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ISSUE BRIEF

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# Environmental Defenders Under Threat: Global Lessons from the Colombian Amazon



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## ***Issue Brief: Environmental Defenders Under Threat***

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**Front cover photo:** Environmental defender in Colombia with a shirt that reads "I promote and defend human rights." Photo credit: Marisol Manrique Morales / USAID Colombia

**Back cover photo:** Kogi village in Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia Photo by Michaela via Adobe Stock.

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# Environmental Defenders: Rising Concerns about an Urgent Human Rights Issue

## INTRODUCTION: A RISING WAVE OF THREATS AND VIOLENCE

Mounting global concerns about climate change and biodiversity loss are bringing even closer attention to a related human rights issue—the growing threats and physical violence directed at environmental defenders.<sup>1</sup> These are people who seek to protect populations, territories, livelihoods, cultures, and biodiversity from the harmful environmental effects of ill-advised or illegal resource use and extraction. Beyond the risks to individuals, human rights violations against environmental defenders create a chilling effect on community leaders and advocacy organizations seeking to voice and address economic, social, and ecological concerns.

This issue brief describes some of the main actors and dynamics surrounding the issue of environmental defenders and examines the case of the Colombian Amazon as an example of the ways in which the grievances of environmental defenders are enmeshed in broader governance challenges—including many areas of continuing focus for USAID programming. The topic of environmental defenders intersects with core USAID policy concerns, such as the [Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance](#) (USAID 2013), [Biodiversity Policy](#) (USAID 2014), [Policy on Promoting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (USAID 2020), [National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#) (White House 2021), [U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption](#) (White House 2021), and [Climate Strategy 2022-2030](#) (USAID 2022).

The Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, for example, calls for “responding to human rights violations by supporting and protecting human rights defenders and other watchdog groups.” Similarly, the Biodiversity Policy recognizes the cross-cutting nature of environmental defenders’ concerns, observing that “a strong [environmental] constituency will include all groups within society, with special attention given to Indigenous Peoples, women, the disabled, and other traditionally excluded groups [to] promote rights-based approaches, collective action, and stewardship.” After discussion of the range of issues raised by the threats and violence faced by environmental defenders worldwide, the issue brief focuses on the case of the Colombian Amazon to illustrate how the interplay of national and local political and economic dynamics can produce environmental harms that threaten their communities. The issue brief then provides examples of integrated USAID program responses in Colombia and concludes with a broader discussion of key areas of engagement and donor support that demonstrate possible responses to protect the rights and well-being of environmental defenders.

While most prominently publicized after brutal killings of high-profile defenders such as the 2016 killing of the Indigenous leader and Goldman prize winner, Berta Cáceres, in Honduras, a rising wave of threats, intimidation, assaults, and violence directed against

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “environmental defenders,” “land defenders,” and “human rights defenders” are sometimes used in ways that overlap, as do the issues of concern to each group. The focus of this issue brief is environmental defenders, but these categories often intersect in practice (or are the same people), and they are targeted by opponents for similar types of environmental and social activism.



"Berta didn't die, she multiplied." Berta Cáceres was an environmental defender from Honduras, who was assassinated in 2016. Her activism has inspired other activists around the world. Photo by Tinalar via Wikimedia Commons.

environmental defenders has been unfolding in dozens of countries around the world. Although the problem is especially prevalent in Latin American countries such as Colombia, Mexico, Honduras, and Brazil, there are also many examples from Asia (Philippines, Cambodia, India, Burma, and Bangladesh) and Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania).

In 2020, there were 227 reported killings, the worst year on record. Global Witness and its partners have documented 2,177 killings of environmental defenders from 2002-2022. From 2016 to 2020, there were more than 10 killings in 12 countries (Global Witness 2020, 2021). The actual numbers are very likely higher as many deaths go unreported.

The risks faced by environmental defenders are far more extensive than is reflected in the numbers of lethal attacks. John Knox, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment stated that, "for every one killed, there are 20 to 100 others harassed, unlawfully and lawfully arrested, and sued for defamation, amongst other intimidations"

(UNEP, 2018). Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association has identified a broad spectrum of challenges and threats to those advocating for climate justice. Climate justice activists have been subject to vilification, smear campaigns, disinformation, criminalization, legal harassment, sexual and gender-based violence, and surveillance fueled by powerful political and economic actors labeling them as "extremists," "militants," "anti-development," and "terrorists." These sorts of rhetoric and defamatory accusations are often precursors to arrests, imprisonment, or physical violence (Voule 2021).

Moreover, the "judicialization" and criminalization of dissent—the use of groundless lawsuits and arbitrary detentions as a form of intimidation and censorship—undermines trust in justice systems and the rule of law. It also blocks the efforts of communities to call to account powerful interests responsible for environmental harms. These quasi-legal actions are expedient strategies for political actors in

semi-authoritarian states, who wish to retain a patina of legality while effectively silencing the voices of environmental defenders. At the same time, however, the use of such questionable legal tactics often exacerbates problems of legitimacy and accountability in states already suffering from flawed governance (Menton et al. 2021; Birss 2017).

## WHO ARE ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS?

The U.S. government interagency working group considers environmental defenders as citizens, activists, journalists, and members of groups who exercise their human rights to try peacefully to protect an area or its natural resources from negative environmental impacts by ongoing or proposed activities. Global Witness has highlighted the underlying dynamics of power and politics behind attacks on environmental and land defenders, referring to them as “people who take a stand and peaceful action against the unjust, discriminatory, corrupt or damaging exploitation of natural resources or the environment” (Global Witness 2021). UN Special Rapporteurs note that environmental defenders carry out many activities related to land and environmental grievances, “including those working on issues related to extractive industries, and construction and development projects” (UNEP 2018). Environmental defenders are made up of diverse groups and individuals, including Indigenous Peoples, rural communities, local conservation and forest monitors, environmental activists, human rights advocates, journalists, lawyers, women and youth leaders, and other individuals affected by or concerned about specific environmental impacts.

## ECONOMIC INTERESTS, WEAK INSTITUTIONS, AND ILLEGALITY

The issue of environmental defenders is linked to the challenges of climate change, biodiversity, healthy ecosystems, pollution, and land and resource governance through the social conflicts that arise from environmentally harmful economic activities. These

often include large-scale projects in oil and gas, mining, dams, agro-industry, ranching, and infrastructure. The harmful impacts of oil spills, water contamination, illegal logging, encroachment of Indigenous lands, and threats to livelihoods and cultures trigger community protests and organized campaigns led by environmental defenders. Land grabbing and insecure land tenure also pose serious threats to the well-being of rural communities. Even where formal land tenure or ancestral rights exist, they may not be protected by the state (Grajales 2015). “Land defenders” bring a spotlight to these institutional failures and demand protection and restitution of individual and community land rights (Gilbert and Khan 2021).

Well-connected and influential developers and business interests, both legal and illegal, often conduct high-value activities like cattle ranching and mineral extraction in remote resource-rich regions. Illegally acquired extractive concessions are at times facilitated by corruption (White House 2021). The state’s presence in these areas may be limited and ineffective—or even complicit in violence—and the local inhabitants are often poor and politically marginalized, with their vulnerability increased by health risks like malaria and COVID-19. Testimony from environmental defenders indicates that security forces—police, military, militias, and private security guards—have sometimes engaged in intimidation and abuse of environmental defenders at the behest of influential business interests (Forst 2019). Threats and attacks are also common from groups seeking land for criminal activities such as illegal logging, money laundering, or drug trafficking. Researchers have found that killings of environmental defenders are more frequent in countries in governments that mix elements of democracy and autocracy, especially when combined with significant foreign direct investment, mineral extraction, or large Indigenous populations (Le Billon and Lujala 2021).<sup>2</sup> Countries with high numbers of environmental defender killings also tend to cluster toward the lower half of the 180 countries ranked in the Transparency International 2020 Corruption Index—e.g., Democratic Republic of the Congo (170), Nicaragua (159), Honduras (157), Guatemala (149), Bangladesh (146), Mexico (124), Philippines (115), Brazil (94), and Colombia (92).

2 [Civicus Monitor](#) reports that most killings take place in “repressed” states with limited civic freedoms, and notes that, in states with “closed” civic spaces, killings are likely to be underreported.

## THE VULNERABILITY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The land, culture, and livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples are at the heart of the concerns and grievances of many environmental defenders. Many of the areas of the globe most at risk for intensive resource exploitation are inhabited by Indigenous communities. The most comprehensive recent survey estimates that at least 36 percent of intact forest landscapes are within Indigenous Peoples' lands (Fa et al. 2021). Logging, ranching, agribusiness, and mineral extraction contribute to rapid rates of land conversion in many of these areas, often without the adequate consultation and consent of the affected communities (FPP 2016). It is estimated that one-third of the forest carbon found in subtropical and tropical countries is "located in areas where Indigenous Peoples and local communities lack formal recognition of their tenure rights" (Rights and Resources 2018).

The unregulated or unlawful exploitation of resources by powerful political and economic actors and corporations operating in Indigenous lands provokes protests and political mobilizations by Indigenous leaders in defense of their livelihoods and territories. Tensions also arise between formal government institutions and the traditional practices of Indigenous communities, which often include community-based resource rights, dispute resolution by recognized leaders or elders, and spiritual values tied to landscapes, flora, and fauna. The lack of government sanctions and corporate accountability for those involved in land grabbing and environmental destruction contributes to perceptions of impunity in Indigenous communities (Human Rights Watch 2019).

The activism of Indigenous leaders seeking the attention of government officials, support for land rights, and environmental justice is often met with indifference, resistance, or violence. Their lives may be endangered for reporting corruption, claiming land or water rights, or advocating for a healthy environment. (Forst 2019). In 2020, "over a third of all fatal attacks [targeted] Indigenous people despite only making up 5 percent of the world's population... Indigenous peoples were also the target of 5 out of the 7 mass killings recorded in 2020" (Global Witness 2021). In

some countries, state authorities continue to allow the business sector to operate inside Indigenous territories even as political leaders publicly advocate for Indigenous rights (United Nations 2021).

## HEIGHTENED RISKS FOR WOMEN ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

While most attacks and killings are directed at men, analysts have identified a strong gendered dimension to assaults on environmental defenders. Women are often subject to gender-based violence by personnel from public and private security forces (Venegas and Van Teijlingen 2021). Women defenders resisting extractive activities have been subjected to physical and sexual abuse both during arrests and in detention. Women environmental defenders also experience intimidation, verbal, and media abuse that attacks them for breaking gender norms, labeling them as bad mothers and wives. Despite these attempts to stigmatize and coerce women in an atmosphere of violence, women have played a leading role among environmental defenders (San Pedro 2019). Women have been active in organizing non-violent protests on issues ranging from deforestation in India to corporate mining activities that endanger the quantity and quality of water accessible to rural households in Latin America (IUCN 2020). In some instances, women have resorted to protests because they have been excluded from negotiations over contentious environmental issues by private sector officials who engage only male counterparts (Barcia 2017). In response to these challenges, Indigenous women have created organizations such as the [Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu](#) in Colombia and the [Mujeres Amazónicas](#) in Ecuador to mobilize against environmental threats and protect their land and traditions for future generations. Umbrella organizations that work more broadly on issues of violence and discrimination against women, such as the [Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras](#), offer support to local women defender groups and help link them to national and international political processes.

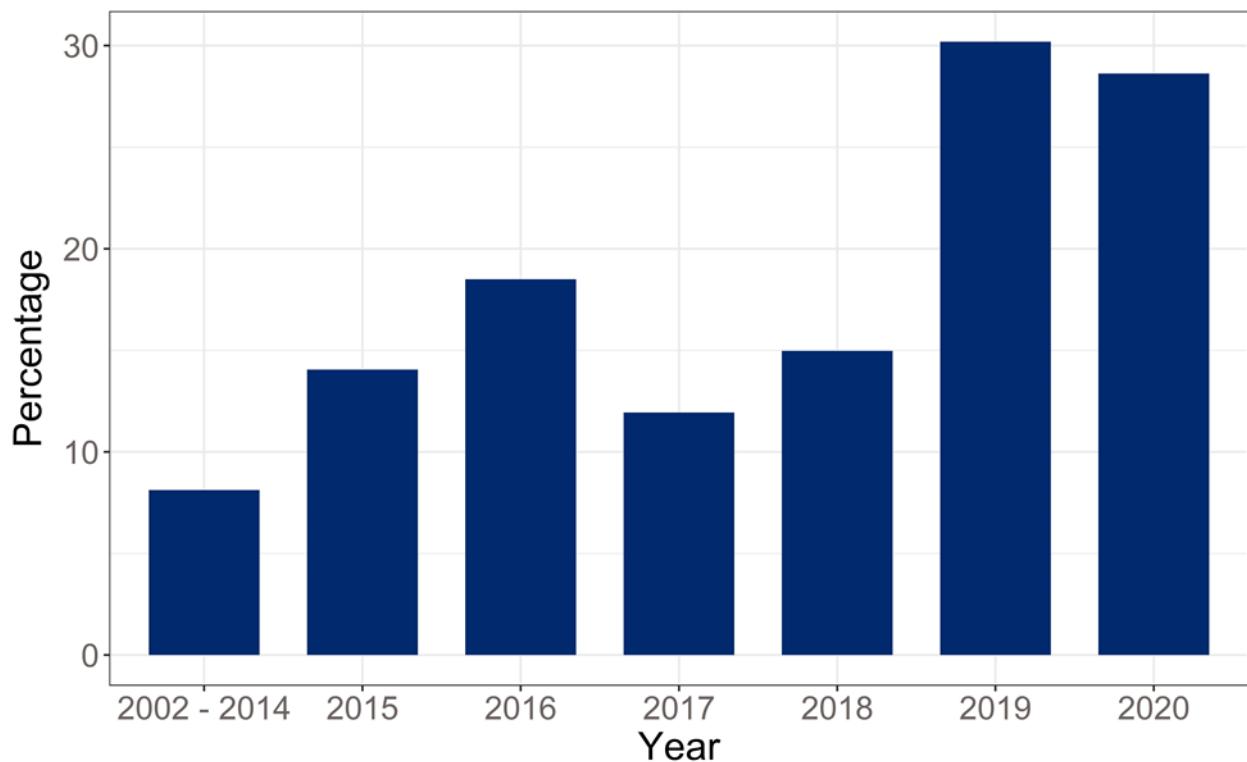
## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 lockdowns imposed by state and non-state actors have restricted law enforcement, regulatory oversight, protection measures, and the movements and mobilization of environmental defenders. One official from the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights of Peru observed that threats from criminal organizations encroaching on Indigenous lands “exploded” during the pandemic (Sierra Praeli 2021). In Colombia, armed groups imposed curfews and lockdowns on local populations to prevent the spread of COVID-19, in some cases killing civilians when they did not comply (Human Rights Watch 2020). In some countries, the efforts of environmental defenders have been constrained by the passage of laws limiting assemblies and criminalizing protests. Protests have been shut down, ostensibly in response to COVID-19, despite the continuation of other types of large gatherings (Human Rights Watch 2021). Criticisms of government responses to COVID-19 have been used as a general rationale to silence activists.

COVID-19 has also had a disproportionate effect on women activists, who have suffered from rising domestic violence, increased care burdens, and economic hardships that have made it more difficult to participate in mobilization efforts (SEI 2020). Activists fear that various emergency responses to the pandemic will be kept in place as coercive mechanisms to limit civic spaces even after the pandemic (Bille Larsen and Lador 2021).

# Colombia

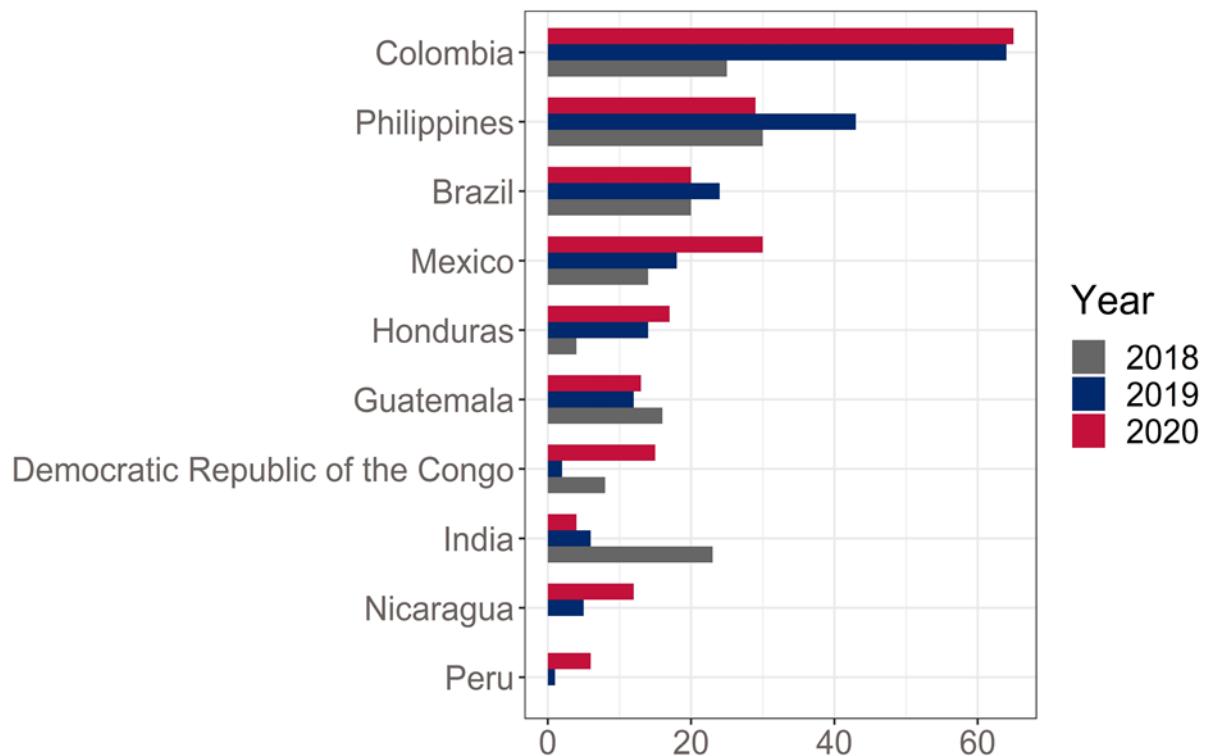
Colombia has figured in the top five countries worldwide in killings of environmental and land defenders in each report by Global Witness and its partners over the past decade. Colombia's percentage of the total number of killings as reported in their data is shown in Figure 1 below. Note that the bar for the years 2002-2014 is an average of around 8 percent, with yearly totals thereafter showing rising levels of fatal attacks that reach 30 percent in recent years.



Source: Global Witness [annual report archives](#); Global Witness 2020, 2021

**Figure 1:** Percentage of Killings of Environmental and Land Defenders in Colombia as Part of Total Killings Reported by Global Witness and its Partners (2002-2020)

Figure 2 shows the top ten countries ranked by total 2018-2020 killings, along with the number of killings for each of those three years. In 2019 and 2020, Colombia led the world in the number of environmental defender killings, with more than 60 fatal attacks each year (Global Witness 2020, 2021).



Source: Global Witness [annual report archives](#); Global Witness 2020, 2021

**Figure 2:** Environmental and Land Defender Killings, 2018-2020

# The Colombian Amazon

## BIODIVERSITY AND CONFLICT

Although the vulnerability of environmental defenders is a global phenomenon, and threats to environmental defenders are common throughout Colombia, the situations that defenders face are grounded in the specific political and development challenges found in the landscapes and regions where they reside. The Colombian Amazon is a region where economic interests, unresolved political conflicts, weak institutions, and failure to implement key provisions of a historic national peace agreement have converged in distinctive ways to create the conditions leading to attacks on environmental defenders.

Colombia is the second most biodiverse country in the world. Its Amazon natural region covers 35 percent of the country's territory, with 11 protected areas, including Chiribiquete, a World Heritage Site and the world's largest tropical rainforest national park (WWF 2018). Colombia's Amazon is also rich in natural resources with great potential for high-value economic activities, including timber, coal, gold, and land for agriculture and cattle ranching. Critics have raised questions, however, about the sustainability of the country's prevailing "extractivist" development model, which they view as reliant on the legal and illegal depletion and despoiling of natural resources (Krause 2020). Climate change is trending toward hotter and drier conditions in the region, with prospects of landscape change from forest to savannah and an increase in intense, large-scale fires (Fundación Ideas para la Paz and adelphi 2021).

The Amazon region is inhabited by peasant farmers, Afro-Colombians, and dozens of Indigenous groups scattered across 183 self-governing reserves (Moloney 2020). Indigenous reserves often overlap with national parks and protected areas. A diverse range of outside economic actors, from cattle ranchers, palm oil producers, and agribusiness entrepreneurs to industrial and artisanal miners, paramilitary groups, coca growers, narco-traffickers, and wildlife traffickers vie with local people for access to and control of Amazonian land and natural resources.

These activities have resulted in the expansion of the agricultural frontier, contamination of water resources, drug trafficking, and widespread environmental crime (InSight Crime 2021). Disputes over land, land grabbing, and land use are central to the conflict in the region.

## CROSS-CURRENTS OF COLOMBIA'S PEACE AGREEMENT

These complex dynamics unfold within the context of a landmark peace agreement signed in 2016 that was intended to end five decades of armed conflict between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's largest guerilla group. While the peace agreement appeared to set the stage for greater stability and new opportunities for economic development, its implementation has been difficult and its effects in the Amazon have been problematic.

During the years of conflict, violence impeded economic activities and the FARC controlled much of the Amazon region, including access to and use of natural resources. Rates of deforestation were lower than in Colombia's neighbors, largely due to restrictions set by the FARC. When the FARC's presence was withdrawn, it left an institutional vacuum and opened the door for land grabbing by displaced subsistence farmers, colonizers who saw new opportunities, ranchers seeking to expand grazing lands, large-scale agricultural interests, mining companies, small-scale gold miners, and various illicit actors. After years of meager budgets, government institutions for land and environmental management lacked the necessary capacity for regulatory oversight and enforcement to manage this intense land and resource competition. Land invasions and encroachment extended into national parks and Indigenous reserves. Hundreds of kilometers of new, illegal tertiary roads facilitated massive land conversion. In the four years following the peace agreement, deforestation soared, at times nearly doubling the previous rate (Botero 2021).

With high levels of land inequality, significant challenges in land policies, and no effective cadastral system, one of the main aims of the peace agreement was to implement a program of Comprehensive Rural Reform. But the land reform process has been slow and incomplete, largely limited by a complex and faulty framework for the implementation of land policies (Kroc Institute 2021). Moreover, in the wake of extended conflict, persistent corruption, and an ineffective state presence, communities in the Amazon region often have little trust in government agencies and authorities (Fundación Ideas para la Paz and adelphi 2021).

While the peace agreement demobilized the FARC, paramilitary and criminal armed groups continue to operate. These include the so-called FARC dissidents, who withdrew from the peace process and who have sought to rearm and establish territorial control in the national parks and reserves in the Amazon region (Semana 2020). These dissident “fronts” have clashed with the armed forces and police, while engaging in “threats, targeted killings, massacres, and other forms of violence against human rights defenders, leaders of social and environmental causes, and ex-combatants” (Kroc Institute 2021).

The government’s Operation Artemisa, a joint military-police operation, has made combating deforestation a national security priority. In 2020, Colombia’s defense minister said the clearing of forests in the Sierra de la Macarena National Park by FARC dissidents to develop coca plantations was “a crime against the environment,” asserting that “we are going to remove them from their dens” (AFP 2020). Peasants without land titles, however, are often obliged to engage in coca cultivation as their only viable livelihood or as a result of threats of violence from drug traffickers, illegal armed groups, and other actors (USAID 2017). Indigenous groups living in protected areas or reserves are also sometimes forced to provide labor for coca production. At the same time, Operation Artemisa itself has come under criticism for the excessive use of force against small farmer land occupants in protected areas, while failing to hold accountable the powerful economic interests driving land grabbing and deforestation (El Espectador 2020). Hence, people from communities long residing in the region face the challenge of resisting deforestation and land grabbing, while also finding themselves the target of repression or violence from various state security agencies and armed non-state actors.

## COCA PRODUCTION AND INSECURITY

The illicit production of coca—much of it in protected areas—is a major contributor to environmental threats and insecurity in the Colombian Amazon. Coca cultivation contributes to deforestation, the acidification of soils, and the contamination of water and land by fertilizers and the chemicals used in aerial eradication efforts. Where land has been cleared for cattle ranching, coca growing and processing often follows. Non-state armed groups and criminal organizations compete for control of the land used for coca growing in the Amazon. While under the peace agreement there is a Comprehensive National Plan for Substitution of illicit coca crops, including a focus on cultivators in protected areas, delays in compensatory payments, lack of support for legal economic alternatives, and continuing insecurity have limited the plan’s progress (Programa Somos Defensores 2021).

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

The combined effects of land poverty, land grabbing, weak land management, illicit and unsustainable resource extraction, environmental crime, and dissident armed groups have created an atmosphere of instability and violence in the Colombian Amazon. Political leaders, influential private sector figures, and members of illegal armed groups have at times stigmatized environmental defenders as “guerrilleros,” “terrorists,” “anti-development,” or “informants.” The Government of Colombia has addressed the issues of concern to environmental defenders through several institutional mechanisms. As documented by Michel Forst, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, the application and implementation of these intentions have been uneven and weak:

- The National Committee for Security Guarantees, created under the peace agreement and led by the President, focuses on reducing criminal and paramilitary activities, as well as protecting social and environmental activists. Although the Committee includes the participation of civil society, it has not been convened periodically as originally envisioned.
- The Ombudsman’s Office, which is responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights, has an early warning system that identifies high risk situations and potential attacks on defenders. The Ombudsman has been critical of the follow-up actions by government agencies responsible for responding to the warnings, finding them to be poorly coordinated, weak, or absent.
- The National Protection Unit (UPN) was created in 2011 with human rights responsibilities that include protection measures for social and environmental activists, ethnic leaders, and land restitution claimants. It currently protects 4,000 such leaders. However, the UPN’s information requirements, delays in risk assessment, use of former police or paramilitary bodyguards, and failure to recognize traditional forms of self-protection used by Indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups have spurred numerous complaints from local communities (Forst 2019).

To counter stigma and defamation, the Attorney General’s Office initiated [Lidera la Vida](#), a public campaign that seeks to bring attention to the threats to human rights defenders, highlights the importance of their efforts, and promotes and defends their rights. The campaign is composed of an alliance of government agencies, civil society organizations, media groups, and international supporters, including UN agencies and USAID.

In June 2018, under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, the Comprehensive Program of Guarantees for Women Leaders and Human Rights Defenders was adopted. Its goals include strengthening women leaders and their organizations, the institutionalization of protection measures, and efforts to combat impunity. The Ministry has initiated pilot activities and a strategy of “regionalization” to socialize the aims and activities of the Program, as well as develop linkages with local government and women’s social movements. However, the organizational process is still unfolding and women’s groups have expressed concerns about the frequency and substance of their participation (Díaz et al. 2021).

In November 2018, the national government established the [Timely Action Plan \(Plan de Acción Oportuna\)](#) for Prevention and Individual and Collective Protection of the Rights to Life, Liberty, Integrity, and Security of Human Rights Defenders, Social and Community Leaders, and Journalists. The Timely Action Plan recognizes the intensification of the struggle for control of illicit economic activities in strategic areas of the country after the peace agreement and the attendant risks to communities and human rights defenders, social leaders, and journalists. It is intended to respond to a lack of effective institutional and regulatory coordination among state authorities. The Plan is structured on three pillars: institutional coordination and redesign based on improved data and risk analysis; strategic actions that respond to identified risks based on subsidiarity and local dynamics; and

improved communication to combat false political portrayals of defenders and elevate public understanding of state actions to address the situation of human rights defenders.

In December 2019, Colombia was one of 24 Latin American and Caribbean countries to sign the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation, and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, better known as the [Escazú Agreement](#). This is the first international treaty to have provisions on the rights and protection of environmental defenders. The Escazú Agreement includes commitments for access to environmental information, public participation in environmental decision-making, and environmental justice, consistent with [Principle 10](#) of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. According to the text, signatory countries “shall guarantee an enabling environment for the work of persons, associations, organizations or groups that promote environmental protection, by recognizing and protecting them.”

Despite support from President Iván Duque, the Escazú Agreement has not been ratified by the Colombian Congress, where it has met with resistance from organized agricultural, cattle ranching, and petroleum interests, as well as members of his own party. Allegedly, some political and economic actors may have ties to paramilitary groups that have been implicated in violence against environmental defenders in the countryside (Grajales 2017). These critics assert that the Agreement’s principles are already present in Colombia’s legal regime and its requirements represent interference in the country’s sovereignty (Infobae 2021; Pesquisa Javeriana 2021). Proponents see the Agreement, however, as a set of clear international obligations that will bring government, the private sector, and civil society to the same table and ensure that the rights of environmental defenders are not ignored (Corporate Accountability Lab 2021).

Domestically, during 2019-2020, the Colombian government conducted an extended process of consultation with hundreds of human rights activists and social leaders across the country to develop a comprehensive policy of safeguards for human rights defenders (Departamento Nacional de Planeación 2021). On November 29, 2021, President Duque approved the “Public Policy of Guarantees and Respect for the Work of Defending Human Rights and Social Leadership” (CONPES 2021). The new policy is an explicit response to rising trends in threats, assaults, and killings. It is designed to 1) address risk factors; 2) strengthen prevention and protection; 3) bolster investigations and prosecutions; and 4) support the rights of defenders to organize and demonstrate against official policies and actions. The planned execution of the policy is once again complex, involving coordination among 14 different government ministries and agencies over a five-year implementation period (CONPES 2021). The urgency of moving forward with the policy is clear, however. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR), there were 202 allegations of human rights defender killings in 2021, with 78 cases verified, 39 in the process of verification, and 85 cases that could not be verified according to UN standards (UNOHCHR 2022).

# Integrated Responses: USAID Programs in Colombia

The programs of the USAID Mission in Colombia provide examples from across the country of how donors can address the issue of environmental defenders by integrating them within programs in both democracy, human rights, and governance and the environmental sector (ENV). They illustrate some of the practical steps to address challenges faced by Colombian environmental defenders in the current context of increasing vulnerability and high levels of risk.

The [Human Rights Activity](#) (2016-2022) works with the Government of Colombia, civil society, and the private sector to develop prevention and protection measures for human rights defenders. Working in conflict-affected areas, the Human Rights Activity strengthens systems to protect social leaders and human rights defenders working on environmental matters and to prevent and respond to attacks against them. Its activities include public awareness campaigns and training on human rights for public officials, journalists, social leaders, students, and human rights defenders. It also focuses on the vulnerability of minority communities and victims of gender-based violence in the post-peace agreement period. The Human Rights Activity has trained over 330 prosecutors and investigators from the Attorney General's Office on threats targeted against women, human rights defenders, and social leaders. The Human Rights Activity has supported the National Protection Unit in expediting protection measures, reducing the time to develop collective protection systems and differential gender and ethnic approaches from five months to three months. Over 39,000 people have benefited from human rights training over six years, including 3,294 social leaders, and 188 public officials. In FY 2021, nearly 8,000 beneficiaries were trained in self-protection, including 653 social leaders. To date, all trained social leaders have been able to prevent attacks and killings.

The [Natural Wealth](#) program (2017-2022) supports the Government of Colombia in the preservation of the country's biodiversity in the tropical dry forests of the Caribbean and in the grasslands and freshwater ecosystems in Orinoquia. As peace implementation progresses, Orinoquia has become the next agricultural frontier in Colombia. The Natural Wealth Program protects these two key ecosystems and related species by increasing land under legal protection, developing financial incentives for conservation, and strengthening capacity to reduce deforestation and threats to biodiversity in land use planning. As part of its approach to increase the land area under legal protection, the program enhances land protection through sound, accountable land management by Indigenous groups, communities, and civil society. In 2021, Natural Wealth partnered with the Human Rights Activity to design and implement a self-protection training initiative for 20 environmental leaders in Guaviare, including strengthening their leadership as environmental defenders.

The [Amazon Alive](#) program (2021-2026) focuses on preventing deforestation, ensuring biodiversity conservation, and fostering sustainable livelihoods in the Colombian Amazon. Amazon Alive strengthens the Government of Colombia's institutional capacity to prevent and prosecute environmental crimes. The activity helps Indigenous communities, civil society organizations, and environmental defenders to understand, prevent, and denounce these crimes. At the same time, Amazon Alive works to enhance land use rights, tenure, and access to land to improve land management for forest conservation. The activity will establish forest and wildlife crime monitoring networks, improve the implementation of laws to support natural resource governance, and train thousands of local people in natural resource management and biodiversity conservation.

The [Land for Prosperity](#) program (2019-2024) supports the Government of Colombia in improving the ability of rural households to achieve licit economic development through strengthened land tenure strengthening by providing extensive access to land titles while supporting land restitution, strengthening local government capacity for land administration, and integrating citizens in licit socioeconomic opportunities in targeted areas. With a special focus on empowering women, ethnic minorities, youth, and other vulnerable groups, the Land for Prosperity Activity unlocks the potential of rural citizens across conflict-affected regions. The program focuses on environmental and citizen security issues and provides the Government of Colombia with inputs and ideas that have been tested in the field in order to update public policy based on evidence gathered during implementation.

Additionally, USAID is working with the Government of Colombia to collect the cadaster of the Chiribiquete National Park to close its boundaries, protect it from further illegal activity, and identify deforestation hotspots with accurate imagery and information. The piloting of two land use contracts for conservation in the surrounding areas of the park are also expected to strengthen the protection of environmentally protected areas, while giving small peasants the formal right to use the land in environmentally friendly livelihood activities in coordination with the state.



Gold mining operations can produce major deforestation.  
Photo credit: Hanz Rippe, Fernanda Pineda / USAID Colombia

# Conclusion: Key Issues, Environmental Peacebuilding, and Donor Support for Environmental Defenders

## KEY ISSUES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

The still-evolving peace process and illicit coca production are distinctive factors affecting environmental defenders in the Colombian Amazon. Other issues like land conversion for agriculture, land grabbing, Indigenous rights, and mining are common points of controversy and contention in many countries. Yet these, too, represent only a part of a larger set of intertwined governance and environmental challenges that underpin many of the grievances of environmental defenders and their communities in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

These include:

1. Poor state-society relations that reflect weak representation of marginalized groups, high levels of corruption, low levels of legitimacy, and a lack of structured opportunities for meaningful dialogue on environmental issues involving government, civil society, and the private sector (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).
2. Unresolved tensions within development strategies that combine heavy reliance on natural resource extraction and large-scale infrastructure with attempts to implement national commitments to conservation and environmental sustainability (Prause and Le Billon 2021).
3. Deforestation, biodiversity loss, and expansion of the agricultural frontier, in some regions for agribusiness and in others for small-holder cultivation (IPBES 2019).
4. Land grabbing and encroachment on Indigenous and community lands and protected areas by external actors benefiting from natural resource exploitation, with inadequate state capacity and political will to create and implement policies and laws to protect Indigenous Peoples' territories (United Nations 2021).
5. Weak or absent land use planning and poorly defined or absent tenure and resource rights, especially for women, with insufficient law enforcement against illicit activities (Rights and Resources Initiative 2021).
6. Environmental impacts that exacerbate gender inequality and gender-based violence (Castañeda Camey 2020).
7. Conflict in and around protected areas linked to illegal resource exploitation or the use of protected areas as a refuge for illicit activities (IUCN 2021).
8. Paramilitary groups and criminal organizations that engage in land grabbing and/or intimidation and violent acts against local inhabitants, while operating in environmentally sensitive or protected areas (InSight Crime 2021).
9. Abuses by law enforcement and security forces, combined with corrupt or ineffective justice systems (Voule 2021).
10. High rates of impunity for those who commit environmental crimes or attack environmental defenders (Forst 2019).



Extractive industries like oil and gas can create controversy and contention. Photo by Alejomiranda via Adobe Stock.

These fundamental challenges are some of the main sources of the unresolved dilemmas that animate the actions of environmental defenders. They present diverse opportunities for substantive engagement with environmental defenders—especially women, Indigenous leaders, and marginalized groups—to help bring attention and facilitate constructive responses to these recurrent areas of concern.

## POLITICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

In some countries the situation of environmental defenders is aggravated by recent trends toward democratic backsliding. It is noteworthy, for example, that in 2020 the Philippines, Brazil, and Honduras were number three through five of the countries with the most environmental and land defender killings. Although the problem of attacks on environmental defenders is widespread, it remains concentrated in what [Freedom House](#) refers to as “partly free” countries, especially those with Indigenous populations and economies reliant on mineral extraction.

In these politically turbulent contexts, those who seek to silence or eliminate environmental defenders often try to link them to trends and groups that the public perceives to be destabilizing or contrary to national interests. They also spotlight and isolate them as dangerous individuals rather than as advocates for their communities and territories. In Colombia and elsewhere, limited awareness and distorted public perceptions increase the risks that environmental defenders face. In response, one of the main goals of environmental defender advocates is to reframe public understandings and “reverse the tide of marginalization” by deepening linkages and support for environmental defenders in wider environmental, peace, and human rights networks ([Geneva Roadmap](#)). These efforts seek to demonstrate how environmental defenders are not sources of disruption but rather a positive vision for the future and validate them as community builders who promote values in line with popularly supported global standards like the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the principles of the [UN Global Compact](#) for businesses on human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption.

## DONOR SUPPORT

There are many additional steps that donors can consider to promote and protect the rights and safety of environmental defenders (EarthRights International 2020, IUCN 2020, CAFOD 2021, FIP and adelphi 2021, Corporate Accountability Lab 2021, Díaz et al. 2021, Dininio 2021). Donor actions taken in coordination with environmental defenders include capacity-building, public information, multi-stakeholder dialogue, host government consultations, discussions with donor counterparts, and referrals for assistance. Some examples include:

### OUTREACH:

- Work with civil society organizations to facilitate multistakeholder dialogues on environmental defender issues.
- Support investigations by journalists and civil society to help inform the public about key problems identified by environmental defenders.
- Support the investigative work and advocacy of UN special rapporteurs and independent experts on environmental challenges and the situation of environmental defenders.
- Convene dialogues or briefings with other bilateral and/or multilateral donors on critical environmental issues, limits on freedoms of expression and assembly, and threats and attacks against environmental defenders.

### HOST GOVERNMENT CONTACTS:

- Raise concerns about environmental defenders' challenges and safety with host country officials.
- Support the development and implementation of laws that promote and protect freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.
- Support the work of ombudsman offices that monitor and report risks faced by environmental defenders and coordinated government responses to implement Early Warning Alerts.

- Support the establishment and strengthening of human rights defender protection programs to ensure that at-risk and threatened environmental defenders are able to access these mechanisms and receive effective support, including collective protection measures for Indigenous Peoples where appropriate.
- Support Indigenous Peoples' organizations and communities to legally secure their territorial claims.
- Advocate for government law enforcement bodies to investigate and prosecute crimes against environmental defenders.
- Monitor judicial proceedings and collaborate on technical assistance to ensure that due process is being observed in cases involving environmental defenders.

### PRIVATE SECTOR:

- Meet with businesses and sectoral organizations involved in high-risk or high-impact natural resource activities to discuss the concerns and safety of environmental defenders.
- Encourage and support enhanced due diligence processes related to land acquisitions and their social and environmental impacts.
- Encourage and support businesses in high risk sectors to commit to policies of non-retaliation against human rights defenders.
- Encourage businesses in resource-based sectors to follow global norms such as those found in the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#), which emphasize good practices in relation to land rights, Indigenous Peoples, corruption, security, and access to remedies to human rights abuses.



Colombian environmental defender speaking to USAID Administrator Samantha Power on the importance of conserving forests and biodiversity in the Amazon on August 7, 2022,  
Photo by Hanz Rippe, USAID/Colombia.

#### INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS:

- Support the active participation of countries and resident businesses in the [Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative](#).
- Promote access to information concerning the environment, public participation, and access to judicial and administrative proceedings, consistent with Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

#### PROTECTION:

- Follow do-no-harm principles and protocols to assess risks, concerns, opportunities, and preferences in providing support for environmental defenders.
- Support and train environmental defenders in self-protection and collective protection practices, such as avoiding traveling alone and maintaining communication with cell phones and radios.

- Refer endangered environmental defenders to organizational efforts like Freedom House's [Emergency Assistance Program](#) and the [Lifeline Embattled CSO Fund](#), which meet the specific needs of recipients, such as medical care, replacement of confiscated computers, and provision of security cameras.
- Identify and address the differentiated needs of women environmental defenders, who often face heightened risk of abuse and violence—Groups like [Sisma Mujer](#) may offer an [emergency fund](#) and assistance with housing, legal issues, and psychosocial services.
- Regularly share informational resources for environmental defenders in locally accessible languages.

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