

# AMPLIFYING COMMUNITY- LED SOLUTIONS TO COMBAT ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES IN THE AMAZON

## ECO-SOLVE COMMUNITY DIALOGUES

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## SUMMARY

**G**lobal attention to the environmental challenges facing the Amazon has increased ahead of the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30), which will take place in Belém, the capital of Pará state in the Brazilian Amazon, in November 2025. This moment offers a rare opportunity to position the voices of the Amazon's environmental defenders at the centre of policy discussions around the intersecting environmental and human security crises facing what is one of the most critical biomes for global conversation efforts. As front-line defenders of the rainforest, Indigenous, quilombola (maroon) and riverine leaders have a deep understanding of the illicit economies, capacity shortfalls and extractive pressures affecting the Amazon. Their insights are essential to building more legitimate and effective responses to environmental crime.

This policy brief is the outcome of a two-day ECO-SOLVE community dialogue organized by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). Bringing together leaders from across the Brazilian states of Pará and Acre, the dialogue prioritized lived experience over elite narratives and grounded expertise over technical abstraction. The result is a set of community-informed findings and policy recommendations aimed at shifting how governments, donors and multilateral actors engage with the Amazon region.<sup>1</sup>

One of the clearest messages to emerge from the dialogue is that efforts to protect the Amazon rainforest are systematically hindered by relationships with state authorities. Participants described widespread police violence and systemic impunity for environmental violations. They also pointed to how private sector actors, particularly agribusiness and infrastructure developers, exploit legal loopholes and weak consultation processes to expand into Indigenous and traditional territories. Far from isolated issues, these patterns reflect a broader political economy in which cycles of violence and community exploitation empower environmental criminals to expand across the Amazon.





Attention to the world's largest rainforest region has increased ahead of the 2025 UN Climate Change Conference, which will take place in Belém, the capital of Pará state in the Brazilian Amazon, in November. © Pblo Porciuncula/AFP via Getty Images

Yet the dialogue was not only a diagnosis of harm. Participants offered a powerful reframing of nature and territory – not as commodities, but as interconnected systems of life, knowledge and identity. They shared strategies that they are already implementing to counter environmental crime in the Amazon, including community policing and sustainable development initiatives. These are not symbolic gestures, but are scalable models for prevention, resilience and justice that call out for international support.

Participants called for deeper inclusion in policymaking spaces, including at COP30. They also proposed reforms to Brazil's consultation laws, new federal interventions in areas overrun by environmental crime, and increased investment in community-led alternatives to environmentally harmful economic activities. Additionally, they emphasized the urgent need for harsher penalties for environmental violations and specialized training for law enforcement and prosecutors working in the Amazon.

In amplifying these demands, this brief supports a community-driven blueprint to rebalance power and restore justice in the world's most vital rainforest.

## Methodology

This brief draws on dialogues held with community leaders in Belem, Pará state in Brazil in May 2024, as well as GI-TOC field research on the criminal dynamics of the Amazon. This was supplemented by a review of relevant literature in Portuguese and English and key informant interviews with law enforcement, government officials and civil society.

# Key findings

## COMMUNITIES ON THE FRONT LINE OF RESPONSE

Across the Brazilian Amazon, Indigenous, quilombola and riverine communities are responding to environmental crimes with resourcefulness, resilience and courage, despite receiving little to no formal support. Participants in the ECO-SOLVE dialogues described how their territories are being rapidly transformed by a convergence of illicit economies: land grabbing, illegal mining, timber trafficking, drug trafficking and the expansion of agribusiness. These activities are enabled not only by criminal actors, but also by complicit public officials and private sector interests who operate under a façade of legality.

Faced with threats and violence – from militias to extractive industries and criminal networks – communities have mobilized their own protective strategies in response to a multi-layered environmental and criminal crisis. These include establishing community policing patrols, organizing legal assistance networks, promoting artisanal and sustainable economic alternatives to criminal livelihoods, and resisting monoculture and pesticide use. In the Kayapó territory, for example, Indigenous leaders have set up monitoring bases at river entry points to prevent illegal miners from entering their lands. This is a direct response to gold mining operations that have caused mercury pollution and generated social divisions within their own communities.

## LAND GRABBING AT THE HEART OF THE CRISIS

Indigenous peoples and communities across the Amazon face increasing difficulties in securing and defending their land rights. Land grabbing – often enabled by corruption, fraudulent documentation and the complicity of local officials – frequently marks the first stage in a broader cycle of environmental exploitation. Once land is illegally seized, it is cleared for agribusiness, logging, mining or infrastructure development. This process forces traditional landholders to abandon their territories, fragments communities, and exposes environmental defenders to violence and intimidation.

## STATE ABSENCE ENABLES CRIMINALITY AND ERODES COMMUNITY TRUST

A consistent concern raised during the dialogues was the absence of state protection in many Amazonian communities. This vacuum has enabled environmental crimes to flourish. Police are widely perceived by Amazonian communities not as protectors, but as enforcers of corporate and elite interests. Participants reported cases of police providing irregular security to private companies engaging in environmental offences, while ignoring crimes committed against local residents. The state's failure to uphold security and justice has left communities feeling abandoned and exposed.

## ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS UNDER ATTACK

Participants described a pattern of targeted repression against those who speak out against environmental crimes. Community leaders who resist the illegal activities of political elites, corporations or criminal actors face criminalization, harassment and, in some cases, assassination. In Pará, one of the most dangerous regions for environmental defenders, this violence has created a deep sense of insecurity and fear among those on the front lines. 'When we report environmental crimes, we are the ones treated like criminals,' one leader noted.

Repression is not limited to law enforcement, however. Participants highlighted how elements of the judiciary are also complicit, with some local judges (often landowners themselves) using their authority to protect private interests and silence dissent. This combination of violence and institutional collusion has left many communities feeling powerless against both state and corporate oppression.

### **ARE CLIMATE SOLUTIONS ENABLING CRIMINAL ECONOMIES?**

Participants raised serious concerns about how climate initiatives are being used to legitimize environmental crime and exploit local communities.<sup>2</sup> Land grabbing for palm oil marketed as sustainable biofuel is displacing traditional populations under the guise of green development. Similarly, carbon credit schemes are increasingly linked to fraud and coercion, with outside investors pressuring communities to sign opaque and exploitative agreements. In April 2024, Brazil's Indigenous affairs agency FUNAI (Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas) publicly warned Indigenous peoples not to enter into carbon credit deals due to widespread abuse.<sup>3</sup>

Despite new regulations passed in December 2024 to govern Brazil's carbon market,<sup>4</sup> participants remained sceptical. Many rejected the idea that their stewardship of the forest requires financial compensation, insisting that protecting their territories is a right, not a service.

### **REDEFINING THE CONCEPT OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND DEVELOPMENT**

Participants articulated a holistic and culturally rooted understanding of nature: one that fundamentally challenges the worldview underpinning extractive industries and organized crime. For Amazonian communities, natural resources are not exploitable commodities but part of a living system that includes water, air, land, animals, minerals and humans. The Amazon is seen not as a reservoir of wealth, but as a living entity with deep spiritual and practical significance.

This worldview is not only a source of identity, but also a tool of resistance. It is what motivates communities to remain in their territories and protect the forest, and to reject economic models that commodify nature. Participants described how extractive projects whether mining, monoculture or infrastructure disrupt ecosystems and sever the relationship between people and land. The destruction of rivers, forests and food sources reflects a logic of exploitation that stands in stark contrast to the communities' belief in interconnectedness, reciprocity and long-term stewardship.

### **COMMUNITIES AS STEWARDS OF RESOURCES AND DRIVERS OF BOTTOM-UP SOLUTIONS**

Despite facing violence, marginalization and exclusion from decision-making, participants articulated clear and grounded ideas for what they expect from the state and from local development. They called for the recognition of their territorial rights, protection from violence, and stronger regulation of land and resource use. Many emphasized that state institutions must engage directly with communities, not merely as recipients of aid or as after-effects of policy implementation, but as key partners in shaping sustainable and just development.

Dialogue participants made clear the potential that lies in technically and financially supporting community-led models that prevent environmental crimes, prioritize environmental protection, preserve cultural traditions and offer economic alternatives to extractive industries. These are not abstract demands, but practical, experience-based strategies that could guide more legitimate and effective state responses in the Amazon.





## INTRODUCTION

The Amazon is facing a climate emergency that is heavily influenced by criminal actors. The rainforest is a vital source of water in South America, and its extensive capacity to absorb carbon dioxide makes it a strategic component of global efforts to address climate change.<sup>5</sup> However, the illegal extraction of gold, trafficking of local fauna and widespread deforestation of the rainforest has propelled it towards a tipping point at which it may no longer be able to function as a crucial carbon sink.<sup>6</sup>

In Brazil, which contains two-thirds of the Amazon rainforest's territory and 70% of its population, criminal violence has surged dramatically in recent decades. Although Brazil reported a 5.2% decrease in homicides nationally between 2011 and 2022, the country's Amazon region experienced a staggering 76.7% increase in homicides during the same period.<sup>7</sup> In 2023, the annual homicide rate in Brazil's Amazon was 41.5% higher than the national average.<sup>8</sup>

This uptick in violence is fuelled by violent disputes over the Amazon's profitable illicit economies. Indigenous, quilombola and riverine communities are disproportionately affected, facing not only killings, but also regular invasions by illicit profiteers – while young people are often recruited or coerced into criminal markets. Meanwhile, environmental activists face constant threats and are being forcibly displaced from their lands. These actions, perpetrated by a complex network of actors including organized crime groups benefiting from political protection, are undermining conservation efforts and accelerating the destruction of the world's largest rainforest.<sup>9</sup>

To address the challenges threatening Brazil and other biodiverse countries, ECO-SOLVE, a three-year European Union-funded initiative, has adopted a multifaceted approach to combating environmental crime, which includes engagement with communities through dialogues to understand their challenges and integrate their perspectives into more effective law enforcement responses.

This comes out of recognition that law enforcement and policymakers lack sufficient data and often struggle to cooperate with local residents to devise strategies to combat environmental



crimes.<sup>10</sup> This issue is widespread around the world but finds particular resonance in Brazil, where environmental crime trends have been on the rise. As a result, political attention towards containing organized crime's forays into the Amazon has increased over the past two years, as a series of ecological disasters and recurring displays of criminal dominance over the rainforest have spurred government agencies to take action.<sup>11</sup> Deploying policy initiatives informed by community experiences with organized crime, violence and environmental destruction in the Amazon is a crucial step towards achieving holistic solutions to these complex challenges. This policy brief attempts to fill a gap in this regard, by providing policy recommendations derived from community engagement.

## **Eliciting community insights on environmental crimes**

This policy brief derives from the findings and activities that stemmed from the ECO-SOLVE community dialogues, held in Belém in May 2024. The dialogues relied on preliminary consultations involving grassroots organizations and law enforcement officials to identify the main barriers to combating environmental crime. These insights informed the design of the two-day community dialogues, which focused on deepening the understanding of the relationship between communities and their environment, exploring their interactions with law enforcement and identifying actionable community-based responses to tackle environmental crime. The event brought together 19 participants from diverse backgrounds, including prominent environmental defenders, Indigenous leaders from the Kayapó and Tembé groups, quilombola community members and riverine dwellers. Activists from the Amazonian state of Acre also participated.

Grounded in a participatory and intersectional methodology, the dialogues emphasized inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. The sessions fostered open dialogue and active listening, allowing participants to share their experiences. By prioritizing oral communication, such as small group discussions and sharing circles, the approach ensured accessibility, honoured the diverse backgrounds of participants and aligned with cultural practices rooted in oral traditions.

The dialogues began by exploring how participants defined and valued their natural resources, ensuring that discussions were built around their perspectives rather than imposed external views. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how these resources are vital for their livelihoods and how they are affected by environmental crimes.

The dialogues also sought to identify the main actors – both supportive and adversarial – involved in the management and exploitation of these resources. Participants were divided into small groups and asked to discuss specific questions from the perspectives of communities, law enforcement, government entities and criminal actors. This activity encouraged participants to consider different viewpoints, which helped deepen their understanding of the complex dynamics at play – particularly the challenges and opportunities for collaboration between Amazonian communities and law enforcement.

Lastly, each organization had the chance to present community-driven initiatives aimed at protecting natural resources and preventing environmental crimes. By fostering a space for participants to openly share their experiences, the dialogues helped identify potential grantees and community-led initiatives that could be supported through the ECO-SOLVE Grant and Innovation Mechanism. These dialogues strengthened solidarity and information sharing among participants, contributing to broader efforts to combat environmental crimes. They also provided valuable insights to inform this policy brief.



## PARÁ: EPICENTRE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME AND COMMUNITY RESISTANCE

**A**t the heart of Brazil's Amazon, Pará stands as both a front line of environmental devastation and a hub of grassroots resistance. It is a state where communities face the daily impacts of illegal logging, mining, land grabbing and deforestation while also mounting some of the country's most courageous efforts to protect their land.<sup>12</sup> ECO-SOLVE has focused its community engagement efforts in Pará precisely because it encapsulates the dual crisis and opportunity that defines the Amazon today.

In 2023 alone, Pará lost approximately 6 640 square kilometres of natural forest, making it the leading contributor to Brazil's national deforestation rate.<sup>13</sup> This pattern is not new: in 2020, nearly 40% of all illicit deforestation in Brazil occurred in Pará, resulting in the loss of more than 3 800 square kilometres of forest – an area larger than the US state of Rhode Island. The state's rich natural resources, particularly timber and gold, have made it a target for organized crime groups, including those linked to drug trafficking networks.<sup>14</sup> Illegal gold mining, or *garimpo*, remains especially widespread, with Pará ranking as the top producer of illicit gold in the country.<sup>15</sup>

At the centre of this challenging context, local environmental defenders and civil society organizations have played a crucial role in resisting criminal economies and extractive industries. Their efforts, however, come at great personal risk. Since the 1980s, Pará has consistently ranked among the most dangerous states in Brazil for environmental defenders. The region has witnessed multiple massacres of land and forest protectors, and many others continue to live under constant threat.<sup>16</sup>

It is precisely because Pará reflects both the challenges and the possibilities of the Amazon that the upcoming COP30 – hosted in Belém, the state's capital – takes on heightened significance.





The construction of the Belo Monte dam in Pará state, which involved the removal and resettlement of local populations, drew extensive criticism from Indigenous peoples and environmental activists.

© Nacho Doce/Reuters

## Communities on the front lines of risk and response

As global attention turns to the city, multilateral bodies, governments and climate activists will converge in a region where communities have long defended the forest under dire conditions. In response, local leaders have organized the ‘COP do Povo’ (‘COP of the people’), a parallel forum aimed at elevating civil society voices and ensuring that grassroots perspectives shape the climate negotiations.<sup>17</sup>

The areas where the attendees of the ECO-SOLVE community dialogues came from are illustrative of the complex nature of environmental crimes in the Amazon. Their communities have been heavily affected by illicit economies such as clandestine gold mining, timber, wildlife trafficking and land grabbing. These dynamics are further complicated by entrenched state corruption and the penetration of illicit interests into public institutions, which exacerbates insecurity and daily hardship.<sup>18</sup>

In response to these issues, participants have mobilized their communities in powerful ways, establishing solidarity networks that provide physical protection and legal assistance to victims of environmental crimes, advocating against government inaction and monitoring how illicit markets affect local ecosystems.<sup>19</sup> They have launched community policing patrols to halt the invasion of criminals in their territories, protested the use of pesticides and hazardous chemicals in local agriculture, and promoted bioeconomy and artisanal initiatives as alternative livelihoods to criminality.<sup>20</sup> The following examples, drawn from different regions of Pará, illustrate how these strategies are being applied in practice and the specific threats communities are confronting on the ground.



Illegal mining in Kayapo Indigenous territory has devastated the rainforest region. © Pablo Porciumcula/  
AFP via Getty Images

## THE KAYAPÓ TERRITORY: A CASE OF DIVIDED RESISTANCE

The Kayapó Indigenous territory is facing some of the gravest environmental crime threats. Spanning more than 32 000 square kilometres on the margins of the Xingu River, the Kayapó territory has become one of the major hotspots for illicit gold mining in Brazil.<sup>21</sup> Criminal actors invade the territory to establish alluvial mines on the riverbanks, causing severe mercury contamination, river degradation and deep divisions among the Kayapó, as noted by dialogue participants.<sup>22</sup> Allured by the potential for profit, some of the Kayapó tribal leaders have partnered with criminal actors and authorized illicit gold mining to take place in their territories. Meanwhile, other Kayapó leaders openly oppose such activities due to concerns about the health risks and environmental damage caused by mining – especially the effect of mercury contamination. Kayapó leaders also report that fish are dying inside the lakes of the territory due to an increase in water temperatures linked to clandestine mining activities.<sup>23</sup>

To counteract these threats and hazardous effects, many Kayapó leaders have set up community policing initiatives in which they establish monitoring bases in the riverine entryways to their territories to prevent miners from encroaching on their land. The Kayapó have developed this policing strategy as their primary community-driven solution to combat environmental crimes, as they are unable to rely on permanent law enforcement presence in their territory.<sup>24</sup>

## PALM OIL AND DRUG VIOLENCE IN THE ACARÁ VALLEY

In the Acará Valley, approximately 60 kilometres from Belém, Indigenous and quilombola leaders are on the front lines of territorial disputes linked to biofuels, political corruption and community displacement. This region has become the epicentre of palm oil cultivation in the Brazilian Amazon,<sup>25</sup> having the ideal climate conditions to cultivate palm trees. From the 1980s onwards, but particularly since 2010, private corporations have seized land in Acará to plant palm trees, creating a large-scale monoculture in the area under the guise of promoting an alternative energy source for the climate transition.<sup>26</sup>



Although relatively new to the Amazon, palm oil has long been a driver of deforestation in tropical regions, particularly in South East Asia.<sup>27</sup> Palm plantations require large landholdings, which can span up to 50 000 hectares. In the Acará Valley, these lands are frequently acquired through irregular or illegal means, sparking widespread disputes involving corporations, private militias, drug traffickers, state-embedded actors, and Indigenous and quilombola communities.<sup>28</sup>

Local communities report decades of harassment by palm oil companies, who have used both legal loopholes and violent tactics to displace residents from ancestral lands.<sup>29</sup> These private sector entities have taken over thousands of hectares of land that Indigenous and quilombola communities previously inhabited.<sup>30</sup> This disputed territory is permanently occupied by company security guards, many of whom are off-duty police officers. Local residents allege that these guards regularly invade Indigenous and quilombola territories to threaten activists engaged in land disputes. In June 2024, a high-profile incident occurred when 10 military police officers, allegedly under the orders of a palm oil company, invaded a quilombola community, looting residents' homes and kidnapping three men from the community.<sup>31</sup>

In recent years, Acará has also emerged a major drug trafficking corridor due to its proximity to international shipping routes connecting the Amazon River to international ports and European markets. This shift has brought new layers of violence and insecurity to already embattled communities. Drug traffickers and private militias have begun operating in the region, issuing death threats to Indigenous leaders and violently suppressing opposition. Activists in Acará have reported intensified efforts to protect local youth from being recruited into trafficking networks.<sup>32</sup>

The situation in Acará exemplifies how long-standing environmental crimes such as land grabbing and deforestation are increasingly converging with other transnational criminal economies. These intersecting threats are accelerating ecosystem destruction, deepening social fragmentation and making community resistance even more dangerous.

## **AGRO-MILITIAS AND LAND-GRABBING IN THE XINGU RIVER BASIN**

The cities of Altamira and São Félix do Xingu in Pará's Xingu River Basin are hotspots of environmental degradation and social displacement tied to agricultural ventures.<sup>33</sup> Participants described how politically connected landowners seize public lands with the backing of *agro-milícias*: irregular paramilitary forces made up of off-duty police officers and local vigilantes. These actors intimidate local residents and clash with environmental protection officers to retain their patrons' illicit landholdings. Once occupied, lands are cleared by setting fires or through illegal logging, then converted into cattle pastures or soy plantations.<sup>34</sup>

São Felix do Xingu is the municipality with the highest number of cattle in Brazil – more than 2.5 million – most of which graze public lands that have been illegally seized.<sup>35</sup> The ratio of cattle to humans in the city is 38 to 1.<sup>36</sup> The opportunity to take control of large amounts of land, particularly in south-western Pará, where Altamira and São Felix do Xingu are located, has attracted significant migration from other regions of Brazil. This population influx has also led to other issues, including increases in drug use, drug trafficking, sex trafficking and sex work.<sup>37</sup> Participants emphasized that the territorial control exercised by *agro-milícia* networks undermines state authority and deepens the vulnerability of traditional communities living in and around these zones.



Development projects catering to a rapidly expanding economy, such as the construction of the Belo Monte dam complex, are threatening the Brazilian Amazon. © Mario Tama/Getty Images

In addition to being a prominent location for land grabbing and deforestation, Altamira is also home to the controversial Belo Monte hydroelectric dam, the second largest dam in Brazil and the fifth largest in the world. Construction of Belo Monte began in 2011 and involved the contentious removal and resettlement of local populations from the Xingu Valley to the peripheries of Altamira. Indigenous and riverine communities living on the banks of the Xingu River were forcibly removed to urban neighbourhoods where water and sewage services are precarious.<sup>38</sup> The region surrounding Altamira where the dam was built was one of the last parts of the rainforest in Pará that had avoided deforestation. The dam's construction has devastated local wildlife, flora and water systems.

Over the course of the dialogues, participants frequently cited infrastructure projects like Belo Monte as examples of large-scale activities that are launched in the Amazon without any regard for local populations. These insights from participants are also reflected in recent satellite tracking data, which shows that major private companies from the meatpacking and soy-trading sectors are some of the main drivers of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon – with much of this deforestation taking place in environmental protection areas.<sup>39</sup>

## ORGANIZED CRIME IN URBAN AREAS

Finally, attendees from the Belém metropolitan region noted that drug trafficking has become entrenched in local neighbourhoods.<sup>40</sup> The Red Command (Comando Vermelho, CV), considered one of the two largest criminal groups in Brazil, has considerable governance authority throughout Belém. The region's ports are of immense strategic importance to the CV, as the group earns much of its profits through its cocaine and cannabis shipments from Belém to Europe. The CV controls a large portion of the Amazon drug trafficking route, including in the tri-border region, Acre and the northern and south-western areas of Pará.<sup>41</sup> Dialogue



attendees noted that the CV's presence in urban neighbourhoods is marked by its control of population flows, creation and enforcement of community conduct rules and implementation of curfews.<sup>42</sup> Community leaders also mentioned that drug traffickers are increasingly venturing into environmental crimes, including timber and wildlife trafficking.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, territorial dynamics brought up during the dialogues revealed that it is not only 'conventional' criminal actors who shape environmental crimes in the Amazon. Rather, state officials, private sector actors and activities that have a veneer of legality and formality in the rainforest are helping to perpetuate these crimes, which are causing lasting damage to local communities and critical Amazonian ecosystems. Dialogue participants are actively resisting this complex illicit ecosystem. Their strategies of resistance are essential to conservation efforts in the Amazon. Greater input from stakeholders in government, the private sector and the multilateral community is essential to ensure the longevity and vigour of these front-line strategies against environmental crimes. With that in mind, the following section of this brief includes policy recommendations based on the findings from the ECO-SOLVE dialogues.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The dialogue insights into the intersections of various environmental crimes, tense relationships between Amazonian residents and law enforcement, and need for improved communication between private entities and communities are crucial for developing effective and adaptive policies to address the region's illicit ecosystems. The policy recommendations included below are tailored to specific sets of stakeholders in government, the international donor community and the private sector.

### FOR GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

- **Increase federal operations in Amazonian territories.**

Dialogue participants emphasized that the long history of police violence and the hostile approach that local government institutions have taken against social leaders in the Amazon has fostered deep distrust between communities and state and municipal authorities.<sup>44</sup> This lack of trust and accountability has allowed environmental crime to expand unchecked across the region. Throughout the dialogues, it became evident that improving relations between local government agencies and Amazonian communities would be a long and difficult process. However, participants were convinced that more immediate results could be achieved through greater federal government intervention to curb the spread of environmental crimes and mitigate their harmful effects on local communities.<sup>45</sup>

The current government under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – commonly known as Lula – has already demonstrated the potential benefits of federal action in the Amazon. One example is the administration's response to the humanitarian crisis caused by illicit gold mining in the Yanomami Indigenous territory. Shortly after Lula took office in January 2023, his administration deployed a task force there that involved federal law enforcement, the armed forces, health agents and social services personnel. This coordinated effort expelled thousands of illicit gold miners from the Yanomami territory



and improved health services for the community, which was previously facing alarming rates of childhood mortality and malnutrition.<sup>46</sup> A similar cross-agency federal operation launched in November 2024 in the Mundurku Indigenous territory in Pará targeting illicit gold miners has also achieved immediate and impactful results, with 90 illicit mining camps disbanded and 24 million Brazilian reais (US\$4 million) in fines issued against environmental criminals.<sup>47</sup>

The success of these task forces underscores the effectiveness of coordination between federal agencies such as the Indigenous protection agency (FUNAI), the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade, ICMBIO) and the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis, IBAMA) – as well as officials from the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples – in safeguarding communities and ecosystems. During the dialogues, participants expressed a strong affinity for these civilian government agencies and a willingness to engage with them. Further cross-agency interventions of this nature in critical environmental crime hotspots of the Amazon could play a significant role in environmental conversation efforts and provide greater security for communities on the ground.

■ **Promote specialized law enforcement training.**

The strained relationship between local communities and state agencies is also a result of the widespread impunity enjoyed by environmental criminals. Community leaders highlighted that, while institutional capacity shortfalls and widespread corruption are rife, the lack of technical expertise regarding environmental crimes also hinders state responses.<sup>48</sup> They noted that there is a substantial gap between community experiences of environmental crimes and the ability of government authorities to understand these dynamics.<sup>49</sup> Most state and federal prosecutors handling issues in the Amazon do not specialize in environmental crimes, as they also address other matters such as civil rights, common crimes and police oversight. Meanwhile, federal police active in the rainforest have primarily focused on drug trafficking.

To combat these challenges, dialogue participants insisted that state authorities need to improve their grasp of the Amazon's unique dynamics of violence and crime.<sup>50</sup> Training programmes should unite prosecutorial and police staff to encourage cross-agency collaboration and intelligence sharing. Increasing specialization in environmental crimes would also help tackle pervasive police corruption at the local level. By familiarizing themselves with the networks and illicit financial flows underpinning land-grabbing, timber trafficking and other environmental crimes, prosecutors and police investigators would be better equipped to identify the ways in which rogue state officials facilitate these illicit economies.

■ **Increase the severity of environmental penalties.**

The pervasive impunity enjoyed by environmental criminals is also aided by the lax nature of environmental regulations in the Brazilian penal code. The current Environmental Crime Law, enacted in 1998, imposes only modest fines and prison sentences ranging from one to three years – which are usually converted to house arrest – for offences that

cause devastating harm to the Amazon.<sup>51</sup> These include starting forest fires, deforesting protected territories, killing or trafficking fauna and polluting ecosystems. In response to mass fires in the Amazon in 2024 that were caused by these criminals, the Lula government proposed changes to the law that seek to increase fines for starting forest fires to as much as 10 million Brazilian real (US\$1.6 million) and hold rural property owners accountable for damages when fires break out on their land.<sup>52</sup>

However, the reform proposal remains under negotiation in Brazil's Congress. While negotiations continue, most of the arsonists responsible for the recent devastating fires in the Amazon have gone unpunished.<sup>53</sup> In fact, since 2019, only 25% of federal investigations into forest fires in Brazil have identified the culprit.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, a recent study found that between 2017 and 2020, only 5% of civil lawsuits filed by federal prosecutors for environmental violations resulted in defendants paying fines.<sup>55</sup> To end the cycle of impunity for environmental crimes in the Amazon, it is crucial to impose harsher penalties that reflect the serious damage caused by these illicit activities.

## **FOR GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR**

### **■ Recognize non-traditional stakeholders and private sector dynamics that can facilitate environmental crimes.**

As noted previously, the relevance of non-traditional stakeholders in driving environmental crimes in the Amazon was a major takeaway from the dialogues. Private sector investments are seen by environmental defenders in the Amazon as significant facilitators of environmental crimes. Agricultural and infrastructure projects have largely neglected speaking to communities before launching their operations. In circumventing consultation activities with communities – or doing so in a way that minimally fulfils legal requirements but fails to adequately address local concerns – private entities perpetuate a cycle of exploitation in which they profit from the rainforest's commodities at the expense of its residents.<sup>56</sup> Projects that are launched without community consultation also generate a series of spillover effects in the area, such as the destruction of local ecosystems and rapid population increase, which can lead to enhanced sexual exploitation and drug consumption. These spillover effects severely disrupt community life and amplify local illicit ecosystems. They are also the reason why local communities often perceive private entities that invest in the Amazon to be operating like criminal actors. Dialogue participants view many companies that operate in the region as rogue stakeholders that neglect local customs and norms to further their own ends, a form of conduct similar to that of criminal entities.<sup>57</sup>

In order to improve the ways in which national and international private sector stakeholders work in the Amazon, the dialogue participants called for substantial improvements to community consultation regulations. Federal and state government agencies need to work together to develop and enforce stricter procedures for private actors to engage in several rounds of substantive consultations with communities. Communities need to understand the nature of the projects in question, and be provided with risk assessments and adequate preliminary studies about the potential effects on local settlements and ecosystems. In tandem, private sector stakeholders looking to operate in the Amazon should understand that having several rounds of substantive community consultations



will aid their investments in the long term, as it will allow them to develop constructive and mutually beneficial links with residents. After all, community insights are essential to avoid repeated dynamics in which private investments and large infrastructure developments fuel environmental degradation, crime and violence in the Amazon.

## **FOR INTERNATIONAL DONORS**

### **■ Invest in alternative development.**

Participants' widespread criticism of the environmental effects of infrastructure and extractive projects highlights the need for greater alternative development initiatives in the Amazon. International donors can play an important role in this regard. Supporting alternative development work in the Amazon can help to halt the exploitative dynamics of commodity extraction and land-grabbing in the region, while also advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals in a critical locus for global conversation efforts.

This shift towards the bioeconomy, which refers to incentivizing socio-economic development through initiatives that preserve biodiversity, not only helps local ecosystems flourish but also creates stable income sources that can prevent local populations from turning to illicit activities that harm the environment.<sup>58</sup> Amazonian communities are already pursuing innovative sources of livelihoods, including the sale of artisanal and locally sourced cosmetic products and sustainable farming and livestock production, which are ready and capable of receiving further investor support.<sup>59</sup> Multilateral bodies and private donors can further boost this alternative development space in the Amazon by financing bioeconomy job training programmes and promoting the creation of further sustainable industries in the Amazon. Empowering existing bioeconomy initiatives to increase their reach could advance sustainability goals while also providing new socio-economic models in the Amazon that are able to offset the environmental harms from organized crime.

### **■ Increase community representation in multilateral forums.**

A recurring theme throughout the dialogues was the urgent need for Amazonian community leaders to have representation at global platforms such as the COP – particularly the upcoming conference in Belém. Participants expressed frustration at being excluded from critical discussions about environmental policies that directly affect their territories. They highlighted the importance of sharing their lived experiences to enact policies that respect their rights and prioritize environmental protection. They expressed concern that official delegations often neglect their interests, and that bureaucratic hurdles hinder grassroots representatives from participating. Through their inclusion in these international forums, they hoped to advocate for stronger protections and greater recognition of their role as guardians of the Amazon.

Dialogue participants noted that participating in high-profile international events like the COP is crucial to harnessing public attention in Brazil towards their conversation, development and anti-crime causes. Through greater domestic attention from their international projection, these activists are able to increase their political capital and more effectively intercede with government authorities.

It is time that multilateral institutions and other government authorities actively listen to the demands of the front-line defenders of the world's most critical biome. The Amazonian leaders who took part in the ECO-SOLVE community dialogues have dedicated their lives to preserving their territories and strengthening the resilience of their communities to withstand a litany of environmental crime challenges. Their input is essential to containing illicit actors and safeguarding the Amazon.



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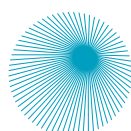




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