

UNTANGLING DYNAMICS OF DEFORESTATION IN THE COLOMBIAN AMAZON

Colombia is one of the richest countries in the world in terms biodiversity and natural resources. But this natural wealth is threatened by deforestation. Driven by the growing global commodity demand, deforestation is often interconnected with other (illicit) economic activities. To gain a deeper understanding of these dynamics, CEALDES and IUCN NL will soon publish a report based on a study that acknowledges the deep complexity of deforestation and environmental conflicts in the Colombian Amazon.

DEFORESTATION IN THE COLOMBIAN AMAZON

Since 2001, 5.39 million hectares of Colombian forest disappeared. The impact on humid primary forest is even more significant: between 2002 and 2023, 1.99 million hectares (ha) was lost, corresponding to 39% of the Colombia's total tree cover loss. It reduced the country's humid primary forest rainforest with 3.6% (GFW 2024).

During this period, deforestation concentrated in five departments: Caquetá, Meta, Antioquia, Guaviare and Putumayo. All of them are located in the Amazon basin or the Amazon-Orinoquia ecotone, with the exception of Antioquia.

Colombia's ongoing deforestation is connected with different sociopolitical and economic phenomena with deep historical roots. The main turning point was the Peace Agreement between the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the government in 2016.

Since then, deforestation increased from 49,600 ha in 2015 to 109,000 ha in 2016, 162,000 ha in 2017 and 177,000 ha in 2018 (GFW 2024). According to IDEAM (2022), main drivers include the expansion of the agricultural frontier, cattle ranching, land grabbing, unplanned road infrastructure, illicit crops and mining.

The report analyses drivers of deforestation and illicit economic activities, and elaborates on the impacts of deforestation on rural communities, youth and women.

IMPACT OF THE PEACE AGREEMENT

The 2016 Peace Agreement transformed the local governance system, resulting in new alliances and new forest legislation. The rearmament of post-demobilisation structures has led to an increase in violence and influenced the regulation of economic activities in Amazon territories.

Through several fronts, the armed group Estado Mayor Central (EMC) controls cattle business and land trade in Guaviare, southern Meta and Caquetá, and coca and mining in the departments of Putumayo, southern Caquetá, Guainía and Vaupés. Another armed group, Segunda Marquetalia, fights for coca and mining revenues in Putumayo and the Venezuelan border area. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and armed groups from Brazil have an important role in the criminal processes related to coca and mining.

The **new report** explains deforestation as a development model that analyses economic, social and cultural patterns in regions with different kinds of state presence, while elaborating on the different ecological impacts of four main drivers of deforestation:

- cattle ranching
- land grabbing
- crops for illicit use
- mining

Although these drivers are analysed in a number of studies, few of them have a relational and territorial emphasis that allows for the assessment of different socio-ecological impacts as is done in this field study.

In addition, the report analyses investor relationships, returns with little traceability, legal regimes and communities under pressure.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

To understand the dynamics of deforestation, it is essential to understand **land ownership issues**. A lack of formalisation of land ownership benefits the informal land market, targeted occupation and profitable production systems. This study shows that land grabbing can be highly profitable for investors and confirms the central role of armed groups in land grabbing processes.



Cattle ranching is a consequence of historical land ownership issues. The study shows that landowners, who are often not present in the territory, wield power in a system of precarious forms of payment and indebtedness of local peasant communities. This creates a vicious circle causing increasing financial dependence and social inequality.



In Colombia's Amazon region, **mining** primarily consists of small-scale alluvial gold mining (InSight Crime 2021, Mongabay 2017). This type of mining affects the quality of forests, but is not perceived as one of the main drivers of deforestation (IDEAM, 2024). Its main impact is the degradation of ecosystems, especially in Caquetá, Amazonas, Guainía and Vaupés, because of the use of mercury, which mainly affects Indigenous communities.



Palm oil is a smaller but growing industry in the Colombian Amazon, which has been linked to paramilitary violence and forced displacement of Indigenous peoples (The Washington Post 2014, Environmental Investigation Agency 2015, Mongabay 2020, Millán-Quijano, J. and Pulgarín, S. 2020).

While the deforestation risk related to industrial palm oil in the Amazon is currently low, it is growing while posing mainly a risk in Meta and Guaviare. Monitoring and increased transparency is of great importance.



Coca has key historical antecedents in the country and contributes to deforestation of new areas and the expansion of already stripped areas. In addition, chemical contamination caused by processing alkaloid degrades the ecosystems. Recent policies, such as the Comprehensive National Programme for the Substitution of Crops for Illicit Use, were unsuccessful and coca plantations removed by the military have been replanted.

The report also elaborates on the different impacts of the drivers of deforestation on **rural communities, youth and women**. Mining mainly affects Indigenous communities, while cattle ranching and land grabbing largely affect peasants, for example. Ecological impacts were also explored.

Finally, the report proposes **recommendations** to improve institutional collaboration at different levels. It highlights the importance of strengthening cooperation in border areas and develop strategies for the entire Amazon region, as well as the need for territorial planning strategies guided by local communities and supported by institutions.



AMAZON RIGHTS IN FOCUS

Together with partner organisations Fundación para la Conservación y el Desarrollo Sostenible (FCDS), Mongabay and Ambiente y Sociedad, we aim to tackle forest crime and improve the territorial rights and livelihoods of Indigenous peoples and local communities in the Colombian Amazon. The project "Amazon rights in focus: peoples and forest protection" is supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD).



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