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# *Protecting Communities to Save the Planet*

CENTERING COLLECTIVE PROTECTION IN GLOBAL CLIMATE ACTION





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**Cover photo:** An Indigenous man walks in the forest in Indonesia. Photo by Joel Redman for If Not Us Then Who?

# ACRONYMS

<b>ADPs</b>	Afro-descendant Peoples
<b>COP</b>	UN Climate Change Conferences (Conference of the Parties)
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>FPIC</b>	Free, prior and informed consent
<b>IPs</b>	Indigenous Peoples
<b>LCs</b>	Local communities
<b>NDC</b>	Nationally Determined Contributions
<b>NBSAPs</b>	National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans
<b>ODA</b>	Official Development Assistance
<b>UNDRIP</b>	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
<b>UNDROP</b>	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global climate crisis continues to disproportionately impact Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendant Peoples on the frontlines, particularly those defending land, water, and ecosystems. This report highlights the urgent need to integrate collective protection strategies into climate policy and programming to ensure the safety, agency, and resilience of environmental defenders and their communities.

Drawing on case studies, interviews, and policy analysis, this report underscores how current climate frameworks often overlook the risks faced by grassroots activists, Indigenous Peoples, and local organizations. These groups are not only vulnerable to climate impacts but also to violence, criminalization, and displacement due to their advocacy and stewardship of natural resources.

Key findings include:

- **Environmental defenders face increasing threats** linked to extractive industries, land grabs, and militarized conservation efforts.
- **Collective protection approaches**—rooted in community-led strategies, solidarity networks, and legal empowerment—are essential for safeguarding defenders and amplifying their voices.
- **Climate finance and policy mechanisms** must be restructured to prioritize protection, participation, and equity.

Through examples of Indigenous Peoples', Afro-descendant Peoples', and local communities' movements from the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala, the Enggano island in Indonesia, India's Bastar region, the Sinangoe in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and Colombia, the report presents best practices from communities defending their territories and cultures. In light of these examples, it calls on governments, donors, and international institutions to:

- Recognize and support collective protection as a core component of climate justice.
- Ensure meaningful participation of frontline communities in climate decision-making.
- Allocate resources to locally-led protection initiatives and legal support systems.

By centering collective protection, global climate action can become more inclusive, effective, and just, ensuring that those most impacted are also empowered to lead the solutions.



Yanesha Indigenous People, Escohormes community, Central Peruvian jungle. Photo taken as part of a collective audiovisual production between RRI and ONAMIAP. Photo by Daiana Gonzalez for Rights and Resources Initiative and ONAMIAP, 2024.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples (IPs), Afro-descendant Peoples (ADPs), and local communities (LCs) play a vital role in protecting climate-critical ecosystems through their collective ownership, governance strategies, and traditional ecological knowledge. The benefits of their efforts are felt globally. Areas under formal governance by IPs, LCs, and ADPs are proven to be associated with positive environmental outcomes, including significantly lower rates of deforestation, greater carbon density values, and improved biodiversity protection compared with lands outside these areas.<sup>1</sup>

Climate-critical ecosystems include tropical rainforests, wetlands, mangroves, grasslands, and other areas of high biodiversity. Their protection and preservation can help mitigate and adapt to climate change by, for example, removing and storing carbon, and protecting against extreme weather events such as coastal storm surges, wildfires, and floods.

IPs, LCs, and ADPs have distinct rights and interests, knowledge and practices, and a profound connection with their lands and territories. Their important role in protecting biodiversity is recognized in numerous global climate change, biodiversity, and human rights instruments and frameworks. These include the Paris Agreement on Climate Change,<sup>2</sup> the Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework,<sup>3</sup> the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP),<sup>4</sup> and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).<sup>5</sup>

Having secure rights to lands and territories is an essential foundation for IPs, LCs, and ADPs to continue to protect and preserve climate-critical ecosystems. Land tenure security is also an essential foundation for realizing their rights to housing and a decent standard of living, preserving their social, cultural, and religious practices, and to protecting them against arbitrary violations and forced displacement.

Today, a large proportion of the world's remaining high biodiversity lands, forests, and waters are held by IPs, LCs, and ADPs. Together, they hold an estimated 50 percent of the world's land area. Yet they have legally recognized rights to just about 11.4 percent of this land, and even more limited rights to manage another 7.1 percent.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, within 10 high conservation priority countries across the world, these groups claim 49 percent of the combined area but have legal rights to only 8 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Limited and insecure land tenure undermines IPs', LCs', and ADPs' ability to protect climate-critical ecosystems. This is compounded by the numerous external threats posed to such ecosystems and to those who defend them.

The most significant of these threats include resource extraction (including mining and logging), infrastructure development (such as roads and dams), and agribusiness (including cattle, soy, and palm oil). The human rights violations that too often result from these activities are often aided and abetted by corrupt government officials and, sometimes, organized crime groups.

Protecting climate-critical ecosystems against these external threats, often within a wider context of conflict and violence, is dangerous work. **Since 2012, over 2,000 people have been killed defending their land and environment,<sup>8</sup> and families and communities have been subject to violence and intimidation.** Many of these defenders were from countries such as Colombia and Brazil, which contain globally important tropical rainforests and other climate-critical ecosystems. In 2023, almost half of those killed were Indigenous or Afro-descendant.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the important and often dangerous work done by IPs, LCs, and ADPs to protect climate-critical ecosystems, limited attention and funding are given to support this work, including from climate funders.

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)—plans prepared by countries that contain their commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change—typically deal poorly with land issues, including land tenure security.<sup>10</sup> Further, few NDCs recognize IPs' jurisdiction over land, Indigenous knowledge systems, or the importance of IPs' full and effective participation in climate governance.<sup>11</sup> More broadly, civil society groups, including community-based groups and those representing IPs, smallholder farmers, women, workers, and young people, among others, are likely excluded from the process to develop their country's NDC.<sup>12</sup>

This context is important because funding for climate change mitigation and adaptation is often based on the content of countries' NDCs. For example, the world's largest climate fund, the Green Climate Fund, which was established within the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, is mandated to support developing countries to meet the commitments outlined in their NDCs.<sup>13</sup>

IPs, LCs, and ADPs need urgent and increased support to defend their territories, the climate, biodiversity, and themselves. Such support must recognize the need for mutually reinforcing strategies.

A holistic approach to supporting communities that are protecting climate-critical ecosystems should include support for rights-based and community-led conservation; securing land tenure; strengthening community autonomy, self-governance, and livelihoods; reducing vulnerabilities and improving the physical security of communities; territorial defense; and collective protection. **Collective protection—that is, all those things that communities do to protect themselves and their territories—is increasingly important considering the failures of states and state-based mechanisms to protect communities' human rights and their territories under threat from malign actors. Collective protection should be central to global climate action.**





Indigenous men fishing on a river in the Amazon Rainforest. Photo by iStock.

## 2. THREATS TO COMMUNITIES AND THEIR TERRITORIES

Resource extraction poses a significant threat to IPs, LCs, and ADPs, their territories, and to climate-critical ecosystems. Too often, mining, logging, hydropower dams, roads, cattle ranching, and monoculture agriculture (including soy and palm oil)—whether legal or illegal—severely and negatively affect communities through water pollution, water scarcity, deforestation, and loss of land and forest resources, restricting access to these resources. These can then impact local people’s health, livelihoods, and cultural practices.

For example, IPs living along rivers in Brazil, where there is significant illegal gold mining activity, have experienced health impacts due to exposure to mercury that is used in gold mining and that has polluted these rivers; their food security is also threatened.<sup>14</sup> The deforestation that can accompany activities like mining or logging can also increase the frequency and intensity of flooding, which may pose physical and economic threats to local people. Loss of forest and other ecosystems has obvious impacts on biodiversity and the role of those ecosystems for carbon sequestration.

While often claimed as being good for the climate, hydropower dams destroy forests, causing habitat loss and degradation, as well as biodiversity loss.<sup>15</sup> Hydropower dam construction also results in the physical and economic displacement of large numbers of people, from both the flooding of land for dam reservoirs and the construction of electricity transmission lines. For example, the Inga 3 dam in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)—which the World Bank will finance<sup>16</sup>—will displace an estimated 30,000 people.<sup>17</sup> The electricity from hydropower doesn’t necessarily benefit the communities whose lands are destroyed by the dams, with electricity often used for industrial or extractive activities, such as mining, in the case of the Inga 3 dam in the

DRC.<sup>18</sup> These industrial and extractive activities then have their own impacts on local environments and communities.

Research on nickel mining in Indonesia found that mining on the island of Halmahera in North Maluku has directly and severely impacted the rights of IPs and LCs. Mining activities threaten cultural and spiritual heritage sites, and some communities are experiencing cultural erasure as land is taken, mining infrastructure is built, and traditional economies are dismantled.<sup>19</sup> Mining concessions have encroached upon forest territory, limiting communities' mobility and access to traditional resources.

In many parts of the world, illegal activities and organized crime pose a major threat to IPs, LCs, and ADPs and to their territories. In some areas, particularly in parts of Latin America, organized crime is the most significant threat to communities.<sup>20</sup> For example, over recent decades, areas used for coca cultivation and cocaine production have increased, becoming locally significant in parts of Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. Research has found that cocaine development leads to other crimes that also fuel deforestation.

Criminal infrastructure built principally for cocaine is also increasingly facilitating illegal deforestation, timber trafficking, and illegal gold mining via control of transport routes, corruption, and intimidation of local authorities and communities.<sup>21</sup> Violence and terror are used by organized crime groups to establish and maintain control over territory and resources.<sup>22</sup> The proceeds from one illegal activity are often laundered through other illegal activities. For example, proceeds from the drug trade are used by organized crime groups to finance massive dredges and other mining equipment, extort money from small-scale artisanal gold miners, and establish their own mining operations.<sup>23</sup>

Environmental crimes, such as illegal gold mining or logging, often form a central part of the political economy of conflicts and can provide much of the financing for non-state armed groups, including terrorist groups.<sup>24</sup> In Colombia, for example, non-state armed groups are involved in gold and coltan mining. They are also involved in gold mining in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and in addition to generating income, mining sites also serve as recruiting and training grounds for these non-state armed groups. The proceeds from illegal activities can escalate conflict and violence, and defending territory in this context is extremely challenging.

Another threat to communities and their territories is wildfire. By some accounts, the majority of wildfires that destroyed parts of the Brazilian Amazon in 2024 were deliberately lit.<sup>25</sup> Fires in the Amazon and elsewhere in Latin America are largely started by arson linked to the clearing of forests for agriculture and illegal cattle ranching.<sup>26</sup> Fires may also be deliberately lit to sabotage forest protection efforts.<sup>27</sup> In Indonesia, operators of palm oil plantations or concession areas often start fires to cheaply (and illegally) clear forested areas for planting of oil palm trees, which frequently spreads to neighbouring forests.<sup>28</sup>

When the territories of IPs, LCs, and ADPs are impacted by resource extraction, the resulting violations are not isolated events, nor do they affect just one person; they are multi-dimensional. Across the world, communities are actively defending themselves and their territories against the threats described above. This is dangerous work as it threatens numerous powerful economic, political, and often criminal interests. Attacks on local people defending their rights and territories (sometimes referred to as human rights or environmental defenders, or similar) are symptomatic of a wider set of collective rights that are being violated.

RRI undertook a study in six Latin American countries to document the collective impact generated by extractive, agricultural, and infrastructure projects when they violate rights over territory, and when there is conflict

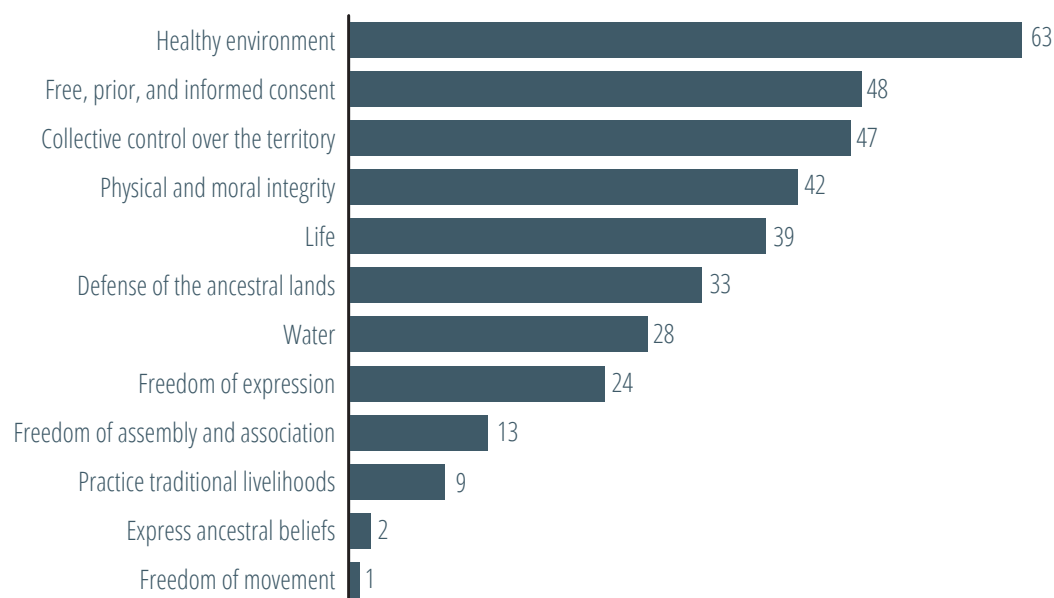


between these projects and IPs, LCs, and ADPs. The study shows that when a collective territory is impacted, multiple rights—both individual and collective—are violated simultaneously.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 1 below shows the number of incidents of rights violations between 2017 and 2019 from 102 projects that were identified as having links to conflict with IPs, LCs, and ADPs.

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**FIGURE 1. Rights Violated in Conflicts with Extractive, Agricultural, and Infrastructure Projects**



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It is important to note that the rights to a healthy environment, to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), and to collective control over the territory were violated in all the countries studied and were the most frequently violated rights. For example, given the devastating impacts of logging and mining on the environment, it is no surprise that the right to a healthy environment was the most frequently violated right. The high number of incidents that resulted in the violation of the right to physical and moral integrity and the right to life were the result of assaults and attacks on individuals defending their territories.<sup>30</sup>

As the data in Figure 1 clearly shows, IPs, LCs, and ADPs who are defending their territories must also defend themselves against physical violence, including killings and gender-based violence, forced disappearances, criminalization, vilification, intimidation, and harassment. While these threats are not new, there are well-founded fears that repression and violence are increasing.<sup>31</sup> Restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly and association, and other efforts to close civic space, compound the challenges faced. There is perhaps no greater direct attack on civil society space than the killing of human rights defenders.<sup>32</sup>

Attacks against IPs, LCs, and ADPs who are defending their territories may come from a variety of state and non-state actors who may often work in collusion. These may include members of national police forces and

the military, parastatal organizations, hired assassins, transnational company security staff or forces, farmers, and illegal miners.<sup>33</sup> In some contexts, such as in Colombia, organized criminal groups (whose members may include members of former paramilitary groups) are responsible for many of the threats against defenders. Inaction and collusion by corrupt state security forces with these groups, and their proximity through corruption or the financing of political campaigns, is also a serious concern,<sup>34</sup> as is the increased militarization of mining in countries like the Philippines, where the military has been linked to the highest number of documented killings and detentions of land and environmental defenders over the past decade.<sup>35</sup> Judicial harassment of defenders is often the result of pressure exerted on states by transnational fossil fuel, extractive, agribusiness, and financial institutions.<sup>36</sup>

Violence and criminalization targeting individuals don't just affect one person, but their communities at large. It causes irreparable harm to the social fabric of the affected communities and destabilizes their social and political organization.<sup>37</sup> Forced disappearances, for instance, can leave other community members in a constant state of uncertainty. Attacks on individuals are undertaken with the express intent to intimidate, silence voices, disrupt community organizing, and prevent other community members from continuing the defense of their territories out of fear that they too will be subject to violence. Violence against individuals often occurs in the context of the harassment, intimidation, and even displacement of an entire community.<sup>38</sup>

It is extremely challenging for IPs, LCs, and ADPs to defend their territories and protect climate-critical ecosystems if their health and livelihoods are undermined and they face forcible displacement, insecure land tenure, destruction of their cultural and spiritual heritage sites, and a need to constantly protect themselves against violence, killings and criminalization. Limited external support, including funding, compounds these challenges.



Members of the Oibura community in Indonesia participate in a community mapping project funded by CLARIFI.  
Photo by Rachel Watson for Campaign for Nature, Rights and Resources Initiative, and CLARIFI, 2024.

### 3. COLLECTIVE PROTECTION AND GLOBAL CLIMATE ACTION

Collective protection is an important response to the destruction caused by activities such as mining, logging, cattle ranching, and monoculture agriculture, to the corruption and organized crime that often enable and benefit from these activities, and to the harassment, intimidation, and displacement faced by the communities that resist these activities.

When activities such as logging or the deforestation that precedes cattle ranching occur in climate-critical ecosystems, they affect us all. **Collective protection recognizes the collective impact of violence on the IPs, LCs, and ADPs defending climate-critical ecosystems and supports the strengthening and unification of communities, drawing on their own wisdom and practices to protect themselves.**<sup>39</sup>

Collective protection has emerged as a central concept in the defense of IPs, LCs, and ADPs confronting systemic violence and territorial dispossession. Unlike individual-based security frameworks, collective protection emphasizes the interconnected nature of land, identity, culture, and self-determination. Further, the collectivity of IPs, LCs, and ADPs is fundamental to the exercise of their human rights, cultural practices and worldviews, and to how natural resources found within their territories are protected and shared.<sup>40</sup> Collective protection measures respond not only to physical threats to people's safety but also to the structural and historical conditions that endanger collective survival.



Conceptually, collective protection brings together several mutually supporting aspects. It consists of being rooted in territory, constructing collective power, nurturing a strong, supportive and well-organized social fabric, and being able to activate a wider network of support in accordance with the culture, capacities, and existing resources in the places and organizations where communities are defending their rights and territories.<sup>41</sup> It also places an emphasis on care and protection as a component of political activity.<sup>42</sup>

Conflicts most often take place on a territory, and it is therefore in this territory that protection needs arise.<sup>43</sup> Territory is an essential space for the existence, livelihoods, and worldviews of IPs, LCs, and ADPs, and is where action to defend human rights occurs. Collective protection, therefore, has a spatial and territorial dimension to it as communities need security in the places where they live and act. **Spatial and territorial-based collective protection measures include knowing what is happening in and around the territory and who might be entering it (this may require physically patrolling and monitoring territory, for example), but also occupying, regulating the use of, and using and deriving a livelihood from that territory.**

While collective protection may involve strategies such as territorial defense, it is more than that. Collective protection is also intrinsically linked to the strengthening of political subjects and processes and is connected to the strengthening of practices and strategies that are framed within the social structures of the community.<sup>44</sup> Social networks, both internal and external, are essential for strengthening collective protection and are vital to breaking isolation, which breeds invisibility and impunity from systemic rights violations that may be occurring.<sup>45</sup>

## **BOX 1. Four Key Principles of Collective Protection**

### **1. Self-determination and autonomy**

- a. Collective protection strategies emerge from community self-governance and sustainable livelihoods.
- b. FPIC protocols, tenure security, and local decision-making are not optional—they are fundamental rights and tools for resilience.

### **2. Multiple strategies, shared goal**

- a. Communities often employ several approaches simultaneously, such as legal advocacy, direct action, livelihood defense, and solidarity networks.
- b. Effective climate action must support this multidimensional reality.

### **3. Solidarity and alliances**

- a. National and international solidarity networks amplify local struggles.
- b. Global actors, including civil society and international organizations, must expand financial, legal, and political support.

### **4. Collective protection as climate protection**

- a. Protecting communities is inseparable from protecting ecosystems.
- b. Violence, criminalization, and dispossession threaten not just people but the forests, rivers, and biodiversity essential to climate stability.

For communities themselves, the preservation of identity, the recovery of the historical memory of defense processes, the exercise of autonomy, and the respect for the spiritual and cultural practices of the group are fundamental parts of collective protection strategies, as are self-strengthening processes.<sup>46</sup> So, too, are establishing networks beyond the community. Networks of external stakeholders can be used to disseminate alerts and complaints, raise visibility of their struggles beyond their territories, provide support during emergencies, and put pressure on the institutions with a duty to protect.<sup>47</sup> These networks are networks of solidarity.

Collective protection has a political dimension to it, and politics is, of course, about power. **Collective protection is an act of resistance against those forms of power that dominate, usurp, and control resources to the detriment of IPs, LCs, and ADPs, their territories, and the global climate.** This includes resistance to private interests such as corporations and organized crime groups who gain power over and within governments, governments that are curtailing rights and constricting civic space, and the power of prejudice and fear to legitimize repression.<sup>48</sup>

Power inequalities—whether based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability/ability—within communities increase the vulnerability of some members of that community, including to attacks from those with a vested interest in the destruction of climate-critical ecosystems (Box 2). Collective protection also requires addressing the discrimination and violence faced by some community members within their own families, communities, and organizations, and ensuring their safety.<sup>49</sup> Too often, discrimination and violence against women and others occur both in their private lives (including in their communities and organizations) and in the more visible and public parts of their lives. Collective protection strategies, therefore, need to strengthen women’s leadership and voice within their communities and organizations.

#### **BOX 2. Gendered Forms of Attacks and Violence Against Human Rights or Environmental Defenders**

Women can face increased risks when protecting their territory and community from external threats. This may include sexual violence (or threats of sexual violence), use of sexist and sexual insults to defame or delegitimize their work, stigmatization, and gender discrimination in the justice system. Other people who experience discrimination because of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability/ability (and the intersection of these) are also at increased risk. The actors behind such attacks adopt and reinforce social prejudices such as misogyny, sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia to generate fear, isolate activists, and create conflicts within communities.<sup>50</sup> This weakens efforts aimed at protecting communities and their territory.

Collective protection involves a set of strategies and actions aimed at collectively safeguarding the human rights of IPs, LCs, and ADPs, including their rights to their territories. Alongside using territory for a livelihood, patrolling lands and waters, strengthening community structures, and establishing solidarity networks with external groups, collective protection may also involve the development of protocols for engaging with external stakeholders, strengthening community identity, direct action, legal advocacy, information and training for community members, and international advocacy and solidarity. Collective protection can take multiple forms

as each approach is deeply rooted in the needs and dynamics of each community, and in their ancestral customs, in response to the external threats or attacks they face.<sup>51</sup>

These and other collective protection measures play an important role in protecting climate-critical ecosystems from external threats such as logging and mining, and the vested interests behind these activities. Protecting ecosystems such as forests is vital to tackling the climate crisis; forests absorb large amounts of carbon dioxide, and their preservation prevents the release of even more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In fact, if we cannot protect the world's forests, there is little hope of protecting our shared climate.

Fundamentally, collective protection is rooted in community. It can also be supported by larger movements and networks of solidarity. These networks can (and do) include many from the climate justice movement. For many IPs, LCs, and ADPs, territory is about life and the climate, and their fight for climate justice mirrors that of others in the climate justice movement.<sup>52</sup>





A river runs through dense forest. Photo by iStock.

## 4. DEFENDING THEIR TERRITORIES, THE CLIMATE, BIODIVERSITY, AND THEMSELVES

Despite the difficulty of protecting climate-critical ecosystems in often very challenging contexts, IPs, ADPs, and LCs around the world employ a range of collective protection strategies to do just that. This section of the report highlights a few examples in the form of case studies of this important work.

### **Managing Fire: Protecting Forests in Community Concession Areas in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala**

In tropical rainforests and other climate-critical ecosystems, managing fire is often a necessary approach to protecting biodiversity and allowing these ecosystems to remove and store carbon. Research has found that in Latin America and the Caribbean, Indigenous-managed lands are best protected against wildfire.<sup>53</sup> A key actor in this area is the Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén (ACOFOP), which manages community forestry concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, promoting sustainable forest use, conservation, and local livelihoods and economic development through community governance.

The Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala was established in 1990 in response to widespread deforestation in the region, although illegal deforestation continued as illegal loggers and cattle ranchers exploited the lack of effective government presence to protect the reserve. Local people, comprising both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, have worked together to protect the forests in community forestry concession areas within the Reserve, where they practice certified sustainable logging that benefits local livelihoods. Managing fire is one part of that work, as is facing threats from cattle ranchers, illegal loggers, and drug traffickers who have appropriated land for illegal activities and who often use fire as a means to take territory.

Methods employed by communities to manage fire on their concessions include i) the development of fire prevention plans; ii) clearing and maintaining firebreaks along concession boundaries; iii) conducting regular patrols of these firebreaks; iv) constructing watch towers; v) using drones and GPS trackers to monitor fire threats; and vi) training and deploying youth in fire brigades.<sup>54</sup> Traditional knowledge is applied in the seasonal and daily timing of burns and the use of firebreaks to prevent fires from spreading beyond the milpa plots (an agricultural system that involves some burning of agricultural plots). Many of the management tools communities use in the Maya Biosphere Reserve feature in other communities' (non-fire-related) territorial defense strategies.

## **The Indigenous Pygmy Peoples of the DRC**

The Congo Basin is one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth, home to 70 percent of Africa's tropical rainforests. It is a globally significant carbon sink, absorbing more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than the Amazon Rainforest (which is larger).<sup>55</sup> Like too many of the world's tropical rainforests, it is threatened by mining, oil and gas, logging, and large-scale agriculture. One group of people who are particularly vulnerable to the appropriation and destruction of the forests in the Congo Basin are the Indigenous Pygmy Peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The Indigenous Pygmy Peoples are the oldest population group in the DRC. While they maintain close links with the forests on which they depend for their well-being, identity, and survival, access to their ancestral lands and the security of their land tenure are fundamental issues for them in today's DRC.<sup>56</sup>

Over the course of centuries, farming, livestock-rearing, and timber exploitation activities have forced some Indigenous Pygmy Peoples to abandon their forests and their traditional way of life, which is based on hunting, gathering, and collecting. Some have also been forcibly removed from their ancestral lands to make way for mining or national parks, which, given the conservation policies and legislation in the DRC, often criminalize and exclude communities from their customary lands.<sup>57</sup> Despite this, many Indigenous Pygmy Peoples have been able to protect and preserve their traditional practices, with their land, forests, and other natural resources the basis of their cultural identity to some extent.<sup>58</sup>

Strengthening Indigenous Pygmy Peoples' land tenure is important because territories occupied or used by them have more intact forest cover, a significantly lower deforestation rate, and better biodiversity conservation than those of the surrounding community areas.<sup>59</sup>

Tenure rights for Indigenous Pygmy Peoples have been very limited historically, but in 2022, following years of advocacy supported by members of the RRI coalition in the DRC,<sup>60</sup> the government adopted a groundbreaking law on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Indigenous Pygmy Peoples. The law formally recognizes and safeguards the rights of Indigenous Peoples, in particular their land rights, and is expected to improve land tenure security and livelihoods for the Indigenous Pygmy Peoples.<sup>61</sup>

Specifically, the law provides a definition of IPs as "hunter-gatherer peoples generally living in the forest, [distinguished] by their cultural identity, their way of life, their attachment and closeness to nature and their endogenous knowledge." It guarantees their rights to land and resources, as well as IPs' collective and individual ownership of the land they occupy and other resources.<sup>62</sup>

## **Free, Prior and Informed Consent Protocols: FPIC Protocol of the Enggano Indigenous People, Indonesia**

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Free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) is established in UNDRIP, and the principles underlying FPIC are increasingly recognized as being relevant to non-Indigenous communities, too. FPIC serves as a practical expression of the right to self-determination, enabling IPs and other customary rightsholders to assert autonomy in decision-making and to give or withhold consent to activities that affect their lands.

One-third of Enggano Island is forested, and these forests are rich in biodiversity; however, this biodiversity and the rights of the Enggano People have been threatened by proposals for palm oil plantations since the 1990s.<sup>63</sup> The Enggano Indigenous People have been making claims to their lands and seas, with the support of Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN), the country's national Indigenous Peoples' alliance, since 2015. The Enggano have registered their claim to be recognized as a Masyarakat Hukum Adat (a customary law or Indigenous community) by the local provincial government.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to their Masyarakat Hukum Adat claim, the Enggano People have adopted an FPIC protocol—the Protokol Padiatapa MHA Enggano/FPIC Protocol of the Enggano Indigenous People—in a further effort to reassert control over their land and future. FPIC protocols (and similar) are widely used across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>65</sup> In this context, the protocol provides guidance for the Enggano People to make decisions related to the security of their living space and management of their natural resources.<sup>66</sup> It provides guidance for external parties, namely companies, governments and others, to respect and comply with their values and decisions, and contains detailed protocols that the Enggano ask to be followed and respected by external parties, including on information, use of trusted advisors, preventing coercion and intimidation, and allowing sufficient time for the community to consider the proposals of external parties.

## **Mass Movements and Peaceful Protest: Adivasi Protest Against Mining and Militarization in the Bastar Region, India**

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The Bastar region of Chhattisgarh state in India contains important and biodiverse forest, grassland, and wetland ecosystems. Bastar is also home to many tribal, or Adivasi, communities who comprise approximately 30 percent of the population. Chhattisgarh state contains significant mineral reserves, with Bastar containing high-quality iron ore, bauxite, and other minerals. Numerous mining leases have been granted across Bastar without the consent of local people. In recent years, several hundred security camps have been established across Bastar to deter the activities of Maoist groups, according to the Indian government. However, these security camps are often located in mining areas and are sometimes paid for by the mining companies.<sup>67</sup>

The intersection of mining and security interests has resulted in Adivasi people experiencing loss of forest rights, livelihoods, and sacred sites, and greater insecurity due to surveillance, arrests, repression of protests, and killings.<sup>68</sup> The right to peaceful assembly is one of the most important tools people have for advocating for more effective environmental protection (and equitable climate action),<sup>69</sup> and this is one tool Adivasi people use to defend their rights and territories.

For many years, Adivasi communities have held large-scale protests, often in the form of extended sit-in protests, across the Bastar region.<sup>70</sup> One sit-in protest at Silger village, which started in May 2021 and involved about 5,000 demonstrators, is still ongoing. These peaceful protests, involving thousands of people, are mostly



led by youth. Protesters are demanding the right to be consulted on anything that affects them, as guaranteed under the Constitution, as well as protesting against the illegal appropriation of their lands. To date, protests have been ignored, or worse, suppressed using violence and intimidation.<sup>71</sup> Yet protests continue.

## **Territorial Defense: The A'i Cofán Guards, Ecuador**

The Indigenous A'i Cofán People occupy territory in the northwest region of the Ecuadorian Amazon. This area and neighbouring parts of Colombia are incredibly biodiverse and home to animals, including threatened species such as jaguars. For decades, the A'i Cofán and their territory have been threatened by oil extraction, gold mining, and narcotic-related deforestation.

In response, the A'i Cofán Guard undertakes an organized defense of their territory, rights, and way of life.<sup>72</sup> The guards travel long distances by foot and boat to monitor their lands and defend themselves against illegal poachers, miners, and loggers trespassing on their territories. They pair technology with traditional knowledge. Strategies employed include the use of drones, mapping phones, GPS, and camera traps to detect and document invasions of territory. The guards also use these technologies alongside traditional knowledge to map ancestral territories, document historical and sacred sites, jaguar trails, medicinal plants, and important fishing holes.<sup>73</sup> Evidence of invasion of territory collected through patrols is used to file complaints and legal action. The A'i Cofán may issue eviction notices to illegal miners or other groups operating on their land or destroy or confiscate equipment.<sup>74</sup>

The results of the A'i Cofán Guard's efforts are clear. Forest cover loss in their territory is significantly less than in neighboring areas, including in national parks and designated protected areas.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to physically monitoring their territories, the A'i Cofán People also engage in legal strategies to defend their territory. In 2022, Ecuador's constitutional court set a new legal precedent to guarantee IPs' right to consent over extractive projects on their lands.<sup>76</sup> While the country's Constitution enshrines the right to FPIC, the decision clarified that the outcome of any consultation process must be consent. The case was brought to the court by the A'i Cofán community. The court's ruling gives all Indigenous nations in the Ecuadorian Amazon the right to veto any project proposed on their territories. The community is also working to gain legal title to its ancestral territory.

## **Protecting Communities at Risk: Defense of Afro-Colombian Communities in Areas Affected by Armed Conflict**

Research has shown that guaranteeing collective tenure rights can contribute to conflict reduction, and that the issue of land ownership can be a cause for conflict, as has been the case in Colombia, where land has been one of the historical causes for conflict.<sup>77</sup> Despite Colombia's 2016 Peace Accord, violence, insecurity, and impunity persist across much of the country. While large parts of Colombia are collectively titled, that does not necessarily protect the rights of the IPs and ADPs who hold those titles. In fact, collectively titled lands are frequently occupied by multiple armed groups and illegal miners, loggers, and ranchers. A collective land title is not sufficient by itself.

In Colombia's Pacific region, ACADESAN—the Community Council of the San Juan River region—, is part of Colombia's vast collectively titled ethnic territories, and it works to defend the rights of its 72 Afro-Colombian

communities, which have collective ownership of over 683,000 hectares, in areas affected by armed conflict.<sup>78</sup> Ongoing armed conflict has resulted in the people of the San Juan River region experiencing extreme levels of risk and persistent violations of their rights; for example, all community members have been affected by forced displacement, many of them several times, making their territories even more prone to land grabbing. Illegal logging, mining, and ranching threaten the region's forests, wetlands, river deltas, and biodiversity.

In response to continual violence and rights violations, the Colombian government has created an institutional apparatus focused on the protection of individual people called the National Protection Unit. However, this Unit has been subject to allegations of human rights violations, corruption, crime, and links with armed groups. Notwithstanding these allegations, rights defenders have questioned the limits of conventional, top-down governmental protection measures intended to safeguard individuals. Instead, they have called for strategies that address the underlying causes of threats to communities and comprehensive collective protection measures that focus on entire communities. The Colombian government has legal obligations to provide collective protection measures for communities at risk, and it is on this foundation that ACADESAN requested 50 collective protection measures from a range of national government agencies that aimed to reduce social, economic, environmental, and material vulnerabilities that expose the community to risk.<sup>79</sup>

At the end of 2023, after over two years of advocacy, an agreement was reached with the government to implement all except one of the measures proposed. The collective protection measures agreed to include:

- Support to strengthen ACADESAN's organizational processes;
- Measures to strengthen cultural identity and recover ancestral memory and knowledge;
- Development of an integrated land use plan to preserve environmental health and biodiversity;
- Implementation of food security and income-generating projects;
- Development of renewable energy projects for communities that are not connected to the electricity grid; and
- Measures to mitigate the impacts of armed conflict, such as motorboats to visit at-risk communities and evacuate communities trapped in conflict, and the provision of health centers.

ACADESAN now faces the mounting challenge of forcing the government to implement its commitments to the Afro-Colombian communities of the San Juan River region. This has become all the more urgent and difficult given the country's deteriorating security situation.<sup>80</sup>



A man holds a communication device near Lake Atitlán, Guatemala. Photo by Rights and Resources Initiative, 2014.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND THE COP30 ACTION AGENDA

The case studies presented in the previous section show just some examples of the multitude of strategies used by IPs, LCs, and ADPs to protect themselves, their territories, and climate-critical ecosystems.

Self-determination, self-governance, and securing sustainable livelihoods are the core foundations on which many of these communities can build their fights to protect their territories and climate-critical ecosystems. For example, communities' efforts in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala to protect against wildfire (among other threats) are possible in part because those communities can earn a livelihood from their forest, including from selective logging and harvesting other forest products such as Ramón seeds. The grievances of the Adivasi in the Bastar region in India are founded in the destruction of their livelihoods due to the forced acquisition of agricultural land and the clearing of forests by the state, and the absence of FPIC. Demands for FPIC need to be understood in the context of communities' practical expression of the right to self-determination.

This can also be seen in communities' efforts to develop their own FPIC protocols. Efforts to secure land tenure—such as those of the Indigenous Pygmy Peoples of the DRC—should also be seen in the context of efforts to protect and preserve traditional practices and for communities to self-determine their own economic, social, and cultural development.

IPs, LCs, and ADPs may use multiple strategies at any one time. For example, ACADESAN, which works to defend the rights of its 72 Afro-Colombian communities, has deliberately sought to address the underlying causes of threats to communities and reduce their social, economic, environmental, and material vulnerabilities via a wide variety of measures.

National and international solidarity and alliance-building are also important. For example, AMAN has advocated for the rights of the Enggano Indigenous People to their lands and seas for many years in Indonesia, and the A'i Cofán Indigenous Peoples in Ecuador have received legal support from Amazon Frontlines. Solidarity can also be expressed less tangibly, although still meaningfully, through statements of support for the rights of IPs, LCs, and ADPs.<sup>81</sup> International groups like RRI also provide communities with financial and technical support, research and advocacy, and spaces for dialogue, coordination, and strategy and skills sharing.

Collective protection—which the case studies are examples of—has emerged as a central concept in defense of communities confronting systemic violence and territorial dispossession. **Collective protection is also essential for the protection of climate-critical ecosystems; if communities are not safe from violence and dispossession, then neither are the ecosystems they are connected to. Community collective protection should, therefore, be central to global climate action.** However, funding for collective protection (and aspects of collective protection such as securing land tenure) is poorly funded.

One study on donor funding (including climate finance) for IPs and LCs to secure their tenure rights and forest management in tropical countries found that between 2011 and 2020, such projects received an average of just \$270 million per year.<sup>82</sup> This is equivalent to less than one percent of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for climate change mitigation and adaptation over the same period. While funding has increased in recent years, key challenges remain.<sup>83</sup>

For example, little funding goes directly to communities' own organizations; funding often goes toward projects focused on large-scale titling or landscape-level conservation and development, and is typically implemented by consulting firms, governments, multilateral institutions, or international conservation organizations; and funding for community-led projects to secure rights and conserve forests continues to meet only a fraction of total demand.

At the First Global Congress of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, held in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, in May 2025, representatives called upon public, private, and philanthropic donors to include IPs and LCs in their financing governance and decision-making structures and for a minimum allocation of 40 percent of direct finance for them through their own representative organizations and mechanisms.<sup>84</sup> The Congress also called on governments to support communities' collective protection measures.

## Action Agenda

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Governments, funders, international development organizations, civil society organizations, and other partners and allies must recognize the following to ensure the collective protection of communities:

- The central role played by IPs, LCs, and ADPs in protecting climate-critical ecosystems through their collective ownership, governance strategies, and traditional ecological knowledge.
- IPs, LCs, and ADPs cannot effectively protect climate-critical ecosystems if their health and livelihoods are undermined, they are being forcibly displaced, land tenure is insecure, their cultural and spiritual heritage sites are destroyed, or if they need to protect themselves against violence, killings, and criminalization.
- When communities' territories are impacted by resource extraction, multiple rights are violated; impacts are not isolated events, nor do they affect only one person.



- That violence and killing of individuals occurs in the context of the harassment, intimidation, and even displacement of entire communities, and that there is a need to focus beyond threats and violence against individual human rights or environmental defenders to see the broader set of rights that are at stake.

## Call to Action Ahead of COP30

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As world leaders gather in Brazil for the UNFCCC COP30 in November 2025, they face a decisive moment: whether to continue sidelining the communities that safeguard half of the planet's land, or to finally place communities' protection and leadership at the center of climate action.

We call on governments, donors, and global institutions to:

- Recognize collective protection as a cornerstone of global climate policy.
- Commit resources and political will to ensure communities can defend their territories without fear of violence, criminalization, or dispossession.
- Elevate the voices of IPs, LCs, and ADPs as equal partners in shaping climate solutions.

The future of the world's forests, waters, and biodiversity—and of the climate itself—depends on collective protection. COP30 must mark the turning point where global climate action finally begins with those on the frontlines.

Below is a broad proposed action agenda for donors, governments, policymakers, the private sector, and other institutional allies ahead of COP30.

### A. Finance Collective Protection

- Donors (bilateral, multilateral, private, and philanthropic) must **dramatically increase direct funding** to IPs, LCs, and ADPs.
- Commit to the Brazzaville Congress demand that at least **40 percent of climate finance** should go directly to communities through representative organizations.
- Prioritize **community-led strategies**, not top-down projects managed by external actors.

### B. Legal and Policy Reform

- Governments must enact and enforce frameworks that legally recognize **collective tenure rights** and strengthen community governance institutions.
- Embed **FPIC as binding consent** in climate and development decision-making.
- Governments must ensure **inclusive revision of their NDCs and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs)**, with community participation at every stage.

### C. Shift Economic Models

- Governments must redirect economic policy away from extractive and destructive industries toward **rights-based, community-led conservation and livelihoods**.
- Align development with global frameworks like the **Paris Agreement** and **Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework**.

## D. Strengthen Solidarity and Mutual Support

- In all territorial and natural resource development projects and policymaking, governments, donors, and private sector allies must support **strategic skills-sharing** among communities and allies as it relates to collective protection and collective rights, recognizing that strengthening one community strengthens all.
- Build **transnational solidarity networks** that amplify protection alerts, provide emergency support to communities, and exert pressure on states and corporations.

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