

Defending Rights, Dismantling Injustice: CAFOD's work on Human Rights, Climate Justice and Peacebuilding in Latin America

"When there is a ruling, or judicial order, that benefits the communities, or a sanction against the [mining] company, that's when the threats start. They send us messages, the phone calls start... Raising awareness about this situation has led to threats, being singled out, to intimidation and to persecution."

Mónica López Pushaina, Wayuu activist and leader in Colombia

1. Overview

Latin America & the Caribbean (LAC) is the global epicentre of climate-linked human rights violations. It is home to the world's most vital ecosystems — the Amazon, Andes, and Mesoamerican Biological Corridor — and the most dangerous region in the world for environmental and human rights defenders (EHRDs). Across the region, extractivism, corruption, authoritarianism and patriarchal violence are intensifying — while civic space is shrinking. Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and small-scale farming communities and among them women human right defenders (WHRDs) are on the front lines of resistance against environmental destruction, extractive industries, and state impunity; and thus, are disproportionately affected by these colliding crises. Despite this, courageous communities and movements are advancing justice, peace and systemic change.



Mónica López Pushaina, water defender and leader of the La Gran Parada community, Colombia.

CAFOD has supported communities in LAC since the 1960s, maintaining deep ties with grassroots, civil society and Church actors. We work in Andes (Bolivia, Colombia and Peru), Brazil, Central America (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala) and with regional partners to tackle these crises from an integral and intersectional approach. Our LAC regional strategy (2025–2030) reflects shared regional priorities developed collaboratively with over 40 partners across the region. It responds to:

- **Escalating violence against EHRDs:** In 2024, 215 defenders were killed in Latin America which amounted to 79% of killing worldwide. Colombia was identified as the deadliest country with 157 killings.
- **Corporate abuse and extractivism:** Multinational companies continue to displace communities, violate rights and pollute vital ecosystems — often with government complicity and with total or partial impunity.
- **Weak rule of law and impunity:** Legal protections are routinely ignored. Civil society is under threat and civic space shrinking. Authoritarianism and disregard for international norms are growing, and regional mechanisms like the Inter-American Human Rights System are under strain.
- **Marginalisation of WHRDs:** Women defenders face threats, criminalization and gender-based violence with limited protection mechanisms.

CAFOD is seeking to expand our long-standing, partner-led work on human rights, governance and peacebuilding in LAC. We combine long-term, grassroots and faith-based engagement, rooted local partnerships that focus on the most marginalised communities and defenders, and systemic advocacy to achieve impact against critical regional challenges.



Eva Colque, Director of our partner Fundacion Nuna, showing seeds produced by indigenous women in Bolivia.

CAFOD's approach speaks to the heart of Oak's strategy: transforming systems, centering local voice, and standing with those most under threat.

2. Vision, Mission and Values

Vision: A just, inclusive LAC region where the most marginalised enjoy rights, peace, and sustainability in harmony with their environment.

Mission: To support communities in transforming social and climate injustices, promoting rights, sustainable livelihoods, and ecological balance.

Values: CAFOD works through solidarity, creativity, cultural diversity, and partner-led action. It prioritises shifting power to partner organisations from the LAC region and grounding change in local realities and movements.

3. CAFOD's Approaches in LAC

CAFOD's strategy is rooted in Integral Ecology, connecting climate, justice, spirituality, and rights. It promotes:

- **Integrated programming:** Linking environmental, economic, social, and humanitarian goals in ways that centre the needs and agency of the most excluded.
- **Partnership:** Long-term, mutual relationships with civil society, research and communication institutions and Church actors, grounded in trust, solidarity, and local leadership.
- **Church engagement:** Supporting Church actors and networks to challenge oppression and foster social and ecological transformation, integral human development, and solidarity with communities in remote or excluded territories.
- **Advocacy and campaigns:** Amplifying partner and local community voices and holding local, national, UK and global actors accountable, seeking structural change.
- **Communications:** Using storytelling and faith-based solidarity to build public support and influence.



Building resilience among female indigenous farmers in Quiche, Guatemala, Partner ASUVI.

4. CAFOD's Strategic Priorities in LAC

Few organisations have CAFOD's combination of long-term, grassroots and faith-based engagement, rooted local partnerships, and systemic advocacy. Human rights, justice and peacebuilding are the heart of our approach and regional priorities, which speak to the heart of Oak Foundation's strategy: transforming systems, centering local voice, and standing with those most under threat.

A. Climate and Environmental Justice

We support EHRDs and local leaders defending land, water and ecosystems and build partner's capacity to access climate funding, research impacts of the climate crisis and other factors threatening the territory and influence national, UK and global environmental policy.

B. Human Rights, Governance, and Peacebuilding

We support litigation, justice access, and peacebuilding in areas affected by armed conflict and socio-environmental disputes over natural resources, such as in Colombia and other regions. We work with Church and civil society to build community protection and advocacy capacity. We hold extractive companies accountable and support women, indigenous and campesino or small farming communities' leadership. We promote trauma-informed and intersectional approaches to peace and governance.

C. Gender Justice

We put women at the centre of our human rights programming and promote their leadership. We invest in women-led organisations and support Church engagement on gender justice. We address intersecting identities—race, class, disability—in our gender justice work.

Shipibo-Konibo indigenous women in the Peruvian Amazon are on the frontlines of defending their rights, protecting their ancestral lands, and preserving their cultural heritage. Photo: CAAAP.



D. Livelihoods and Food Sovereignty

We support food systems transformation and food sovereignty through resilient approaches including agroecology, ancestral food practices, land rights and dignified livelihoods and value chains. Within this, we prioritise women, youth, and indigenous and campesino communities, including the recognition of the collective rights.

5. Goals and Objectives –Human Rights and Climate Justice

Our goal in this area is to strengthen human rights, accountability, and peacebuilding across LAC by protecting EHRDs, challenging impunity, and advancing grassroots-led justice.

Our Objectives:

- 1. Protect and support EHRDs**, especially women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and Indigenous leaders, through holistic protection models and movement-led strategies.
- 2. Corporate accountability:** Tackle human rights violations and environmental degradation by focusing on supply chains, legal reform, and access to remedy and

reparation –especially in sectors like mining -including transitional minerals- and agribusiness.

3. **Increasing access to integral justice and accountability** for human rights violations, environmental crimes, impunity and breaches of international human rights law.
4. **Strengthen democratic voice and peacebuilding** by investing in grassroots leadership, civic space, and community-led social change, including work with
5. -based and other civil society actors.
6. **Amplify advocacy and international solidarity** through Church and civil society networks, from regional platforms to UK/EU and international advocacy spaces.
7. **Build shared learning and documentation** of effective models to influence practice, policy, and resourcing, supported by community-led monitoring and evidence.

We want to do this by:

- **Strengthening EHRDs' capacities, strategies and mechanisms** for their own protection, wellbeing and individual and collective resilience; improving their access to justice; and expanding community-based protection models (physical, legal, digital, spiritual);
- **Promote intergenerational and inter-movement peer learning** (especially among WHRDs).
- **Support strategic litigation and legal empowerment** to challenge corporate and state violence and promote access to justice and accountability (e.g., Glencore/Cerrejón; or on gold mining and/or transition minerals);
- **Enable grassroots participation in international advocacy** (e.g., UN Binding Treaty, Escazú, COP30);

6. Examples of Partnership and Impact

In Colombia:

- In the unique ecosystem of the **Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta** in **Colombia**, which has the highest coastal mountains in the world and is considered the “Heart of the World” by its indigenous peoples, climate change, illicit economies and armed conflict are putting their cultural and physical survival at risk. With the support of CAFOD's partner **CINEP**, Wiwa indigenous youth receive training and established a professional communications commission, which documents and safekeeps indigenous knowledge and raises awareness about the risks they are facing, including by using drones. Kankuamo indigenous women also started a GBV observatory, raising awareness and supporting survivors on access to justice and GBV prevention.

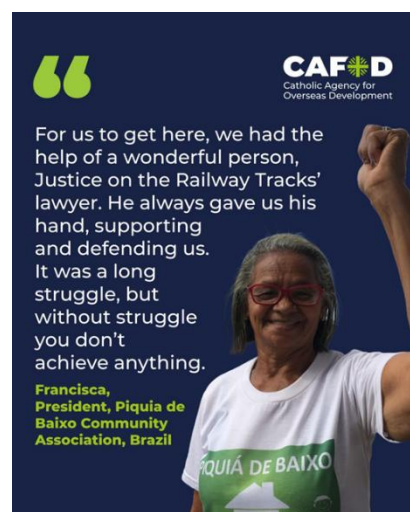
CAFOD is supporting Wiwa indigenous communities in Sierra Nevada Santa Marta, Colombia, in their fight to defend human and land rights. Credit: Lacides Villazón Mójica.



- In **Cajamarca**, in the eastern Andes foothills of Colombia, smallholder farmers have successfully defended their right to protect land and water from gold mining. Through a 2017 legally binding local referendum supported by CAFOD partner **SIEMBRA**, where 98% voted against the mine, the community challenged powerful extractive interests. Despite legal obstacles, recent court rulings have upheld their decision, reinforcing community participation in environmental governance and safeguarding their territory.
- CAFOD partner **CINEP**¹ has supported Wayuu Indigenous, Afro-descendant and small-scale farming communities and organisations in achieving over 10 court rulings to defend their rights. These communities have been resisting displacement and environmental harm caused by the **Cerrejón coal mine in northern Colombia** - one of LAC's largest open-pit coal mines. Communities' have reported pollution and diversion of water and land, destruction of livelihoods, and particular impacts on women's cultural and spiritual practices, alongside increased levels of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence. Local communities and CINEP supported by CAFOD and other allies have carried out strategic litigation, including cases at the Colombian Constitutional Court, as well as other legal action and international complaints, including to the OECD, yet these have so far failed to bring effective remedies. Sustained support is needed.
- In the Amazon foothills in **Meta**, through strategic litigation women in separate cases supported by CAFOD partner **CODACOP**² won court rulings affirming the community's right to water, ordering the company to provide water. An environmental licence to expand oil extraction was also stopped. However, provision of water has been sporadic. Recently, a "accion popular" lawsuit to protect the collective rights to water was initiated. The women's advocacy and stories were featured in a documentary "Victims of Extractivism", presented at a human rights film festival, raising awareness of the impacts of extractive industries on local communities.

In Brazil:

- CAFOD partner, **Justiça nos Trilhos (JnT)** has won **the 2025 Gwynne Skinner Human Rights Award** for their support to communities affected by powerful mining companies in Piquiá de Baixo – who are to be resettled after decades of legal support. JnT has campaigned, provided legal support and advocated with the community to ensure it can now breathe fresh air, drink clean water, and eat healthy food, in peace. CAFOD's ongoing support over the last eight years has contributed to JnT's wider work supporting other mining-affected communities in the state of Maranhão, north-east Brazil. The case of Piquiá de Baixo can now serve as an emblematic case, setting a precedent for the rest of the region.



¹ CINEP is the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular/Programa por la Paz.

² CODACOP is the Corporación de Apoyo a Comunidades Populares.

- **Sinéia do Vale, an Indigenous leader** and the Environmental Department Manager at our long-term partner, Indigenous Council of Roraima (CIR), was appointed to the COP30 Global Climate Task Force to represent Indigenous communities. Our support and accompaniment has included: building a strong and effective Indigenous programme with three other partner organisations with a focus on climate change, land management and institutional strengthening; technical support to CIR's Environmental Department for over a decade; providing financial and institutional strengthening support; and increasing their funding base to specialise in key thematic areas, such as water access, land management and advocacy to halt setbacks to constitutional Indigenous rights.
- **Black women** are leading campaigns for urban housing and climate resilience through our **Sustainable Cities Programme** which protect homeless women—mainly Black and indigenous GBV survivors—by securing safe housing and advocating for their rights. The programme has secured safe housing for 6,400 people and enabled nearly 15,000 people to demand housing rights. In May 2025, our partner Semeando celebrated the inauguration of Prestes Maia Residence, in the building which was once the largest vertical residence in Brazil, and which was once notorious as the face of urban exclusion in Latin America. Abandoned in 1990, [Prestes Maia](#) once sheltered almost 2,000 people in improvised dwellings in its decaying structure, the largest such occupied building on the continent. Today, following an extensive retro-fit into self-contained modern apartments, 287 formerly homeless families, including many former occupiers, call the building home. This transformation would not have been possible without the support of our partners APOIO and Semeando. For almost quarter of a century, they supported women-led grassroots housing groups to campaign for the building to be turned into safe and affordable housing in the centre of the city, guaranteeing access to essential services, jobs and education and protection from flooding, violence and health risks.



Residents of Elza Soares building and CAFOD and partner Semeando staff members celebrate moving in. The mural shows Elza Soares and the caption reads: No Woman Without a Home!

In Honduras:

- CAFOD partners **ERIC-Radio Progreso's** and **CEHPRODEC's long-term advocacy** to accompany environmental and human rights defenders has contributed to **the publication of Decree 18- 2024 that restored the core area of the National Park Carlos Escaleras which has been affected by multiple mining, energy and agrobusinesses projects.** This is a significant achievement for accompanied communities in Tocoa and Olancho. CAFOD has supported the advocacy efforts of these organisations for 15 YEARS, including in the use of national and international mechanisms to denounce forced displacement, criminalisation and killing of several EHRDs and religious leaders because the collusion of extractives and organised crime in the region. Advocacy efforts have also focused on demanding justice for the killing of several EHRDs including the killing of Juan López in September 2024, Guapinol river defender, coordinator of the environmental committee and cofounder of the Social Pastoral on Integral Ecology in Honduras.

In Guatemala:

- The Lempa river runs through Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, where it is the most important source of freshwater (providing 56.9% of surface and groundwater in El Salvador). CAFOD partners are involved in a regional advocacy effort led by the **Mesoamerican Ecological Ecclesial Network (REMAM) and the Central American Network for the Defence of Transboundary Waters (RedCat)** demanding a regional agreement on transboundary waters. As result of the process, the organisation and systematic pressure from the Church and local communities produced the **suspension of Cerro Blanco Gold Mining Transboundary Project**, based in Jutiapa, Guatemala. It prevents 8 tonnes of cyanide would end up in the Lempa river each day.

In El Salvador

- Our partner **Asociación de Derechos Humanos Asociación de Derechos Humanos Tutela Legal, Dra. María Julia Hernández** has accompanied victims of the State of Exception and documented cases before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to make the State accountable according to international standards. The partner also provided legal support to Water Defenders in Santa Martha, Cabañas who have been at the forefront of the fight against metal mining in the territory and were arrested in 2023. The case has evidenced the lack of independence of the judiciary. The 5 defenders were initially released in October 2024, but a retrial was ordered. The partner and national networks continue to exhaust internal mechanisms in the face of increasing surveillance and intimidation of the defenders' families by national police intelligence agents.

Across Latin America:

- CAFOD supports the Latin American Church with its “Life hangs by a thread” campaign, a powerful example of regional collaboration and proactive advocacy for human rights defenders regionally. Bringing Church networks and organisations, civil society and communication platforms in a unified, regional action, the campaign is spearheaded by our partner **CELAM**, the Platform for Peace, Democracy and Human Rights, the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, and other ecclesial and civil society actors. With high-profile figures, such as Cardinals Spengler, Mattasoglio, and Czerny behind its presentation, the campaign has already succeeded in raising the profile of defenders at risk and galvanizing commitment across the borders. The launch put several emblematic cases at the centre of attention, such as the above-mentioned Honduran leader Juan López, whose struggle to protect the Guapinol River now serves as a poignant emblem of the campaign. Other cases will include the case of the Acapulco families in search of their disappeared (Mexico); Peregrinos del Seibo case (Dominican Republic); Case of Women Sowers of Hope (Paraguay); and a Case of Indigenous Peoples (Colombia), which is currently being defined.
- Our approach stems from evidence and learning from decades of research and on-the-ground support to EHRDs and their organisations. See 2021 report [“Protecting our common home: land and environmental human right defenders in Latin America](#)