



LANDLINKS

#LandMatters Research Edition #4

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Environmental Defenders

Welcome to *Land Matters, Research Edition*, a quarterly publication that spotlights research critical to advancing our collective land and resource governance work. These editions present research produced and/or identified as critically important by USAID’s Land and Resource Governance (LRG) Division, identify ties to policy and programs, and highlight observations about the ways that land and resource rights are advancing.

Land and Environmental Defenders

Land and environmental defenders—defined by the international NGO Global Witness as those who “take a stand and peaceful action against the unjust, discriminatory, corrupt, or damaging exploitation of natural resources or the environment”—are on the frontlines of ecological and social justice. As countries clear land at scale to export food and fuel to an exploding population worldwide, and as climate impacts accelerate global demand for critical minerals necessary for our energy transition, these defenders are coming under increased threat. Between 2002 and 2022, Global Witness identified more than 2,100 documented killings of land and environmental defenders. In 2020 alone, 227 killings were reported, a rate of nearly five per week, making it the worst year on record. The vast majority of those killed are in Latin America, and Indigenous Peoples are particularly vulnerable: in 2020, over a third of all fatal attacks targeted Indigenous Peoples, despite them only making up 5 percent of the world’s population. As John Knox, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment has noted, “for every one [environmental defender] killed, there are 20 to 100 others harassed, unlawfully and lawfully arrested, and sued for defamation, among other intimidations.”

Land grabbing and insecure land tenure are often at the root of the incursions that land and environmental defenders seek to halt. According to the [Land Matrix Initiative](#), when governments and companies impose large-scale land acquisitions, “the exclusion of local communities from their land, as well as from the decision-making processes and institutions governing the land, are putting enormous strain on land rights and governance systems.” But the grievances of environmental defenders are related to more than just land tenure: they are enmeshed in broader governance challenges, including human rights abuses, elite capture, and lack of due diligence. These issues are addressed by USAID’s [Strategy on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance](#); [2022-2030 Climate Strategy](#); [Policy on Promoting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(PRO-IP\)](#); and draft updated [Biodiversity Policy](#); as well as by the [White House’s National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#) and the [United States Strategy on Countering Corruption](#).

The USAID Land and Resource Governance Division is expanding its research and programming focus on land and environmental defenders. In the coming months, look out for a USAID solicitation for concept notes to support land and environmental defenders.

Below is a sample of current and forthcoming USAID research and tools that communicate the complex challenges that environmental defenders face and the opportunities to support them:



Environmental Defenders Issue Brief

This brief provides an introduction to the range of issues facing environmental defenders worldwide, followed by a discussion of key areas for engagement and donor support for protecting the rights and well-being of environmental defenders. It provides an in-depth discussion of Indigenous Peoples and women, two groups of environmental defenders who are at particular risk for violence.



Coming Soon: User Guide on Due Diligence

USAID is currently developing a *User Guide on Environmental and Social Due Diligence for Engagement with Commodity-based Private Actors in the Amazon Basin* to increase environmental and social safeguard compliance within USAID’s South America Regional (SAR) Missions, including the mitigation of threats to environmental and social defenders in the region.



Environmental Defenders Under Threat: Lessons from the Colombian Amazon

A companion piece to the Environmental Defenders Issue Brief, this brief examines the case of the Colombian Amazon as an example of the ways in which the grievances of environmental defenders are enmeshed in broader governance challenges—including many areas of continuing focus for USAID programming. The brief outlines possible actions for USAID Missions and other Operating Units to consider in responding to threats to environmental defenders in the Colombian Amazon.

As the severity of climate impacts and biodiversity loss grows, the work of environmental defenders is more critical—and more under threat—than ever. USAID is committed to standing with environmental defenders, supporting their work, and protecting them against threats.

Learn more about our work on environmental defenders

Check out the resources below, or visit <https://www.land-links.org/>.

- **Event Recording:** [Frontiers: Standing with Environmental Defenders Under Threat](#)
- **Blog:** [Environmental Defenders are Under Threat. Here's What USAID Can Do To Help](#)
- **Report:** [Mining and the Green Energy Transition](#)
- **Reference Sheet:** [Incorporating Land and Resource Governance into Biodiversity Conservation Programming](#)