinator of the National Organization for the Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (*Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonía Colombiana* – OPIAC).

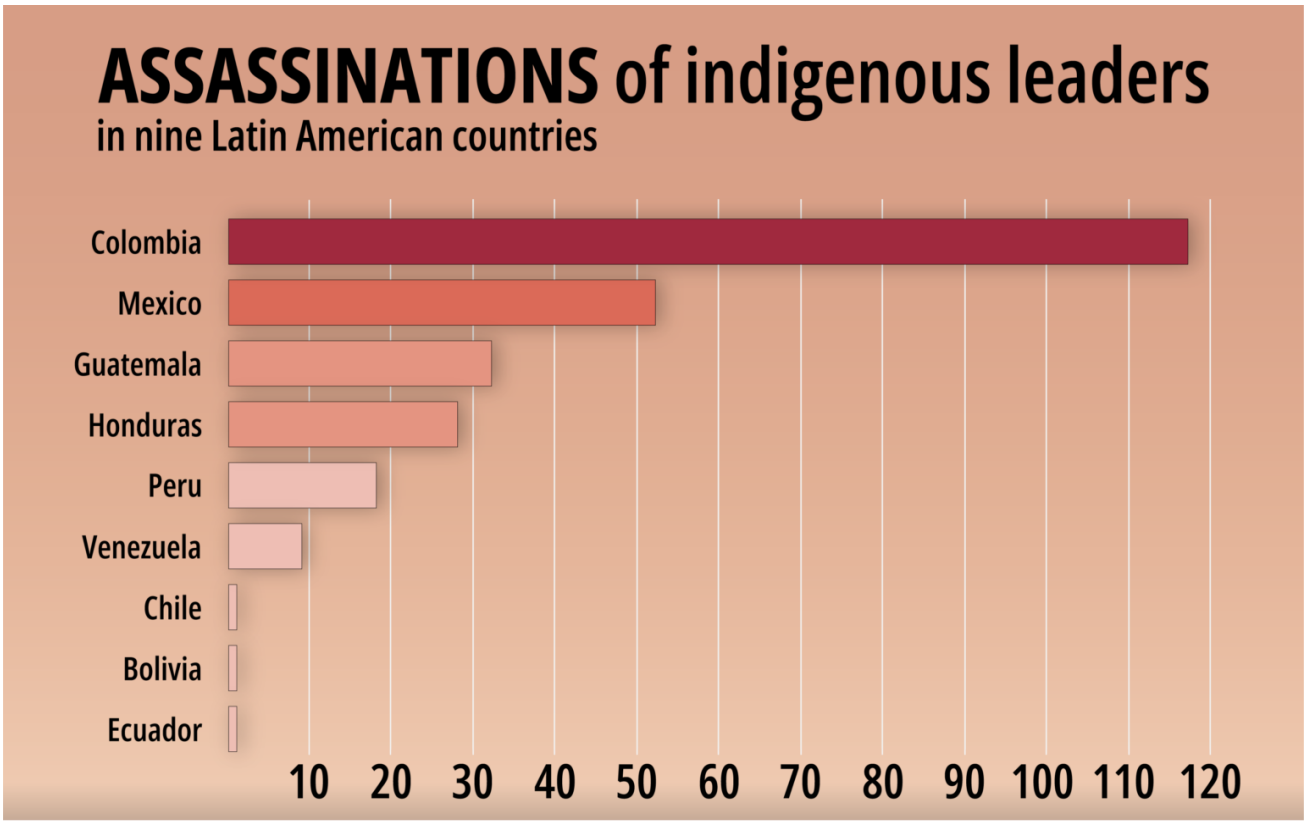
An Indigenous man practices a ritual in front of a large crowd during the Free Land Camp 2022. Around 6,000 Indigenous people gathered in Brasília where they debated current issues that are affecting Indigenous and traditional peoples' rights. Image courtesy of Tuane Fernandes/Greenpeace.

Why are Indigenous leaders being murdered? How have they responded to this wave of violence? Mongabay interviewed 12 Indigenous leaders from nine countries across the region to gain a broad understanding of the main threats facing the leaders, their demands, the state's unfulfilled duties, the challenges of being an Indigenous leader and their visions for biodiversity conservation.

Escalation of violence

On Saturday, April 30, Yesid Caña, an Indigenous leader and member of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (*Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca – CRIC*), was shot dead by armed men who entered the Indigenous reserve of La Guada, in the department of Cauca, in southwestern Colombia. According to the Institute for Development and Peace Studies (INDEPAZ), Caña's death follows those of 61 social and environmental leaders in Colombia in the first months of 2022 alone.

Last year, Indepaz reported that 171 social leaders and human rights defenders were assassinated in Colombia, with 55 of them members of Indigenous communities.



Period: 2012–2020
Source: Global Witness

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"Many of our guards, authority figures, social leaders, women, children and the community in general have been murdered. We are facing an extremely serious situation, especially in the department of Cauca and in the Colombian southwest in general," Aida Quilcué told Mongabay. Quilcué is a female Indigenous leader for the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca and currently a senator for the Alternative Indigenous Social Movement (*Movimiento Alternativo Indígena y Social* – MAIS). She was a victim of such violence herself when, in 2008, her husband was murdered. She has also been threatened on a number of occasions.

The situation is no different in other countries in the region. The ministry of justice in Peru has recorded the murders of 11 human rights defenders since the start of the pandemic, a figure that is at odds with those reported by other organizations. The National Coordinator of Human Rights puts the number of murdered human rights defenders at 14, with 10 of them being Indigenous leaders.

"The biggest problems are territorial invasions, as well as deforestation, oil drilling and mining activities, and even the construction of roads," said Teresita Antazú, an Indigenous leader who sits on the governing board of the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (*Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana* – AIDESEP) and runs AIDESEP's Indigenous Women's Program.

According to Silvana Baldovino, director of the Peruvian Society of Environmental Law's Biodiversity and Indigenous Peoples Program, in Peru, the majority of environmental defenders who lose their life do so while protecting their territories from illegal activities. This means that their enemies, and the culprits of such killings, are not so easily identified.

Women and children are also present at the march of indigenous peoples in Bolivia, in 2021. Image courtesy of Antonio Terceros.

"It's a very complicated situation, the enemy is not so easy to identify and you need the state to have a stronger presence in order to combat these threats. We're talking about mafias deeply entrenched in illegal activities that are just one part of a chain of corruption," Baldovino said.

Marina Comandulli, from Global Witness, added that these crimes are effectively related to the power dynamics of paramilitary groups, who have long controlled certain regions. This pattern of violence sadly repeats itself across other countries that are part of the Amazon biome, such as Brazil and Venezuela.

In Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras – three countries that also rank as some of the most dangerous in the world for environmental activists – crimes against Indigenous leaders are linked to the growing presence of companies involved in extractive activities and to the state of impunity that reigns over their lands.

“I have received threatening phone calls, I had to flee from where I was because they were going to kill me. Later I realized that they were just trying to intimidate me, to stop us from resisting, to silence us. There have been a lot of killings here, leaders from the Tolupán Indigenous community are being killed, from the Chortí Indigenous community and the Garifuna community, too,” said Donaldo Allen, president of the Confederation of the Autochthonous Peoples of Honduras (*Confederación de Pueblos Autóctonos de Honduras* – CONPAH). CONPAH is an organization that brings together nine Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendent communities from Honduras, the country where 28 indigenous leaders were murdered between 2012 and 2020, according to Global Witness.

Allen lives in La Mosquitia, a territory of tremendous biodiversity that has become a site of bounty for land grabbers who seek to exploit the area’s resources. Drug-trafficking routes have been identified on the same land, as well as clandestine airstrips and drug-processing laboratories.

Peruvian Indigenous leaders are demanding that the government attends to their demands for land titles. Image courtesy of IRI Perú.

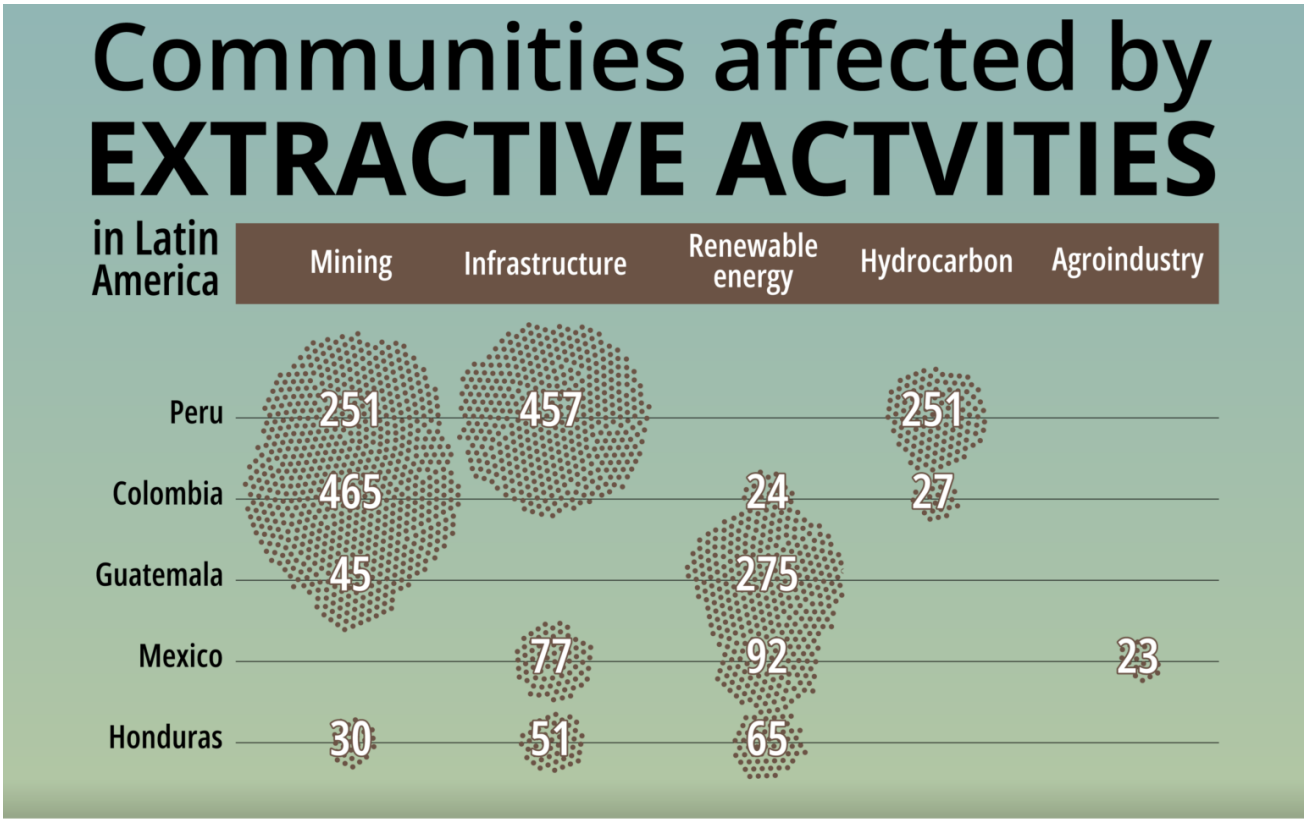
“In Honduras we have the case of Berta Cácered [an Indigeneous leader murdered in 2016], but since her there have been another 10 or 15 brothers and sisters who have disappeared and been murdered, not only people from Indigenous communities but also from our Garifuna brothers, the Afro-descendent communities of Honduras,” Allen added. “Violations of the human rights of Indigenous peoples are daily and systematic.”

The situation could even take a turn for the worse, said Chris Van Dam, coordinator of the NGO Communities and Territorial Governance Initiative of the Forest Trends. Van Dam explained how the episodes of violence that Indigenous peoples face as a result of the activities of extractive industries, logging companies, mining companies and hydrocarbon companies "are going to increase as a result of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has lead to an exponential increase in the price of hydrocarbons and food [...] One must think, therefore, that these companies are going to want to move in on the areas of rainforest currently held by Indigenous peoples."

Disputes over Indigenous territories

"The most serious problem we face is the issue of territorial invasions," said the Peruvian Indigenous leader Teresita Antazú about other threats that are currently overwhelming the Peruvian Amazon.

Aida Quilcué, from Colombia, agreed. Quilcué has witnessed the forced displacement of people from Colombia's Indigenous territories that have been a constant feature of the years of war and violence that have assailed the country.



Period: 2017–2021
Source: The Coalition - Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI)

"As Indigenous peoples, the only thing that we receive from the government is contempt. They despise us because we are just a hindrance to them, because we still hold large amounts of land and because of our identity and the worldview that we hold in connection

with the natural world," said Miguel López, a Nahua leader from Mexico.

The Honduran leader Donaldo Allen González also spoke of illegal land grabbing and the consequent damage inflicted upon land which has historically been populated by the Central American country's Indigenous peoples.

A study by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) has shown that, between 2017 and 2021, there were 2,109 cases of communities being affected by extractive industries and their associated activities across the five countries that were the subject of the study; Peru, Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras.

A large part of these cases – at least 791 – correspond to conflicts surrounding mining activities. Colombia was the country with the highest number of communities affected by such conflicts, with 465. This was followed by Peru, with 251, then Guatemala and Honduras with 45 and 30, respectively.

Yanomami woman with her child in the Yanomami Indigenous Territory in Brazil. A new investigative report shows that an estimated 15,000 Yanomami Indigenous inhabitants have been directly affected by illegal mining, with girls as young as 11 lured into sex work with the promise of food and clothing. Image courtesy of Sam Valadi via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2.0).

"People have been sent to prison for defending their communities, mainly from mining activities. In Bolivia it's the most powerful sector [of the economy…] the miners control everything and it's them who are swallowing up whole rivers, mountains," said Ruth Alipaz,

the Bolivian Indigenous leader. “Communities like mine have been sold off to mining concessions.”

The situation is the same in Venezuela. Eligio DaCosta is the president of the Regional Organization of the Indigenous Peoples of the State of Amazonas (*Organización Regional de los Pueblos Indígenas de Amazonas* – ORPIA) and lives in the community of Guarinuma, in the Venezuelan state of Amazonas. The leader of the Baniwa Indigenous spoke to Mongabay about the impacts of illegal mining in his country.

“We have 182,000 square kilometers [113,000 square miles] of Amazon rainforest and there are mining sites across a number of Indigenous territories,” DaCosta said.

DaCosta can remember clearly what happened in his community of Guarinuma.

“For nearly three years we were the victims of illegal gold mining, our river was badly affected,” the Baniva Indigenous leader said about the impact the activity had on the Atabapo River, which flows through his community and feeds into the Orinoco River to the east.

A panoramic view of the impact of gold mining in the Indigenous community of San José de Karene in Peru. Image by Christian Ugarte.

Guarinuma is located close to the border with Colombia, and communities from both sides of the border came together to fight against the gold miners. That's how they managed to destroy the tailings ponds and get the miners out, DaCosta claimed.

Mining activities are not the only industrial projects putting a strain on Indigenous communities. Infrastructure works, such as the construction of highways, hydroelectric plants, and railways are another issue. The number of conflicts caused by such projects between 2017 and 2021, according to the RRI report, came to 585 across the five countries included in the study. Peru was the leading country for conflicts resulting from infrastructure projects, with 457 communities affected. This was followed by Mexico, with 77, and Honduras, where the figure stood at 51.

Laura Hernández, coordinator of the Mexico branch of the Continental Network of the Indigenous Women of the Americas (*Enlace Continental de las Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas – ECMIA*), pointed to the construction of the Tren Maya as an example of what happens when infrastructure projects are imposed upon Indigenous territories.

"The Tren Maya is part of a larger project, which is the Interoceanic Corridor. And when a project like this comes along, the destruction of the flora and fauna, Indigenous territories, archaeological sites, and spiritual sites comes with it," said Hernández.

Josefina Tunki, together with other leaders from the PSHA, marches against mining in Morona Santiago in Ecuador. Image courtesy of Lluvia Communication.

Hernández also mentioned how the implementation of construction works such as these contributes to the desertification of the soil and drought in lakes and rivers. For Indigenous communities, the ECMIA coordinator added, it changes their communities' way of life.

On top of the problems posed by mining and infrastructure projects, prospecting and drilling for oil is another grave threat. The Ecuadorian Indigenous leader Patricia Gualinga remembers how her community stood up to the Argentinean General Fuel Company (*Compañía General de Combustibles – CGC*) in 2002, when it entered her community of Sarayaku, located in the province of Pastaza in the Ecuadorian Amazon, to start their extractive activities.

After years of complaints, in 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) made a ruling in favor of the people of Sarayaku. After all those years, however, Gualinga said that the practices of those engaged in extractive activities remain the same: "every week, we have seen oil spills take place in the northeastern regions, which have been affecting the river basins of the Amazon River; such is the case of the Napo River, which is a tributary of the Amazon, and has been severely polluted."

The environmental impact of the oil industry can be witnessed across the Amazon region. According to the RRI's study, between 2017 and 2021, there were 158 communities affected by hydrocarbons across the five countries studied. Peruvian communities suffered the most, topping the ranking with 131 communities affected, followed by Colombia, with 27.

According to *Stained By Oil*, a special report by Mongabay, at least 282 cases have been opened against 72 different oil companies in Peru and Colombia, with at least half of these companies having received fines that total over $55 million.

Indigenous peoples in Mexico demanding the freeing of political prisoners and against mining activities and the plundering of water sources. Image courtesy of Astrid Arellano.

A geospatial analysis carried out by the same report found that 1,647 Indigenous territories in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru have been affected by the superimposition of oil blocks over their territory.

“Indigenous territories guarantee water, food, [and] clean air. If they are destroyed, the future of humanity on this planet is also put at risk,” said José Gregorio Díaz Mirabal, who has led the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (*Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica – COICA*) for almost four years. The organization represents communities from across the nine countries that share the Amazon biome.

Díaz Mirabal mourned the fact that the world’s forests are disappearing at such an alarming rate, one that is even faster in the Amazon.

“Now we have reached the point of no return, we’ve run out of options. Either we defend our territory, or we’ll disappear,” he said.

The slow process of granting land titles

Although all of the countries investigated in Mongabay's special report officially recognize their Indigenous peoples in their Constitutions, the strength of legal protections for these communities continues to be an enormous problem. Likewise, although every one of these countries has signed up to Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) regarding Indigenous and tribal peoples, this has not guaranteed that these communities' rights are respected.

Peruvian Indigenous leaders are demanding that the government attends to their demands for land titles. Image courtesy of IRI Perú.

For José Díaz Mirabal, the lead coordinator of COICA, the lack of granting land titles for Indigenous lands is one of the biggest problems they face, since the lack of legal recognition of Indigenous people's rights to their land has led to conflicts and disputes. For 15 years, Díaz Mirabal pointed out, Indigenous peoples have been asking to be granted titles to 100 million hectares (247 million acres) of land in the Amazon.

"If this can be achieved before 2025, then there is hope. But titles have not been granted because the land has been sold off to mining and oil companies. If the situation continues as it is today, then there'll be no answers to the climate, economic, social, legal and moral crises [that we are facing]," Díaz Mirabal added.

The situation regarding the granting of titles to Indigenous territories is different in every country, but in general, the delays in recognizing Indigenous people's territorial rights are affecting Indigenous communities across the continent. In the Amazon region, Chris Van Dam explained, the granting of land titles started in the 1970s, but there then came a point "in which economic interests realized that these territories are not empty or poor places – much the opposite, there are territories rich in resources both above and below ground."

In Peru, the granting of land titles is one of the central demands of the country's Indigenous peoples. As reported by Mongabay in *Communities in Resistance*, the wait for the recognition of territorial rights can take up to thirty years, as has been the case for the Unipacuyacu community. In total, 694 communities are still waiting to be granted land titles across the five regions of the Peruvian Amazon, with 647 of these communities still waiting for their claims to be recognized, let alone granted.

The Mura, who have been struggling for land rights for decades, say they never agreed for the energy project to pass through their territory and were never consulted or compensated. Image by Ana Ionova for Mongabay.

"There has never been the political will on the part of the Colombian government," Quilcué said about the process of granting land titles in her country. "We have made progress as we have continued to demand [our rights], but of course, there's still a long way to go."

Miguel Vargas, the executive director of the Bolivian NGO Center for Legal Studies and Social Investigation (*Centro de Estudios Jurídicos e Investigación Social – CEJIS*), said that the process of granting titles to Original Community Lands (*Tierras Comunitarias de Origen – TCOs*) was making good progress until 2010, however since then "the percentage of TCOs that have been established is minimal and there has even been a reverse in the recognition of Indigenous lands."

Patricia Gualinga spoke of how her community of Sarayaku, in Ecuador, only gained the titles to their land after "a great amount of protest," and how, in the years since, they have helped other Indigenous peoples gain titles to large parts of their territories.

"This [having land titles] acts as a sort of shield for us, as it allows us to defend ourselves," she said.

Aerial image shows the deforestation inside the Piripkura Indigenous Territory in Mato Grosso state. Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), a nonprofit that advocates for the rights of Indigenous and traditional peoples, also found evidence of cattle ranching within these protected lands. Image courtesy of Christian Braga/Greenpeace.

The situation in Mexico and Guatemala is somewhat more complicated, since both countries do not recognize Indigenous people's property rights.

“The right to one’s territory is not recognized, but Indigenous communities know what their territory is and they defend it, backed and protected by international laws that Mexico has signed up to,” said Francisco López, a researcher from the Colegio de San Luis, and a member of the Mixtec people.

López pointed out that there are cases in which Indigenous communities have won recognition of their territorial rights through the legal system, as happened with the Huetosachi community, part of the Rarámuri people, in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. In 2015, Mexico’s Supreme Court of Justicerecognized that the Huetosachi community were the legitimate owners of a property that was being claimed by a trading company in the municipality of Urique.

Laura Hernández, from ECMIA, explained that in Mexico there are *ejidos*, or traditional communal lands, that, in some cases, belong to peasant or Indigenous communities. She also explained how, in 1992, a reform took place “to facilitate the privatization of these lands, especially for the development of infrastructure projects.”

Miguel López Vega, a councilor on the Indigenous Council of Government in Mexico. Image courtesy of Astrid Arellano.

A similar situation prevails in Guatemala.

“The way that Indigenous people govern and run their territories is not recognized, there are no legal mechanisms that allow us to say that we are the owners [of our land],” explained Dolores de Jesús Cabnal, president of the Indigenous Council on Climate Change.

“We see governments come and go, but we don’t see any change in terms of the policies towards Indigenous peoples. Why do they attack us so much? At its heart, it’s about land ownership. All governments are looking to exploit the land. So, for them, us Indigenous people are nothing but a nuisance,” Jesús Amadeo Martínez told Mongabay. Amadeo Martínez is an Indigenous leader from El Salvador and currently the general coordinator of the Abya Yala Indigenous Forum and chairman of the Indigenous Council of Central America (*Consejo Indígena de Centro América – CICA*), an organization which brings together smaller groups from Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and Mexico.

Faced with this range of issues and threats, Indigenous peoples have sought to increase and improve their level of representation in both national and international political spheres.

Indigenous peoples on the global stage

José Díaz Mirabal, the lead coordinator of COICA, also talked about the greater political representation that Indigenous peoples are gaining on the world stage.

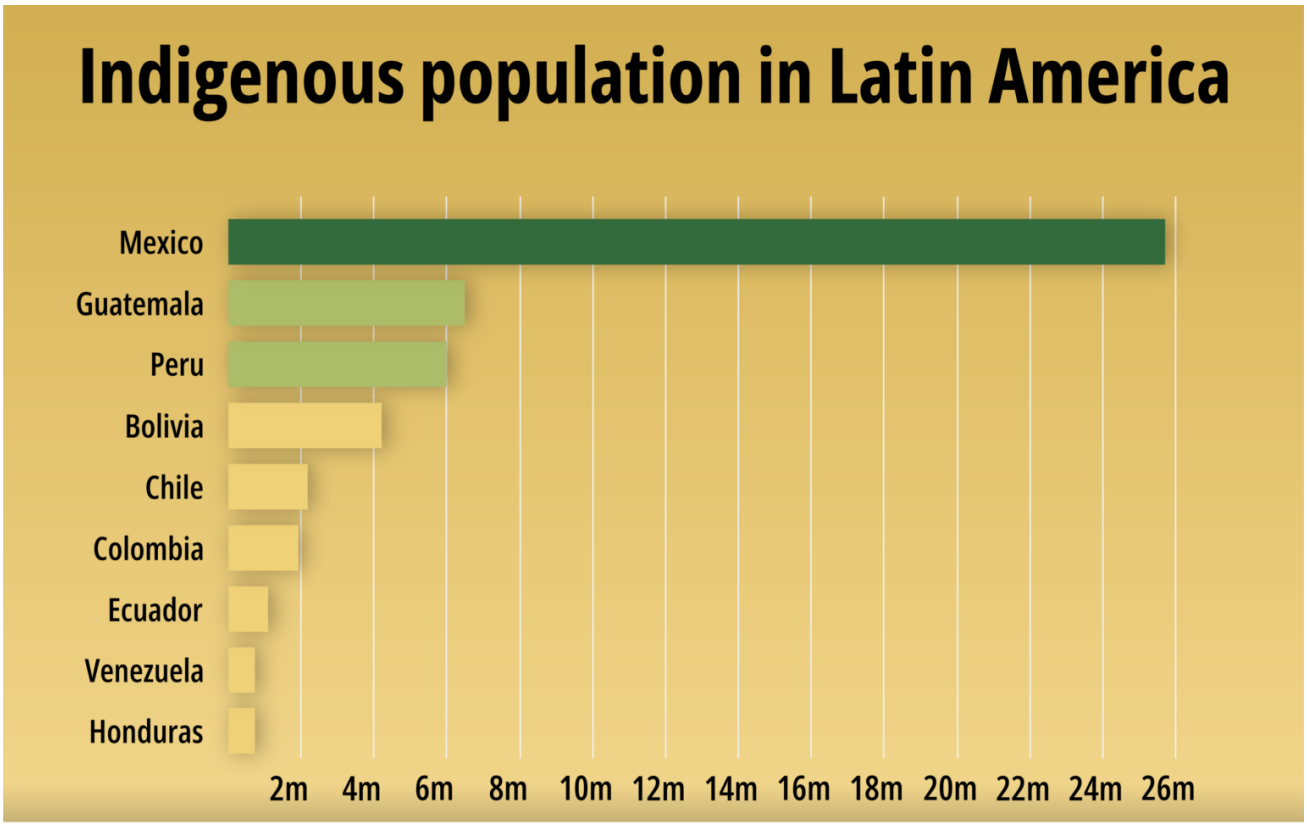
“We have tried to take up the position of international spokespeople [on these issues], and we have had a global impact because, when we have got together with those from Asia, Africa, Central America and the Indigenous peoples in these organizations, we have been able to sit down [not only] with governments from Europe, [but] also with our own governments at events in Europe,” he explained. “It’s incredible: we can’t speak [with our own governments] here in South America, but at these international conferences, we have to speak with them.”

José Gregorio Díaz Mirabal, General Coordinator of the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) speaks at the United Nations Permanent Forum of Indigenous Issues. Image courtesy of ©Ecodeo.

Silvana Baldovino, from the Peruvian Society of Environmental Law (*Sociedad Peruana de Derecho Ambiental – SPDA*), believes that Indigenous leaders have become more visible thanks to their participation in international summits. Baldovino recalled how the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) included Indigenous peoples as a member for the first time at their Congress in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 2016. The same thing happened in Peru in 2014, Baldovino said, at the United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP 20, when indigenous peoples were represented for the first time in the history of international climate summits.

The presence of Indigenous peoples at international events, however, has gone even further, since they have managed to have both a voice and a vote on the agreements that they are involved in. At the IUCN's most recent World Conservation Congress in 2021, which took place in Marseille, France, an agreement was passed that called for the protection of 80% of the Amazon rainforest by 2025, a proposal that came from COICA's grassroots activists.

At the COP 26 event in Glasgow, Scotland, one of the most important commitments made, backed by 141 countries, was to halt and reverse deforestation and soil degradation by 2030. About $18 billion has been assigned to achieve this goal, including $1.7 billion dedicated to supporting Indigenous peoples stewardship of forests.



Sources: México INEG 2015; Guatemala: INE 2018; Perú INEI 2017; Bolivia INE 2012; Chile INE 2017; Colombia DANE 2018; Ecuador INEC 2020; Venezuela INE 2011; Honduras INE 2013

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“Seven delegations of Indigenous peoples from different regions of Latin America went to COP 26, and when we have to negotiate these global proposals, we do so collectively. What we want and what we are doing is to make sure that we as Indigenous peoples have the chance to make big proposals and then work on these in every country across the region,” said Dolores de Jesús Cabnal, president of the Indigenous Council on Climate Change, in Guatemala.

For these Indigenous representatives, it is not only enough to be more visible on the world stage. One of their main concerns is how to have more of a say on how funds destined for their communities are administered.

“In Glasgow there were a lot of announcements. Five or six months have gone by since then and there are still no mechanisms set up that will allow these resources, like the $1.7 billion for supporting Indigenous peoples and the fight against climate change, to trickle down to the communities themselves,” de Jesús Cabnal explained.

According to a study by Rainforest Norway, less than 1% of climate funds end up reaching Indigenous peoples.

“There are many reasons for this, but one of the main ones is the distrust that governments and donors have about the capacity of Indigenous organizations to efficiently and effectively use these funds,” said Chris Van Dam, from the NGO Forest Trends.

Indigenous leaders and activists gathered in the streets of Glasgow, Scotland, during COP26. The climate protest march attracted 100,000 people. Image courtesy of Rainforest Foundation Norway.

Van Dam signals that work is going on with regional Indigenous organizations to create a mechanism that would allow them to directly manage the climate funds.

“By the end of 2025 there should be a mechanism, run by Indigenous organizations themselves, that allows them to manage these funds themselves.”

Díaz Mirabal has faith in Indigenous organizations’ ability to achieve their goals.

“We have a voice, we have a right, that’s for sure; but that achievement has come at the cost of so much pain, so much sacrifice, and so many losses. It has not been gifted to us,” he said. “However, this is still not enough, we need our rights to be truly respected, that words turn into actions. Every organization in every country that is defending our rights is necessary, they are key to Indigenous people’s lives.”

As Indigenous leaders have gained more representation on the world stage, the makeup of Indigenous leaders themselves has also started to become more diverse. The appearance of new and powerful female voices of leadership is another achievement of the Indigenous

movement.

Indigenous women in positions of leadership

“People have made sure that the most prominent figures, the presidents, have always been men. Now that it’s fashionable to have a female vice-president, we have risen up the ranks a little (…) It got to a point where we, as women, said no: women have to have a voice, we have to be in the position to speak out, we have to be more visible,” said Patricia Gualinga, the Kichwa Indigenous leader from the community of Sarayaku, Ecuador.

Patricia Gualinga, leader of the Sarayaku community in Ecuador. Image courtesy of Patricia Gualinga.

Gualinga points to the creation of the group Amazonian Women (*Mujeres Amazónicas*), a coalition made up of more than 100 women from across Ecuador, who strive to defend their territories and strengthen their knowledge, as well as preserve their culture and reaffirm their commitment to defending Mother Nature.

“We also have our own forms of organization, of protesting, of looking after ourselves, but, above all, we have a non-hierarchical structure where everyone can talk, everyone can make statements, where every woman is a leader,” she said.

This year, the Indigenous World 2022 report, which has just been published by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), is dedicated to women and women’s issues. The study indicates that the discrimination, marginalization and exclusion

to which Indigenous peoples are subject is expressed, to a large extent, in violence against women.

According to the document, they are the victims of rape at the hands of colonists, soldiers, policemen, foreign workers and tourists, cases of aggression that they don't usually report and which are therefore not registered.

"In fact, Indigenous woman and girls stand a much higher chance of being victims of different forms of sexual violence," the report specifies.

Teresita Antazú, a leader from the Yanesha people of Peru. Image courtesy of COICA.

The 2021 meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues featured a discussion on the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic had worsened the numerous pre-existing inequalities, in particular reference to Indigenous women and girls.

From Mexico, Laura Hernández talked of how female leadership has grown in the last few years, but that there is still a long way to go.

"For an Indigenous woman to become a deputy or senator in their countries it's still a struggle, as they need all their strength and all the backing, not only from other women, but from their own colleagues, organizations and communities. When women win, Indigenous peoples win too," she said.

For Fany Kuiru, from the National Organization for the Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC), female leadership has always been there, but it has often been ignored or made invisible.

“In the Amazon Basin I have seen great leadership from women from Brazil, such as in all these marches they are doing to defend the Amazon from deforestation, from forest fires, and from the policies of [Brazilian president Jair] Bolsonaro,” Kuiru extrapolated.

Dolores Cabnal, an Indigenous leader from Guatemala. Image courtesy of Dolores Cabnal.

In Chile, of the 17 seats reserved for Indigenous peoples in the Constitutional Convention, nine have been occupied by women. Furthermore, an Indigenous woman, Elisa Loncon, a Mapuche leader, was elected president of the Constitutional Convention and she now leads the Convention’s mission to draft a new Constitution.

The six Indigenous women interviewed for this special report spoke of what it means to be female leaders of their communities, and how they have had to push forward in order to be able to occupy these spaces on an equal footing to men. They also spoke about the discrimination they faced when they first took up their leadership roles.

For Ruth Alipaz, from the National Coordinator for the Defense of Indigenous Peasant Territories and Protected Areas (*Coordinadora Nacional de Defensa de los Territorios Indígenas Originarios Campesinos y Áreas Protegidas – CONTIOCAP*), it is women who

are at the forefront of defending their territories.

“We are there in the marches and vigils. We were the ones taking care of the food, everyone handed the little bits of food they had brought to the women and we gathered it together and made sure it was enough for everyone,” she said.

Since the start of her term as president of the PSHA, Josefina Tunki has opposed mining in the Indigenous group’s territory. Image courtesy of Lluvia Communication.

“They call us leaders because we speak out, because we say things how they are and we don’t remain silent […] What are the implications of that? It means that you’re looked upon negatively, often it means that you’re marginalized. It means they ridicule you. It means that, at some point, they’ll try and destroy you, and make you feel unsafe,” Patricia Gualinga, the Ecuadorian Indigenous leader, reflected. “But it also means that you can make progress, and help other people to shake off their fear […] That’s what being an Indigenous leader is about.”

Banner image: *Portrait of Sarayaku Warmikuna, member of Mujeres Amazónicas (Amazonian Women). The women of the community were the first to be part of the collective known as Amazonian Women. Image courtesy of Esteffany Bravo.*

Related listening from Mongabay’s podcast: *A conversation with Cultural Survival’s Daisee Francour and The Oakland Institute’s Anuradha Mittal on the importance of securing Indigenous land rights within the context of a global push for land privatization.*

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