

# A future for the Amazon, a future for all

The Amazon rainforest is the world's largest tropical rainforest. Like other tropical rainforests (e.g., the ones in the Congo and Indonesia), it plays a vital role in regulating the Earth's climate and is one of our best defences against catastrophic climate change. The pan-Amazonian region is a rich, complex biome that hosts up to a third of the world's biodiversity. It is also home to more than 30 million people<sup>1</sup>, including some 380 Indigenous groups<sup>2</sup>, each with their own culture, traditions and languages.

Climate change and resource exploitation are driving Amazonia to a "point of no return," characterized by deforestation, pollution and displacement. Our insatiable demand for gold, iron, oil, meat, corn and soy is fuelling the destruction of its fragile land and water ecosystems<sup>3</sup>. Infrastructure mega-projects deliver little of their promised benefits to Indigenous, *quilombola* (descendants of African slaves), *seringueiro* (artisanal rubber tappers) and other traditional communities. These peoples' time-honoured sustainable modes of living have protected the forests for millennia. The women and men who defend their human rights face violence, criminalization and dispossession. In Brazil, many land and rights defenders have even been killed<sup>4</sup>. Protecting them is the key to protecting the Amazon and preserving our common home for future generations.

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## The Amazon and its tributaries<sup>5</sup>

Through the 5.5-million-square-kilometre Amazon rainforest flows the mighty Amazon River. It begins flowing from headwaters in the towering Andes highlands of Peru. Gathering tributaries from Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia, the river meanders through vast forests in Peru and Colombia before reaching the lowlands of Brazil, where it creates the world's largest river delta before pouring its massive freshwater flows into the Atlantic Ocean. Torrential yearly rainfalls also create seasonal floodplains called *várzea*<sup>6</sup>, flushing nutrient-rich waters into the Amazon's channels, raising their levels by up to 10–15 metres.

Along the way, 1,100 tributaries merge into it, making the 6,992-kilometre Amazon the world's longest river by some measures and the largest by discharge volume. With a floodplain that also includes parts of Bolivia, Suriname, Guyana and French Guiana, the Amazon basin occupies some seven million square kilometres — roughly the size of Australia.

## A short history of Amazonia<sup>7</sup>

Evidence suggests that the Amazon basin has been home to significant Indigenous populations for over 10,000 years. The Indigenous peoples living on and protecting the land faced a dramatic shock in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of the Incan empire. Spanish conquistadors began exploring the region in 1541, naming it after the Greek Amazon warriors. They documented large, well-established communities in the Andean highlands and along the banks of the Amazon and its tributaries, including the Yanomami, Kayapo, Awá and Ticuna peoples. These Indigenous populations declined dramatically because of diseases introduced by Europeans to which they had no natural immunity.

Keen to exploit the region's gold and other resources, the Spanish settled the Pacific coast, while the Portuguese focussed on the Atlantic. The French, the Dutch and the English built settlements in Guyana. These colonists stole the land from Indigenous peoples, forcing many into the forest hinterland, away from



their traditional food and water sources. Many of the few survivors were forced to work on mines and agricultural haciendas alongside African slaves. Jesuits, who opposed their brutal treatment, established evangelical missions at the mouth and along the banks of the Amazon.

In the 1870s, a rubber boom reached deep into the Amazon. Indigenous peoples had long used the sap of the native rubber tree to make tools and bags. As the material became popular globally, the colonial rubber trade led to the enslavement and genocide of several Indigenous groups in Brazil. By the 1910s, the British had established rubber plantations in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and parts of Africa, ending Brazil's monopoly. Trade recovered briefly during World War II, as the Japanese cut off Asian rubber supplies<sup>8</sup>. Devastating as it had been for many, the rubber boom did not lead to large-scale land clearing. Sustainable, artisanal rubber extraction now forms an important part of conservation efforts in Brazil and Bolivia.

Since the 1950s, roads built deep into the Amazon have facilitated the exploitation of natural resources, including the building of hydroelectric dams<sup>9</sup> to power massive gold and iron mines and oil and gas projects. With often-dubious promises of fertile land, national resettlement programs have encouraged peasant farmers to colonize the rainforest. This “land reform” has caused much conflict, pitting peasants against Indigenous peoples. Neither group has gained much, because development policies have favoured large agriculture, mining and energy projects.

In the 2010s, deforestation was briefly arrested as a progressive government reconsidered Brazil's settlement and development policies. That hope died when the new government led by President Jair Bolsonaro vowed to rapidly expand resource exploitation and curtail the powers and budgets of environmental and Indigenous welfare agencies. Unsurprisingly, the Amazon is now losing between one and three soccer fields worth of forest cover every minute<sup>10 11</sup>.

Today, many Indigenous and traditional communities continue to live sustainably in the Amazon region, having survived colonization, enslavement, land theft and disease. However, they have to continually defend their human rights and the little land they have left.

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***“Why is it taking so long to believe that if we hurt nature, we hurt ourselves? We are not watching the world from without. We are not separate from it.”***

— Davi Kopenawa, Yanomami leader

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## **The ecological role of the Amazon**

The Amazon regulates humidity, water cycles and carbon levels at the regional and global levels. The forest absorbs and stores greenhouse gases. It also transpires water vapour, which creates clouds. The river's freshwater outflow into the Atlantic Ocean acts as a cooling mechanism. Thus, the Amazon forest and river cool the local climate and help generate rainfall, affecting weather across vast regions.

As the Amazon is degraded, its power to mitigate climate change is weakened; and the implications are frightfully global. Fed by the inordinately high levels of nutrients that the Amazon River is flushing into the ocean because of deforestation and industrial agriculture, a 9,000-kilometre bloom of seaweed is threatening marine life across the Atlantic<sup>12</sup>. Some scientists think the Amazon is already emitting more carbon dioxide than it is absorbing<sup>13</sup>, because of rising temperatures, decreasing precipitation and increasing “savannization,” where dry plains are replacing forests. Without the Amazon's regulatory influence, climate disasters will increase regionally, and temperatures will rise around the world.

## **The Pan-Amazonian synod**

The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, taking place at the Vatican in October 2019, will shine a spotlight on the Amazon and its people. Entitled *Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*<sup>14</sup>, the Synod is a response to the papal encyclical, *Laudato Si'*<sup>15</sup>. The encyclical inspires us to act against social and ecological crises born of overconsumption and a culture that views nature as a commodity. With the Synod, Pope Francis invites the Church to “find new ways of developing the Amazonian face of the Church and to respond to situations of injustice in the region.”

## The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples<sup>20</sup>

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples around the world to self-determination and to free, prior and informed consent. It was adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, with 144 states voting in favour, four states (Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand) voting against and 11 states abstaining. With the four naysayers having since reversed their positions, the Declaration now enjoys near-universal support.

A sweeping, historic accomplishment, UNDRIP lays out standards to ensure the survival and well-being of the world's Indigenous

peoples. In Brazil, it underpins advocacy for Indigenous land rights. More than 10 per cent of Brazil's land, mostly in the Amazon rainforest, is recognized as Indigenous territory. Yet, many Indigenous peoples' land rights are precarious and often violated. Moreover, the current government has signalled its intent to greatly reduce areas earmarked for Indigenous peoples.

In 2018-2019, Bill C-262, a private member's bill to bring Canada's laws in line with UNDRIP, was presented in the House of Commons and the Senate. Its enactment could have been a watershed, given the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recognition of the UNDRIP as a framework for reconciliation. Unfortunately, the Bill died in the Senate, a victim of procedural delays that seemed intended to stop it.

The *Instrumentum laboris*<sup>16</sup>, the Synod's working document, released in June 2019, is based on consultations with people from across the Amazon region. It depicts Amazonia as a wounded, deformed beauty and "a place of pain and violence" whose "environmental destruction and exploitation" it laments. It notes "the systematic violation" of human rights; the threatening of Indigenous peoples' rights to territory and self-determination; and the benefit that profit-driven extractive companies derive from governmental permissiveness. It describes the Amazon's environmental degradation, pollution, deforestation, species extinction and loss of human lives as "a brutal reality that challenges us all."

The *Instrumentum* calls for the protection of Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation, who are increasingly vulnerable because of expanding mining and deforestation. The document notes that urbanization has seen some 70 to 80 per cent of the population abandoning rural areas to live in cities. It concludes that instead of integration, this migration has led to the "urbanization of poverty;" further exclusion; and social problems like drug and alcohol abuse and human trafficking.

At the Synod, bishops from the Amazon and around the world will discuss how to change humanity's course, so that the Amazonian biome and people are protected. To save the Amazon and our planet, we must transform our extractivist approach into respect for our common home<sup>17</sup>.

## Women defenders of the Amazon

The *Instrumentum laboris* gravely notes that, "In some regions of the Amazon, 90% of the Indigenous people murdered in isolated settlements have been women." Extractivism, too, has had exceptional negative impacts on women. Extractivist projects have accelerated urbanization, which has brought with it more workers, mainly men, and increased rates of violence and sexual abuse against women. In addition, prostitution and human trafficking have taken root as a consequence of these projects.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples has remarked on how Indigenous women become especially vulnerable when their land is taken:

"The loss of land and exclusion of women can create vulnerability to abuse and violence, such as sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking. Additionally, the secondary effects of violations of land rights, such as loss of livelihood and ill health, often disproportionately impact women in their roles of caregivers and guardians of the local environment<sup>18</sup>."

As caretakers of the forest, many Indigenous women have become frontline leaders in defending the land, water and forests of the Amazon. Yet, they face brutal repression and criminalization. A recent report by Amnesty International details how authorities in Ecuador ignored death threats made to a group of Indigenous women protesting oil and mining exploration in the Amazon<sup>19</sup>. Some of these women describe how they have to go into hiding to remain safe.

States must ensure that the rights of Indigenous women in the Amazon are respected, provide safeguards against threats, and properly investigate and prosecute those who perpetuate crimes against them.



## Human rights defenders at risk

Intent on continuing to live sustainably in the Amazon, individuals and communities are defending their territories and opposing the devastation and pollution of forests, land and water. These defenders, many of whom are women, often face threats, criminalization, violence and even murder by the representatives of powerful corporations and government officials. In 2018, Front Line Defenders found that defenders of land, environmental and Indigenous rights were nearly three times likelier to be assaulted than other human rights defenders<sup>21</sup>. Rural and Indigenous leaders of these movements, especially women, are often vilified as “anti-development,” “criminals” or even “terrorists.”

This victimization undermines the vital role that these defenders play in the urgent task of protecting the environment. In a landmark 2018 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned of dire consequences if global warming is not limited to 1.5 degrees above the preindustrial average temperature<sup>22</sup>. It cautioned that if this goal is not reached within 12 years, hundreds of millions of people will face calamitous food shortages, drought, poverty and extreme temperatures.

The IPCC emphasized the urgent need for fundamental changes to the global economy to contain the damage wrought by climate change. Yet, the defenders of land, Indigenous and environmental rights are more threatened than ever before. These include Indigenous peoples who have lived on their rainforest territories for generations without contributing to global warming; small family farmers; and artisanal rubber tappers who resist dispossession by industrial agriculture, mining and energy projects.

Land and water defenders must be protected from threats and violence so they can protect the Amazon, and thereby the Earth, from climate chaos. Their right to say “no” and to choose their own models of development must be respected by governments, companies and development finance institutions.

### Voices at Risk: Canada’s guidelines on supporting human rights defenders<sup>26</sup>

The Canadian government has stated that it is committed to working with other governments, civil society, international organizations and the private sector to strengthen international rules that protect universal human rights. This includes the protection of human rights and land defenders in the Amazon.

*Canada’s Guidelines on Supporting Human Rights Defenders* offer practical advice to officials in Ottawa and at Canadian missions abroad on defending the defenders of rights. Advocating for human rights defenders, strengthening their effectiveness, and protecting them from harm are thus national commitments for which Canadian citizens must hold their government to account.

## How our partners protect the Amazon

**CPT** (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, the Pastoral Land Commission) supports Brazilian peasants’ and landless people’s fight against unjust land distribution by documenting rights abuses and land disputes and by helping with litigation. Inspired by liberation theology, it promotes genuine land reform, respect for the environment and the emphasis of peasants’ voices.

**REPAM** (Rede Eclesial Pan-Amazônica, the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network) is a Catholic Church network supported by the Latin American Bishops’ Conference, CELAM. It promotes the rights and dignity of Amazonian peoples and draws the world’s attention to the fragile situation of Indigenous peoples and the critical importance of the Amazon biome.

**CIMI** (Conselho Indigenista Missionário, the Indigenous Missionary Council), established by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, supports Indigenous peoples’ struggles for autonomy, territorial rights and social justice. Its 400+ missionaries help oppressed communities organize, litigate, advocate and publicize their causes more effectively.

## How the Amazon is Canada’s business

Many Canadian-owned mining, energy, oil and gas companies are among those exploiting the Amazon’s resources. Global Affairs Canada reports that Canadian firms invested about \$11.5 billion in Brazil last year, accounting for about one per cent of total investment abroad<sup>22</sup>. Export Development Canada supports Canadian investment throughout the Amazon region through loans and guarantees. The Globe and Mail recently concluded that this federally funded agency lacks transparency and found that it has invested in projects that would not meet Canadian standards<sup>23</sup>.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and his environment minister have questioned the reality of climate change and spoken in favour of expanding mining and industrial farming in the Amazon<sup>24</sup>, including in protected Indigenous territories and rubber tapping reserves. In this political situation that imperils the rainforest and its peoples, it is imperative that Canadian companies and the government institutions that support them do due diligence to ensure that their projects do not dispossess people, strip the forest or pollute the livelihood-sustaining waters and lands.

The breaches of iron ore mine tailings dams in Mariana in 2015 and in Brumadinho in 2019 that caused massive pollution and killed hundreds have highlighted the inability of Brazilian regulation to force mining companies to protect the environment and the communities surrounding their projects. These disasters should compel Canadian investors to think about the impact of their investments in Brazil.

Notably, the Canadian government is exploring a free trade agreement with Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) that could have major implications for the Amazon region. The Government of Canada’s repeatedly affirmed commitment to a progressive trade agenda that considers human rights impacts should govern any negotiations with the current government of Brazil.



## Towards binding solutions

Canadian companies often insist that they respect local laws and follow the best social responsibility practices. Yet, community testimonies reveal that such voluntary compliance does not protect peoples' rights in the Amazon and the Global South. The Canadian government must adopt laws and policies to compel our extractive, energy and agricultural companies to respect human rights wherever they operate.

The UN *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*<sup>27</sup> seek to help states and companies “prevent, address and remedy human rights abuses committed in business operations.” They recommend due diligence to ensure that businesses respect human, environmental and labour rights. European countries like France and the United Kingdom have adopted due diligence laws that require companies to report

on risks to human rights and workers posed by their activities. While Canada is considering developing due diligence legislation, its scope would be limited to child labour. In not addressing the full spectrum of rights, such diluted legislation cannot address the issues that the Amazon faces today.

In 2014, the UN Human Rights Council created an inter-governmental working group to draft a legally binding treaty on business and human rights that would regulate transnational companies and create a level playing field for all companies operated across borders. The draft currently being negotiated focusses on the access to remedy and justice by victims of corporate abuse and the legal accountability of transnational corporations. As a recent entrant in the treaty process, Canada has the opportunity to show leadership on this issue and spearhead the protection of the future of our planet and its people.

## Our campaign

Our campaign, *For our Common Home*, operates under the theme, *A future for the Amazon, a future for all* in its first year. It urges Canadians to act to protect the Amazon through solidarity, advocacy and personal commitment. By showing solidarity with and advocating for Amazonian communities facing the impacts of deforestation and wanton resource exploitation, we support their defense of their land, which in turn protects the Amazon and can avert climate catastrophe. By making sustainable choices like reducing consumption and using public transport, we address the root causes of climate change.

### Solidarity Letters

We invite Canadians to support two Brazilian communities – the *seringueiros* of Machadinho d'Oeste and the Mura people of Manaus – by signing or writing a letter of solidarity. This will shine a spotlight on these communities' struggles against dispossession and destitution, their courage in defending their land and the root causes of their plight (see **Action Sheet** for details). The more individuals, communities, schools and parishes that sign the Solidarity Letter, the more attention these communities will receive. These letters, which will be brought to the communities, will show them that they are not alone, and that we stand with them in defending their land and our whole planet. [devp.org/act](http://devp.org/act)

### Advocacy Letters

We will use the signed letters to apply pressure on the new Canadian government, Canadian embassies, local and national governments in Brazil, and implicated companies. Citing the numbers of Canadians concerned about the situation of the Amazon's defenders, we will write and publicize forceful advocacy letters. These letters will include specific demands to protect the defenders and will emphasize Canadians' awareness of and solidarity with their struggles. They will be sent, with due fanfare, to companies that threaten the communities and to agencies tasked with their protection.

### MP engagement

We will encourage our members to meet their federal Members of Parliament to share the urgency of acting to protect the Amazon and its defenders. The post-election period will be an opportune time to meet new and re-elected MPs. Some questions that can be posed to MPs are:

1. Given the importance of the Amazon in regulating global climate and the Bolsonaro government's undermining of Indigenous land defenders' rights, what will your party do to pressure the Government of Brazil to protect the environment and respect human rights?
2. Canada is currently negotiating a possible Mercosur free trade agreement. What will your party do to ensure that this agreement is contingent on respect for human rights by all parties?
3. The Trudeau government had promised to create an independent ombudsperson empowered to investigate alleged human rights abuses linked to the overseas operations of Canadian resource and energy companies. So far, this ombudsperson has not been given enough power and independence to be truly effective. What will your party do to ensure that the new Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise (CORE) is effective in ensuring that communities suffering from the impacts of Canadian mining operations have access to justice?

Members who meet an MP should submit a report at [devp.org/campaign/reportac](http://devp.org/campaign/reportac).

### Intergenerational pledge

Canadians are challenged to take our *Intergenerational pledge for our common home* at [devp.org/pledge](http://devp.org/pledge). The pledge invites people of all ages to commit to at least one lifestyle change for the sake of the environment. Examples including reducing meat consumption and using public transport. Pledge-takers can also upload a selfie for a mosaic of engaged citizens.

*We thank you for your commitment to this important campaign!*

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