

# AMAZON UNDERWORLD

CRIMINAL ECONOMIES IN THE  
WORLD'S LARGEST RAINFOREST

NOVEMBER 2023



INFOAMAZONIA 



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is the result of a collaboration between Amazon Underworld (a project by media outlets InfoAmazonia, Armando.Info and La Liga Contra el Silencio), Amazon Watch and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

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## FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.

# ACRONYMS

<b>ACTO</b>	Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization
<b>CV</b>	Comando Vermelho (Red Command)
<b>CV-AM</b>	Comando Vermelho-Amazonas
<b>ELN</b>	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)
<b>EMC</b>	Estado Mayor Central
<b>FARC</b>	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
<b>FDN</b>	Família do Norte (Northern Family)
<b>PCC</b>	Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Capital Command)



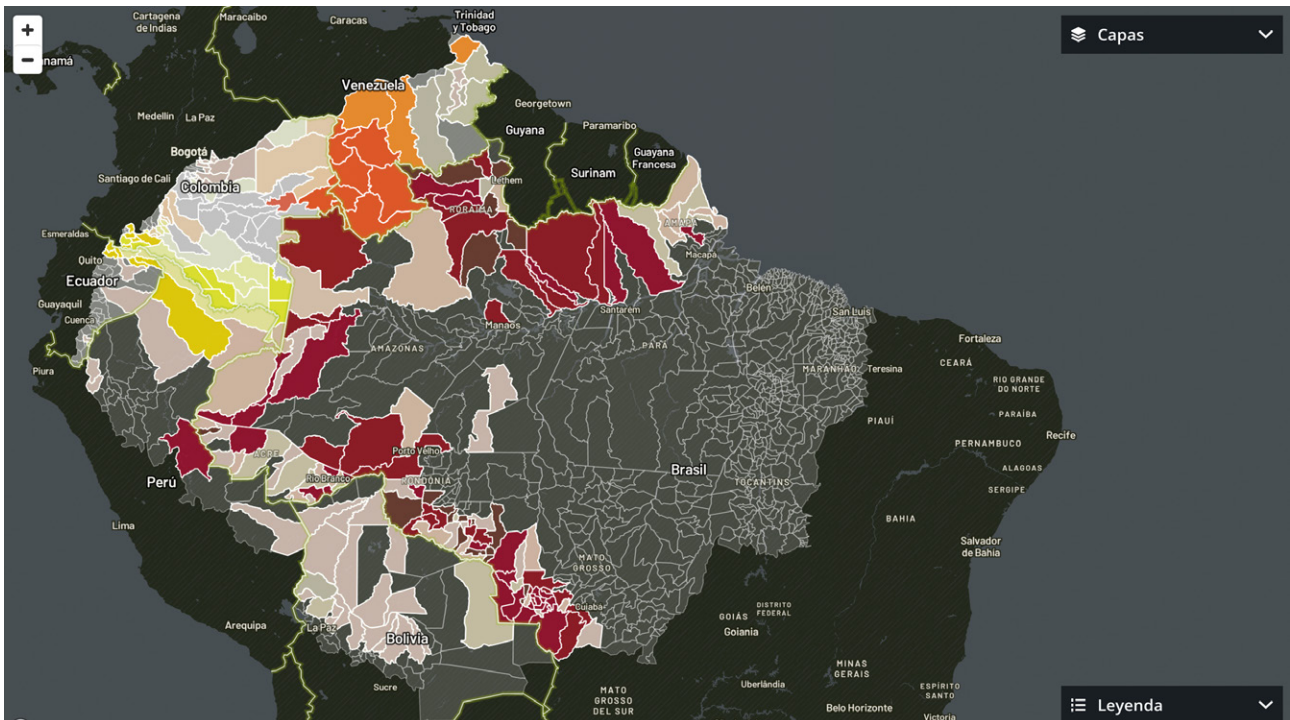
## INTRODUCTION

**T**he Amazon, the world's largest rainforest, covering some 7 million square kilometres and linking nine countries, has become one of the main sources and transit points for criminal economies in Latin America. From shipments of cocaine, gold and timber moving down its hundreds of rivers, to the makeshift airstrips that facilitate the nightly movement of small contraband planes, the Amazon is now home to a complex underground economy that feeds growing global demand but also fuels violence and deforestation. The unchecked actions of increasingly powerful criminal organizations pose an existential threat to the planet's most biodiverse region and the communities it shelters.

Over the past decade, the Amazon has become one of the most dangerous regions in Latin America, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of the violence. In Brazil, for example, indigenous communities have been systematically subjected to violent invasions by armed *garimpeiros* (miners), while in Colombia's nine Amazon departments, where 43 massacres have been documented since 2020, non-state armed groups terrorize rural communities.<sup>1</sup> In Peru, drug traffickers are increasingly recruiting indigenous children to work on coca plantations, and guerrilla groups are sending entire families to work in illegal gold mines in Venezuela.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, one in five killings of land and environmental defenders worldwide occurred in the Amazon.<sup>3</sup>

As demand for illicit goods, particularly cocaine, has risen to historically high levels and the price of gold has increased dramatically since the early 2000s, so have criminal opportunities.<sup>4</sup> This, combined with a low state presence, high levels of corruption, decades of faltering security strategies and a lack of coordination between states, has created the perfect environment for some of Latin America's most prolific criminal groups to reorganize and take over.

The reshuffling of the local criminal ecosystem – which includes Colombian guerrilla groups, Brazilian gangs, Peruvian criminal groups (including drug and human traffickers) and Venezuelan crime syndicates – has resulted in some groups being wiped off the map, leaving room for others to emerge or expand. Through field research and data analysis, Amazon Underworld found that non-state armed groups or crime syndicates are active in 70 per cent of the municipalities investigated in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela (see the methodology section below), and that all of the Amazon's borders have at least one armed actor on one side of the divide.<sup>5</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Presence of non-state armed groups in the Amazon region.

NOTE: Municipalities highlighted in light grey represent areas covered in the research without armed presence, while the municipalities in dark grey have not been included in the investigation. Some municipalities are affected by the presence of more than one armed group; to engage more closely with the data, see the interactive map at [https://amazonunderworld.org/#link\\_mapa](https://amazonunderworld.org/#link_mapa).  
SOURCE: Amazon Underworld

This presence translates into various forms of criminal governance and control that directly or indirectly dominate the lives of a large proportion of the Amazon's nearly 50 million inhabitants, straining the efforts of states, communities and civil society to protect the rainforest and its most marginalized populations.<sup>6</sup> Local communities, often indigenous to the Amazon, struggle daily with armed intruders who impose a form of criminal governance, dictating access to the region, controlling local economic activities, forcing some to participate in illicit activities and using violence to dispense rudimentary justice.

Crime dynamics are also accelerating the destruction of the Amazon, which has become a global public good of paramount importance due to its cultural and biological diversity, and its status as one of the world's most important climate regulators. This has led to a surge of interest in protecting the Amazon, driven largely by concerns about the potential impact of its destruction on climate change.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Amazon Fund, a mechanism created to raise funds to support efforts to prevent and combat deforestation, is backed by countries such as Norway and Germany, while governments across South America have put the issue firmly on the agenda.<sup>8</sup>

There is ample evidence that indigenous communities and their territories play a central role in protecting the rainforest, while at the same time coming under increasing attacks from organized crime.<sup>9</sup> Efforts to protect the Amazon's ecosystem must go hand in hand with social, environmental and security policies that are both sustainable and robust, and with the full implementation of the rights of indigenous peoples and other local communities. It will be difficult to implement conservation projects for which funds are available if states do not control their respective parts of the Amazon. Anything less than a coordinated, state-led approach will fail to achieve this, and both the environment and the communities that protect the Amazon will pay the price.

## Methodology

This paper is the result of a partnership between the Amazon Underworld journalism project, Amazon Watch and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. The paper is based on data from Amazon Underworld, a project by media outlets InfoAmazonia, Armando.Info and La Liga Contra el Silencio, which brought together 37 investigative journalists and media professionals who ventured into the most remote areas of the Amazon to document cross-border criminal economies, their dynamics and impacts, conducting hundreds of interviews. Fieldwork was carried out between April 2022 and July 2023 and included visits to Loreto and Ucayali in Peru; Putumayo, Caquetá, Amazonas, Vichada and Guainía in Colombia; Bolívar in Venezuela, and Roraima and Amazonas in Brazil.

Amazon Underworld then combined quantitative and qualitative methods to build a database for mapping criminal groups and illicit economies in 348 municipalities in six Amazon countries, using satellite imagery to detect illegal mining operations and developing an algorithm to detect coca crops. The mapping and data analysis is based on data collected through more than 60 freedom of information requests, satellite imagery and open-source documents. Experts consulted included those directly involved with armed actors and illicit economies (such as drug traffickers, gang members and illegal miners), as well as indigenous leaders, community members, law enforcement agents, intelligence personnel, prosecutors and businesspeople, among others.

Finally, the paper includes feedback from indigenous leaders and organizations from Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil, gathered and systematized by Amazon Watch through interviews and focus groups, to develop conclusions and recommendations based on the concrete situations and challenges faced in indigenous territories in the Amazon. Focus group discussions with experts from law enforcement, government and academia were also convened to formulate recommendations.



## THE AMAZON UNDERWORLD

In the Amazonian borderlands – peripheral and crime-ridden regions – states often lack control and criminal governance dominates the lives of millions of people. In these regions, it is not uncommon for regional and local governments to be involved in illegal economies and to govern by and for criminal networks, leading to a de facto convergence between state institutions and crime. The absence of the rule of law and the growing proximity between criminal networks and institutional structures, combined with the immense natural wealth of the rainforest and the growing international demand for Amazonian commodities, have created a successful formula for organized crime to prevail.

In addition, remoteness and government neglect have led to a significant lack of basic infrastructure in these areas, including a shortage of public services such as health care, education and economic development. This has created an environment where poverty, exclusion and marginalization are the norm, and where informal and often illicit economic activities tend to become a means of subsistence.

Gold mining, poaching and the timber trade have existed in the Amazon for decades, but these economies have grown exponentially since the early 2000s, driven by global demand and rising gold prices. This has transformed the local landscape physically, economically and culturally, catalyzing the destruction of the Amazon and fuelling violence and crime.<sup>10</sup> With the growing convergence of illicit economies such as drug trafficking and illegal gold mining (see 'Main illicit economies' below), the line between legal and illegal business, and sometimes between state and non-state armed groups, has become blurred.

Crime has always existed in the Amazon, but the criminal ecosystem has undergone significant changes. Various economic booms in the Amazon had profound impacts on communities and the environment throughout the 20th century. Quinine, rubber, gold, petroleum, timber, furs and animal parts all attracted aggressive intruders into the jungle, leading to numerous human rights abuses against indigenous populations.

While the Amazon has always been home to poachers, criminals and smugglers, it was the cultivation of the coca plant that drew organized crime and armed groups to the region. Coca is a plant native to the Amazon, with numerous traditional uses and significant cultural importance for indigenous peoples. It is also the primary ingredient in cocaine production, and was particularly so during the 1970s, when it was commercially grown in Bolivia and Peru, with processing labs operating in Colombia. The



global demand for cocaine surged during the 1980s and 1990s, making the drug trade a major driver of conflict in Colombia, which became the world's largest producer in the mid-1990s.

Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel amassed significant wealth from the cocaine trade from the 1970s through the 1990s. Guerrilla groups such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army, ELN) have been involved in the cocaine trade for decades, alongside former paramilitary organizations. However, it was the rising price of gold in the early 2000s that enabled armed groups and criminals to diversify into other economic activities, further exploiting natural resources and the environment on a larger scale.

The criminal landscape has further changed since 2016, for a number of reasons. First, the Colombian peace accords, signed in 2016, led to 13 000 combatants from the continent's largest guerrilla force, the FARC, to lay down their arms and leave the rainforest. However, the flawed execution of the agreement resulted in a power vacuum. This was swiftly filled by dissident FARC factions and other armed groups, who continue to aggressively vie for control of coca-growing areas, drug trafficking routes and mineral-rich regions.<sup>11</sup>

Second, after signing a decree in 2016 that opened up 112 000 square kilometres of Venezuelan land in Bolívar state bordering Colombia, Brazil and Guyana for mining development, called the Orinoco Mining Arc, President Nicolás Maduro failed to promote a formal mining sector.<sup>12</sup> Local criminal organizations seized the opportunity and aggressively expanded their control over gold mining areas, often in collusion with state security forces and backed by higher political powers. Venezuelan criminal groups were not alone – Colombian guerrilla groups, including the ELN and dissident FARC factions, also increased their presence within and outside of the Orinoco Mining Arc.<sup>13</sup> The heightened footprint of armed groups seeking to control resource-rich regions, coupled with the widespread availability of cheap labour due to the country's political, economic and humanitarian crisis, led to an unprecedented surge in illegal gold mining, fundamentally reshaping the social, cultural and economic landscape of southern Venezuela.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, an all-out battle for control of the Amazon between some of Brazil's most powerful criminal organizations – the Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Capital Command, PCC), the Comando Vermelho (Red Command, CV) and the Família do Norte (Northern Family, FDN) – began after the CV and the PCC ended a non-aggression pact in 2016, leading to a series of prison massacres and the reconfiguration of the local criminal landscape. The wealth of the Amazon region has enabled these groups to diversify and expand their criminal portfolios, shifting attention to illegal gold mining and other economic activities.<sup>15</sup> In addition, prisons in Brazil's Amazon region have become overcrowded with people awaiting trial or imprisoned for minor offences. This situation has allowed criminal groups such as the PCC and CV to expand throughout the region, while recruiting new members within the prison system.

## Main illicit economies

The Amazon region's cycles of crime and violence stem from the lucrative multi-billion dollar illicit trade in drugs and minerals, particularly illegal gold mining and cocaine trafficking, which are inextricably linked.

### Gold mining

Illegal gold mining in Latin America is estimated to be worth between US\$3 billion and US\$12 billion a year.<sup>16</sup> This represents a significant portion of the region's economy and is a major source of income for criminal organizations. Much of the illegal gold is mined in the Amazon, with nearly 4 500 illegal mining hotspots identified there in 2020.<sup>17</sup> The areas most affected are southern Venezuela, particularly the state of Bolívar, and the Brazilian states of Pará and Roraima, but illegal gold mining is also expanding in Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.

Most of the criminal groups present in the Amazon are involved in illegal gold mining, albeit in different ways. This criminal economy is one of the main sources of revenue for Colombian non-state armed groups, which have been involved in illegal mining since the 1990s. The activity also features in the criminal portfolio of Brazil's PCC, particularly in the states of Roraima and Pará. The Mexican Sinaloa cartel and other smaller groups are also involved in the trade through the trafficking of mercury, a toxic substance used in gold mining.<sup>18</sup>

Across South America, beyond the Amazon region, organized crime and non-state armed groups are often involved in other aspects of the illegal gold mining economy. Members of the ELN in Colombia and Venezuela may own the equipment used, while FARC dissidents in Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela tax gold production, and corrupt state forces in Brazil and Venezuela are involved in gold trafficking.<sup>19</sup> Illegal gold mining is also a sought-after activity for laundering the profits of drug trafficking, and it generates the income needed to finance the violence used by criminal groups to control territories and communities.<sup>20</sup>



A mining site in Ikarabú, southern Venezuela. The region's gold reservoirs are attractive targets for illegal miners and armed groups.

© María Ramírez Cabello

Given the complexity of the gold supply chain and the many ways to legalize illegally mined gold, which may have been acquired through drug-funded purchases or mined with drug money, gold has become an attractive option for criminal groups.<sup>21</sup> In Brazil, for example, a law enforcement source claimed that the CV buys illegal gold as an investment or to use as payment for cocaine and cannabis shipments.<sup>22</sup>

From a criminal perspective, gold has a number of advantages that make it attractive: it is easy to transport and more resistant to damage than substances such as cocaine; it is a stable investment, as even small quantities have significant value that tends to rise in times of economic uncertainty; and it can be easily smuggled out of a country, even during border closures, as seen in Venezuela during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the legal consequences for trafficking gold are often less severe than for trafficking illicit drugs.

## The impacts of illegal gold mining on indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon

Between 2016 and 2022, illegal gold mining on indigenous lands in the Brazilian Amazon increased more than eightfold, according to data from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research. In the ranking of the most affected indigenous territories, the top three are the Kayapó territory (with 11 542 hectares taken for mining), the Mundurucu territory (4 744 hectares) and the Yanomami territory (1 557 hectares).<sup>24</sup> The expansion of gold mining in these areas was a political project that peaked during the administration of former president Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), which dismantled environmental oversight agencies, persecuted indigenous leaders and organizations, and allied with miners exploiting traditional territories.<sup>25</sup>

The expansion of gold mining has had severe socio-environmental consequences. In Mundurucu, Yanomami and Kayapó lands, entire rivers have been disrupted or contaminated with mercury. In 2021, researchers found that all 200 residents evaluated from three Mundurucu villages along the Tapajós River were contaminated with mercury, with higher levels in areas most affected by mining activities.<sup>26</sup>

Social conflicts within indigenous communities and violence against indigenous land defenders peaked with the influx of illegal miners. In 2021, Mundurucu leaders who opposed mining in their territory were attacked by pro-mining groups. Their homes were burned and they were forced to flee their community.<sup>27</sup> Persecution, intimidation and other acts of violence against indigenous leaders are common in areas disputed by miners. The same violence has invaded Yanomami territories in the state of Roraima, where illegal gold mining has led to severe malaria epidemics, endemic child malnutrition and violent attacks on communities and leaders who resist its encroachment.<sup>28</sup>

Illegal gold mining and criminal organizations have expanded in parallel. Gold production in the *garimpos* (mines) is often linked to other crimes, ranging from environmental crimes and crimes against public property to human trafficking, sexual exploitation of women and children, and modern slavery. The relationship between illicit mining and drug trafficking has also deepened – based on reports from *garimpeiros*, a 2021 investigation by journalist network Amazonia Real explored how members of the PCC may be operating in indigenous land.<sup>29</sup> ■

## Drug trafficking

Coca, the main raw ingredient used to produce cocaine, is grown extensively in the Amazon. Although Colombia is the world's largest producer, most of the coca cultivation in the Amazon region takes place in Peru.<sup>30</sup> Owing to a rising demand for cocaine in Europe and developing markets in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, the Amazon routes are increasingly being used by drug traffickers.<sup>31</sup> The hundreds of rivers and clandestine airstrips scattered across the region provide ample opportunities for trafficking, as law enforcement agencies lack the personnel and resources to patrol them.<sup>32</sup>

Crime syndicates use various seaports in Brazil, as well as in Guyana and Suriname, to export most of the cocaine to Europe and West Africa. It is estimated that significant quantities are funnelled through Venezuela and are transported by semi-submersible vessels to the open sea, where the drugs are loaded onto ships departing from other countries.<sup>33</sup>

Although Colombia and Peru remain the largest producers, coca crops have migrated across the borders into Venezuela and some crops have even been detected in Ecuador.<sup>34</sup> As a result of the current political and security crisis in Ecuador, violence escalated rapidly in 2022 and 2023. Criminal networks took advantage of weak control in port cities and began moving increasing quantities of cocaine through the country. In addition, the increasing number of cocaine hydrochloride laboratories detected in Bolivia indicates that the country is evolving from being a source country and transportation hub for coca leaf to a producer of the final product – cocaine.<sup>35</sup>



Coca leaf harvesting in Bellavista, Peru. Owing to rising demand for cocaine globally, the Amazon routes are increasingly being used by traffickers. © Alex Rufino

Ancillary economies to the drug business in the Amazon region, including the trade in precursors and the theft of fuel or crude oil for coca production, require further research, as do the trade's associated environmental impact. A 2023 study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime highlighted the links between corruption, violence and the reinvestment of drug money in other, sometimes legal, industries that cause environmental damage, such as cattle ranching and agriculture.<sup>36</sup> The murder of indigenous rights activist Bruno Pereira and journalist Dom Phillips in the Vale do Javari region of Brazil highlighted the links between the drug trade, illegal fishing and poaching.<sup>37</sup>

Although the cocaine trade dominates the drug trafficking landscape in the region, the cannabis trade should not be underestimated, especially given the high demand for potent cannabis, often called 'skunk' or 'creepy', which provides Colombian guerrilla organizations with hefty profits. The price of 1 kilogram of cocaine base paste in the Amazon is regularly the same as that of 1 kilogram of potent cannabis.<sup>38</sup>

## Non-state armed groups and crime syndicates

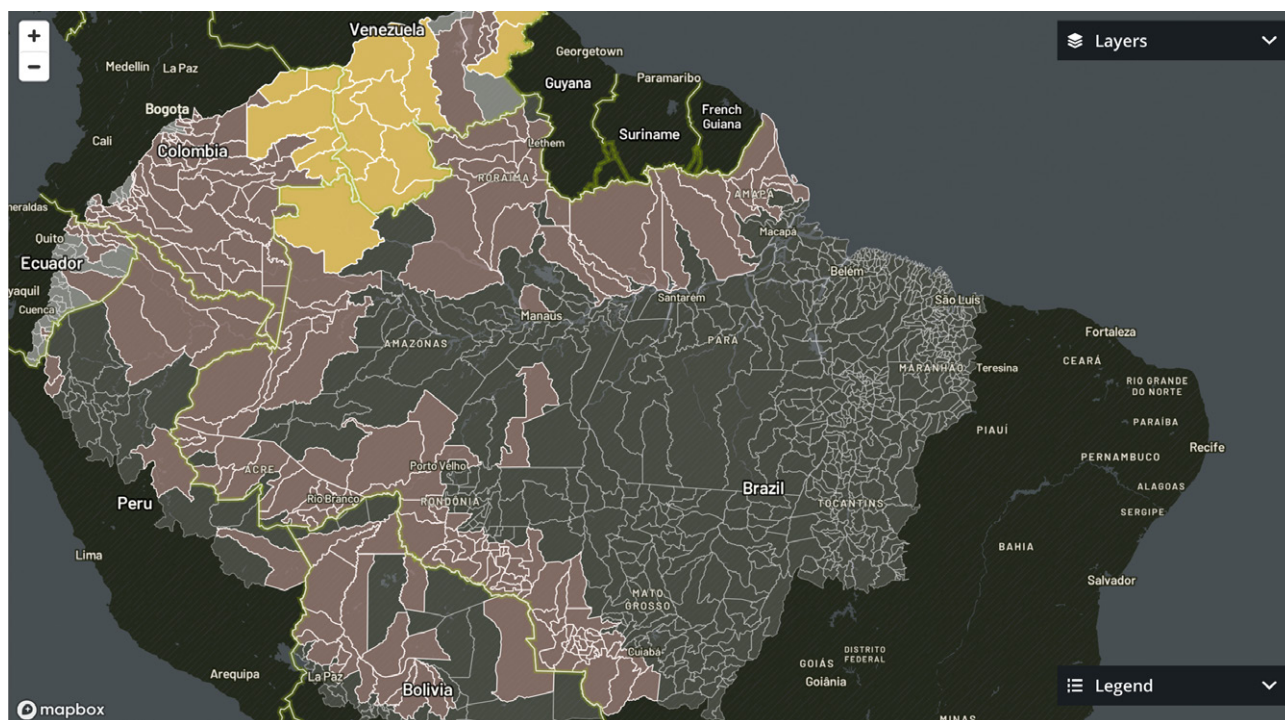
The Amazon is contested, with several armed groups controlling different parts of the region. Hegemonic control is rarely established, leading to ongoing territorial disputes. While larger structures, particularly in Colombia and Venezuela, can manifest some form of social and territorial control, economic supply chains are fragmented, and criminal outsourcing has led to many freelancers and criminal start-ups operating throughout the region. In addition, other small groups tend to be associated with larger franchises. However, the main players are presented below.

### Ejército de Liberación Nacional

Founded in 1964, the ELN became Colombia's largest guerrilla organization after the FARC demobilized in 2016 following a peace deal with the Colombian government. Historically, the ELN has operated along the Colombia–Venezuela border, the Pacific coast and in some of the Andean interior regions rich in natural resources.<sup>39</sup>

Although the Amazon has not been a traditional stronghold for the ELN, the group has expanded its presence in Venezuela, using the border regions as a strategic rearguard to rest, move troops and hide kidnapping victims.<sup>40</sup> More recently, particularly since Maduro signed the Orinoco Mining Arc decree in 2016, opening up a 112 000 square kilometre area in Bolívar state to mining development, the ELN's presence and involvement in illicit gold mining has been consolidated.<sup>41</sup>

The ELN currently has a strategic presence on both sides of the Amazon border between Colombia and Venezuela. It controls illegal gold mining operations in the states of Amazonas, Bolívar and Delta Amacuro, as well as drug trafficking routes to Guyana and Brazil, where it also extorts payments along the Cuyuní River bordering Guyana and where drug traffickers working for the ELN enter Brazil with merchandise via the Rio Negro.<sup>42</sup>



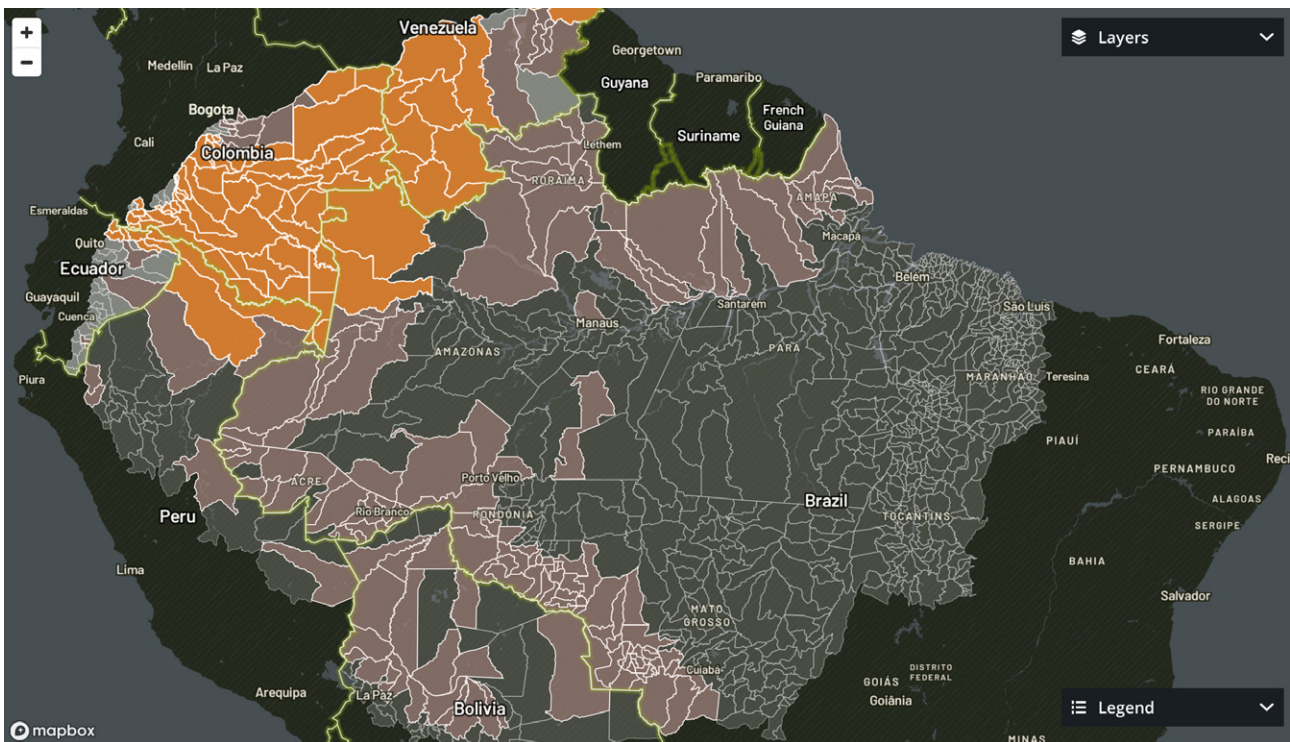
**FIGURE 2** Presence of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional in the Amazon region (shown in yellow).

NOTE: To engage more closely with the data, see the interactive map at [https://amazonunderworld.org/#link\\_mapa](https://amazonunderworld.org/#link_mapa).

SOURCE: Amazon Underworld

## FARC dissidents

The FARC, also founded in 1964, reached an unprecedented peace agreement in 2016 with the government of then-president Juan Manuel Santos, after numerous failed negotiation attempts. The majority of FARC forces demobilized, but certain war blocs did not sign the peace treaty and some took up arms in the following years due to the agreement's faltering implementation and the lack of security for former FARC combatants.<sup>43</sup> More than any other non-state armed group in Colombia, the former FARC had a strong presence in the Amazon region. For various reasons, including social control and the use of the dense forest canopy for troop movement and concealment, the FARC limited large-scale deforestation.<sup>44</sup> When state authorities failed to regain control of these vast rural areas of the Amazon after the FARC demobilized, loggers, cattle ranchers, drug traffickers and land speculators seized the opportunity to clear land and assert dominance over key areas, which led to significant environmental degradation. This trend began to reverse when dissident FARC factions reasserted control over the Amazon. In 2022 and 2023, they restricted logging activities, leading to a drastic reduction in deforestation rates in the Meta, Caquetá and Guaviare regions.<sup>45</sup>



**FIGURE 3** Presence of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia in the Amazon region (shown in orange).

NOTE: To engage more closely with the data, see the interactive map at [https://amazonunderworld.org/#link\\_mapa](https://amazonunderworld.org/#link_mapa).

SOURCE: Amazon Underworld

Currently, two primary FARC dissident structures operate in at least four different countries.<sup>46</sup> The Segunda Marquetalia (led by former FARC chief negotiator Luciano Marín Arango, better known as 'Iván Márquez') and the Estado Mayor Central (EMC)-FARC (commanded by Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández, alias 'Iván Mordisco') have taken advantage of the remaining structures, lack of territorial control and available illegal economies to expand their operations across borders.

In Venezuela, the Acacio Medina Front, commanded by Géner García Molina, alias 'John 40', and Julián Cholo, was previously allied to the EMC-FARC. However, it switched its allegiance to the Segunda

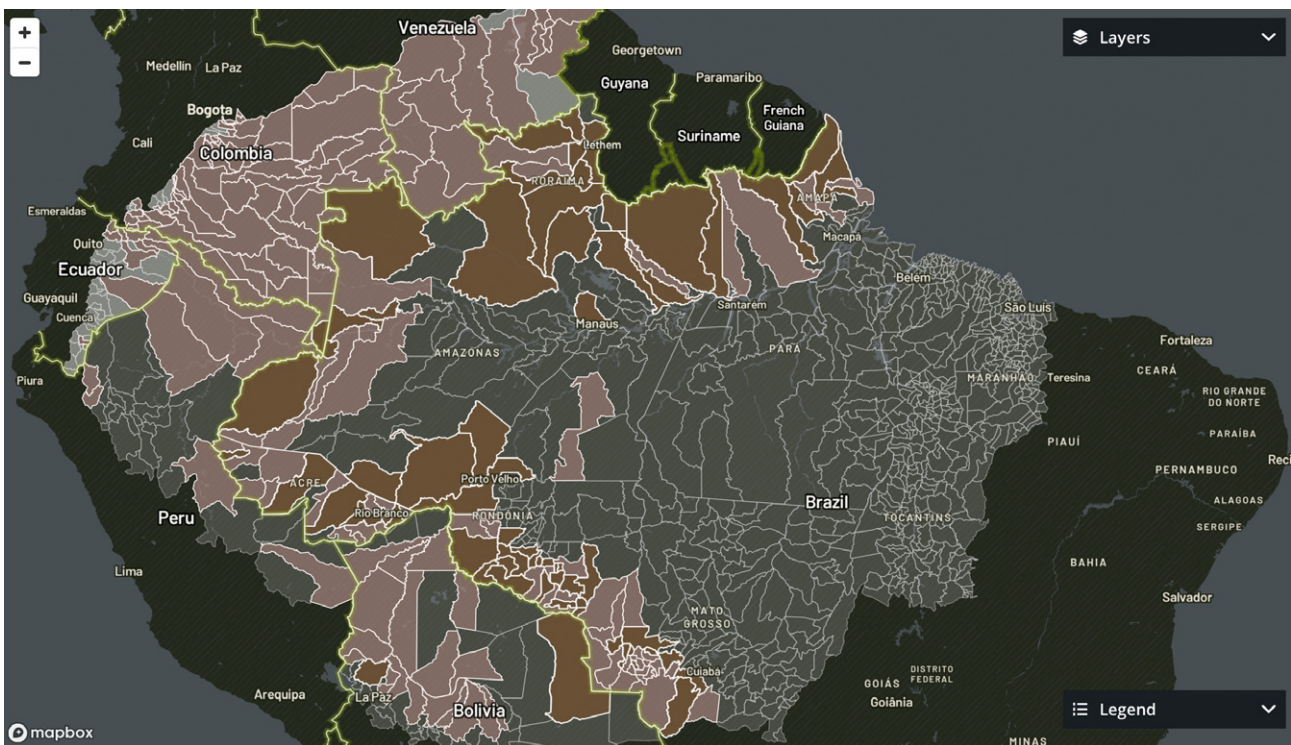
Marquetalia. The Acacio Medina Front mainly controls drug trafficking routes in Venezuela and is involved in illegal mining operations, including in the Yapacana National Park in the state of Amazonas.

While the EMC-FARC predominantly dominates the Colombian Amazon, a group called Comandos de la Frontera is loosely linked to the Segunda Marquetalia, mainly politically rather than militarily. The Comandos de la Frontera have evolved from occasional incursions to a strategic presence, setting up camps, recruiting members and asserting territorial control in certain areas of Peru, such as Pacora, as well as in Ecuador's border regions.<sup>47</sup>

## Primeiro Comando da Capital

The PCC, based in São Paulo, Brazil, is the country's largest crime syndicate. It was founded in 1993 inside the Taubaté prison near São Paulo. Initially focused on drug trafficking, the group quickly expanded its reach, gaining territorial and economic control, and increasing its membership.<sup>48</sup> Managing extensive networks and a franchise of allied local criminal groups, the PCC is known for its exceptional organizational skills and operational efficiency, and is now Brazil's leading cocaine exporter.<sup>49</sup>

The 'Rota Caipira', a route used almost exclusively to transport drugs into Brazil, mainly through Paraguay, is under the control of the PCC, which has also extended its influence into the Bolivian Amazon and has a tacit presence Colombia. The latter has been highlighted by its role in the murder of a Paraguayan public prosecutor in Cartagena, and by the arrest of one of its main cocaine suppliers, a Colombian national, in Medellín in August 2023.<sup>50</sup> Since 2015, the PCC has significantly increased its presence in the northern Amazon region, with the intention of taking on the local criminal group FDN and extending control over drug trafficking routes linking Colombia, Venezuela and Peru. In



**FIGURE 4** Presence of the Primeiro Comando da Capital in the Amazon region (shown in dark brown).

NOTE: To engage more closely with the data, see the interactive map at [https://amazonunderworld.org/#link\\_mapa](https://amazonunderworld.org/#link_mapa).

SOURCE: Amazon Underworld

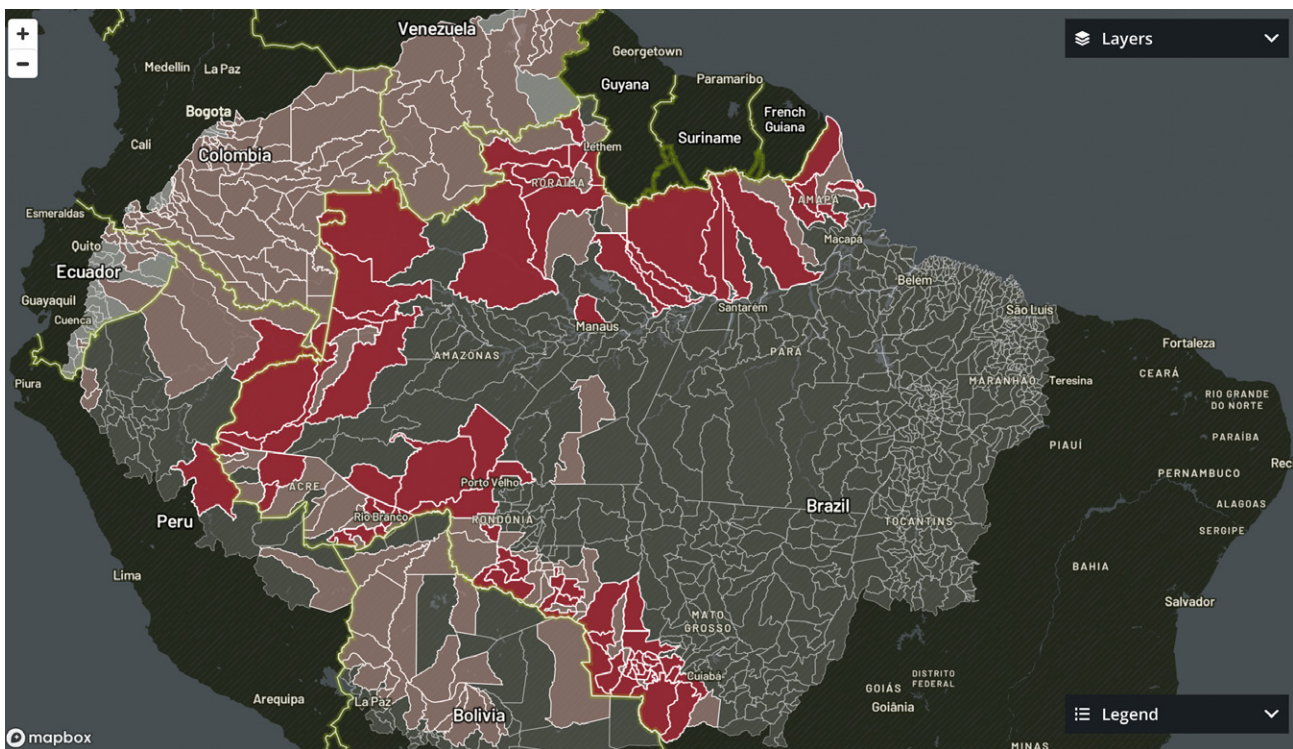
the state of Roraima, which borders Venezuela, for example, the PCC went from having a minimal presence a decade ago to around 1 000 members in 2016 and an estimated 2 000 today. The group now targets vulnerable migrants from Venezuela, who in Roraima make up an estimated 40 per cent of its membership, and people in prison.<sup>51</sup>

More recently, the group has focused on illegal gold mining, where it reinvests its profits from drug trafficking, according to a Brazilian law enforcement official who spoke with Amazon Underworld.<sup>52</sup> The PCC's presence in Roraima drew significant attention in 2021, when several of its members were implicated in a series of attacks on indigenous communities in the Palimiú region.<sup>53</sup> Sources told Amazon Underworld that the PCC's involvement in mining economies on indigenous lands includes the supervision and taxation of people working in the service sector, including brothels.<sup>54</sup>

## Comando Vermelho

Founded in 1979 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the CV began as an urban, vertically structured and hierarchical drug trafficking organization. By the end of the 1990s, however, it had evolved into a larger criminal network with a presence extending into Colombia and Paraguay.<sup>55</sup>

In the Amazon, the CV linked up with drug traffickers in the state of Amazonas and the FDN – a notorious Manaus-based criminal organization that controlled drug trafficking from Colombia to Brazil through the Amazon. After breaking a non-aggression pact with the PCC in 2016, their alliance with the FDN allowed the CV to benefit from key cocaine and cannabis trafficking routes, and expand its operations into Peru and Colombia, where it established a presence in the prison system in some key Amazon border towns.<sup>56</sup>



**FIGURE 5** Presence of the Comando Vermelho in the Amazon region (shown in red).

NOTE: To engage more closely with the data, see the interactive map at [https://amazonunderworld.org/#link\\_mapa](https://amazonunderworld.org/#link_mapa).

SOURCE: Amazon Underworld



Internal power struggles within the FDN in 2018 led to the organization's downfall, prompting many of its members in Manaus to defect to the CV (see 'Smaller organized crime groups' below). This led to the formation of Comando Vermelho-Amazonas (CV-AM), a relatively autonomous group affiliated with the Rio de Janeiro-based criminal multinational.<sup>57</sup>

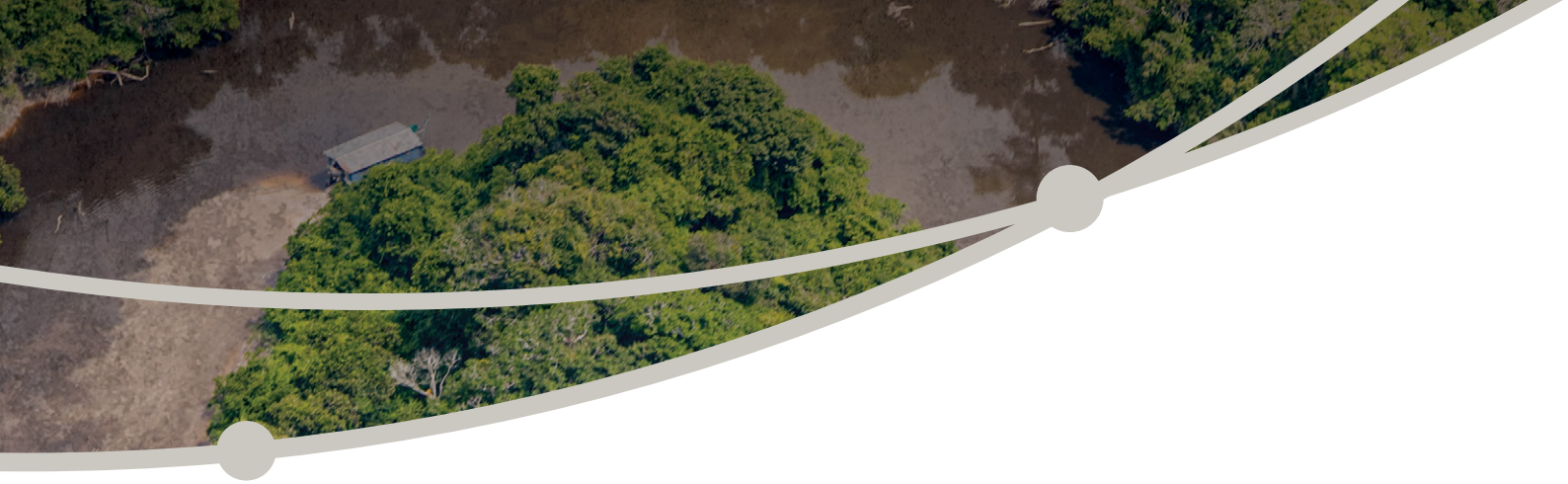
Since the creation of the CV-AM, the group has increased its presence in the Brazil-Colombia-Peru tri-border area and in Ucayali, a Peruvian region bordering Brazil known for illicit coca cultivation. Although police intelligence sources claim to have first noticed the CV in Ucayali in 2015, the group's expansion after 2020 demonstrated its growing confidence.<sup>58</sup>

## **Smaller organized crime groups**

Criminal start-ups, dissident criminal groups and smaller gangs in the Amazon were identified in 124 of the 348 municipalities investigated in this study. In Brazil, as discussed earlier, the most notorious gang of Amazonian origin, the FDN, had allied with the CV to counter the PCC. However, their criminal partnership was shattered in 2018, leading to a rapid decline in power as the CV began to clash violently with the FDN.<sup>59</sup> While former FDN members in Manaus were absorbed into the CV, in Tabatinga, dissidents from the FDN, along with new recruits from Colombia and Peru, rebranded themselves as Os Cria and aggressively took control of significant parts of the drug trade and micro-trafficking in the tri-border region of Brazil, Colombia and Peru. Os Cria now controls parts of the drug trade originating from collection points in the Peruvian province of Mariscal Ramón Castilla.<sup>60</sup>

In Bolivia, the criminal landscape is highly fragmented but has a significant impact on the environment and security, particularly through illegal gold mining and drug trafficking. This includes cases of armed gunmen protecting illegal airstrips and imposing territorial restrictions on park rangers due to the lack of security. In addition to the presence of the PCC and the CV in Bolivia, there are family-based clans, Brazilian criminals who sometimes have access to Bolivian identity cards, and Colombian drug traffickers operating in the region.<sup>61</sup>

Another country with a proliferation of criminal upstarts is Ecuador, which has become Latin America's main exit point for cocaine, bordering the world's biggest producers – Colombia and Peru. Violence has increased since 2022, and new urban gangs, such as Los Lobos, and existing criminal structures, such as Los Choneros, have gained significant control over growing cocaine trafficking corridors.<sup>62</sup> Their presence has been reported in small parts of the Amazon. In addition, Los Tiguerones operates in the municipality of Sucumbios, on the border with Colombia and Peru.<sup>63</sup>



# THE IMPACTS OF EXACERBATING CRIME DYNAMICS

## Environmental impacts

The ecological state of the Amazon has gained political attention because of its role as a vital carbon sink, crucial for mitigating climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) through its unique rainfall cycles. Scientists warn of an impending tipping point that could trigger ecological collapse if global temperatures rise more than 2.5°C above pre-industrial levels and deforestation reaches 20–25 per cent. The current rate is 17 per cent, and the south-eastern region of the Amazon is already emitting more CO<sub>2</sub> than it absorbs.<sup>64</sup>

The destruction of the Amazon is a human-made environmental disaster, often driven by legal economic activities. Cattle ranching, industrial agriculture and land grabs, often fuelled by international demand, have overwhelmingly contributed to the alarming levels of deforestation over the past decade.<sup>65</sup> Illegal gold mining and cocaine trafficking, however, have particular impacts that are compounded by the intricate links between legal and illegal economic activities.<sup>66</sup> For example, while it is well documented that cocaine profits support illegal gold mining, as noted above, it is less well known that these funds can also find their way into cattle ranching and industrial agriculture.<sup>67</sup> However, the legality of these economies is often questionable in the first place, as they regularly fail to comply with legal standards.

At the local level, illegal economies such as gold mining and cocaine production contribute to soil and water contamination through the discharge of chemicals used in the processing of coca leaves and the extraction of gold in illegal mines.<sup>68</sup> Illegal mining in the Amazon threatens both the environment and human health by disrupting river flows and introducing toxic mercury into the ecosystem. Mercury poisons local waterways and is absorbed by plants and consumed by animals – including fish – affecting not only communities that depend on these resources, but also those in distant regions.<sup>69</sup>

A 2018 study near the Brazilian border in the Colombian Amazon found that nearly 90 per cent of indigenous community members had higher than recommended mercury levels, in some cases up to four times higher.<sup>70</sup> In Brazil, the Mundurucu indigenous people in two communities along the Tapajós River are facing severe mercury pollution from expanding mining activities. A 2020 study found that six out of 10 people had mercury levels above the safety limit set by health authorities.<sup>71</sup> Mercury



Contaminated water is dumped into the river, Venezuela. Illicit economies in the Amazon contribute to the destruction of the rainforest through deforestation and the contamination of soil and water. © *Andrés Cardona*

contamination has serious consequences for the human body, manifesting in a variety of symptoms such as tremors, insomnia, memory loss, neuromuscular impairment, headaches, and cognitive and motor dysfunction.

Illegal cultivation also affects the environment in a number of ways. Although coca cultivation is not the main driver of large-scale deforestation,<sup>72</sup> there are cases of non-state armed groups directly financing logging for this purpose, often in exchange for loans to be repaid with cocaine base paste.<sup>73</sup> Cocaine production also requires large quantities of toxic chemicals, including acetone, sulphuric acid and fuel, which are often dumped in the jungle, contaminating soil and water sources.<sup>74</sup> In some areas, such as Colombia's Putumayo department, crude oil is stolen from pipelines and processed into fuel in makeshift jungle refineries. It takes over 300 litres of petrol to produce just 1 kilogram of cocaine.<sup>75</sup> Illegal valves that leak or become disconnected, as well as improvised jungle refineries, contribute to contamination and significant spills.<sup>76</sup>

## Social impacts

Illicit economies, which thrive on criminal territorial and social control, often have devastating and traumatic effects on local communities that can last for generations. The ecosystems on which these communities depend for their livelihoods are destroyed, while their leaders are threatened and their children are recruited into organized crime. Combined with an environment of extreme lack of opportunity and state presence, this drives communities further into a cycle of marginalization and violence.

## Violence

The social fabric of the Amazon is rapidly changing, as indigenous, farming and Afro-descendant communities come under constant pressure from armed groups, who seek to exploit them in illicit economies, forcibly confine or displace them through violent threats, or recruit them into their ranks. Those who speak out are increasingly at risk of being killed, as the voices of these communities can be silenced by eliminating their most outspoken leaders. According to Global Witness, 39 land and environmental defenders were killed in the Amazon in 2022.<sup>77</sup>

Urban centres in the Amazon have also become extremely violent in recent years. Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state, is the third most dangerous city in Brazil, with a homicide rate of 54.5 per 100 000 inhabitants. However, violence in smaller towns, such as Tabatinga, is even higher, with a rate of 106.6.<sup>78</sup> Across the border in Leticia, Colombia's hub for international tourists visiting the Amazon, the homicide rate in 2022 was 60 per 100 000 inhabitants, the second highest in Colombia for towns with fewer than 100 000 inhabitants.<sup>79</sup>

The situation in rural areas is also alarming, amid disputes over territorial control of coca-growing areas and drug trafficking corridors. In Putumayo, Colombia, 21 massacres have been recorded since 2020, mainly as a result of the territorial conflict between the guerrilla groups Comandos de la Frontera and the Carolina Ramírez Front, which is part of the EMC-FARC structure.<sup>80</sup>

There is also extreme violence in areas where gold is illegally mined, with groups competing violently for access. This can be seen in Venezuela, where Colombian guerrilla groups, corrupt state forces and local criminal syndicates are involved in conflicts over mineral wealth. Reports of torture, executions and sexual violence are widespread.<sup>81</sup> In Brazil, for example, in the lands of the Yanomami indigenous people, violence by miners against the local population is common.<sup>82</sup>

As crime syndicates gain power and control, drugs become more readily available on the streets in towns along drug trafficking corridors. This not only leads to increased consumption, but also to overcrowding of prisons with people arrested for minor offences such as petty theft, drug possession or dealing. These prisons, often controlled by criminal gangs, pose a significant risk as they actively recruit vulnerable young people.<sup>83</sup>



The military police arrest a young man in Brazil. Young people are vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, both within and outside prison.

© Wagner Almeida

## Recruitment and instrumentalization of Amazon communities

One of the reasons that illicit economies have been able to expand is the availability of cheap manual labour. Venezuelan refugees in Brazil, indigenous communities in Venezuela, and indigenous and farmer groups caught up in conflicts in Colombia become vulnerable targets for armed groups and crime syndicates, who exploit their dire circumstances.<sup>84</sup>

In the Venezuelan Amazon, Colombian guerrilla groups offer indigenous youth what their families often struggle to provide – shelter and food. These minors, sometimes as young as 14, are lured with gifts and small payments, and are gradually drawn into the guerrillas' activities, either to work in one of the illicit businesses or to become rebel fighters.<sup>85</sup>

'They told me that I was just going to work to support my family,' recalled a young Venezuelan indigenous man of the men who brought him to a hidden forest camp located hours from his home. But it was a one-way journey. 'When I wanted to leave, I couldn't, because they told me I was already part of the group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. That's when I started the guerrilla life,' he said.

In Colombia, on the other hand, recruitment is often carried out by force. According to one community leader interviewed by Amazon Underworld, when a guerrilla group confined his village, no one could enter or leave for an extended period;<sup>86</sup> during this time, a sick teenager who had no access to medical care was offered medicine by the guerrilla faction on the condition that he would join the group when he recovered. In May 2023, four young people were killed by the Carolina Ramírez Front after escaping from a similar situation of forced recruitment.<sup>87</sup>

In the Venezuelan state of Amazonas, many rural schools have been abandoned, with sometimes more than half of their students falling under the influence of these insurgent groups. Further south, along the Colombia–Brazil border near the Caquetá River – a key route for cocaine and 'creepy' – drug traffickers associated with EMC-FARC dissidents are recruiting indigenous men to carry packages through the jungle, bypassing the watchful eyes of the Brazilian army along the riverbanks, to deliver the cargo to Brazilian organized crime groups such as the CV. In private conversations, most reluctantly acknowledge the grim economic reality that keeps their isolated villages afloat. 'The only way out is carrying drugs and cannabis,' said one indigenous drug courier.

## Human trafficking and modern slavery

**H**uman trafficking in the region is linked to structural discrimination against indigenous communities in the labour market. This discrimination is characterized by factors such as systemic racism, lack of education and social isolation due to a lack of livelihoods and the remoteness of their villages. Victims are forced to accept exploitative and precarious working conditions, often linked to criminal activities such as illegal mining.

Women and children are also recruited into mining and other illicit activities. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported a significant increase in sexual exploitation and trafficking in mining areas in southern Venezuela, including of minors, with cases of children as young as nine working in the mines.<sup>88</sup> Cases of sex trafficking, modern slavery and exploitation have been reported in Peru's illegal gold mining hotspot of Madre de Dios and in areas such as the mining district in Brazil's Pará state.<sup>89</sup> ■

## Impacts on indigenous communities and territories

The various environmental and social impacts mentioned above have a particularly negative impact on indigenous peoples, as their relationship with their territories has deep social, political, cultural and spiritual dimensions, which constitute the preconditions for individual security and living conditions, but also for their collective material and cultural survival. As organized crime has a unique ability to penetrate or condition the community and gain access to isolated territories, it literally represents an existential threat.

This is most specifically true for the indigenous communities who have sought refuge in remote areas of the rainforest to protect themselves from the threats of extractive industries and colonization. The indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact are most vulnerable to the impact of criminal organizations in their territories. The Peruvian state drug observatory Devida has noted a dramatic increase of coca bush cultivation areas in territories reserved for indigenous communities, from 171 hectares in 2021 to 598 hectares in 2022.<sup>90</sup> This is due to the expansion of the Northern and Southern Kakataibo reserves and, most recently, the presence of clandestine labs and airstrips, as well as illegal forest concessions in the Atcuari, Sierra del Divisor Occidental and Tamaya-Abujao reserves.<sup>91</sup> In Colombia, the lands of the semi-nomadic Yuri-Passé, who live in voluntary isolation in Colombia's Puré National Park, are encroached upon by illegal miners from the Brazilian side of the border.<sup>92</sup> FARC dissidents, involved in taxing the illegal miners and in drug trafficking, cross the rivers near their settlements, and contact with the tribe is imminent.

In regions where indigenous territories are highly fragmented, crossed by roads or integrated into economic and social dynamics that are highly dependent on urban markets, illicit markets expand rapidly, placing indigenous peoples in a situation of great vulnerability and constant risk, and leading to the disintegration of communities. For example, in regions such as Ucayali or Madre de Dios in



Wampis peoples lead operations to protect their territory from illegal gold mining, 2017. © Andres Larrea

Peru, where all social and political activities are linked to various illegal economies that overlap and support one another, indigenous communities end up being subsumed and, if they manage to resist, isolated to the point that even entering and leaving their territories depends on whether they are able to reject illegal groups or are effectively forced to coexist with them.

In other regions where indigenous peoples have greater control over the territory (the case of the Wampis in Peru, for example),<sup>93</sup> illegal economies can be controlled or at least intervened in by the social and political structures of the communities themselves, while at the same time allowing for much more fluid coordination with the state's control apparatus. Just as indigenous peoples have proven to be a buffer against deforestation,<sup>94</sup> they can be a central component in the response to illegal activities in the Amazon through their own systems of governance and territorial control.

Throughout the Amazon, indigenous peoples and communities are defending their territories and livelihoods. In Peru, the Wampis and many others are organizing to control their territories and expel gold miners. In Ecuador, the Indigenous Federation of the Napo is mobilizing, carrying out cultural campaigns and pressuring the state to act against illegal mining, while in Brazil the Munduruku, Yanomami and Kayapó have formed a historic alliance to jointly oppose mining activities in their territories. In the face of coca colonization, the Kakataibo and Shipibo-Konibo-Xetebo peoples in Peru have organized indigenous guards to protect their territories. Action in the territories is accompanied with strategic litigation, such as Brazil's Indigenous People Articulation (Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil, APIB)'s case against *garimpo* mining in 2020 in Brazil,<sup>95</sup> and national and international advocacy.

However, the price paid by indigenous organizations and leaders is very high. They face threats to their lives and families, and are increasingly the target of violence and even murder. Cases of violence against defenders are not well investigated and often result in impunity for perpetrators, as the case of the Kakataibo shows (see box below).

## The Kakataibo people, the main victims of drug trafficking in Peru's Selva Central

The Kakataibo territory, located between the regions of Huánuco and Ucayali, in Peru's Selva Central (central jungle), is a strategic corridor for various illegal economies, mainly drug trafficking. Settlers from Huánuco and the Valley of the Rivers Apurímac, Ene and Mantaro dedicated to growing coca began arriving in the area in the year 2000, expanding the coca-growing frontier, a phenomenon that increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Peruvian environmental NGO Pro-Purús, by mid-2023 there were 85 active clandestine airstrips in the area.<sup>96</sup>

The exponential growth of coca cultivation in the region over the past 20 years has led to increasing pressure and violence against the Kakataibo people. Since 2020, four Kakataibo community leaders have been assassinated, the most emblematic case being that of Arbildo Meléndez, leader of the Unipacuyacu community in the Codo del Pozuzo district.<sup>97</sup>

The Unipacuyacu community has been waiting for acquisition of title to territory for 23 years. During this time, settlers have obtained certificates of possession or ownership from local authorities, with indirect support from the central government and international partners. The settlers claim to use

the land for fruit plantations and cattle ranching, thus receiving financial incentives and support from government programmes, which initially even received international cooperation funds. However, these areas have become the front line for the expansion of drug trafficking, which has led to the forced displacement or encirclement of the indigenous population.

In Peru, indigenous organizations at the national, regional and local level have reported the expansion of drug trafficking in the Amazon, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing the authorities to implement anti-drug operations.<sup>98</sup> Drug traffickers have responded with violence and threats as well as with increasingly sophisticated strategies, including legitimizing their presence in the areas by seeking legal recognition as *rondas campesinas* (a collective of farmers), as well as increasing their penetration of indigenous communities by offering employment and through forced subjugation. ■





## CONCLUSION

**T**he much discussed point of no return for the Amazon, often called the 'tipping point', refers to climatological and ecological events. But how deeply can the Amazon be infiltrated by criminal organizations to the point where we declare that violent illegal economies have prevailed?

The absence or complicity of state institutions in large parts of the Amazon has allowed criminal networks to dominate the rainforest and establish economic operations that far exceed the budgets of governments trying to counter them.<sup>99</sup> The global pandemic in 2020 allowed crime to expand further as governments shifted their focus and spending to fighting COVID-19. This led to budget constraints on law enforcement operations, increasing the opportunities for organized crime to tighten its grip on the Amazon.

Meanwhile, increased demand for cocaine and a rise in the price of gold have made control of the Amazon paramount for organized crime networks, with many Brazilian and Ecuadorian port cities serving as major exit points, and local populations as cheap labour.<sup>100</sup> The profits from illegal gold mining, now involving organized crime and groups such as the PCC and the ELN, allow those involved to bribe senior law enforcement officials, judges and local politicians, making the region more vulnerable to corruption. Two high-profile arrests in the Brazilian state of Amazonas have pointed to possible widespread corruption in the upper echelons of the security apparatus.<sup>101</sup> If corruption in the region is not addressed, it is challenging to envision any effective conservation strategy for the Amazon.

While the tipping point for the Amazonian underworld may not yet be upon us, there are worrying signs of what that scenario might look like. Examples can be found in certain areas of the Brazilian states of Amazonas, Roraima and Pará. There, illegal miners, loggers and cattle ranchers generate more revenue than the government's budget allocated to combat them. This is a direct result of budget cuts to government agencies responsible for protecting indigenous territories and the environment, such as the Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas (National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples) and the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources.<sup>102</sup> With low budgets or little state presence, reversing the criminal trends is a virtually impossible challenge.

In Venezuela, state complicity with illegal gold mining and drug trafficking within the country's borders has created a bonanza for the illicit economies that exploit the Amazon. This has opened the door for non-state armed groups to take control of vast resource-rich regions and position their forces close to strategic borders. As a result, the security situation has become increasingly difficult to reverse, even if there were the political will to do so.

In Colombia, a worrying issue of ungovernability concerns the National Parks Institute. Since 2020, uniformed park rangers have been banned from entering or operating in parts of the national parks in the Amazon region.<sup>103</sup> This situation has arisen due to threats and restrictions imposed by FARC dissidents. As a result, the state has been unable to effectively monitor, control and protect its most valuable ecological assets in the Amazon.<sup>104</sup>

Throughout the Amazon, criminal networks know how to exploit the weaknesses and lack of co-operation between Amazonian states, using borders as safe havens to multiply and evade sporadic law enforcement crackdowns. Groups that initially controlled a particular economic activity have now diversified their criminal portfolios across the Amazon. As economic opportunities continue to expand, there is no reason to believe that armed groups will stop growing and escalating their violence, both among themselves and against civilians, and social and indigenous leaders, while wreaking havoc on the Amazon's ecosystem.

Responses such as strategies to improve the traceability of Amazonian commodities and work on the global demand side, the development of alternative forms of livelihoods for local communities and discussions on coherent cross-border security strategies could only begin to address the issues at stake. The unlimited prospects for enrichment, combined with the largely untapped potential of economies such as wildlife trafficking, contribute to a scenario that is likely to worsen.

All is not lost, however, as there are important lessons to be learned from local civil society. Indigenous communities in the Amazon have been among the most active in pushing back against these criminal organizations, showing resilience and adaptability. Indigenous guards patrolling vast territories have successfully prevented economic activities and criminal groups from penetrating deeper into their ancestral lands. There are many examples of them using technological tools, such as drones and GPS devices, to monitor their territories, curb deforestation and drive out illegal miners.<sup>105</sup>

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for governments, as regional cooperation is often lacking. As long as governments fail to coordinate security strategies, crackdowns, drug policies, rural development plans and legal frameworks for environmental crime, organized crime will continue to move from one illicit economy to another, crossing borders in search of the best opportunities at the lowest cost and risk.

Recent public commitments by the presidents of Brazil and Colombia – the largest Amazonian countries in terms of population and economy – to the importance of protecting the Amazon, and the August 2023 summit of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization, which produced a joint declaration, could provide opportunities to advance a regional agenda that prioritizes both the environment and the security of the region's inhabitants.<sup>106</sup> Cooperation is the key to saving what is left of the Amazon.

## Recommendations

Addressing the growing presence of criminal organizations in the Amazon and their impact on communities and the environment requires a coordinated and determined approach by authorities at different levels and in different sectors. It requires the implementation of comprehensive public policies that go beyond simplistic repressive and sporadic law enforcement responses and instead aim to transform the structural conditions that drive criminal activity, while strengthening the capacity and cooperation of different stakeholders to contain organized crime.

## Cross-border security strategies

Environmental crime does not respect political borders. In addition to international regulations, a regional security strategy is needed to improve law enforcement cooperation, environmental security and diplomacy in the Amazon. Governments alone lack the operational and financial capacity to effectively counter transnational criminal operations, whose illicit revenues often exceed their resources. Addressing this challenge requires the involvement not only of law enforcement agencies, but also of non-military government agencies, regional bodies and foreign donors. Based on this, we make the following recommendations:

- Authorities should establish effective communication, intelligence sharing and cooperation mechanisms among law enforcement agencies, particularly in border areas, to prevent criminal groups from transporting illegally obtained Amazonian commodities, precursors and equipment across borders.
- Authorities should shift the focus of regional security cooperation initiatives from a strictly law enforcement and border control perspective to one that prioritizes the protection of indigenous peoples, marginalized communities and the conservation of the ecosystem. This includes ensuring the effective participation of indigenous organizations and other Amazonian populations in the design, implementation and evaluation of cross-border security policies in the Amazon. This can be achieved through platforms such as the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) or the Organization of American States.
- At a time of high geopolitical interest in the Amazon and its natural resources, it is crucial that regional cooperation, based on the national sovereignty of the Amazonian countries, with full respect for human rights and recognition of collective rights and territories, be the basis of all security efforts, strategies and international cooperation.
- Peace dialogues with non-state armed groups, as in Colombia, should recognize the transboundary presence of these groups in the Amazon. They should also involve foreign governments to address the spillover effects of conflict and the economies that finance violence.
- Ecosystems do not recognize borders, but some indigenous ancestral territories extend and cross national borders, safeguarding these ecosystems. The creation of binational parks and indigenous territories is essential as part of a diplomatic solution that could not only promote cooperation between states, but also protect ecosystems with the involvement of bi- or even trinational communities. The region can draw on international best practice in this regard.

## Indigenous peoples

In order to harness the full potential of indigenous communities in curbing organized crime, public policies should be directed at strengthening indigenous peoples' own strategies of territorial control and governance, which could help to limit the further expansion of organized crime and counter current criminal operations. Rather than portraying indigenous peoples as mere victims, it is crucial to recognize them as political agents. Authorities should:

- Ensure indigenous peoples are included in decision-making bodies at local, national and regional levels, including the ACTO, through the establishment of commissions and specialized forums to discuss security issues and closer coordination with law enforcement bodies. The standards of the International Labour Organizations' Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples should be consistently implemented.

- Strengthen governance systems and the territorial rights of indigenous peoples through collective titling of integral territories, accelerating pending titling processes in each country. Targeted policies must be developed and implemented to stop land invasions and identify high-risk areas. This will allow for the rapid and formal recognition of collective ethnic land titles in these regions.
- Support indigenous people's strategies for territorial control, governance and self-protection by increasing funding and ensuring legal recognition of indigenous guards and harmonizing indigenous collective territorial defence strategies with national legislation. In addition, officials and law enforcement agents should receive training so that community jurisdictions are respected. Increased cooperation between the state and Amazonian communities could enable both parties to become more effective in protecting Amazonian territories, if they fully respect indigenous rights and follow appropriate protocols and agreements.
- Implement new programmes, or improve existing ones, aimed at strengthening the economy of indigenous communities. These programmes should be based on the plans of the communities and guided by interculturalism and free, prior and informed consent. They should be targeted at indigenous organizations and communities, with a focus on promoting 'standing forest economies' – economic models that are based on the sustainable use and conservation of forests.
- Ensure the protection of indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact through the development and implementation of a robust institutional framework with sufficient financial and technological resources to prevent their territories from becoming safe havens for criminal organizations. This requires strengthening territorial governance in the border areas of indigenous reserves and ensuring safe cross-border corridors with coordinated protection measures.

## **Protecting those who speak out against organized crime**

Organized crime will only be stopped if those who oppose its activities, whether by defending their territories, reporting in the media, denouncing it from within the state administration or working on political responses, are supported and protected. Existing protection programmes tend to be under-resourced and lack the necessary sensitivity to the Amazonian context. Authorities should:

- Ensure effective mechanisms, including rapid response and emergency protocols, with sufficient financial and technological resources to protect indigenous and environmental defenders, journalists and those who expose corruption or criminal activities.
- In the case of indigenous communities and leaders, consult on and agree upon protection measures with indigenous organizations. The measures must include a focus on the collective rights of indigenous peoples and complement the self-protection efforts of communities, not only to defend the lives of their leaders, but also to protect their communities and territories.
- Make it a top priority to ensure access to justice and reparations for victims and the families of murdered environmental defenders. This is essential to end the prevailing impunity for the crimes committed against them, with a particular focus on identifying those ultimately responsible.
- Ratify and implement the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (also known as the Escazú Agreement),<sup>107</sup> which offers precise obligations to protect environmental defenders.

## Corruption and state complicity

Many government policies will be ineffective if corruption and entrenched state involvement in illicit economies are not effectively addressed. To combat this, authorities should:

- Strengthen the investigative capacity of public prosecutors, increase their presence in the region and provide tools to investigate the financial flows behind environmental crimes. The rule of law should enforce strict disciplinary measures for those found engaging in corrupt practices.
- Impose special administrative sanctions on those responsible for violating national land rights legislation, including direct actors and politically accountable figures.
- Encourage community and civil society involvement in identifying, reporting and monitoring cases of corruption to ensure that law enforcement agencies remain accountable.
- Establish robust oversight mechanisms, such as independent ombudsman offices or external audit bodies, to monitor the activities of law enforcement agencies.
- Establish a transparent system for reporting and investigating claims of corruption within these agencies.

## Financing of environmental crimes

Given the blurred lines between legal and illegal economies, there is a need for increased judicial scrutiny of those who finance environmental crimes. The sharing of intelligence and capabilities, and cross-border communication among Amazonian governments and law enforcement agencies is of paramount importance.

- International organizations such as INTERPOL, as well as the US government and the European Union, should provide technical, coordination and investigative capacity to support efforts to identify those who finance environmental crimes.
- Agencies responsible for monitoring suspicious transactions, such as the Unidad de Información y Análisis Financiero (Financial Investigation and Analysis Unit) in Colombia or the Unidad de Inteligencia Financiera (Financial Intelligence Unit) in Peru, should establish mechanisms for information exchange with law enforcement agencies and monitor alerts from civil society organizations. This would allow them to prioritize and focus on the critical geographical areas for tracking financial flows. This information sharing could streamline the work of financial monitoring agencies by identifying patterns and generating evidence that could then be used by law enforcement agencies.
- States should investigate individuals and corporate structures involved in land grabbing and deforestation. Colombia set an important precedent with a policy aimed at stripping the lands of those who cleared forests in protected areas. International donors and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, as in the Colombian case, could provide technical assistance.<sup>108</sup>

## Climate financing

US and EU climate policies should be conditioned and implemented with a focus on protecting environmental defenders, strengthening indigenous economies and territorial rights, and countering organized crime. To this end, authorities should:

- Develop permanent standards and evaluation methods to prevent climate funds or projects aimed at protecting human rights, indigenous territories or sustainable development from being handed over without due diligence to state entities that may use them as a channel for facilitating illegality. If a violation of these standards is detected, funding should be cut off.

- Use climate finance to create a special fund for areas particularly affected by illegal economies, with a combined focus on local development and reducing emissions from deforestation. These funds could be implemented with alternative development agencies in each country or local governments, and directly reach indigenous communities, when involved.

## **Illegal markets and supply chains**

Establishing barriers to prevent Amazonian commodities from accessing international markets has proven insufficient. Instead, closing policy loopholes and increasing transparency and traceability would go a long way towards limiting the reach of illegal markets. Governments should:

- Promote the effective exchange of information and knowledge among states, law enforcement and financial monitoring agencies to enhance cooperation and stem the flow of illicit goods and substances.
- Promote international regulations for states and the private sector that cover the extraction, production and commercialization of products with potential impacts on the Amazon, as well as the precursors that enable their production, such as the mercury needed for illegal gold mining or the chemical precursors used to produce cocaine. This would involve adopting and updating regulations to prevent the use and production of harmful substances, harmonizing legislation for national and international transactions, and establishing mechanisms to review lists of controlled substances and facilitate the exchange of information.
- Review and modify taxation and administrative procedures related to trade in the Amazon to remove incentives for the movement of illegal products across borders.

## **Access to information**

In order to design and implement strategies and policies to protect the Amazon and counter environmental crime, it is essential to have detailed, disaggregated and systematically collected information. To this end, governments and civil society should:

- In cooperation with indigenous peoples, establish databases to monitor environmental damage across the region, including mercury contamination levels, forest degradation, gendered indicators of violence, land ownership, mining and timber concessions, and trade data. Amazonian countries should work together to establish common scientific standards and methodologies.
- Complement the institutional analysis of the impact of organized crime on the Amazon Basin by involving civil society in monitoring organized crime and its impact on the Amazon. Such monitoring could provide more detailed information through civil society groups in the territory, as states grapple with challenges in controlling and understanding the vast expanses of the Amazon. Early warning systems could address not only violent threats and ecological damage, but also assess the extent of existing institutional capacity. In turn, cooperation with state agencies could enable governments to identify, support and systematize the responses of civil society and indigenous communities to the impact of crime. Particular attention should be paid to urban areas, given the growing number of small towns that serve as hubs for the political economy of crime and environmental harm in the region.
- Shift the analysis of the presence and impact of criminal organizations from an exclusively national level to a local and regional level, especially as conflict and crime dynamics are rapidly evolving. Understanding how these armed groups exercise criminal governance at the local level is the first step in developing effective strategies to counter their activities, strengthen state control and support community governance.

- Establish an expert group composed of academics, policy experts, law enforcement professionals and participants from civil society and Amazonian communities to formulate regional solutions that transcend the term of an elected government. This group should collaborate on supranational solutions for the region, with a mandate to address the environmental and climate crisis, as well as cross-border security issues, all with the goal of preserving the Amazon ecosystem and the communities it shelters. Amazon countries could appeal to the United Nations and the Secretary General to appoint a group of experts.



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## THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 600 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)

## INFOAMAZONIA

InfoAmazonia is an independent media outlet founded in 2012, that uses maps, data, and geolocalized reports to tell stories about the endangered Amazon region. We are a nonprofit organization based in Brazil with a borderless view across the largest tropical forest, engaging local and international outlets in collaborative and innovative products.

[www.infoamazonia.org](http://www.infoamazonia.org)

## AMAZON WATCH

Amazon Watch is a nonprofit organization founded in 1996 to protect the rainforest and advance the rights of Indigenous peoples in the Amazon Basin. We partner with Indigenous and environmental organizations in campaigns for human rights, corporate accountability, climate justice and the preservation of the Amazon's ecological systems.

[www.amazonwatch.org](http://www.amazonwatch.org)

## AMAZON UNDERWORLD

Amazon Underworld is an alliance of media outlets founded in 2022 to investigate the presence of crime networks and illegal economies in the Amazon as well as the impact they have on the environment and local communities. In 2022/23 InfoAmazonia, La Liga Contra el Silencio y Armando, Info teamed up with Amazon Underworld to investigate these issues in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.

[www.amazonunderworld.org](http://www.amazonunderworld.org)

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