

Position of the Panamazonian Ecclesial Network of the Catholic Church in light of the violation of the right to territorial property of Indigenous Peoples and Amazonian communities

Pan-Amazonia is made up of portions of nine countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, French Guyana, Peru, Surinam and Venezuela. It is a most important habitat or biome where life is present in its immense diversity as a gift from God for all on earth. This area, however, the principal “lung” of the planet, is increasingly devastated and imperiled. Here we find that human dignity, the self-determination of peoples, and bio-diversity are under ever greater threat. In response, the Pan-Amazonian Church Network (Red Ecclesial Pan-Amazónica (REPAM) was founded in 2014. Consistent with the vision of Pope Francis’ *Laudato si’*, it seeks to respond coherently and effectively, pastorally and socially, and to care for all life – human in harmony with natural – and with a special option for the most vulnerable. www.redamazonica.org

Amazonia is at the heart of the Church and the lung of the planet. It contains the world’s most extensive tropical forest, and its biggest river. It is home to 390 indigenous peoples and 137 isolated peoples, who speak 240 languages. The lives of these communities and people are threatened by pollution, by the radical and rapid change of the eco-system on which they depend and by lack of protection of their fundamental human rights. Their very existence is threatened and their dignity is disregarded when, for example, there is uncontrolled deforestation, or when mining projects or intensive agricultural operations are conducted without consultation or any involvement of the local populations.

This network seeks to share through ecclesial, political, academic and social spaces, the reality of indigenous people in the Amazon, the role of accompaniment of the Catholic Church through REPAM, raising awareness of this important Amazon biome and affirming the urgency to answer the call in *Laudato Si’* to care for creation and the most vulnerable communities. REPAM is also looking for ways the indigenous and community leaders may present their realities regarding human rights violations faced by their territories, and also generate networks of support and animate the accompaniment of their situations, and the respect of their territories and rights.

REPAM aims to unite the efforts of the Church (in the nine countries) in favor of the responsible and sustainable care of this whole Amazon region so as to promote its integral good, human rights, pastoral accompaniment, as well as the social, cultural and economic development of its people, especially the original indigenous peoples

“I believe that the central issue is how to reconcile the right to development, both social and cultural, with the protection of the particular characteristics of indigenous peoples and their territories. ... In this regard, the right to prior and informed consent should always prevail, as foreseen in Article 32 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” (Pope Francis, February 15, 2017, Rome).

In this sense, the Catholic Church of Latin America, represented on this occasion by REPAM, desires to share with the United Nations, and with the countries and civil society of the Americas and other regions, its vision and position regarding the violation of the territory and land rights of indigenous peoples and Amazonian communities by extractivist industries and other legal (and illegal) activities.

“I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poorest.” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*. No. 13).

We, as REPAM, realize the serious impact that extractivism and other legal and illegal activities have on the Amazon Region, being prejudicial not only to the environment and natural resources, but also to the human rights of the local population, both indigenous and nonindigenous, especially to their right to territorial property. These prejudicial effects should act as a call to reflection for our governmental leaders regarding the need to look for and find new alternatives that try to harmonize respect for human rights and the environment on the one hand with economic progress and development on the other.

The right to territorial property is not limited to issues of land ownership. This right is based on the culture that a people or community identify with within the specific space in which they carry out their daily activities. The concept of territory is related to the idea of habitat and extends to specific interpretations of human production habits, whether they be directed towards obtaining natural resources or creating new forms of production.

We likewise wish to highlight the importance of conceiving territory using holistic criteria that are also interdependent with human rights in general. In this way the various dimensions of territory can be understood within a protective framework that includes indigenous peoples and peasants, their ways of life, worldviews and culture, especially their spiritual connection with their lands.

As a result of REPAM's comprehensive process of on-going support to and promotion of human rights in areas belonging to five countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru), we have confirmed and documented serious violations of the rights of indigenous and peasant communities.

Based on the above concepts, one can identify specific groups of indigenous peoples and Amazonian communities whose ties to our common home and Mother Earth, along with their identify-forming values and sacred world view, transform them into guardians of nature and its resources. In them, one finds the wisdom and vision of an authentic development that looks to better, in a holistic way, the quality of human life.

*"We cannot fail to praise the commitment of international agencies and civil society organizations which draw public attention to these issues and offer critical cooperation, employing legitimate means of pressure, to ensure that each government carries out its proper and inalienable responsibility to preserve its country's environment and natural resources, without capitulating to spurious local or international interests."*¹

Based on this panorama of the reality in the Amazon, REPAM has decided to demand and work for a renewed agenda for the defense of the territories and rights of the indigenous peoples and peasants in the region, giving them the appropriate tools to document their cases and to present them before the pertinent authorities and institutions, with REPAM's help when necessary. This means that we are asking for participative and informative spaces where a regional strategy can be developed, permitting the conception of the countries that share the Amazon as one body with unique characteristics, as well as serious problems that need to be made visible as a whole and faced with shared efforts.

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¹ *Laudato Si* No. 38.