ENDANGERED AMAZONIA:
ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN THE AMAZON: A THREAT TO THE REGION AND THE GLOBAL CLIMATE

AMAZONIA ALIVE: PROTECT + RESTORE 80% 2025 2030 AVERTING THE TIPPING POINT

COORDINADORA DE LAS ORGANIZACIONES INDÍGENAS DE LA CUENCA AMAZÓNICA

AMAZON WATCH

Technical Briefing: Key Takeaways

1. Amazon on the brink of collapse

The combination of accelerated deforestation, intentional fires, agricultural expansion, and mercury pollution is weakening the Amazon's resilience. If it loses its ability to absorb carbon, the region could become a net source of emissions, altering the global climate. Criminal economies are driving this process by promoting the systematic and unregulated destruction of forests.

2. Illicit economies as drivers of degradation

Coca cultivation, drug trafficking, and illegal gold mining generate billions of dollars a year. These economies attract international networks that invest in machinery, logistics, and money laundering. Their scale makes them major drivers of deforestation, river pollution, and biodiversity loss. Furthermore, their connection to global legal markets allows local damage to have global repercussions.

3. Criminal governance displaces the state

In regions with weak institutional presence, armed groups and criminal organizations impose rules of coexistence, collect illegal taxes, and exercise control over strategic territories. This "criminal governance" limits state action, undermines local democracy, and prevents the implementation of environmental protection and human rights policies. For indigenous communities, this means living under constant threat and losing autonomy in their territories.

4. Triple border as the epicenter of Amazonian crime

In the area of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, groups such as FARC dissidents, the ELN, and transnational gangs converge to control strategic cocaine, gold, and arms corridors. This concentration of criminal power disrupts traditional indigenous governance structures and creates an environment of violence that prevents the defense of forests and community culture. The result is a vicious circle where insecurity reinforces the illegal exploitation of resources.

5. Impacts on human rights

Local communities suffer forced displacement, murders of leaders, recruitment of minors, and sexual violence as methods of social control. This violence fragments the community fabric and

Photo: Meeting of tributaries in the Jatunyacu River, Napo Province. ***Credit:*** *Sofía Jarrín - Amazon Watch*

weakens the capacity of Indigenous Peoples to manage their territories and protect them from invaders. The erosion of indigenous governance also opens the door to the expansion of illicit activities that directly affect the climate and biodiversity.

6. Massive environmental devastation

Illegal gold mining releases tons of mercury into rivers, contaminating fish and affecting the health of entire communities. The clearing and burning of forests to make way for coca crops or cattle pastures leads to accelerated deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and greenhouse gas emissions. These dynamics degrade ecosystems that are critical to global climate balance, with impacts that transcend borders.

7. Convergence with legal economies

Illegally mined gold, uncontrolled logging, and meat and soy produced on deforested land are inserted into global value chains. This intertwining blurs the boundaries between legal and illegal, giving the appearance of legitimacy to activities that destroy the Amazon. By normalizing criminal extraction, the agricultural and mining frontier expands into indigenous territories and conservation areas, amplifying the climate crisis.

8. A regional and global threat

The criminalization of the Amazon is not only a national security problem for Amazonian states, but also a global challenge to climate security and biodiversity. The expansion of criminal economies in the rainforest means that the future of the world's largest tropical forest, and therefore the stability of the global climate, is in the hands of transnational illicit networks.

9. Strategic recommendations

Strengthening international cooperation is key: the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) needs to be aligned with the global commitments of the Paris Agreement and COP16 on biodiversity. It is also essential to protect indigenous territorial governance, ensure the safety of leaders and communities, and build sustainable economic alternatives that break the dependence on criminal economies. Without these measures, the Amazon will continue to be captured by illicit networks that threaten the climate, democracy, and human rights.

Summary

Illicit economies, criminal governance, and transnational organized crime networks have become one of the main threats to the Amazon and, by extension, to the global climate. This article explores the historical context and conditions that facilitated the expansion of organized crime, highlighting institutional weakness, porous borders, and the profitability of illicit economies due to high prices and demand in the global market. Through concrete examples from Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela, we illustrate how transnational crime networks and illicit economies have established criminal governance, creating conditions of exploitation in the Amazon and pushing it beyond the point of no return. Finally, we conclude that political responses to this situation must incorporate the perspective of human and climate security, placing indigenous territorial governance and the traceability of global chains at the center of the response.

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ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE IN THE AMAZON: A THREAT TO THE REGION AND THE GLOBAL CLIMATE

1. INTRODUCTION

The Amazon covers 847 million hectares, making it the largest and most biodiverse tropical forest on the planet, regulating South America's hydrological cycles and stabilizing the global climate (MapBiomas Amazonia 2024). It is home to more than 500 Indigenous Peoples and contains one-third of known plant and animal species. It also has a carbon storage capacity of 56.8 gigatons of carbon, which could reach between 70 and 100 gigatons if the carbon reserves contained in the soil and necromass are included (Springer 2024). Its role as the world's lung and climate regulator is now seriously threatened by the expansion of multiple forms of extractivism—both legal and illegal—including mining, oil, livestock, and agribusiness projects, as well as illicit economies and transnational organized crime networks. In recent years, these dynamics have shaped new forms of criminal and extractive governance in vast areas of the biome.

The Amazon is not isolated from global dynamics. On the contrary, it is deeply embedded in the illicit value chains that supply international markets with cocaine, gold, and timber, as well as meat, soy, oil, and other products. The rise in the international price of gold (UNODC 2024), the persistent demand for cocaine in North America and Europe, and the growing pressure on natural re-

Photo: Coca harvest. ***Credit:*** *Tom Lafay*.

sources have encouraged the expansion of criminal organizations with transnational networks. These groups take advantage of institutional weaknesses and limited state presence in the region to consolidate forms of criminal governance that replace the traditional functions of the state.

Beyond being a national security issue, this phenomenon must be understood as a challenge to climate and human security, as it compromises the forest's ability to regulate the global climate and the survival of the peoples who inhabit it. It also threatens indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant governance processes by eroding the community institutions that have historically protected the territory. The advance of organized crime in the Amazon represents simultaneously a crisis of governance, an attack on the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples, institutional and physical erosion of States, and a direct threat to the planet's climate stability.

Illegal gold mining and indiscriminate logging consolidated a criminal ecosystem that is expanding by taking advantage of porous borders and the profitability of illicit markets (WRI 2022).

2. EXPANSION OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE AMAZON

Historically, the Amazon has been the scene of successive extractive cycles: from the rubber boom in the 19th and early 20th centuries to oil and timber exploitation in the last century. These processes consolidated dynamics of violence, exclusion, and limited state presence. Since the late 20th century, coca cultivation and cocaine production have transformed the region into a strategic hub for drug trafficking. Subsequently, illegal gold mining and indiscriminate logging consolidated a criminal ecosystem that is expanding by taking advantage of porous borders and the profitability of illicit markets (WRI 2022). In this sense, the expansion of Amazonian illicit economies cannot be analyzed in isolation, but rather as part of transnational value chains that are connected to local territories, financial centers, and global consumption.

This historical process consolidated a pattern of accumulation and dispossession: the Amazon became a territory where extractive cycles, whether legal or illegal, develop under schemes of violence, exclusion, and criminal governance. The weak state presence in the Amazon creates gaps in authority and deepens the absence of basic services, making it easier for illegal actors to occupy that space. In addition, porous borders and corruption allow criminal networks to expand, operate with impunity, and consolidate their power. From a political economy perspective on violence, this pattern has been described as a system of "brown zones" where the state shares or loses its monopoly on coercion in the face of non-state armed actors (O'Donnell 1993). This power vacuum translates into growing vulnerability for indigenous and rural communities, who have

seen their territories transformed into illicit corridors occupied by foreign actors seeking to control access to resources through coercion and violence.

Between 2016 and 2025, multiple factors converged in a perfect storm that expanded the influence of organized crime: i) high prices and demand for gold (since 2022) and cocaine on the global market (GoldPrice 2025), combined with the impoverishment and abandonment of Amazonian populations; ii) permissive or complicit policies in Venezuela[1], Brazil[2], Peru[3], and Bolivia[4] have contributed to the expansion of illicit economies; iii) the incomplete implementation of the peace agreement in Colombia left power vacuums that have been disputed by different criminal organizations; and iv) finally, the pandemic diverted state resources, reduced security operational capacity, and expanded opportunities for illegal control. Various UNODC reports (2021; 2023) show that these factors did not act in isolation, but rather reconfigured criminal routes and markets throughout the Amazon basin, with visible impacts on the dynamics of drug trafficking, mining, and logging.

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The ecosystem of armed control and criminal governance was also transformed: the fragmentation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the consolidation of the presence of the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Venezuela, and the breakdown of the pact between the Comando Vermelho (CV) and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). In Brazil, this triggered prison massacres and criminal reconfigurations, bringing their dispute to the Amazon. The escalation and fragmentation of Ecuadorian criminal groups, which have

1 See International Crisis Group (2017), report on how the Orinoco Mining Arc decree enabled extractive operations in protected areas and facilitated the advance of criminal networks.

2 Human Rights Watch (2021) describes how, during the Jair Bolsonaro administration, regulations such as bill PL 191/2020 and the reduction of environmental penalties contributed to the expansion of illegal mining on indigenous lands.

3 The Peruvian Society for Environmental Law (2023) and various analyses of the REINFO (Registry of Informal Miners) point out how the constant extension of permits allows operations to continue without rigorous controls.

4 The Institute for Socioeconomic Research and Community documents that mercury remains legal for artisanal mining and that Bolivia is a key importer in the region, facilitating its availability throughout the Amazon.

The weak state presence in the Amazon creates gaps in authority and deepens the absence of basic services, making it easier for illegal actors to occupy that space.

also expanded their influence in the Amazon region, contributed to this as well. Our field research, conducted with the *Amazon Underworld* team in six countries, found the presence of armed groups and crime syndicates in 70% of the municipalities analyzed, with at least one armed actor stationed at each Amazonian border; this presence imposes "criminal governance" on millions of people (Amazon Watch 2023).

Today, the Amazon has become a global corridor for organized crime. Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia maintain high rates of coca cultivation, with Colombia reaching 253,000 hectares in 2023—a 10% increase over 2022—and recording the highest potential cocaine production worldwide (UNDOC 2024 b). This production is transported to the United States, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Brazil via a variety of land, river, and air routes.

At the same time, illegal gold mining has established itself as one of the main criminal economies in the region: in 2020, at least 4,500 sites had been identified in the Amazon (RAISG 2020), but more recent estimates by international organizations show that the scale and profitability of this activity have increased dramatically, moving between $12 billion and $48 billion annually worldwide (Interpol 2022), with Latin America as one of the main epicenters (Fact Coalition 2025). Both economies converge in a functional way: coca finances machinery and bribes, while gold launders profits and reduces legal risks.

Other illicit economies, such as biodiversity trafficking, human and arms trafficking, illegal logging, and extortion, fuel the economic and political power of transnational crime networks. Their activities also have a large presence in formal economies and politics. From the political economy of violence, this network forms parallel orders that replace state functions and reconfigure markets and territories, reinforcing the convergence between legal and illegal extractivism.

3. CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE: THE CASE OF THE TRIPLE FRONTIER

To understand how this criminal governance works, it is useful to review the case of the triple border between Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, which has become one of the most violent areas in the Amazon. In our report produced with Amazon Underworld, *"In the Shadows of the State" (Amazon Underworld 2025), we analyze how this model of power is characterized by the comprehensive control exercised by armed groups and criminal organizations over territories, communities, and natural resources. Our findings reveal that* criminal governance has succeeded in consolidating illicit corridors along cross-border rivers and transforming the sociocultural dynamics in the area through the impacts of armed coercion.

The main armed actors are the Comandos de la Frontera and other dissident factions of the FARC in Colombia, which, following the 2016 peace agreement, expanded their influence into Ecuador and Peru, as well as Ecuadorian gangs such as Los Lobos and Los Choneros, which moved from operating in urban and prison environments to establishing themselves in the Amazon. These groups are not only involved in drug trafficking and illegal mining—forming pragmatic alliances with those who regulate access to machinery, fuel, and river corridors—but have also developed structures of social and political domination that replace the state in regions where institutions are weak or non-existent (Amazon Underworld 2025).

The basis of criminal governance is the illicit economy. Coca cultivation and cocaine trafficking are the main sources of financing, with Putumayo, Sucumbíos, and Peruvian Amazonian areas as the epicenters of production and logistics. Added to this dynamic is illegal gold mining, which uses mercury and causes serious environmental damage, while generating revenues that rival those of drugs. These activities are coordinated through river corridors such as the Putumayo, Caquetá, and Napo rivers, which simultaneously serve as transport routes for cocaine, gold, and weapons.

The insertion of these products into international markets—cocaine to the United States, Europe, and Africa; gold to global supply chains that are difficult to trace—turns criminal governance into a cog in transnational economies that transcend Amazonian borders. Evidence of illegal gold exported from Guyana, Suriname, and Peru to the United Arab Emirates and Swit-

Photo: Puerto Leguizamo in the Tri-Border area of Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. ***Credit:*** *Raphael Hoetmer, Amazon Watch*

zerland confirms the difficulty of tracing these flows and preventing the laundering of money obtained from drug trafficking (OECD 2023).

Therefore, the control exercised by armed groups is not limited to the economic sphere, but rather constitutes a parallel system of authority that imposes social norms through curfews, violent sanctions, surveillance of communications, and the administration of "justice" by their own hands. They collect "taxes" from producers and traders, regulate prices, and manage access to land and resources, becoming arbiters of daily life. In addition, they co-opt or intimidate traditional and indigenous authorities, weakening their community governance structures. The forced recruitment of minors and young people fuels the sustainability of these organizations, perpetuating cycles of violence and social breakdown.

The impact on local communities is devastating. Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and peasants suffer forced displacement, confinement, selective killings, and a constant climate of fear. Cultural autonomy is eroded as traditional institutions are penetrated by criminal logic, and environmental devastation directly affects the livelihoods of populations that depend on rivers, forests, and soils for their survival. The loss of biodiversity, mercury pollution, and deforestation compromise not only local life but also global climate stability.

All this occurs in a context of structural state weakness. The presence of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru in these areas is fragmented and episodic, marked by military operations that fail to establish security and, at times, increase abuses against civilians. Corruption in security forces and local authorities facilitates the consoli-

Photo: Clandestine landing strip in Reserve for indigenous people in isolation. ***Credit:*** *Aidesep*

dation of criminal power. In addition, the lack of cross-border coordination allows groups to take advantage of porous borders to take refuge or move their operations without hindrance. In this scenario, criminal actors not only fill a power vacuum, but also build their own order which, although based on coercion, ends up being the frame of reference for communities that find no protection or opportunities in the state.

In short, criminal governance in the Amazonian triple border area is configured as an alternative system of power that combines territorial control, social discipline, and transnational illicit economies. This criminal governance has not only replaced and undermined state authority, but has also selectively incorporated its functions, appropriating its resources, local institutions, and even symbols of authority to reinforce its coercive legitimacy.

In this way, criminal governance is not limited to reaffirming the absence of the state, but also challenges the very concept of sovereignty: it belongs to the realm of the illicit, but it feeds on formal structures, legally established institutions, and business actors that legitimize and facilitate its permanence. At the same time, it is true that, given the state's abandonment of the Amazon, it is these actors who provide economic opportunities, work, and even various services to local populations. As a result, new forms of colonization are emerging, where indigenous and rural communities are treated as populations administered for the benefit of illicit and extractive networks.

Similar situations are repeated throughout the Amazon, such as in the Triple Frontier of Colombia, Brazil, and Peru, on the border between Venezuela and Colombia, in

The triple border between Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, which has become one of the most violent areas in the Amazon.

Guaviare in Colombia, in the Mining Arc in Venezuela, Madre de Dios and Ucayali in Peru, and in several Amazonian states in Brazil. Comparative evidence in these areas shows patterns of local institutional capture, social disciplining, convergence of illegal economies, articulation with formal legal chains, reinforcing the logic of "criminal governance" as a substitute order. In other words, we are facing a structural problem that must be analyzed at the regional level, implementing intersectional approaches where human rights and climate security provide us with the introspection and foresight needed to address the future scenarios we face as a region.

4. IMPACTS ON THE RIGHTS OF AMAZONIAN COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The impacts of criminal governance are manifold: they undermine state authority, destroy the community fabric, systematically violate human rights, and cause irreparable environmental damage.

The Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon face devastating impacts from criminal expansion. Entire communities are being dispossessed of their territories, while

mercury pollution and deforestation threaten their traditional ways of life. In Brazil, the Munduruku and Kayapó territories have suffered massive invasions by illegal miners who are destroying the rivers and forests on which they depend for their livelihoods. The Kakataibo and Ashaninka peoples suffer a similar situation at the hands of drug traffickers in Peru. Between 2020 and 2024, six Kakataibo leaders were murdered in Ucayali in retaliation for their opposition to coca and illegal logging; FENACOKA reported previous threats, evidencing a pattern of criminal retaliation (Mongabay 2024). In Colombia, the Constitutional Court has identified risks to the survival of entire peoples, while human rights networks have documented that more than 50% of the murders of environmental defenders in the country between 2020 and 2023 occurred in indigenous Amazonian territories. Sexual violence against indigenous women, the forced recruitment of children, and the murders of environmental leaders constitute serious violations of the human rights and cultural survival of these peoples. According to Global Witness (2023), in 2022, one in five deaths of environmental defenders worldwide occurred in the Amazon, revealing the magnitude of the risk in the region.

In Venezuela, reports from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UN 2022) describe conditions of forced labor and modern slavery in the Orinoco Mining Arc, where indigenous communities are forced to pay extortion fees or work under threat. In Brazil, Federal Police operatives seized military weapons from garimpeiro camps in 2023, illustrating the criminal militarization of conflicts over gold (Policia Federal do Brasil 2023).

Photo: Kakataibo Guard. ***Credit:*** *Jhomar Maynas*

The environmental impact of organized crime in the Amazon is profound and multifaceted. Illegal mining contaminates rivers with mercury, causing irreversible damage to aquatic ecosystems and human health in areas such as Napo in Ecuador and Maynas in Peru. In Kichwa communities in the Napo, community biomonitoring has identified mercury levels above WHO safety limits (Amazon Watch, 2024), compromising food security and the health of entire generations.

Illegal logging contributes to the degradation of critical ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity. Drug trafficking, for its part, opens up corridors of deforestation in national parks and protected areas. In Venezuela, the Orinoco Mining Arc has devastated thousands of hectares of forest (Transparencia Venezuela 2022), while in Brazil, the expansion of criminal groups into Amazonian states such as Pará and Roraima has accelerated forest destruction (Mongabay 2025). Fires, often set to clear new areas for exploitation, also generate massive greenhouse gas emissions.

Organized crime also erodes the rule of law in the Amazon. Local mayors' offices, justice systems, and security forces are co-opted or intimidated. Institutional corruption facilitates the expansion of criminal networks and limits the state's capacity to respond. Violence becomes a daily occurrence: homicides, massacres, forced displacement, and threats against social leaders are common. In Amazonian cities, homicides are skyrocketing: Manaus records 54.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, Tabatinga 106.6, and Leticia 60.

In rural areas such as Putumayo, disputes between factions have led to 21 massacres since 2020, and in Ecuador, it is the Amazonian provinces of Sucumbíos and Orellana where the homicide rate has grown the most in 2024 in a country overwhelmed by violence. In Putumayo, Colombia, intermittent displacements of at least 12 indigenous communities have been documented since 2022, fragmenting social life and weakening territorial governance processes (Ombudsman's Office 2022 to 2025). In Ecuador, FOIN has recorded the displacement of community leaders and technicians threatened by illegal miners, directly affecting environmental monitoring processes.

Entire communities are being dispossessed of their territories, while mercury pollution and deforestation threaten their traditional ways of life.

5. CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE, THE POINT OF NO RETURN, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate and ecological threats—such as deforestation, mercury pollution, and violence associated with illicit economies—directly impact the physical and cultural integrity of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples. However, state responses to security issues continue to focus on militarization and securitization strategies that prioritize territorial control over addressing structural causes.

These strategies do not address historical inequalities, the unequal distribution of wealth, or disputes over common goods. Instead of strengthening the resilience of Indigenous and rural communities, securitization deepens their exclusion and vulnerability. This approach is at odds with contemporary notions of "climate security," which argue that the protection of ecosystems is inseparable from human security and social justice. This situation calls for an urgent review of national security strategies in Amazonian countries, moving toward comprehensive human security that incorporates human rights approaches, climate justice, and differentiated protection for Indigenous Peoples.

In this context, criminal governance has consolidated itself as one of the dominant forces in vast areas of the Amazon, in many cases displacing state authority and imposing a system of control based on violence, coercion, and resource capture. This phenomenon directly affects the capacity of Amazonian countries and local communities to protect the forest and maintain their traditional systems of governance. Its impacts are multiple: some direct, such as deforestation and environmental degradation resulting from illicit economies; and others indirect, such as the erosion of community institutions and the weakening of the management of parks and nature reserves that until recently had contained destruction. Taken together, this web pushes the Amazon toward the dreaded point of ecological no return. Scientific literature warns that this threshold will be reached if total deforestation exceeds 20% to 25% of the biome, degrading the Amazon rainforest into a savanna and generating irreversible climatic consequences (Lovejoy 2020).

Photo: Coca plantation in Putumayo. ***Credit:*** *Tom Lafay*

Criminal governance not only sustains illicit economies such as drug trafficking, illegal logging, and clandestine logging, but is also intertwined with forms of formal extractivism. Through corruption, the capture of local authorities, and territorial control, these criminal actors create conditions conducive to the expansion of activities such as cattle ranching, logging, and even mining, oil, and energy projects on previously dispossessed or degraded territories. In this way, illegal circuits open roads, clear land, and displace communities, while formal sectors benefit from this infrastructure of violence and dispossession, allowing the extractive frontier to advance with an appearance of legality but on deeply illegitimate and destructive foundations.

Illicit economies—illegal gold mining, indiscriminate logging, and drug trafficking—are the main drivers of this criminal governance. Each leaves behind devastated landscapes: ravaged forests, arson, rivers contaminated with mercury, invaded indigenous territories, and displaced or subjugated communities. These activities do not operate in isolation, but are linked to formal economies that launder their illicit origins, such as cattle ranching or the timber trade, thus consolidating a criminal ecosystem that penetrates ever deeper into the forest.

The crisis facing Ecuador's Amazonian indigenous communities (Amazon Watch 2024) shows that illegal gold mining in Ecuador has created different corridors of expansion where massive deforestation, contamination of rivers with heavy metals and mercury, weakening of indigenous governance projects, and an increase in murders, extortion, and social fragmentation that threaten the cultural and physical survival of indigenous peoples. In Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, and other areas, studies have documented mercury levels in indigenous communities well above safety thresholds, highlighting the severity of the contamination. This vicious cycle contaminates, sickens, and weakens local governance, opening up even more space for criminal networks.

Illegal logging, for its part, opens gaps in the forest that facilitate fires and conversion to pasture. Recent research shows that about 40% of timber extraction in the Brazilian Amazon is unlicensed, and a significant portion occurs within protected areas. Although Brazil managed to reduce total deforestation in 2023–2024, illegal logging increased by 19%, demonstrating the adaptability of these networks. This timber often enters global chains through fraudulent documentation, making traceability difficult and facilitating money laundering.

Livestock farming represents the final destination for much of the deforested land. *Cattle laundering* is also a money laundering technique that involves rais-

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ing cattle in protected or illegally deforested areas. Laundering occurs when cattle are moved from illegal or seized properties to "clean" farms with falsified or incomplete documentation, concealing their origin and thus enabling their entry into legal supply chains. This undermines international commitments to zero deforestation. Globally, conversion to pasture is responsible for almost half of the loss of forests in South America, and the Amazon is one of the epicenters of this dynamic.

Drug trafficking adds another significant pressure: coca cultivation is expanding rapidly. In 2023, Colombia reached a record 253,000 hectares of coca, with much of it concentrated in Amazonian areas; Peru reported more than 92,000 hectares, many in Amazonian micro-basins and indigenous territories (UNODC 2024). In addition to crops, there are clandestine airstrips, laboratories, and illegal corridors that further fragment and degrade the forest. Between 2018 and 2022, the Amazonian territories of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru lost more than one million hectares, largely due to the expansion of coca.

Organized crime in the Amazon is not a marginal phenomenon, but a structural threat that compromises both regional stability and the planet's climate balance.

These drivers of illegality are part of a global dynamic of organized crime and criminal governance that combines armed violence, institutional corruption, and illicit economies. Wherever they advance, communities lose control over their territories, traditional environmental protection systems are weakened, and the forest becomes a net source of carbon emissions. Recent studies show that parts of the eastern Amazon already emit more CO_2 than they absorb, bringing the entire region closer to the critical threshold at which the forest could collapse into a degraded savanna ecosystem.

It is particularly worrying that they are managing to penetrate the hitherto most protected areas of the forest, where community territorial governance had remained more intact. Self-determination processes, such as the Autonomous Territorial Government of the Wampis Nation or the Munduruku in Brazil, are facing both attacks from outside and internal pressures from these activities.

In this context, the literature on "tipping points" in the biome reinforces the link between ecological degradation and climate security, emphasizing that the loss of forest resilience also translates into greater social and political vulnerability for the populations that inhabit it. Hence, the defense of the Amazon cannot be understood solely as environmental conservation, but rather as a global human and climate security strategy that articulates the care and protection of biodiversity, human rights, and social peace.

Conclusions and recommendations

Organized crime in the Amazon is not a marginal phenomenon, but a structural threat that compromises both regional stability and the planet's climate balance. The expansion of illicit economies has created a network of criminal governance that replaces the state in vast areas, with devastating consequences for Indigenous Peoples, ecosystems, and the security of the region.

Evidence shows that the Amazon is on the verge of an ecological tipping point, largely driven by criminal dynamics. If deforestation reaches critical levels, the collapse of the Amazon ecosystem will have global repercussions. Faced with this reality, political responses must transcend traditional security approaches and comprehensively address the social, environmental, and climatic dimensions of the problem.

Faced with the growing threat of organized crime in the Amazon, a comprehensive and regional political response is required that combines security, environmental protection, and social development. The experience of recent decades shows that militarized responses, isolated from a human rights and sustainable development approach, have not been effective. Therefore, six dimensions must be considered:

1. **Strengthen regional cooperation -** the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) must be strengthened as a mechanism for cross-border coordination. The recent Amazon Summit in Belém in 2023 marked a step forward in building a common agenda, which was confirmed at the Summit in Bogotá in 2025, but these commitments have yet to be translated into concrete actions. For its part, the Andean Community of Nations has been advancing cooperation initiatives to combat illicit economies, particularly illegal gold mining. Such cooperation should prioritize the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in decision-making mechanisms and ensure that their proposals for territorial governance are a binding part of regional agreements.

2. **Implement international commitments and agreements that link biodiversity and climate justice with security and policies against organized crime** - COP16 on biodiversity and the Paris Agreement on climate change provide global frameworks in which the Amazon must be prioritized as a critical ecosystem. Linking the fight against illicit economies with international climate commitments would allow for the channeling of greater financial resources and the strengthening of international cooperation. In this regard, climate finance commitments should be directed towards schemes that strengthen human security, the protection of defenders, and indigenous governance initiatives, rather than replicating models of militarized securitization. To this end, a protocol on crimes affecting the environment at the COP on Transnational Crime (UNTOC), which places indigenous territorial governance at the center, is essential.

3. **Strengthen the protection of environmental defenders and Amazonian peoples** - Indigenous Peoples are the

main guardians of the forest, but also the most exposed victims. It is essential to guarantee their safety through collective protection mechanisms, recognition of territorial rights, and strengthening of their traditional economies. The self-determination of peoples such as the Wampís, Munduruku, and FOIN demonstrates that indigenous governance systems are the most effective defense against the expansion of illicit economies.

4. **Promote alternative economies rooted in conservation** - Alternative development and sustainable policies must offer real alternatives to communities that currently depend on illicit economies. Programs to replace illicit crops, incentives for sustainable forest economies, and access to fair markets are necessary measures. These programs will only be successful if they are designed with community participation and respect for the worldview of indigenous and/or rural communities, avoiding the reproduction of welfare schemes or state imposition.

5. **Confront corruption and state complicity** - Institutional strengthening and the fight against corruption are essential. Without strong institutions, any strategy will be insufficient. Justice systems and environmental prosecutors must be strengthened, the legitimate presence of the state in isolated territories must be increased, and transparency in the use of resources must be guaranteed

6. **Ensuring traceability of natural resources** involves certification and tracking the entire supply chain of gold, timber, and other products, which is key to reducing incentives for illicit economies. Cooperation with consumer countries, especially in Europe and Asia, is essential. However, this traceability will only be effective if the convergence between illegal economies and formal extractive chains, such as large-scale livestock farming and mining, which often benefit from the infrastructure of dispossession and violence created by criminal networks, is also controlled.

7. **Regulating supply chains** is essential to close the critical links that feed criminal markets: (i) mercury and chemical precursors: despite the Minamata Convention, smuggling remains a central factor in illegal mining; mandatory traceability, strict customs controls, and cross-border sanctions are urgently needed; (ii) Laundering of illegal gold: without robust verification and due diligence mechanisms, illicit gold enters formal markets through lax certifications and triangulated exports; (iii) Inputs and facilities: effective monitoring and regulation of machinery, fuels, and other critical inputs associated with these chains. Likewise, controlling illicit financial flows and cooperating with financial centers and consumer countries are necessary conditions for dismantling the criminal profits that put pressure on indigenous territories and biodiversity.

In short, policy responses require a holistic approach that combines local, regional, and international action, with the active participation of communities and a sustained commitment from Amazonian states and the international community. The defense of the Amazon must be understood as a global climate security strat-

egy, in which biodiversity, human rights, and social peace converge. The future of the Amazon is also the future of the planet. For decision-makers, this challenge requires the coherence of public policies based on international cooperation, the protection of human rights, institutional strengthening, and a real commitment to sustainability. The window of opportunity for action is rapidly closing: the time for fragmented responses is over; it is time to build coordinated and decisive action to ensure that the Amazon remains the green heart of the world.

About the authors

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Amazon Watch is a non-profit organization founded in 1996 to protect the rainforest and promote the rights of Indigenous peoples in the Amazon basin in Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Brazil. We work in solidarity with Indigenous and environmental organizations on campaigns for human rights, corporate responsibility, and the preservation of the Amazon's ecosystems. We are part of the 80x25 campaign.

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