

# Militarization of Anti-peasant Forest Conservation: The Case of the Amazon Forest Reserve Zone (AFRZ) after the Colombian 2016 Peace Agreement

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## ABSTRACT

In 2016, the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) that included the implementation of a Comprehensive Rural Reform (CRR) with the purpose to allocate and formalize land for peasant populations. In parallel, Colombia was committed to implement the global environmental agendas, including efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) by reducing deforestation in the Amazon. *Campesino* communities in Colombia have historically been marginalized and pushed into forested lands and protected areas. This study seeks to understand the configuration of land-use conflicts in the Amazon Forest Reserve Zone (AFRZ) - a land management category in the Colombian Amazon - amid the implementation of the global environmental agendas and the Peace Agreement, with a focus on the environmental justice implications for peasant communities. After undertaking a historical review of peasant colonization of the Amazon, we focus on the administration of the former president Iván Duque (2018-2022) in which military operations were deployed to counteract the increase of deforestation. These operations resulted in the destruction of private and community infrastructure, and the stigmatization, criminalization, and even homicide of rural inhabitants. Militarization is only the most obvious of the conservation strategies that limit access to nature by peasants, who depend on it for their livelihoods. We further explore the environmental justice implications of this military conservation approach through a case study in the village *El Camuya*, located in San Vicente del Caguán (Caquetá), in the Colombia's "arc of deforestation". Using qualitative methods, we demonstrate how the Comprehensive Rural Reform included in the Peace Agreement has been insufficient to fulfill the needs of Amazonian peasants and that, when intersecting with the environmental agendas, it has fostered land use conflicts that can be understood as environmental injustices.

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## KEYWORDS

Amazon rainforest; Peasants; Deforestation; Militarization of conservation; Environmental justice.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The bulk of the social costs of complying with the international environmental agendas rely on vulnerable and impoverished inhabitants of the Global South. This is one of the key findings of post-structuralist and critical studies, which have shown how hegemonic conservation strategies stem from colonial and Western visions that reinforce the culture-nature dichotomy (West & Brockington, 2006; West et al., 2006; Serje, 2005; Fairhead et al., 2012; Bragagnolo et al., 2016), affecting the rights of local populations, their autonomy and livelihoods (Moeliono et al., 2017). Hegemonic conservation initiatives have been inserted into the logic of the neoliberal model by linking nature to the market as a commodity and consolidating development projects in ecological strategic regions where investments in conservation are promoted and external conditions are imposed on local governance models (Bragagnolo et al., 2016).

In the context of the international agreements on biodiversity conservation and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions mitigation, conservation efforts have been directed towards frontier territories in the Global South, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America rainforests. Global environmental conventions, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), promote commitments related to the creation of protected areas as one of the main measures to contribute to conservation (Woodhouse et al., 2018). Following the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), one of GBF's key targets is that 30% of terrestrial and ocean areas should be set as protected areas or other effective conservation measures (OECM) by 2030. This objective may explain the increase in protected areas reported globally, which rose from 12.7% in 2012 to 16.11% in July 2024 (UNEP-WCMC, 2024).

There is broad evidence around the globe on how protected areas may deepen tensions regarding land-use rights, due to the restrictions on access, use, appropriation, and control over nature and land, and even can cause the displacement and marginalization of populations historically settled in these places (Brockhaus et al., 2024; Balmford & Whitten, 2003; Roth, 2008). "Top down" conservation initiatives, such as protected areas, tend to disregard the cultural values associated with caring for nature (Meilani et al., 2021; Infield, 2001) and to disrupt traditional social norms, practices, uses and governance systems of local communities (Chomba et al., 2015; St John et al., 2010). As a result, responsibilities for environmental degradation are misplaced and rural communities and small landowners are forced to modify or renounce to their traditional activities, rights and land for the sake of conservation strategies (Wong et al., 2024). These impositions affect local autonomy and impose increasing burdens on rural communities that even prevent them from enjoying the benefits that are promised along with conservation programs, such as the guarantee of land tenure security (Ragandhi et al., 2021).

Restrictions imposed on local communities often lead to the privatization of nature that was once public and of common use (Spiteri & Nepal, 2008), based on the idea that environmental degradation has been caused by local communities through their agricultural practices and land uses (Huber, 2024). Peluso & Vandergeest (2001) refer to this as "colonial forest practices", which constitute "new forms of discipline and reshaped the general view of the region's land and resources" (p. 801). Such colonial practices include land and forest laws that establish state ownership of forest territories and their products. This has justified communities' re-education and their removal from their territories, instead of recognizing their fundamental role in nature and biodiversity stewardship. Thus, the gap between national and international conservation perspectives and the visions of rural communities, as well as the inequitable distribution of costs and benefits of conservation, have been questioned through the lenses of environmental justice and the interrelation of its three dimensions: procedural justice, distributive justice and recognition (Walker & Day, 2012).

In the Colombian case, the progressive globalization of the Amazon has led to the establishment and expansion of conservation programs that impose strict restrictions on land access, use and ownership for local communities and a progressive militarization of environmental protection. This has been reflected in programs such as "Vision Amazonia"<sup>1</sup>, led by the national government with the financial support of international cooperation (Hein et al., 2020), and which explains the enormous focus, since 2015, on what has been called "the fight against deforestation" (Dávila et al., 2024). However, these strategies have not achieved the proposed goals. Since the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://visionamazonia.minambiente.gov.co/remii-inicio/>

signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Amazon has been the region with the highest rates of deforestation in the country (Murillo-Sandoval et al., 2021; Paz, 2022).

To curb rising deforestation, the Colombian national government launched *Operation Artemisa* in 2019, an essentially military strategy aimed, in the words of former President Iván Duque, to stop deforestation, recover the rainforest and prosecute those behind the “deforestation culture” (Presidency of the Republic, 2019). This operation, which continued until 2022, focused on the National Natural Parks (NNP), but operations were also carried out in Forest Reserve Zones (ZRF for its initials in Spanish), a land management category that is not strictly part of the national protected areas, but whose legal objective is the regulation of the forest economy which imposes restrictions almost as strict as those of NNP. *Operation Artemisa* caused serious impacts on rural populations, including human rights violations such as the arbitrary arrests of community leaders and farmers, destruction of community infrastructure such as roads and houses, forced displacements and even homicides (El Tiempo, 2022; El Espectador, 2022). *Artemisa* also reports negligible results in terms of reducing deforestation (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2020; Mongabay, 2022).

This process of militarization of conservation has taken place in a context where the international environmental agendas intermingle with the implementation of the Peace Agreement, which includes a Comprehensive Rural Reform (CCR) that seeks to solve the historical causes of the armed conflict and the structural transformation of the countryside (Colombian Foreign Ministry, 2016). The CCR seeks to promote peasant agriculture and to ensure land access for the rural population acknowledging that unequal land distribution was at the roots of the Colombian conflict that dates back to 1960s. Therefore, our research aims at exploring how the historical anti-peasant rural policies in Colombia have been reproduced through the militarization of conservation in peasant territories, and how this dynamic has been influenced by the tensions and intersections between the environmental and peacebuilding agendas. We observe that the CCR has been insufficient to meet the demands of the peasantry related to land access and peasants’ political recognition. Far from helping to overcome the marginalization of the peasant subjects and land-use conflicts, the CCR has been limited by the global conservation agenda, contributing to a particular configuration of environmental conflicts in the Amazon and remaining neutral in the face of a new stigmatization of the peasants, who have been portrayed as predators of the rainforest and as environmental criminals.

In sum, we argue that the CCR has been unable to solve Amazon rural communities’ claims for justice and recognition which together with the conservation approach implemented by the Colombian government has resulted in serious environmental injustices by posing the burden of conservation on the most vulnerable actors of the region. These dynamics have threatened peasants’ security, rights and livelihoods affecting their trust in and relationship with the national state. This research contributes to the analysis of land-use conflicts and discussions on environmental justice in a country affected by an internal armed conflict and in which there is a complex intersection of local, national and global agendas related to justice, peace and the environment.

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

### 2.1 Case description

The Colombian Amazon covers 48 million hectares (ha) which corresponds to the 41.8% of the country's continental territory. Due to its environmental importance, most land uses in the Amazon region are restricted to conservation and sustainable uses. In addition to National Parks and Indigenous Reservations, most of the land in the Colombian Amazon is part of the Forest Reserve Zone, established in 1959 to promote "the development of the forest economy and the protection of soil, water and wildlife" (Law 2<sup>nd</sup> of 1959)<sup>2</sup>. FRZ extends over 50% of the continental territory of Colombia (48 million ha<sup>3</sup>) (Amaya, 2018), 72% of which corresponds to the Amazonia Forest Reserve Zone (AFRZ). Eighty percent (80%) of the area of San Vicente del Caguán, the municipality where our case study is located, belongs to the AFRZ (IDEAM, n.d.), distributed in Type A and Type B zoning, being the first category the most restrictive.<sup>4</sup>

The village of *El Camuya*, in San Vicente del Caguán (see Figure 1), was selected as a case study because it is located within the Amazon Forest Reserve Zone, in the strictest zoning category (Type A). This area also borders the *Serranía de Chiribiquete* National Natural Park, the largest NNP in Colombia which was declared as a Mixed World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2018, placing an even greater burden on the peasants who live in the area. All this makes *El Camuya* a paradigmatic example of the tensions and injustices involved in land use and conservation in the Colombian Amazon and its intersections with agrarian conflicts, the internal armed conflict and the transitions to post-conflict.

### 2.2 Data collection and analysis

This study is focused on the period between 2018 and 2022, which corresponds to the administration of former President Iván Duque, a representative of the Colombian political right. Data was collected at both local and national levels, using field qualitative research tools and secondary sources, respectively. For field data collection, we conducted a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) workshop (n=10), using three of the tools proposed by Geilfus (2008): the group profile, the timeline and the community history chart. The purpose of the workshop was to understand the main socioeconomic characteristics of the participant group (group profile), to identify the key past events that continue influencing the community's current situation and attitudes (timeline) and to trace changes in natural resources, population and productive systems over the past decades (history chart) (Appendix 3).

The invitation to the workshop was extended during a meeting of the Community Action Board<sup>5</sup>, allowing interested farmers to attend. All participants in the workshop

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<sup>2</sup> Law 2<sup>nd</sup> of 1959 established seven Forest Reserve Zones: Pacific, Central, Magdalena River, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Serranía de Los Motilones, Cocuy and Amazonia.

<sup>3</sup> This data includes 37 million ha of Previous Planning Decisions, corresponding to higher-ranking territorial planning figures that have been established on the FRZ.

<sup>4</sup> Resolution 1926 of 2013 creates the zoning framework for the FRZ. It establishes that Zone Type A are areas designated to guarantee the maintenance of the basic ecological processes necessary to ensure the provision of ecosystem services, mainly related to water and climate regulation the assimilation of air and water pollutants, soil formation and protection, unique landscapes and cultural heritage protection, and the support of biological diversity. Type B are areas characterized by having favorable coverage for sustainable management of forest resources through an integrated forest management approach and the comprehensive management of biodiversity and ecosystem services.

<sup>5</sup> Community Action Boards (Juntas de Acción Comunal – JAC) are a formally recognized organizations with legal status that have played a crucial role in helping rural communities - particularly in the Amazon – to negotiate with the state, provide local public goods and manage resources.



(Caquetá), within the AFRZ. Theoretically, our research draws from the political ecology scholarship as we are concerned with explaining the production and reproduction of environmental injustices (Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020) and from which socio-environmental conflicts over land use in the Amazon are understood as ecological-distributive conflicts (Martínez-Alier, 2004). Our research considers the impact of transnational and global dynamics in the analysis of environmental inequalities and conflicts. It also contributes to the literature by adding the category of 'peasantry' into the social categories of gender, race and ethnicity —beyond class differences—, which have been considered within the intersectional approach to understanding environmental inequalities.

Empirically, we focus our analysis on a conservation management category other than the National Parks, on which studies on socio-environmental conflicts have generally focused, to open the discussion on land use and conservation conflicts in other types of restricted areas that have been less visible in academic literature yet generate significant territorial tensions. The interviews were manually systematized using a matrix with predefined categories and actors. Our analysis employed qualitative content analysis techniques, following a deductive approach, which allowed us to identify and interpret key themes, patterns, emotions, values, and perspectives (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Considering that the political ecology approach recognizes subjectivity, cultural and territorial dimensions of socio-environmental conflicts, as well as the values embedded in the discourses of environmental protection and conservation, we made an explicit effort to question and expose the meanings established in the information collected throughout the research process.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 Peasants: The unrecognized inhabitants of the Colombian amazon**

Despite ongoing conservation efforts in the Amazon, deforestation in this region has peaked since the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC guerrilla, with the ending of what has been known as "gunpoint conservation" (Prem et al., 2020; Murillo-Sandoval et al., 2021; 2022). This has come along with the emergence and intensification of environmental conflicts associated with land uses. Peasant settlement in the Amazon rainforest has historically been linked to the unresolved agrarian conflicts in the country's interior and the displacement of Andean peasants towards the agricultural frontiers (Fajardo, 1996; LeGrand, 1988; Guhl, 1969). However, the agrarian frontier in the Amazon never stabilized as land grabbing and concentration processes pushed peasants deeper into the frontier, in a recurrent cycle of migration-settlement-conflict-migration (Fajardo, 1996). For this reason, in the Peace Agreement of 2016, the solution to the land issues in the Amazon and the promotion of peasant agriculture were conceptualized as key strategies to "close" the agricultural frontier.

Parallel to the process of peasants' settlement in the Amazon, forest policy was developed to regulate the forest economy and to promote forest conservation. However, this policy failed to account for the fact that much of the land designated as protected or restricted for productive uses overlaps with the very areas where displaced peasants had settled. As a result, until the signing of the Peace Agreement and the rise of discussions on the Amazon's global environmental importance, together with national policies aimed at curbing deforestation, many Amazonian peasants were unaware that they were living within reserve zones such as the AFRZ or other types of protected areas.

*“It was four years ago that I learned that I live in a Forest Reserve Zone, despite having owned the land for 10 years. I found out when I became president of the Community Action Board” (Interview 7, June 2022).<sup>7</sup>*

The lack of awareness among farmers about whether they live within the AFRZ, as well as the restrictions implied in these zoning, is quite common. It was only with the arrival of military operations and the implementation of recent conservation strategies that they began to receive and seek information about this management category. In this regard, the Municipal Ombudsman pointed out that,

*“Confusing messages lead farmers into an error - they confuse the Forest Reserve Zone with areas eligible to land titling. [This confusion] has been reinforced by the state itself through the Mayor’s Office, the possibility of having animal transport guides for livestock such as cattle, access to credits from the Agrarian Bank, among other benefits” (Interview 2, May 2022).*

The Agrarian Bank is a public institution which has the purpose of promoting agricultural development, including peasant farming, through credit. The confusion caused by the actions of the Agrarian Bank is one of the recurring arguments used by farmers to demand greater coherence from the state. As conventionally, agrarian authorities require evidence of economic use of the land - such as clearing 30% of forest for pasture - in order to grant land titles or approve loans (Interview 3, May 2022; Uribe, 1992). This shows that the agrarian reform and the environmental protection measures were built disjointly and incoherently without acknowledging their impacts on the inhabitants of the Amazon (Dávila et al., 2024).

Thus, the peasants who settled into the Amazon had previously experienced violent expulsions from their territories and their political communities, pushing them to struggle for survival and recognition (Salgado, 2009). In addition, historically and systematically, an imaginary has been constructed that portrays both these communities and their territories as barbaric spaces beyond the reach of state control (Serje, 2005). This idea was deepened by the influence of the FARC guerrillas in the Colombian Amazon during the armed conflict, which served to legitimize the systematic denial of peasants’ rights (Salgado, 2009). Additionally, forests were increasingly framed as arenas for counterinsurgency strategies which can be “domesticated” through actions like land rights adjudications, changes in vegetation covers, and promotion of human settlements, as has been shown in the case of Southeast Asia (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011; Woods & Naimark, 2020).

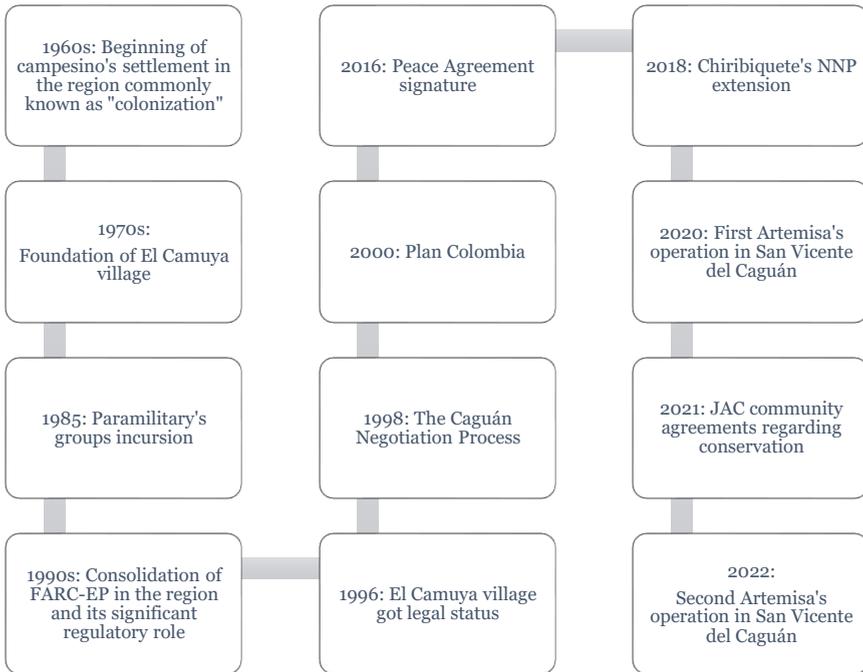
Figure 2 presents the timeline constructed with peasants during the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) workshop, illustrating how the historical process unfolded in the village of *El Camuya*. It highlights how the peasant settlement process into the Amazon began in the 1960s, and how environmental conflicts over land-use have been closely intertwined with the broader agrarian struggles and the dynamics of Colombia’s internal armed conflict.

Despite of the importance of the department of Caquetá for the FARC guerrilla, paramilitaries were also a key actor in the Colombian conflict and in this particular region (see, for instance *Ciro Rodríguez*, 2015). The arrival of paramilitaries in the area was linked to the establishment, consolidation, and control of the coca paste

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to clarify that the quote mentioning land ownership refers to informal property transfers between peasants, which lack legal recognition. In the absence of formal land titles, Community Action Boards have often assumed the role of third-party entities responsible for supporting and enforcing these informal property rights agreements (Espinosa, 2003, 2010).

production chain. However, following the death of the regional main paramilitary leader, the FARC consolidated its position as the dominant armed actor. In 1998, the National Government initiated the Dialogue Table with the FARC in San Vicente del Caguán. The failure of this negotiation led to an increase in U.S. funding for Plan Colombia, a predominantly military strategy by the Colombian government aimed at combating drugs and insurgency. Although the analysis of these processes lies beyond the scope of this paper, they were significant in shaping the stigmatization of the Amazonian peasantry. Plan Colombia and its counterinsurgency approach to the war on drugs lasted until the negotiation and the signing of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC in 2016.



**Figure 2.** Timeline of El Camuya village [Source: Authors' elaboration based on PRA workshop].

**3.2 The international environmental agendas, conservation and (neo)colonization**

In this section, we propose to question the role of the global environmental agenda, which is nourished by international norms, in the production of inequalities and socio-environmental conflicts affecting peasants in the Colombian Amazon. On the global scale, the dominant argument that revolves around the Amazon conservation centers on the importance of this biome to mitigate climate change. Deforestation not only releases carbon into the atmosphere but also reduces the capacity of forests to act as carbon sinks. The Amazon is both the largest rainforest and the largest agricultural frontier in the world (Revelo-Rebolledo, 2019), also crucial in biodiversity conservation.

Although international law has long established that elements of nature could not be subject to private appropriation, in recent decades the interpretation of international principles has progressively enabled, legitimized and normalized the economic valuation and commodification of nature through its global appropriation and privatization (Göbel et al., 2014). It takes place in the context of the interaction of various policy regimes, from supranational agreements - such as the Paris Agreement

(2015), which replaced the Kyoto Protocol (2005), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) - and the national implementation of those agendas through public policies and programs. The “dialectic between change and limits” (Arsel & Büscher, 2012) - i.e., the dynamic relationship between capitalist change and ecological limits - is pushing capitalism towards a new phase in which it attempts to resolve ecological contradictions by integrating and responding to ecological limits. This movement reflects the process of “green grabbing” (Fairhead et al., 2012) which manifests, among other ways, through the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends, either through land alienation or by changes in rules and authority over access and management of resources.

In recent decades, the discourses around the Amazon have shifted from being a periphery to becoming the center of environmental debates (e.g., Science Panel for the Amazon, 2021). The reasons for this change in narratives around the Amazon arise from the global discussions and concerns about climate change. In this context, the region and its inhabitants have been burdened with the idea that “saving” the Amazon represents the very continuity and guarantee of humanity’s survival (Roa, 2021). In multilateral forums where climate change and other environmental discussions are addressed, the Amazon is praised for its contribution to climate regulation and to resolving a crisis that is the result of an economic system in which their peoples have participated only marginally. The cultural, political, economic, social and environmental problems of the Amazon, as well as the climate crisis, have been caused, to a great extent, by countries in the Global North and transnational corporations, through an unsustainable development model that has materialized through global extractivism (Nepstad et al, 2014; Roa, 2021; Chagnon, et al., 2022).

The nature-culture dichotomy, once instrumental to justify the exploitation of nature, is now used as part of the argument to conserve it. However, this dichotomy is not only disconnected from social and material realities, but also prevents the ontological assessment of nature, leading us to value it only from the ecosystemic and environmental “services” and its productive functionality (Descola, 2011). The dismissal of the cultural values of peasants and other rural inhabitants regarding nature in these scenarios “*breaks territoriality because it impacts the collective action of thinking about the territory*” (Interview 8, June 2022).

The Amazon has become an alternative for fulfilling the environmental commitments of central countries and multinationals and, for this reason, a series of strategies have been deployed on it that capitalize its value (Adelman, 2014; May et al., 2013; Rodriguez-de-Francisco et al., 2021). This is the case of carbon credits, a mechanism that initially emerged from the Kyoto Protocol and that demonstrates the intention to integrate conservation into classic development policies and the current economic model, by assigning a price to pollution as part of the production process (Fairhead et al., 2012; May et al., 2013). Tropical forests such as the Amazon have become objects of “green environmental governmentality” which favors commodification of nature over forests inhabitants’ rights (Adelman, 2024). This aligns with the perception of Amazonian peasants:

*“The national government’s interest in conservation is just rhetoric. Over there, in the city, they pollute factories and industries, and they are allowed to pay money to repair the environmental damage. [...] Oil exploitation, how much environmental damage does that cause?”* (Interview 7, June 2022).

The environmental agenda has received so much importance that it has even been framed as a matter of national security, since water and biodiversity are considered

strategic assets of the nation in a context of scarcity and potential international conflicts over their control (López, 2022). This framing implies that the protection of the Amazon is a bargaining chip in an international negotiation, in which it can be exchanged, granted or sold to the highest bidder. Hence, saving the Amazon becomes the best excuse for its effective appropriation while the representation of peasants as deforesters is another strategy to advance towards that end. Neither militarization nor carbon credits have been successful in reducing deforestation<sup>8</sup> but they do guarantee the presence and advance of the countries of the Global North in the region to deepen their model of exploitation of tangible and intangible assets.

Peasantry, as a category that recognizes peasants as rights-holders and as key actors in conservation has been largely absent from both the global environmental conventions and agendas (Edelman & James, 2011; Girard & Frison, 2021), as well as at the Colombian national level constitution and environmental laws and regulations (Guiza et al., 2020; Hein et al., 2020; Salgado, 2009).<sup>9</sup> The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), adopted in 2018, is an international legal instrument that addresses the specific realities and needs of peasants and that must guide states to guarantee their rights to land, natural resources, water, biodiversity, seeds and participation in decision-making processes. UNDROP has also recognized the fundamental role of peasantry in ensuring global food security, development and environmental protection, which must be urgently integrated into the global environmental agenda (Girard & Frison, 2021). Despite the opportunity that the UNDROP declaration represents, in terms of integrating rural inhabitants' rights and the environment (Lyons & Suarez Franco, 2023), there is still a recognition gap (Güiza et al., 2020), in Colombia but also internationally. In addition, peasantry's situation of exclusion and stigmatization has been reinforced as a consequence of the national and local implementation of the global environmental agendas (Hein et al., 2020; Rodriguez-de-Francisco et al., 2021), as we demonstrate in the following section for the case of *El Camuya*.

### 3.3 Militarization of anti-peasant conservation: “Operación Artemisa”

In Colombia, deforestation has been explained as the result of the absence of political authority in regions previously dominated by the FARC, i.e., the withdrawal of the FARC caused a “power vacuum” that explains current deforestation (Revelo-Rebolledo, 2019). Thus, if lack of enforcement and state weaknesses are the cause of deforestation, militarization of conservation is the logical response which materialized in *Operation Artemisa* during president's Duque administration.

Deforestation monitoring shows that the Amazon is the region in Colombia with the highest deforestation rates during the period 2016-2022 (Figure 2). Likewise, in the period 2016-2019, Caquetá was the department with the largest number of deforested hectares nationwide, and in the subsequent years, it ranked second. At the municipal level, San Vicente del Caguán has the highest report of deforested hectares during the period 2016-2018 and in 2020. For 2019 and 2021, it ranked second, below Cartagena del Chairá, another municipality in Caquetá.

For both government agencies and farmers in San Vicente del Caguán, the departure of the FARC as an actor that regulated and ordered the territory through

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, West et al. (2023) for an evaluation of market carbon offsets from forest conservation in reducing deforestation and, therefore, mitigating GHG emissions.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth mentioning that the formal recognition of peasants as rights-holders and as a group entitled to special protection through a constitutional reform (Law Project 1, 2023) took place in Colombia under the administration of Gustavo Petro - the first leftist government in the history of the country.

norms has been a decisive factor in the increase in deforestation. Before the Peace Agreement, the dense Amazon jungle helped the FARC to establish rearguard zones in the region. Strategic corridors were established to connect the Amazon Piedmont and the Amazon lowlands, both to strengthen their finances through the control of illegal mining, drug trafficking revenues and, in general, the entire coca paste production chain, and to develop their war actions (Truth Commission, 2022a). Thus, for FARC, keeping the standing forests was strategic, both for military and economic motives. For that reason, they built institutions that helped to control deforestation among other environmental regulations (Espinosa, 2010; Graser et al. 2020; Johnson et al., 2025; Rodríguez & Maya, 2025). A farmer who lives in the AFRZ pointed out that:

*“Before the Peace Agreement, the FARC imposed a fine of five million pesos<sup>10</sup> per hectare that was deforested.”* (Interview 6, June 2022).

Other farmers signaled that,

*“Until the guerrillas demobilized, they did not allow logging here. [...] Before the Agreement, nobody bothered because there was a guerrilla presence, and they also kept the issue under control”* (Interview 7, June 2022).

The demobilization of the FARC-EP and its withdrawal from the region as an actor that regulated land use through norms and sanctions, not only enabled peasants to cut down forests to improve their farms but also opened the door for the entry of new powerful actors into the territory. These actors have the political and economic capacity necessary to develop economic activities such as illegal mining, logging or extensive livestock farming for the purpose of land grabbing, contributing significantly to the increase in deforestation (FIP & Adelphi, 2021; Truth Commission, 2022a; Rodríguez & Maya, 2025). Thus, after the guerrilla demobilization, new actors have appeared in Amazonian territories, and processes of land clearing and land grabbing are taking place with formal authorities and local boards incapable to control them *“[in] lawless territories, the predators enter: - land grabbers, absentee ranchers, businessmen, absentee owners.”* (Interview 8, June 2022). Large landowners and investors who were discouraged from investing in such regions due to the strong presence of the FARC, benefited from the end of measures regulating land use during the conflict and promoted a major change in land cover (Volckhausen, 2019; Krause, 2020; Sánchez-García & Wong, 2024).

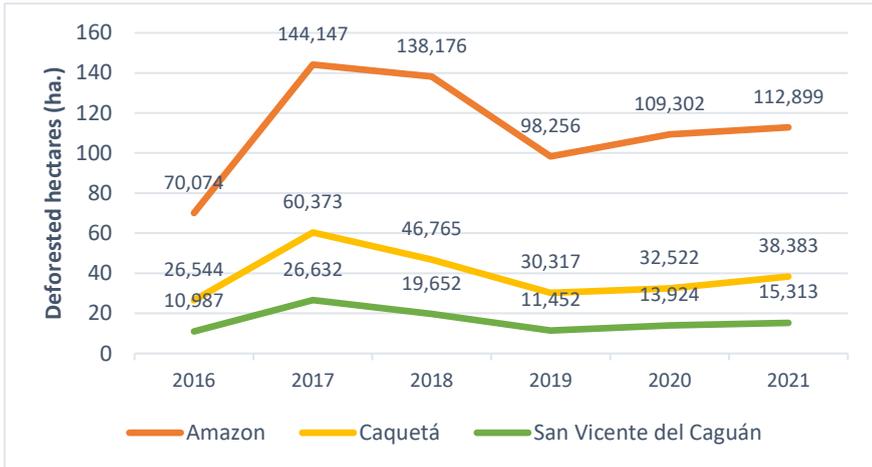
In this context marked by high deforestation rates, the Supreme Court of Justice in Colombia recognized the Amazon as “an entity subject to rights - a right-holder -, entitled to protection, conservation, maintenance and restoration by the State and the territorial entities that comprise it” (Judgment T 4360, 2018, p. 45). The Court ordered different actors, headed by the Presidency of the Republic, to formulate a short, medium and long-term action plan to counteract the rate of deforestation in the region. After the ruling, both the operations of the Attorney General's Office against deforestation and the operations of Artemisa were justified as actions to comply with the Court's mandate.

In turn, the 2018-2022 National Development Plan (PND) “Pact for Colombia, Pact for Equity”, implemented during Duque's administration, understood deforestation as one of the main challenges faced by the country. Land grabbing and the expansion of the agricultural frontier were identified as key drivers of deforestation, with the subsequent use of pastures largely for livestock, illegal mining and the expansion of

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<sup>10</sup> About US\$1,200.

transport infrastructure for colonization purposes. Within the strategies proposed to counteract deforestation, the army played a key role in exercising “territorial control” in areas of special environmental importance. In the words of the National Government, *Artemisa* was created to “achieve the goals agreed upon in the administration of President Duque and contribute to the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda” (Ministry of Defense, 2022, p.168), through the preservation and defense of water, biodiversity and natural resources.



**Figure 3.** Deforestation 2016-2022: hectares lost nationally, regionally and municipally [Source: Authors' elaboration using data from Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Research Institute (IDEAM)].

As part of the *Artemisa* strategy, around 19 operations were deployed, focused on the National Natural Parks of the Amazon and Orinoquía regions, in the Amazon Forest Reserve Zone and in the Nukak Natural Reserve. The results reported by the Ministry of Defense are the intervention of 27,043 hectares (Table 1), the capture of 116 people by court order and/or in flagrante delicto for environmental crimes, the disabling of 53 buildings, 23 illegal road points, 10 bridges in a natural protection zone, 40.87 km<sup>2</sup> disabled and the seizure of 13 cattle branding irons, 34 chainsaws, 18 scythes, 29 seized weapons and 7 vehicles (Ministry of Defense, may 5<sup>th</sup> of 2022)<sup>11</sup>. In the case of the ZRFA in San Vicente del Caguán, where two phases of the operation were carried out in 2020, 12 people were reported arrested by court order or in flagrante delicto, 2 bridges were disabled associated with illegal roads, 3 brands of cattle were seized, 2 homemade shotguns, 4 chainsaws, and 1 scythe.

While the impact on deforestation of seizing chainsaws or scythes is debatable, the destruction of homes and community road infrastructure in rural areas with historical deficiencies in terms of connectivity with urban centers for access to goods and services, as the arrests of indigenous and peasant leaders did have an enormous impact on the community fabric. Social, peasant and community organizations in the region reported that those arrested were members of the Community Action Boards —the main form of peasant organization in Colombian rural areas—, as well as day laborers and peasants. They argue that these arrests are part of an unjust persecution against peasants in the region since none of them are linked to major deforesters or financiers

<sup>11</sup> This data was obtained on May 5th, 2022, through a petition submitted to the Ministry of Defense and provided for this research by Fundación Ideas para la Paz.

of deforestation.

**Table 1.** Artemisa results in the ZRFA in San Vicente del Caguán

Date	Phase	People captured	Destroyed material	Seized material	Hectares intervened
9/10/20	7 <sup>th</sup> phase	6 by court order, 4 in flagrante delicto	2 disabled bridges associated with illegal routes	3 cattle brands, 1 homemade shotgun, 2 chainsaws, 1 scythe, 1 laptop, 1 CPU.	1,461
26/11/20	8 <sup>th</sup> phase	1 by court order, 1 / in flagrante delicto		2 chainsaws, 1 homemade shotgun.	1,625

[Source: Authors' elaboration using data from the Ministry of Defense]

As mentioned above, large deforesters have contributed directly and indirectly to the expansion of the so-called “arc of deforestation” in the Amazon, in three departments including Caquetá. However, there is still little clarity on how the dynamics of deforestation work in detail and at the micro level since they can vary in each department. As we have observed, in the case of Caquetá,

*“The departure of the guerrilla [left] the territories lawless and the predators enter: land grabbers, absentee ranchers, businessmen, absentee owners.”*  
(Interview 8, June 2022).

It should be noted that despite the demobilization of the FARC as an organized and hierarchical structure, some guerrilla factions in Caquetá and other regions of the country either refused to demobilize or rearmed and expanded. By 2022, at least two armed groups were reported in San Vicente del Caguán, one of them calling itself *Estado Mayor Central* (EMC) and the other *Segunda Marquetalia*. In particular, the EMC has been identified as a relevant actor in the deforestation dynamics of the municipality, as it has been strengthening its capacity for territorial control and regulation of land use, that is, determining who can or cannot deforest and under what conditions (Andreoni, 2024; our interviews).

In this scenario in which there are at least two powerful armed actors that determine the dynamics of deforestation in the territory, *Operation Artemisa* violently attacks the peasants who live in protected areas, seizing their property, burning their houses and bombing their roads. In contrast, it fails to consider that it is politicians, landowners, drug traffickers and other large landowners who hire dozens of workers to cut down thousands of hectares of forest (López, 2022). This militarized approach “ignores the reality of the territory and the need for differentiated treatment for the actors involved in the dynamics of deforestation” (Interview 2, May 2022).

Environmental protection, then, serves as a legitimizing discourse for the violation of human rights, the militarization of territories considered outside the law and the reach of the state, and the continuation of an anti-peasant project that has historically unfolded in Colombia (CNMH, 2015; Truth Commission, 2022b). The peasants who inhabit the Amazon have been actively proposing alternatives that ensure their survival in the territory and recognize that peasant economies also can contribute to the care of nature and biodiversity protection (Rodríguez & Maya, 2025). They also consider that land concentration and inequity in its access, use, and ownership are causes of environmental pressures in ecologically relevant areas. For this reason, they saw the Comprehensive Rural Reform as an opportunity to advance both agrarian and environmental justice.

### 3.4 A timid comprehensive rural reform

There is clear evidence on the link between the Colombian armed conflict and long-lasting problems related to exclusion and inequality in the countryside (Historical Commission on the Conflict and its Victims, 2015). Thus, it was not by chance that the first point of the Peace Agreement was the Comprehensive Rural Reform (CRR), which contains commitments for the transformation of the Colombian countryside and improving the lives of inhabitants in rural areas.

The principles that guided the CRR are based on the idea of sustainable development and the democratization in access to and proper use of land. This means the possibility for most men and women living in rural areas without land or with insufficient land to gain access to it, and to encourage its proper use based on environmental sustainability, territorial planning and community participation. To comply with this, several mechanisms were established such as the creation of a land fund to gather lands from different sources that could be distributed among peasants. Nevertheless, as of March 2022, only 1,343,207 ha had been incorporated into the fund - out of a target of 3 million hectares - of which only 25% had been distributed among rural dwellers; and of this percentage, only 2.57% (12,433 ha) had benefited peasants without land or with insufficient land (Congress of the Republic, 2022).

The CRR also contemplates a goal of seven million hectares that are currently occupied by peasants to be formalized so that property rights are recognized to their occupants. While the national government reports the formalization of about 2,612,983 hectares, this data includes formalization processes that were advancing prior to the signing of the Peace Agreement. The Attorney General's Office (2021) estimates that formalization between 2017 and 2020 is close to 913,548 hectares, way below the commitment of the Agreement. In addition, 93% of the formalized land corresponds to collective territories of black or indigenous communities, not peasants.

Specifically, the main commitment of the CRR for the Forest Reserve Zones is the implementation of a Participatory Environmental Zoning (ZAP) in order to establish, together with the communities, the delimitation of the agricultural frontier and the areas of special environmental interest. Moreover, it was expected that this process would serve to define appropriate productive activities according to the soil potential, and to prevent ecosystems loss and environmental degradation. Peasant communities view this commitment as a fundamental tool for the management of land-use conflicts. The Ministry of the Environment developed a National Environmental Zoning Plan at a scale of 1:100,000 in all the municipalities prioritized by the Peace Agreement, including San Vicente del Caguán. This plan had the purpose of defining guidelines for the identification of areas of special environmental importance through nine use categories grouped into three macro zones (Ministry of the Environment, 2022). Within these categories, only one considers peasant production, revealing the conservation bias of this territorial planning instrument (Díaz & Cruz, 2023) while the ZRF remain as highly restricted areas in terms of land use. This Ministry's guideline, which must be considered for the ZAP, risk limiting the objective of the Peace Agreement's commitment related to land access and the development of peasant economies.

As complementary measures, Payments for Environmental Services (PES) were proposed as an economic incentive-based conservation strategy. This strategy was implemented in *El Camuya*. However, money disbursements, as agreed with the implementers, were delayed, raising concerns and questioning the effectiveness of this conservation instrument. Beyond the practical difficulties of strategies such as PES and carbon credits, these initiatives show how the current approach to conservation is restricted to the integration of nature into the prevailing model of commodification

(Durán, 2023), with little discussion on the environmental role of peasant communities in biodiversity protection. Instead of focusing solely on strict forest preservation, peasant communities have played a central role in biodiversity conservation through more complex agroecosystem matrices (Perfecto et al., 2009).

Another commitment of the Peace Agreement was the Peasant Reserve Zones (ZRC for its initials in Spanish), a category of peasant territorial planning recognized in the Colombian law since 1994. The CRR acknowledges ZRCs as a mechanism to stop the expansion of the agricultural frontier and reconcile the land rights of peasants with environmental protection. Peasant communities see in this mechanism an opportunity for dialogue and agreement around restoration processes (Interview 5, May 2022). Although ZRCs can be established through a process of land subtraction from the Forest Reserve Zones, progress in their recognition during President Duque's administration was minimal, mainly due to the obstruction of the National Land Agency (Bautista et al., 2021; Interview 2, May 2022).

Therefore, as this summary of the CRR shows, the reform does not address land redistribution by removing property rights of unproductive lands to grant them to peasants without land or with insufficient land, who are legally recognized as agrarian reform beneficiaries (Law 160 of 1994). On the contrary, the CRR is limited to the distribution of the properties that enter the land fund and to formalization of already occupied lands, most of them in the agricultural frontier. However, most of the land in the agricultural frontier has environmental restrictions due to its ecological importance and because it lies within the FRZ. Although the Peace Agreement contemplates the possibility of updating, delimiting and strengthening the Forest Reserves so that they can be included in the land fund for their allocation to agrarian reform beneficiaries, as of 2020, of the hectares entered the fund, none came from the Amazon Forest Reserve Zone (Gutiérrez & Parada, 2022).

Peasant communities have proposed updating the FRZ by removing those areas with considerable changes in forest cover due to the presence of peasants previous to the signing of the Peace Agreement. They also have advocated for the formalization of land tenure and agreements for the relocation of peasants who live in the NNPs, as economic alternatives to guarantee their rights and livelihoods (Interview 4, May 2022; *Parques con Campesinos*, 2020; Salazar, 2021). Additionally, they seek government support to create conditions to contribute to nature protection in the Amazon based on peasant territorial governance.

To summarize, the CRR was not proposed to radically affect the structure of land ownership in Colombia, which remains a historical debt. The refusal to redistribute land, combined with the results of the participatory zoning according to which most areas cannot be formalized due to environmental reasons, has intensified competition or disputes over land. To the historical struggle for land access, a new layer of conflict has been added, centered on the claims of the environmental agenda for forest conservation.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The discussion on the implications of conservation policies for the peasantry of the Colombian Amazon is relevant because it reproduces situations of injustice and inequity in a population that has been historically marginalized. We locate this discussion in the context of an international agenda framed around the environment and climate crisis that is focused on conservation strategies that fail to recognize peasants as rights-holders and their historical connection with land, water and forests. In Colombia, these processes intersect with the implementation of a Peace Agreement

that aims to transform the conditions of the countryside, and its inhabitants based on the promises related to justice in access to land and proper recognition of peasantry's rights and identities.

Based on field data and a review of secondary sources, the case of the AFRZ in San Vicente del Caguán helps to expose the power dynamics behind the struggle between conservation and peasant existence. The political ecology approach led us to question the discourses on environmental protection, the Amazon and its inhabitants. It also highlighted the unequal distribution of costs and benefits associated with environmental change which, in turn, reinforces the existence of economic and social inequalities with political implications in terms of power relations (Robbins, 2004).

We paid special attention to questioning the discourse that legitimizes militarized environmental protection strategies such as *Operation Artemisa*. As shown, this operation did not achieve significant results in reducing deforestation in the Amazon – because it did not target large-scale deforesters. Instead, it reproduced violence against peasants, resulting in arrests, injuries, damage to community infrastructure, and even homicide. To do so, we describe how *Operation Artemisa* constitutes the militarization of a territory portrayed as outside the order of the nation-state, whose inhabitants were depicted as enemies of that order. Controlling the Amazon and its resources is part of the domination of a geostrategic territory, necessary for the reproduction and accumulation of capital, that was unreachable in the past due to the armed control exerted by the FARC guerilla. Thus, environmental deterioration (e.g. deforestation) is perceived at the local and national levels as connected to transformations on global scales. That is, environmental deterioration in the global south occurs as a function of an increase in the integration of peripheral regions into the global capitalist system (Dietz, 2014).

In short, as shown in the case of *El Camuya*, socio-environmental conflicts are the consequence of a set of structural factors such as land concentration and the persistent obstacles to accessing ownership, which have driven the settlement of peasants in the Amazon. Recent state violence against peasants is the continuation of a long-term process of violations of peasants' human rights as they have been acknowledged as the main victims of internal armed conflict (Truth Commission, 2022b).

Although the Peace Agreement has been positioned as a key policy to addressing the root causes of the internal armed conflict, our analysis leads to the assertion that it does not propose the structural changes needed to meet this objective. In fact, the Peace Agreement and the CRR are explicitly framed within the principle of sustainable development, which is superimposed on the rights of local inhabitants of areas that are considered and defined as of special environmental importance. Thus, in addition to failing to create the structural conditions to transform the situation of Amazon peasants in terms of rights recognition, the CRR is also limited by the environmental mandates that respond to international interests. No land available within the agricultural frontiers and environmental restrictions in areas such as the FRZ, that are nevertheless used by peasants to make their living, reflect the contradictions of Colombian conservation and agrarian policies. To this, we must add the absence of a clear distinction between peasants and land grabbers in the fight against deforestation which has resulted in serious violations to individual and collective rights to peasant (and indigenous) communities.

In the face of these problems, we highlight the inequalities implied in the commitments that countries of the Global South, such as Colombia, have adopted in the international arena, driven by a discourse in which “protecting” the Amazon is saving humanity. From this perspective, the Amazon is primarily valued for its coveted ecosystem services, allowing western countries to claim that they are contributing to

counteracting climate change without addressing structural changes in their current models of production and consumption. Likewise, the hegemonic discourse on conservation, from which restrictive figures such as National Natural Parks or the Forest Reserve Zone itself emerge, leads to a separation between culture and nature, where humans are not recognized as part of nature, legitimizing the symbolic or de facto expulsion of inhabitants from regions such as the Amazon. This entire scenario facilitates the domination and appropriation of nature by national and international actors.

Future research should investigate how the peasant economies and local and traditional uses of nature can be compatible with the commitments that states assume as members of international environmental conventions. This is in a context marked by ongoing disputes over land and resources in which the termination of the conflict with the FARC guerilla only opened the door for new interests to arrive, putting again the peasantry in the middle of violence. A discussion on how to build peace through the sustainable use of nature is essential to guaranteeing the rights of peasants and rural communities. This is particularly urgent for countries in the Global South that, such as Colombia, seek both agendas: advancing reforms regarding land access and the recognition of peasants' territorial rights, while also leading commitments around the global environmental agenda in the face of biodiversity loss and climate change.

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## APPENDIXES

### Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview - Peasants

#### General Information

- How long have you been in the territory?
- If you have not always lived in the region, ask: Why did you come to the territory? Why did you stay here? Why did you remain?
- How was the process of founding the village? Who founded it, and how?
- What economic activities do you engage in? What are the main land uses in the village?

#### Socio-Environmental Conflicts

- Do you perceive environmental conflicts or conflicts over natural resources in the Amazon? What are those environmental conflicts? What are the causes of those environmental conflicts?
- Do you know what the Amazon Forest Reserve Zone (ZRFA) is? Have conflicts been generated as a result of the establishment of the Amazon Forest Reserve Zone? Tell me about those conflicts.
- Have you noticed any changes in those conflicts in recent years? Explain how these conflicts have evolved, how they were before the Peace Agreement, and how they are now.  
*Differentiate between the Santos government and the Duque government\**
- What are the interests of the actors involved in the land-use conflict? What is the interest of the National Government? What is the interest of the farmers?

**Impacts on Access and Use of the Territory**

- Have your possibilities of accessing natural resources (water, forests, land) changed as a result of the establishment of the ZRFA? How has the establishment of the ZRFA affected you? What benefits or problems has it brought you?
- How do the farmers envision themselves in this territory? What do they want to do with it?

**Conflict Management Strategies**

- How and who has tried to solve this environmental conflict? The State? The farmers? Who do you think could solve this issue?
- Do you believe that the commitments of the Peace Agreement aim to resolve this conflict? How?
- How much do you think strategies such as the ZAP, the multipurpose cadastral system, and the PDET have been implemented?
- What are the proposals from farmers to address environmental conflicts in the region?
- What programs, projects, or support have come to the village to improve the conditions of farmers, reduce deforestation, and/or resolve the problem?

**Appendix 2. Semi-structured interview – Governmental organizations and international cooperation****Socio-Environmental Conflicts**

- Do you perceive environmental conflicts or conflicts over natural resources in the Amazon? What are those environmental conflicts? What are the causes of those environmental conflicts?
- Have conflicts been generated as a result of the establishment of the Amazon Forest Reserve Zone? Tell me what these conflicts consist of.
- Who are the actors involved in these environmental conflicts?
- What interests do the actors have regarding the environmental conflicts?
- Have you noticed any changes in these conflicts in recent years? Explain how these conflicts have evolved, how they were before the Peace Agreement, and how they are now.
- Since the signing of the Peace Agreement (2016), do you believe that conflicts over land use have changed in the region? Why? \*Differentiate between the Santos government and the Duque government.
- What challenges does the post-agreement context present for the goals of environmental policy? \*\*Environmental entities.

**Impacts on Access and Use of the Territory**

- How has this conflict been attempted to be resolved?
- Who has tried to resolve the conflict? The State? The farmers?
- What impacts have these strategies had for the farmers? \*Access and use of the territory.
- How do you perceive the forms of land use and the productive systems developed by farmers in this area?
- Are there proposals for alternative productive activities from the institution? (programs, support) Which ones are being developed?

**Peace Agreement Scope and Implementation**

- Do you believe that the commitments of the Peace Agreement aim to resolve this conflict? Which agreements?
- Do you think those agreements have been fulfilled? Tell me how much you think they have been fulfilled. Why?
- If the Agreement were fully implemented, how could it help resolve the environmental conflicts in the territory?
- What are the proposals from farmers to address environmental conflicts in the region?
- What proposals from local/national institutions do you know to solve environmental conflicts? Which ones are you working on?

**Appendix 3. Participatory Rural Appraisal Workshop**

Exercise	Objective	Guiding questions
Group profile	To jointly determine and get a general understanding of the socioeconomic characteristics of the group of participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the community's main activities/crops?</li> <li>• What other incomes are relevant for the community?</li> <li>• Which is the situation of land tenure for peasantry?</li> </ul>
Timeline	To identify significant changes in a community's past that continue to influence events and attitudes in the present. A timeline is a list of key events as the participants remember them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When was the community founded?</li> <li>• Who were the first to arrive?</li> <li>• What are the key milestones in the community that lead us to recent events?</li> </ul>
Community history chart	To visually portray the changes that have affected community life over the past few years, in terms of key elements such as natural resources, population, production systems and institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What issues would you like to be addressed in this chart? (population, natural resources, productive systems)</li> <li>• Do you remember an exceptional year for this issue? (for each issue).</li> <li>• How do you perceive annual variations? (for each issue).</li> </ul>

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