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Reducing violence against defenders of the Amazon: a political economy approach

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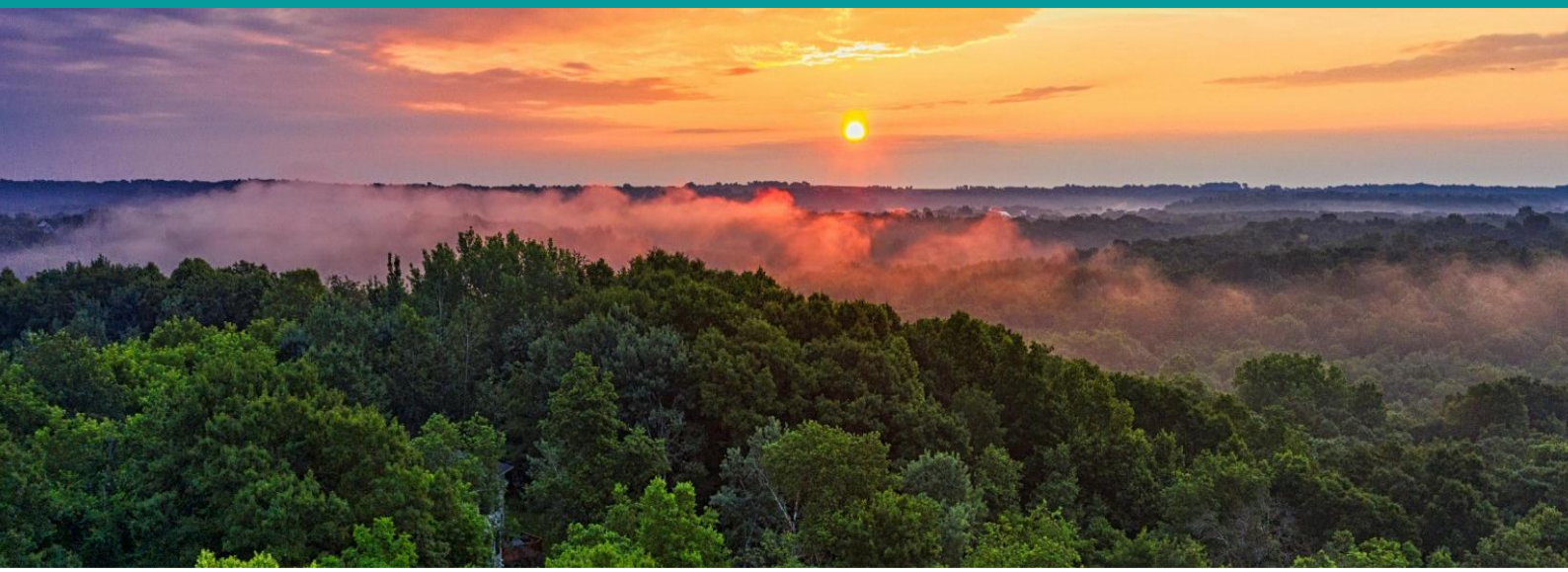

Summary

COP30 in Belém is focusing a global spotlight on Brazil's Amazon. The event holds significance for climate action globally but also represents an opportunity to address a problem closer to home, that of severe criminal violence against environmental human rights defenders in the Amazon. It is often land and resource conflicts that are the cause of this violence, and they have proven extremely hard to resolve. Meanwhile, analyses often focus on vested political and economic interests that can drive violence against defenders, with much less attention to how ideas contribute to shaping this violence.

This Working Paper, drawing on a political economy analysis undertaken by The Policy Practice, shows that ideas of the Amazon are a powerful influence on behaviour, combining with interests to direct actions. A better understanding of not just 'what people want' but also 'what their mindset is' can lead to more innovative solutions to help in addressing violence.

Key findings[1]

- Historical and cultural perspectives shape multiple interpretations of what the Amazon is. The most dominant – that the Amazon is a place of untapped resource wealth and opportunity for extractive development – is held by powerful domestic and international actors with economic and political vested interests in developing the region.
- Another perspective, one that is gaining prominence, is based on common ground between indigenous understandings of the Amazon and scientific analysis of its ecosystems. This sees the Amazon as a complex living system supporting life locally and globally. This view remains less valued in economic terms but holds greater prospects for climate action.
- Opposing understandings of the Amazon fuel political polarisation in Brazil. The approach the current government is taking is to attempt to balance both perspectives simultaneously through policies that often seem contradictory. However, the widely accepted view, that rules and laws do not apply or are not enforced in the Amazon, has led to a culture of violence and the expectation that criminal violence against defenders will go unpunished.
- Consequently, there is deep antagonism between actors who want to exploit the Amazon's land and resource wealth, and those who seek to conserve it. This situation erodes trust, deepens violent conflict and makes resolution very difficult. Powerful international actors who back the dominant narrative of resource extraction are complicit in enabling violence against defenders.
- A balanced approach including both extractive and preservation policies will not succeed while one narrative of the Amazon remains dominant. Narratives that seek to restore and conserve the Amazon must be further empowered, globally and within Brazil, if defenders' rights are to be protected and climate action for the Amazon achieved.
- This paper proposes three pathways of change that consider ideas and interests together. They plot possible routes forward by suggesting counterweights to the disproportionate influence of extractive development in the Amazon, including through elevating the economic and political interests in conservation.
- We encourage the further refinement of these pathways and urge those engaged on supporting defender's rights, green economic development and climate action in the Amazon to use them to inspire their interventions.

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[1] This paper draws on the author's own work and research collaboration with Sam Bickersteth for a PEA undertaken with Jesse Worker, Elizabeth Moses, Anamaria Martinez and Cristiane Fontes of the World Resources Institute. In addition, the author would like to acknowledge conversations that have inspired this work, including with Gareth Williams, Neil McCulloch, Gabriella Brianchini, Renata Giannini, Fernando Mathias, Felipe Milanez, Paula Moura, Jonathan Watts and members of the ALLIED alliance.

1. Why look at the political economy of violence against defenders?

Environmental defenders are defined as individuals or groups that strive to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, including water, air, land, flora and fauna. Their actions, whether personal or professional, are conducted in a peaceful manner. But their defence of the environment, often of the land on which they live, regularly draws criminal violence and reprisals, a trend that has been getting worse in many countries around the globe. In 2023, Global Witness documented the murder of 196 defenders worldwide, a figure that many believe is likely to be far higher, and that doesn't include those who are injured, threatened or otherwise abused. Defenders are rights-holders. They are entitled to legal rights and protections under domestic, regional and/or international laws. Yet these rights are often not realised; in some cases, they are actively undermined, and their actions even criminalised.

The concepts of environmental and climate justice continue to gain prominence as more people face threats to their fundamental human rights because of environmental damage, such as pollution, and the impacts of climate change. Climate justice has its roots in the imbalance of historical responsibility for climate change. It is generally accepted that certain countries and groups hold greater responsibility for the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming. The flipside of this is that those least responsible for emissions are the most likely to be adversely affected by climate change.

Environmental justice recognises the detrimental effects to human rights caused by biodiversity loss, climate change and damage to the environment, stating that everyone has the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Importantly, this right underscores the fact that the environment is crucial to the realisation of other human rights and reaffirms that States are obliged to respect, protect and promote actions undertaken to address environmental challenges.

However, the realisation of human rights is complex, and generally reflects the existing patterns of inequality and power distribution in societies. In real terms, this means the benefits of clean water, secure land tenure and unpolluted air are not guaranteed, particularly for those people with the least power and agency over political and economic decision-making. In many countries, defenders are marginal, and either absent from politics or considered to be on the fringe of mainstream views. Their understanding of land and nature is thought to be different from the norm; many have a far more familial relationship with the land on which they live than is common in urbanised societies.

A purely rights-based assessment of why defenders commonly do not realise their rights would usually focus on formal legal frameworks and their adoption and enforcement. A political economy lens contributes to this perspective. Political economy analysis (PEA) can provide a deeper understanding of the local, national and international factors that influence whether laws are adopted and enforced. Whereas analysis of a legal system will often rest on issues concerning legislation, capacity, jurisdiction and enforcement capability, all of which are often present, PEA will try to 'look under the surface' at what and who influences persistent institutional weaknesses, and how change may happen.

This Working Paper is based on a 'bird's eye view' PEA undertaken in 2024 by Niki Palmer and Sam Bickersteth, Principals from The Policy Practice. It highlights an often-neglected aspect of PEA – how ideas and ideology help influence the actions of groups and individuals. The PEA considered national and international factors influencing the realisation of defenders' rights in Brazil's Amazon. Supported by the World Resources Institute (WRI) and the Ford Foundation, it found many ways in which actors well beyond the Amazon were undermining defenders' rights. Mapping out the interconnected economic, political and sociocultural factors influencing violence helped those involved with the PEA to imagine realistic ways to support change by working with actors in the Amazon, in Brazil and globally.

2. Brazil's many Amazons

The Amazon means many things to many people, some of whom have come to rely on the tropical biomes for cultural and economic survival. The varied and often contradictory narratives interpreting the Amazon have been shaped by its geography and history, but also by competing ideas and powerful economic and political vested interests. Several narratives stand out, some more influential than others.

2.1 The Amazon is a living ecological system, regulating water cycles, stabilising the atmosphere and supportive of varied and diverse species

The Amazon is a highly complex system consisting of interconnected species, biomes and peoples. It has achieved a great age, which has allowed it to mature into the largest repository of biodiversity on Earth. As such, it plays a crucial role in stabilising the Earth's climate, storing carbon equivalent to 15–20 years of global carbon dioxide emissions, which results in a net cooling effect.

The Amazon also regulates water cycles. Water vapour released into the atmosphere from the tropical forest creates 'flying rivers' that are vital not only to the local ecosystem also to the wider region, where they influence rainfall. Without the Amazon, South America would be far more arid, with severe impacts on agricultural production.

The Amazon occupies a rarified position in the global public imagination. It is popularly thought to represent the terrestrial 'lungs of the planet,' by providing oxygen to the Earth's atmosphere. Scientists have long raised alarms on the dangers of deforestation in the Amazon, predominantly because threats to its integrity risk the forest reaching a tipping point at which it will collapse, transforming into drier savanna.

The idea that the Amazon is a crucial ecosystem, vital for South America but also the rest of the world, has led to a sense that the Amazon is not just Brazil's, but a global resource affected by global actions.

2.2 The Amazon is integral and deeply connected to the cultural traditions of indigenous, riverine and other traditional peoples

The recent evolution of science-led understanding of the Amazon has also influenced a popular acceptance that a forest can be more than its trees. This position has helped inform a wider appreciation of the fact that damaging too much of one or more aspects of an ecosystem – uprooting trees, hunting certain species, introducing pesticides and herbicides, extracting minerals, overusing water – threatens the integrity of the whole.

In Brazil, this more holistic appreciation of the forest chimes with indigenous and traditional worldviews as well as the views of many Brazilian (and international) scientists and conservationists. The indigenous and traditional groups that live in Brazil's Amazon believe strongly in the intrinsic connection between their peoples and the Amazon. They are an integral part of the living whole. Unlike for many people who live removed from their environment, there is no separation between human and nature; the Amazon is familial, an extension of and part of them. For some groups fighting for land rights, or to uphold their rights to recognised territory, the Amazon is not 'home' in the western understanding, but rather the source of their cultural and social identity. Consequently, damaging them damages the Amazon and vice versa.

The idea that, for some groups, violence against the forest is violence against themselves helps propagate a wider understanding of the Amazon as alive and interconnected, more than the sum of its constituent parts.

2.3 The Amazon is a source of national pride and prosperity, supporting development, including through cattle-ranching, farming and mining

As well as having an obvious wealth of timber, the 'Legal Amazon' – demarking the administrative jurisdiction of Brazil's Amazon – is rich in many minerals, including gold, nickel and tin. It also contains rare earth elements critical for green technologies. The Amazon's major river, the Amazon River, is a vital source of hydropower, while its land is highly valued for ranching and farming. In fact, the value of agricultural production in the Amazon has climbed, with estimates putting growth at 272% between 2002 and 2019 in comparison to 84% in the rest of Brazil.

The significance of the Legal Amazon as a set of land and resources for development has long held sway in the popular imagination. European colonialists first understood the Amazon as a vast, empty space with the potential to provide settlers with economic opportunities through the clearing of the forest and the harvesting of its treasures. Colonialism and resource extraction go hand in hand with a history of slavery, the violence of which has created persistent inequalities in Brazil, and a lasting mindset that has commodified the Amazon.

The idea that Amazonian land is available for settlement, and that land clearance is the first, necessary step towards the Brazilian dream of land ownership, has persisted. This idea also connects to a broader sense of Brazilian patriotism and development, based on the understanding that the Legal Amazon belongs to Brazil.

It is still the case that, for many who settle in this area, the patriotic dream of land ownership incentivises the 'dirty' work of clearing and mining. To those engaged in small scale clearance, their contribution to deforestation may seem inconsequential, given the size and scale of the Amazon. Instead, land-grabbing and clearance are justified in terms of the immediate business of economic survival.

2.4 The Amazon is a violent, frontier region, standing in contrast to vibrant, modern Brazil

To the many Brazilians living outside of the Amazon, particularly in the country's more densely populated coastal areas, the Amazon remains mysterious and unknowable, narrated to them but not experienced. The high cost of transportation to the Amazon disincentivises Brazilians from visiting. So too do other factors, including that much of the Amazon is wilderness, with well-advertised dangers and discomforts. The Brazilian media communicates stories of violence in the Amazon, passing on the message that confronting powerful forces there is a sure-fire way of getting killed. Taking on the big guys is dangerous, and everyone knows it. This attitude seems to convey the inevitability of impunity and to cast defenders' actions as reckless and thus inviting violence.

The tacit acceptance by many Brazilians of lawlessness and conflict in the Amazon can be traced to colonial legacies and the European slave trade. Slavery was legal and widespread in Brazil for over 300 years. Structural inequalities have persisted and are expressed in racism against Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples, who are often defined by their 'otherness' to Brazilians of European descent. Implicit in these characterisations is the portrayal of modern vs traditional, developed vs undeveloped and mainstream vs marginal. Even though conservation of the Amazon has been popularised in Brazil, as has the representation in politics of marginalised groups, the association of the Amazon and its people with the past lingers.

The idea that the Amazon is a relic of the past includes an acceptance that forces of modernity are inevitable – if not always correct – and can be violent. To most Brazilians, this violence remains largely out of sight, perpetrated against 'others.'

3. How ideas shape actions in Brazil's Amazon

These narratives help explain how different groups and individuals understand the Amazon. One's perception of the Amazon as a violent frontier or as familial and interconnected tends to be formed based on how we see ourselves; our ideas combine with and are shaped by identities and by our worldview. Together, these establish a sense of 'who we are' that is distinct from 'what we want' (our interests). Ideas and interests work in combination to incentivise what we do (our actions). Meanwhile, neither interests nor ideas are fixed, singular or static; they evolve in dynamic and sometimes unpredictable ways, changing with shifts in circumstances and in reaction to shocks.

Various analyses have focused on how rational vested interests, often motivated by wealth production or political ambition, influence violence in the Amazon. Such analyses can offer reasonable solutions to mitigate violence. However, just focusing on interests can be limiting. While politicians may want to secure votes and increase support from influential constituencies, because they are motivated by a will to preserve their political power, they may also be deeply proud of the potential of the Brazilian Amazon and see themselves as pioneers in maintaining the tradition of frontier settlement. Simply judging how they act based on their political interests misses the ways in which their ideas are also likely to nuance their behaviour.

Considering the multiple competing interests and ideas of the Amazon together helps explain how a situation that is full of contradictions has become normalised:

- Land rights and protections covering the Amazon are provided through a patchwork of institutions. These confer tenure, dictate supply and set restrictions on land use. Indigenous and traditional groups in the Amazon have received some rights enshrined in law. There is also a complex system to limit illegal deforestation and land-grabbing and to conserve forested land. Similarly, domestic laws uphold the rights of those who protest peacefully in defence of the Amazon. At the same time institutions concerned with Brazil's economic development support ranching, agri-business, mining and energy interests in the Amazon. These institutions appear to balance extractive development with conservation and human rights.

- However, laws and policies are implemented and enforced selectively in the Amazon, which has contributed to the persistence of land and agrarian conflicts. In addition, criminal law lacks enforcement, which has created a climate of impunity and a culture of pervasive violence.[2] The people who are most at threat from this situation are those who hold the idea of the Amazon as integral to and interconnected with themselves. Of this subset of people, women are the most severely affected by violence, much of which is invisible to the outside world.

[2] The Igarape Institute has published extensive research on violence in the Amazon, including gender-specific violence against women.

- The beneficiaries of this violence against defenders tend to be driven by the dominant narrative of the Amazon – that it is a place of untapped resource wealth and opportunities for extractive development. The most powerful of these actors are not Brazilian, but international investors in the Amazon's development – both licit and illicit – who are also driven by the idea that nature is separate and can be commodified, boosting wealth creation and distribution.

- Antagonism in Brazil between groups with opposing narratives of the Amazon amplifies political polarisation. Ideas of ownership, of national pride and of modernisation – among other ideas – are routinely used to reinforce divisions, playing into broader (national and global) political strategies. This has created a vicious cycle increasing the prospect of violence for Amazonian defenders while also making it harder to resolve.

4. Defining pathways of change

PEA helps us understand the problem of violence against defenders of the Amazon, including by considering the interplay of ideas and interests in driving actions.

It can also be used to identify potential ways in which lasting change could come about, towards a more desirable situation where defenders realise their rights. We refer to the causal explanations of how change may happen as 'pathways of change.' This allows us to consider how a more positive future might emerge in different ways, driven by different trends, events and processes.

Based on the current situation of violence against Amazonian defenders, summarised in the box below, we identify three potential pathways of change, which would operate singly or in combination.

Summarising factors that explain violence against Amazonian defenders

Brazil's legacy of social inequalities and its resource wealth have led to the creation of institutions that formally balance the overt influence of industries, including those in beef, leather, soy and timber, with land, agrarian and environmental policies intended to confer rights to land and resources and to restrict deforestation in certain areas.

At the same time, informal norms enable land-grabbing, fraudulent titling and violence, sustain impunity and help channel rents into deforestation. Frontier settlement persists, inspired by the Brazilian dream of land ownership made possible through land clearance in the Amazon. Domestic and international investors back land speculation and benefit financially from land clearance.

Indigenous peoples, traditional communities and environmentalists oppose actions that damage the Amazon, and through extension their own deep connections to its biomes. They routinely face systematic violence and intimidation for demanding their rights. Their ideas of the Amazon are disconnected from dominant economic and political ideas and interests.

The lack of legal enforcement in the Amazon has led to a perception of impunity, which drives further violence. Many international and domestic actors benefit from this violence, reducing the incentives to improve the situation. The clash of narratives of the Amazon fuels political polarisation, with further impacts on attempts to mitigate or resolve violent conflict.

Pathway 1: Enhance the influence of indigenous groups and other Amazonian defenders.

There are opportunities to significantly increase the influence of environmental defenders and indigenous groups. The platform COP30 provides can raise the profile of coalitions of defenders and further motivate regional discussions on enhancing legal protections for Amazonian defenders.[3] If coalitions of defenders can use this and similar forums to elevate their ideas, then a counterweight to the influence of industry lobby groups could develop. A greater focus on protecting the Amazon should catalyse the rebuilding of regulatory and enforcement agencies and capacities in the Amazon. Amplifying the voices and ideas of defenders would generate stronger sanctions for forest clearance and land-grabbing, resulting in greater realisation of human rights protections for environmental defenders.

Pathway 2: Enhance the perceived and actual economic value of conservation for Brazil.

COP30 is also crucial through the role it plays in amplifying global demand for deforestation-free goods and improved traceability and in ensuring stronger regulatory checks. Strategic engagement underscoring the potential economic value involved in conserving the Amazon should also highlight Brazilian pride in the development of a modern, non-extractive green economy. Shifting the narrative of non-extraction into the mainstream and underlining its value for all Brazilians could temper the polarisation that fuels violence. This would adjust incentives in key value chains towards production on non-deforested lands and prove catalytic for investment in the Amazon's 'new green economy' of deforestation-free goods. Such moves may reduce land clearance while fostering viable means to boost sustainable growth and address poverty reduction in the Amazon.

Pathway 3: Ensure (much) more international financing is channelled to support conservation.

Investment in new financing instruments, expanded support for the Amazon Fund and emerging carbon market payments could help reshape incentives by rewarding forest conservation and penalising illegal clearance. Triggered by the international spotlight of COP30, significant funding for new mechanisms would eventually dampen the direct and indirect financial encouragement by domestic and international investors for land speculation in the Amazon. Less international and domestic financial support for clearance would also lower the prospects for small-scale land ownership in the Amazon that currently fuels many land conflicts.

We do not know which, if any, of these pathways will transpire. However, constructing such pathways is helpful because it helps us see how positive change might happen. It also allows those wishing to support a reduction of violence and protection of the rights of environmental defenders to consider how their actions, and the actions of others, can best increase the likelihood of one or more of these pathways becoming a reality.

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[3] For instance, the Escazú regional agreement, which Brazil has signed but not yet ratified.

5. Conclusion

The influence of non-rational ideas on behaviour is significant in Brazil. In this context, it is easier to imagine innovative pathways of change when ideas and interests are considered together. In the case of violence against defenders of the Amazon, one narrative has far more power and influence than others. The idea of the Amazon as a source of prosperity reinforces the identity and worldview of many actors and combines with political and economic interests to motivate land-grabbing, resource extraction and, ultimately, violent conflict over land and its use.

Yet ideas are not singular, nor are they static. Worldviews change and identity politics shift. In Brazil, the disproportionate influence of extractive development in the Amazon needs a counterweight, and not just through stronger formal institutions that can enforce rights. To achieve real balance, other ideas of the interconnectedness of the Amazon, and its intrinsic value locally and globally, must be elevated. Realistically, this would require a concurrent increase in economic and political interests in conservation.

The three pathways of change suggested in this paper begin to plot a possible route forward. We encourage the further refinement of these pathways, and urge those engaged in supporting defenders' rights, green economic development and climate action in the Amazon to use them to inspire their interventions.

About this Working Paper and The Policy Practice

The Policy Practice is a network of development professionals who take a political economy approach to supporting positive change in developing countries. We undertake strategic and policy work including political economy analysis, programme designs, reviews and evaluations. Our multidisciplinary approach uses the political economy perspective to understand the processes of socioeconomic change and their effect on the implementation of development programmes.

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