

*Ecumenical and
interreligious
dialogue for human
dignity in the
Amazon*

Distribution material for dialogue and
interaction¹

The current situation in the Amazon has gained more attention from broad sectors on the global agenda. The forest is a **source of life** for its population in terms of food, culture and climatic regimes which affect different types of crops. It is also important for the planet as a whole. However, the environmental, economic and social degradation of the region has grown precipitously, and the fires of 2019 broadened the international public debate about its future and environmental, political, economic, geopolitical and social implications.

The Amazon encompasses nine countries in Latin America (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Guyana, French Guiana and Suriname) and has an area greater than 40% of South America. It is home to an **immense biodiversity**, being the world's largest tropical forest, in addition to having a fifth of the entire freshwater reserve on the planet due to its 25,000 km of navigable rivers. It is **culturally diverse**, with around 20 million Indigenous people living in 400 communities, 60 of which are in voluntary isolation, and Afro-Descendant communities. It has hundreds of municipalities, which are home to around 34.2 million inhabitants.

Such wealth has been the target of powerful interests that, in recent decades, have increased their pressure to implement economic projects with a high socio-environmental impact.



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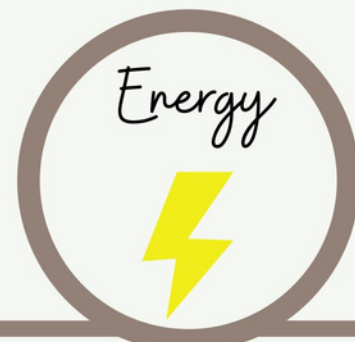
Threats: Exploitation of the Territory, Spoliation and Fundamentalisms

The current **development model** has been a vector for deepening **poverty and inequality** in rural and urban communities, with a particular impact on Indigenous peoples and Black communities. With the end of progressive government cycles in some countries, there is an aggressive resumption of “development at all costs”, based on economic growth promoted by governments that facilitate extractive economy. With this, the violation of economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights of peoples is accentuated.

Economic sectors that are expanding in the Pan-Amazon region and that exacerbate **inequalities in the region** are:



In particular in Brazil, Peru and Ecuador, and more recently expanding to the Guianas, Venezuela, Colombia and Bolivia. In 2016, there were 44.9 thousand mining projects in the Brazilian Amazon, of which 17.5 thousand were, totally or partially, on Indigenous territories or conservation units. Mining activities pose a particular threat to the Yanomami people, as their territory has been systematically attacked by miners, affecting more than 4,000 people and exposing indigenous women to sexual violence. Quilombola populations in Brazil are also being seriously affected by mining activities, such as the communities of Oriximiná, in the State of Pará, which are dealing with the contamination of water in their territory, among other threats.

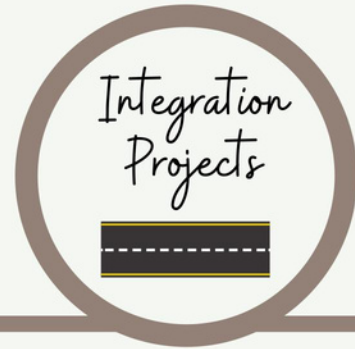


In the hydroelectric sector, especially in Brazil, Ecuador and Peru. Of the 272 hydroelectric plants planned, under construction or in operation in 2020 in the region, 78 are located in the in Indigenous territories. The strongest example is the construction of the Belo Monte plant in Brazil.





In Venezuela and Bolivia, with recent expansion also to Peru.



Promoted by the Iniciativa para Integração da Infraestrutura Regional da América do Sul (IIRSA, Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America), which structures the continent for the extraction of natural resources, their transport and export. According to RAISG (2017), of the 136,000 km of roads mapped in the region, 20% overlap protected natural areas and Indigenous territories. In the Colombian Amazon, 2,336 km of tertiary roads are located within Indigenous areas.



The most relevant actors heading the investments in the extractive sector, which act according to criteria of **capital flows** and **value chains** linked to the demand for commodities in Northern and Asian countries, are:

Private Actors who prioritize the expansion of the agricultural frontier for the production of agrofuels and cellulose.

Public Actors concentrated in the infrastructure sector.

Mixed Actors (Public and Private) especially related to the hydrocarbon, infrastructure and legal mining sectors.

Informal (or Illegal) Actors generally related to informal mining.



Photo: Bernardo Dias - Câmara Municipal de Belo Horizonte

Urgencies and Emergencies among The Indigenous Peoples and Afrodescendant Communities

An alarming situation concerns indigenous peoples in a situation of **voluntary isolation**. In Brazil alone, during the month of March 2021, deforestation in indigenous lands of these peoples grew 776%, as did criminal invasions and attacks. In Peru, the Nahua people who live in one of the most remote areas of the Amazon, have been hit since 2018 by an epidemic of **mercury poisoning**.

The impossibility of the countries to fully guarantee the **territorial rights of Indigenous peoples, Afrodescendant and traditional communities** threatens their ways of life and increases the risk of all kinds of violence. Between 2009 and 2018, the *Terra de Resistentes* (Land of Resisting [People]) project registered 1179 acts of violence against environmental activists in Latin America, 56% of which were against individuals from Indigenous peoples or Afro-Descendant communities. Brazil has the highest number of attacks, with half of them taking place in the Amazon.

The arrival of the **Covid-19 pandemic** in the Amazon, primarily affecting urban populations and brutally Indigenous communities, alarmed researchers and local Indigenous and international organizations from the beginning. It is not the first time that communities have found themselves facing diseases brought by foreigners, and the previous situations have signaled the risks of disappearance of the main defenders of the forest. The **spread of the virus** in Amazonian territories was driven by the historical lack of assistance, information and adequate sanitation and health services. In Peru, one of the most affected countries, only one in four Amazonian Indigenous communities has **access to safe drinking water** through the public network (UNICEF). The state's absence in this region also imposes **trips of several days** to access any health services, increasing the risk of mortality from Covid-19 compared to other regions. So far, the pandemic has spread to communities, there are huge deficiencies in terms of vaccination, and the nefarious action of fundamentalist missionaries denying science. This is yet another threat to the lives of peoples who, with their lives, defend the Amazon.

"Between ideas and realities, today the term Amazon carries in its name a high symbolic value that is disputed politically and materially. On the one hand, as the place of the environment, ecology, Indigenous peoples, traditional populations, forest, biodiversity, preservation, and survival. But, on the other hand, also as the place of exploitation, violence, misery, many political, social and environmental problems, and multiple demands" (Investimentos predatórios e desigualdades na região amazônica = Predatory investments and inequalities in the Amazon region, May 2020).

Faith and Fundamentalisms in The Amazon

The Amazon is a space rich in beliefs, myths, enchantments, religions, religiosities, spiritualities, experienced in the **diversity of traditions** of Indigenous peoples, of religions of African matrix, riverine populations and extractivists. To these were added the Christian groups that arrived in the region over the centuries with the **missionary perspective** related to the Iberian colonization.

The **Amazon Synod**, convened by Pope Francis in October 2019, gave new perspectives to this Catholic presence in the region. However, there are still traditional practices that maintain the perspective of catechization and denial of cultures and traditions. **Evangelical churches** have a diverse presence in the Amazon from the 20th century onwards, from historic churches to Pentecostal churches and different mission agencies, most of them from the United States. In this Christian mix, different organizations, institutions and confessional and ecumenical projects are included, which began to act in the region with different purposes, such as proselytizing, assisting and defending human, social, economic, cultural, and environmental rights.

The term “fundamentalism” refers to practices and discourses of intolerance and rejection of dialogue, which shape a worldview, an interpretation of reality, of a religious matrix, combined with political actions resulting from it which undermine democratic processes, sexual and reproductive rights, rights of traditional communities, and policies that value plurality. In 2020, the ACT South America Ecumenical Forum (*Fórum Ecumênico* ACT, FESUR) conducted a survey on the advance of **political-religious fundamentalisms**, and the study identified religious discourses, their use in politics, and their identity with values spread by neoliberal ideology.



Photo: Pictures Library/Canva

In the last two decades, religious and non-religious organizations that work in defense of rights have observed the advance of the presence of groups and projects classified as **fundamentalist**. Thus, communities and the environment throughout the Amazon region are targets of political actions of fundamentalist religious matrix. It was identified that in the 2000s the activities of these fundamentalist groups expanded, some of them linked to agribusiness, mining, logging, digging (for gold etc.), and real estate speculation companies, which seek to intervene in the territories of these populations to implement projects of economic extraction and exploitation.

The association between **fundamentalism and neoliberalism** in the Amazon materializes in political and economic destruction practices, having effects far beyond the discursive. One example is the case of Brazil, where president Jair Bolsonaro, elected with broad support from Neo-Pentecostal Evangelical churches and neoliberal economists, fulfills his campaign promises to stop the demarcation of Indigenous lands and expand economic exploitation in the Amazon. Since the beginning of his government, in January 2019, almost 20,000 square kilometers have been deforested, according to the National Institute for Space Research (*Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais*, INPE, 2019). For these reasons, the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (*Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil*, APIB, 2020) also denounces what they call a **genocide policy** on the part of the Brazilian government.

"Way more than numbers, they were our shamans, our prayers, midwives, elders, and chiefs who left. We lost our elderly people, the ones who keep the memories of our ancestry, guardians of knowledge, of songs, of prayers, of our spirituality. Leaders who dedicated their lives to the struggle to defend the territory, the integrity and the physical and cultural existence of their peoples. We suffer in our mourning for this tragedy that affects not only us indigenous people, but all of humanity" (Relatório da Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil – Our Fight is for Life, Report of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil [APIB], November 2020).

"There is an urgent need for access to and conservation of essential productive resources (land, water, forests and biodiversity) by indigenous peoples and local communities, for which the processes that affect the region are not just a matter of nature conservation, but also of material subsistence and survival of their social and cultural being" (Investimentos predatórios e desigualdades na região amazônica – Predatory investments and inequalities in the Amazon region, May 2020).

Response and Intervention Strategies

An **integral vision of the Amazon** considers its complexity, heterogeneity as well as its regional and international dimensions. Strategic responses based on this vision must be anchored in the **global strategic revaluation** of the Amazon, in an **effective participation of civil society**, producing development alternatives given its physical-geographic and human exhaustion, and in the construction of a **regional agenda** of articulated actions. In this context, it is essential to develop:

Advocacy Strategy...

that gathers experiences, encourages action strategies that recognize disputes over territories, where political and economic powers are mixed up in the exploitation of natural resources, depriving traditional communities of the forests and their decision-making power over their own lands, resources and lives. That has the objective of putting pressure on States to guarantee threatened peoples and communities access to and control over land and its **common goods**. That works to guarantee access to health care in times of pandemic, for the defense of human rights and nature defenders under threat and against attempts to criminalize the struggles of the peoples of the Amazon; that reports the nefarious action of proselytizing missionaries who, as part of an economic, social, cultural, and religious fundamentalist project allied to agribusiness, seek to take over territories; that considers the articulations between the resistance in the territory and organizations specialized in complaints and international litigation strategies, and counts on the **legal frameworks of environmental protection** and of listening to traditional peoples and communities, such as Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO).

Platforms of Resistance and Struggle...

based on the organization of the bases and the articulation between social movements, ecumenical movement, Churches and academics, in the defense of rights, preservation of cultures, and construction of local alternatives in the Amazon. This work, historically supported by international organizations, built a network of solidarity and visibility of the struggles of the “forest peoples” and the marginalized populations in the growing and disordered Amazon towns and cities. These groups, targets of rights violations promoted by companies of the private sector and the absence of the public sector, must be recognized as central subjects of the global importance that the Amazon has today. At the **Pan-Amazon** level, an important example of a platform is the *Foro Social Pan-Amazónico* (Pan-Amazon Social Forum, FOSPA), a territorial extension of the World Social Forum whose main objective is to promote concrete actions for the preservation and defense of the Amazon, towards a “Pan-Amazon ruled by its people”. Furthermore, strengthening **global articulations**, such as the World Rainforest Movement (*Movimento Mundial pelas Florestas Tropicais*), Rainforest Investigations Network, and the International Week of Anti-Imperialist Struggles (*Fornada Internacional de Luta Anti-Imperialista*).

Eco-spiritual Communities...

based on the spirituality of the Amazonian populations which has already been worked on by theologians, in the sense of a spirituality that permeates religions and integrates all dimensions of human life in its relationship with the universe and in different social subjects. FBOs such as *Paz y Esperanza* (Peace and Hope), *Iglesias y Minería* (Churches and Mining), and *Tierras Bajas* (Lowlands) of the *Instituto Superior Ecueménico Andino de Teología* (Superior Ecumenical Andean Institute of Theology, ISEAT) develop initiatives in this direction. These experiences point to the importance of reinforcing existing projects and stimulating the creation of new experiences. Promote **training courses on the care and rights of the environment** and its full range, with faith communities as audiences, so that churches and other religious groups can go beyond emergency issues (fires, floods, Covid-19) and understand the range of the struggle. It is necessary to train leaders and people from the bases of different religious groups to defend cultures and raise awareness of environmental disputes, so that they understand the urgency of a sustainable development of the land and its relationship with the sacred.

Broader Ecumenism...

beyond the institutionality of the churches and acting in alliances. A broader ecumenism will involve articulation with people's movements and their leaders, and for action together and in partnerships. It is important to place at the center the **prophetic voice of communities** in the region, organized for **collective action**, in networks and articulations in the struggle for rights, highlighting their resistance and proposals for alternatives. In this sense, the work with regional and global networks must be considered as spaces of resonance for the voice of communities.

For this purpose, it is particularly important to reinforce and expand the international cooperation policies of churches and ecumenical organizations. It is necessary to assess, jointly with the ecumenical agencies, their policies and presence in the region, in light of the degradations imposed by political-religious fundamentalism, as an important aspect for this reconfiguration of the ecumenical movement. For this purpose, it is urgent to deepen the knowledge and mapping of expressions of **fundamentalism** and the use of religions by large mining and agribusiness corporations. It is essential to know their strategies, way of expression and alliances.

Strategies of Communication and Building of New Narratives...

based on a common effort among FBOs and Amazonian social movements. Develop simplified materials that support the struggle against fundamentalism, promoting a liberating Bible interpretation, using a contextual theology that responds to the challenges of the region, supports the struggle against the pandemic and focuses on caring for the environment. The Evangelical Coalition for Climate Justice in Latin America (*Coalizão Evangélica pela Justiça Climática na América Latina*) is working in this direction, producing booklets on Covid-19. It is strategic for this to establish partnerships with universities to develop a renewed **narrative**, based on information on territories and socio-environmental issues, produced by local organizations and local, national, regional, and global networks and articulations. In this sense, it will be important to strengthen the **Portal do Diálogo Ecueménico e Inter-religioso pela Amazônia** (Portal of Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue for the Amazon), launched in 2020 by *KOINONIA Presença Ecueménica e Serviço* and CREAS, both part of the ACT Alliance, as an initiative aimed at strengthening ecumenical and interfaith initiatives for human dignity in Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia and Peru, promoting shared analysis and joint actions. Multiplication and capillarity of **Ecumenical Campaigns**, such as *Somos Amazônia* (We Are Amazon), a campaign endorsed by more than 130 churches and faith-based organizations around the world and supported by dozens of ecumenical organizations in Latin America, Africa, Europe, North America and Asia, in 2019 holding ecumenical vigils for the Amazon, in addition to promoting solidarity with the Amazon Synod.

Framework for a Future Impact

The diagnosis of the region poses an important question for defining impact: **impact for what?** The impact desired to achieve in the Amazon is not towards bringing development to the region and its communities, but considering the impact of solidary action to guarantee rights and protect the territory, against the very ideal of predatory development. A new reference point of transformative impact for the Amazon must be identified by the deep, lasting and inclusive changes for the forest and all the peoples who live in it, which considers, as a reference, the **cosmovisions of the communities** that live in the forest and who are its guardians.

Impact interventions are those that align with the objectives and aspirations of local populations. The question is not what communities could do based on a given intervention, but what they are already doing in defense of their way of life and the forest.



For a positive impact in this regard, the pillars must be:

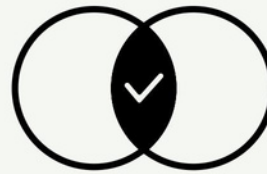
Effective Communication

Regular, direct, objective and based on trusting relationships.



Share Common Values

Understanding the values of each party involved, with a mutual commitment to share goals and responsible behavior towards each other.



Long-term Commitment

Commitment beyond the execution period of a specific project and keeping up with the challenges and advances in a given community or organization.



transparency

Communicate expectations and goals for maintaining transparent relationships. Transparency in management and fundraising is also essential for balancing power relations.



Shared Learning

Active knowledge management is important so that tacit knowledge of a group of people and/or organizations becomes explicit knowledge and, therefore, shareable.



Contextual Action

Deep knowledge of the local context and updating interpretations based on new actors and active listening to local communities and organizations.



Good Practices

Local Transforming Experiences:

Refers to the **quality of the intervention** of a given organization (Church, FBO, Pastoral, NGOs etc.). Both what it can mean and what is wanted as examples of good practice is defined in **dialogue** with the community where this activity/methodology/strategy will be developed.

Joint and coordinated actions:

This is the second group of good practices that stands out for **articulated interventions** between more than one organization and/or between more than one Amazonian country (**regional character**) which are committed to complementarity in relation to common objectives. They can be campaigns, projects or initiatives that aim to coordinate thematic agendas, geographic action areas, and the experiences of the actors involved.

Ecumenical platforms:

complex challenges such as those in the Amazon must be answered by **sharing costs, risks and solutions**. The investment of an organization in permanent networks and alliances, based on complementary logics, brings a series of benefits, from **efficiency** to **relevance**. **Building permanent alliances** is an important practice in such a diverse region, whether new platforms and ecumenical networks or reinforcing existing ones. The scope of these platforms can be local, regional and global.

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This document was elaborated by Mara Luz and Sarah de Roure, developed within the framework of the completion of the project supported by Christian Aid and coordinated by KOINONIA Presença Ecumênica e Serviço, which intends to offer strategic directions for the strengthening of ecumenical work in the Amazon, exploring in the Latin American context the capacities and possibilities inherent to the position of churches and faith-based organizations (FBOs) and building an impact framework for evaluating the future work of ecumenical dialogue in the Amazon which is based on identifying good practices, focused on strengthening joint actions and strengthening ecumenical articulations at local, regional and international contexts.

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