REGIONAL TRENDS AND GOVERNANCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA: TERRITORIES AND ACTORS AT THE CROSSROADS

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

Central America is currently experiencing a context of multiple crises, very different from the optimism of the 1990s regarding human rights protection and expanding opportunities for social and political expression and participation. The present context of violence, corruption, impunity and erosion of the rule of law not only threatens the civil and political rights won in prior decades, it also stresses and impacts the local communities, indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants who are on the "front lines" defending alternatives for coexistence that are essential if we are to hold out hope for a more democratic, inclusive and sustainable future.

Civil society organizations, both national and international, have the opportunity to strengthen their efforts if they are able to recognize the synergies between defending values such as democracy, the rule of law and transparency, and defending local communities and their diverse forms of organizing. In fact, democratic, inclusive and sustainable governance needs territorial actors who have been strengthened in their political and civil rights, as well as their socioeconomic, cultural and territorial rights and the right to self-determination.

This happens by acknowledging the existence of numerous experiences of local and regional governance that successfully meet objectives simultaneously in food security, diversification of local economies, social cohesion and the protection and restoration of national resources and ecosystem services. These local and regional actors also play a key role in the territories' identity and institutional life, as an integral part of civil society, together with other non-governmental and nonprofit organizations. Acting from their own governance systems or under the framework of opportunities opened up by State institutional structures, they make resilience-building possible in the face of diverse crisis situations such as the pandemic, the erosion of democratic institutionality and extreme climate events.

However, a series of trends is currently jeopardizing these governance experiences, including increased interest in commercial exploitation of natural resources, expressed through the aggressive expansion of export agriculture, the increase in mineral and hydrocarbon mining, and an on-going gamble on positioning the Central American region as a logistics and services hub. This takes place in a context of high vulnerability to climate change and the implementation of territorial control mechanisms by actors of the illicit economy.

Furthermore, several countries in the region are suffering setbacks in the rule of law, a situation that threatens the minimum conditions for local populations' effective participation in the governance of their territories and resources. Rights won in prior periods are being hollowed of their real meaning, with the introduction of regulations and practices seeking to block, stigmatize, control, repress or even criminalize types of social and citizen organization. The interests behind these trends use diverse forms of political and territorial control, normalizing violence, discretion and secrecy as daily resources for exercising power. These trends in turn occur in a context of weakening of the international governance systems called to the protection of human rights.

This report is a contribution to collective reflection by civil society to promote increased understanding of the complexities of the moment currently facing Central America. Its starting point is an overview of the region as a whole, emphasizing some of the main dynamics affecting territorial governance, and linking it to the preliminary study of some subnational territories as settings where the observed trends take shape. The report also seeks to contribute to understanding how to forge ahead with new and better connections among civil society actors to build resilient societies in an adverse context, emphasizing the role of the territorial level.

We believe that this context dictates the need to promote a deliberate effort to foment strategic collaboration within and between different fields of work of civil society organizations. In fact, the challenges wrought by these dynamics in the region are of such magnitude and complexity that no territorial actor, rural community or indigenous authority can face them alone.

The report is organized in three sections. The first lays out the regional perspective, showing how the cur-rent rule of law crisis is related to the interests promoting rapid, unsustainable natural resource extraction processes, and how territorial actors, social movements and civil society are reacting to that context. The second section turns its eye toward a mosaic of rural territories in Central America, the territorial dynamics seen there and their implications for territorial governance. The third and final section proposes possible paths for deepening strategic collaborations in key environments for strengthening both the territorial actors immersed in this context and their agendas oriented to the construction of democratic, inclusive and sustainable territorial governance.

REGIONAL TRENDS:

TERRITORIES AND ACTORS AT THE CROSSROADS

In contrast with the current situation facing Central America, the 1990s ushered in a series of changes that fueled a sense of optimism in the region's future. First, the internal wars that for decades had affected various countries finally ended. This achievement took several years of dialogues, which addressed –at least partially– the causes that had given rise to those conflicts. Reforms were thus initiated that opened up spaces in civil society and electoral politics, enabling the public participation of social and political actors and sectors who had traditionally been excluded or marginalized from public-interest debates on social, economic, environmental and political issues. These democratization processes contributed to generating expectations in the sense that, finally, the cultural, social, economic and political aspirations for inclusion of rural, indigenous, Afro-descendant populations and other excluded sectors would be met.

Another element contributing to the optimism of the 1990s were the debates around environmental degradation and Sustainable Development. The second United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, known as the Rio Summit (1992) was a milestone demonstrating that environmental degradation had reached the status of a political issue with global priority. The Sustainable Development proposal thus end-ed up relaunching Development as a goal for countries, addressing previously underestimated environmental impact.

The preparatory process for the Rio Summit and the summit's results stimulated important debates and significant resource mobilization to strengthen institutions and initiatives by countless economic and civil society actors. These were targeted to facing the diverse factors and dimensions of environmental degradation in a series of areas: from personal practices and attitudes to the complex questions posed by countries' development models, encompassing issues related to the relationship between gender and environment or the production and business models of diverse productive sectors of the economy. In Central America, all this was reflected in the creation of new institutions, the relaunching of the conservation agenda, and programs that sought to channel agricultural production toward sustainability objectives. These and other regional initiatives seemed to enjoy the highest political support, as suggested by the Alliance for the Sustainable Development of Central America, an agreement signed by the region's presidents in 1994.

In this decade, the decentralization and local development agenda also started to gain momentum. In general terms, this agenda broadened the powers of local governments, although it did not always provide them with greater resources. Nonetheless, it seemed that there was a consensus around the expansion of municipal autonomy, considering that local governments are the closest level of government to citizens and, therefore, they are better positioned to channel and address the population's interests and needs, as long as they have adequate ability and resources (FUNDEMUCA, 2011).

In the territories, this was embodied in a series of public policies and programs that proposed strengthening local economies and guiding them along the path of sustainable development, in a context that seemed to offer optimal conditions for regional government to move toward the ideal of a higher degree of cooperation and connection between the State and non-governmental organizations, meeting regulatory imperatives of horizontality, the inclusion of diverse actors and the establishment of relationships at different levels of government (Ballón, Rodríguez y Zeballos, 2009).

However, it is important to underscore that, while the conditions appeared optimal for advancing all

these agendas, no fiscal, labor or social reforms were undertaken to address the deepest causes leading to the in-ternal conflicts, such as exclusion and inequality. The democratization process of the 1990s emphasized political and civil rights, while only secondarily focusing on socioeconomic development issues. For example, in both Guatemala and El Salvador, the socioeconomic component of the peace accords was blocked by conservative forces.

One of the factors that favored this bias was the supremacy that, in the 1990s, was enjoyed by the neoliberal agenda of privatization of government assets and services, budget cuts, and trade and financial liberalization as strategies for insertion into the global economy. These ideas took force not only in governments but also in cooperation and multilateral organizations, leading to a State that had reduced functions in the social arena, while playing a very active role in the economic arena in terms of exposing national economies to globalization (Robinson, 2011).

Nonetheless, post-war reconstruction needed States able to address key issues in areas such as education, housing and health. In addition, a culture of peace also had to be built, for which it was necessary to establish the truth about the human rights violations and violent acts that took place during the conflicts. But the opposite happened: the purging of security forces did not adequately progress, while a culture of impunity became institutionalized.

All of this created doubts around the lack of completeness of the democratization process of that decade. Even so, the climate of optimism of the time led one to suppose that civil society and progressive political forces would have room for maneuver to propose public policies that could address issues such as poverty, territorial gaps, the lack of access to land and the cultural, economic, and gender exclusion affecting broad sectors of the population (Azpuru et al., 2007).

Currently, Central America is facing a very different situation from that observed in the 1990s. Three trends define a context of growing complexity and in light of which hope needs to be restored: i) regarding nat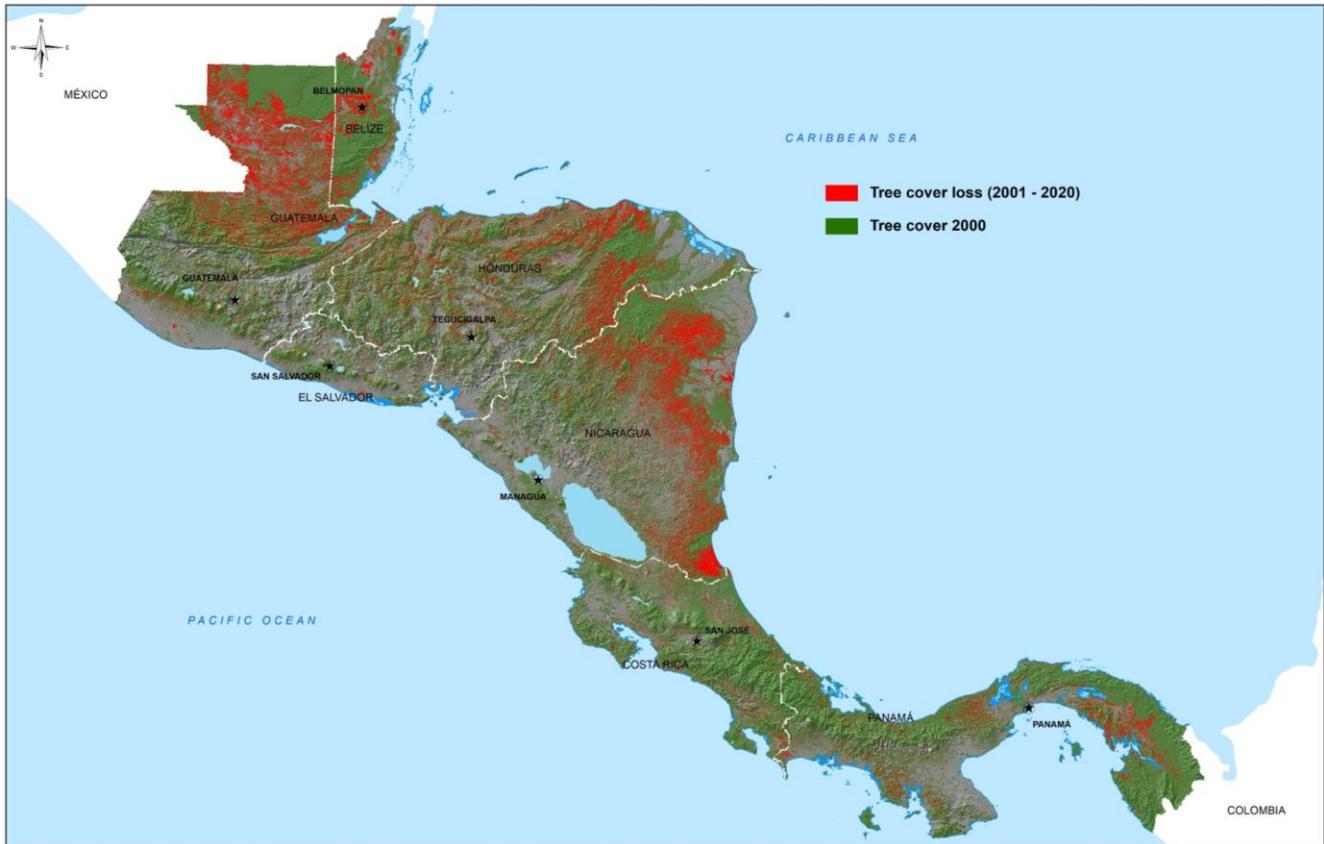ural resource governance, greater interest is seen among regional or international investors in natural and territorial resources, which translates to large-scale investment projects, whether in extractive industries, monoculture plantations or infrastructure, with significant implications for building resilience in the face of climate change; ii) the intensification of socio-political trends that jeopardize the minimum conditions for the effective participation of local communities and other civil society sectors in the governance of their territories and resources; and iii) pertinent changes in civil society and social actors that, on the one hand, spearhead resistance struggles against territorial dispossession processes and which, on the other hand, promote new approaches for the governance of natural resources and territories.

Increased interest in commercial use of the natural resources of rural territories in Central America

Starting in the 1990s, policies to attract investment spurred a series of projects in activities such as tourism, energy generation and mining, using the reformulation of incentive frameworks, active facilitation of permits and the cooperation of local governments (Davis and Diaz, 2014).

Central America today is experiencing a series of changes that reflect a strengthening of this interest in exploiting the natural resources of its rural territories, trends that reproduce and deepen historical patterns of exclusion, vulnerability and environmental degradation (see Map 1). These trends refer to the rise in incorporation of rural areas into globalization, including the expansion of crops for agroindustry, biofuels, and the increase in extractive projects (minerals, hydrocarbons, etc.). An upsurge is also seen in infrastructure megaprojects (transportation, renewable and non-renewable energy, etc.) that are part of broader strategies to turn Central America into a logistics hub for trade, services and tourism. If in addition to these trends we keep in mind that diverse illicit actors are implementing violence-based strategies for the use and control of various territories in the region, we see greater complexity in the dynamics of exclusion and degradation that result in greater socio-environmental conflict and have repercussions on

Map 1
Central America: Loss of tree cover 2001–2020

Source: Prepared by the authors using Hansen/UMD/Google/USGS/NASA, accessed via Global Forest Watch (2022); INETER, 2022 and MEM (2021)

livelihoods and on the rights of forest, rural and family farming communities, as well as on indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

The global crisis caused by the pandemic has exacerbated these trends, obliging governments to take on greater debt loads and to see the increase in natural resource exportation as a viable source of currency and tax revenue. This is also caused by a global reordering of countries as sources of commodities for the inter-national market, including the expansion of agro-industrial crops, commercial agrifood systems and extractive projects (minerals, hydrocarbons, forest resources, etc.) (PRISMA, 2020a).

Expansion of crops for agro-industry and agrifood systems

The boom in agro-export and the expansion of agribusiness are widespread trends in the kind of agriculture that has been incentivized in the Central American region, mainly oriented to highly profitable industrial agriculture at the expense of an agenda committed to food sovereignty. These crops have benefitted from climate change mitigation policies, which have prioritized biofuels and agrofuels for reducing carbon dioxide emissions (CLACSO, 2018; Davis and Diaz, 2014).

African palm and sugarcane have experienced a dramatic expansion in the last two decades. African palm jumped from 102,390 ha in 2000 to 516,412 ha in 2020, quintupling its harvested area in the last 20 years (404% increase rate). Guatemala stands out as the country with the greatest area harvested in 2020 with 198,000 ha, increasing its area by a factor of 9 (843% increase rate); however, the country that has grown exponentially is Nicaragua, going from 2,000 ha in 2000 to 33,000 in 2020, increasing its harvested area 16 times (1,572% increase rate) (see Figure 1).
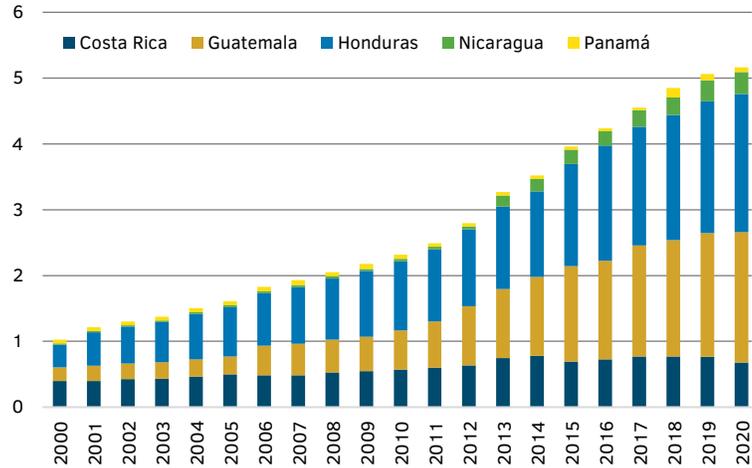
In the case of sugarcane, while it has not seen such strong growth as compared to African palm, the area harvested in the Central American region increased from 420,490 ha in 2000 to 565,000 in 2020, a 34% in-crease. The greatest producer is Guatemala, with 251,020 ha of harvested area (37% increase rate); however, Nicaragua and Panama show the greatest increase, of 53% and 51%, respectively (see Figure 2).

Investments in agro-industrial crops and large-scale livestock production are signs of persistent interest by investors in controlling land. The investments no longer take place by country, but rather on a regional scale, through direct purchase, including in legally recognized indigenous territories, generating a high concentration of resources and land, much greater than in prior periods (PRISMA, 2019a).

Increase in extractive industry: Metal mining and hydrocarbons

During the last 15 years a boom has been seen in extractive industries globally. While this activity is not new in the region, a new capacity for large-scale extraction has been seen, powering the indiscriminate

Figure 1
African palm Central America:
Area harvested 2000–2020 (Hundred thousand hectares)

Source: FAOSTAT (2022)

Figure 2
Sugarcane Central America:
Area harvested 2000–2020
(Hundred thousand hectares)

Source: FAOSTAT (2022)

exploitation of natural resources with export objectives, driving toward new mining frontiers (see Map 2).[1]

Extractive activities do not represent a large portion of the region's gross domestic product; however, they are important for State operations as a source of financing for national budgets. The orientation of

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[1] In territories of the Caribbean coast, they are associated with heavy investments in extractive industries and infrastructure, where they overlap with protected areas and emblematic indigenous territories –such as protected areas in Petén, the Honduran and Nicaraguan Muskitia or copper reserves in the Ngäbé Buglé region– stands out (Sauls & Rosa, 2019).

Map 2
Central America: Extractive industries, logistics hub and illicit drug trade corridors

Source: Prepared by the authors using Geocomunes (2018) and Ventura (2014) https://vaventura.com/divulgacion/geografia/camino-la-droga

most of these countries toward extraction-based development corresponds to the demands of the global economy (goods prices, openness to global private investment), and it reflects the consolidation of powerful economic groups at the regional-national level, between the pressures from international institutions to deregulate the economy and financial opportunities identified by elites (PRISMA, 2019b).

The distinctive feature of these investments is that they are arbitrarily imposed on local populations: they involve the usurpation of land and competition for or contamination of water resources, unleashing a series of serious conflicts. In several cases the State has responded to these conflicts with militarization of the territories and the criminalization of social protest. It is with good reason that countries such as Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala appear at the

top of the list of countries with more per capita murders related to environmental activists and land defenders, with extractive industries being the main sector causing these crimes (Bebbington et al., 2019; Global Witness, 2020a; CALAS, 2019).

Transportation, energy and logistics hub infrastructure for trade, services and tourism

Over the last few decades, the context of globalization strengthened economic groups operating on national and regional scales whose strategies promote a vision of development that emphasizes the combination of economic growth, geographic integration and promotion of large national and international investments (Bebbington, 2013; Davis & Díaz, 2014). Many of these investments are based on the idea of Central Ameri-ca as an international logistics hub linking the

Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and South to North America, with a series of investment megaprojects (transportation, energy and communications infrastructure, etc.) in territories that, until recently, were outside the scope of the main accumulation strategies in the region (PRISMA, 2019b).

This has redefined the role of both rural areas and territory, which have been affected by the scale, intensity and relatively short timeframes within which these projects are executed, giving rise to heavy impacts and conflicts throughout the region. This tendency is neither new nor exclusive to Central America. Since 2001, a series of megaprojects contained in the so-called Mesoamerican Project (formerly Plan Puebla Pan-ama) in Central America and Mexico promoted the modernization and expansion of ports and airports, the establishment of the International Network of Mesoamerican Highways (RICAM), the Central American Electric Interconnection System (SIEPAC) and the Central American Fiber Optic Network (REDCA) (see Map 2). The Mesoamerican Project also sought connectivity with the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA), thus promoting an agenda of physical infrastructure modernization via megaprojects throughout Latin America. In 2008, the Mesoamerican Project included the addition of Colombia and the Dominican Republic and structured a series of projects to move forward in the interconnection of transportation infrastructure, Mesoamerican energy integration, the interconnection and integration of telecommunications services, and trade and competitiveness facilitation (Cuéllar et al., 2012).

More recently, as a result of the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, governments are seeking to follow up on large infrastructure works, such as those contained in the Comprehensive Development Plan for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and south-southeast Mexico (CEPAL, 2021) and the Mayan Train, an investment proposal for promoting tourism and urban development that covers territories in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize.

These infrastructure projects have synergistic relationships with the expansion of agricultural and resource extraction frontiers (Bebbington et al., 2018),

but they also transform relationships between society, territory and the environment with implications for governance, resilience and sustainability, to the extent that they are embedded in asymmetrical networks of social relationships (Delpino Marimón et al., 2021).

Climate change challenges and contradictions for adaptation and mitigation

In this context of exclusion, environmental degradation and renewed interest in natural and territorial re-sources, Central America also has to face the severe and growing impact of climate variability and change. In fact, Central America is one of the regions at greatest climate risk in the world, due to its combination of biophysical and social factors. Its location between two oceans in the intertropical convergence zone and its rugged topography expose the region to growing climate threats, such as greater frequency and intensity of events with excessive rain and flooding, more severe and prolonged droughts, the increase in average temperatures, as well as the rise in sea level seen throughout the region, while severe environmental degradation and patterns of social and economic exclusion shape a context of vulnerability that magnifies the enormous and recurring impact of climate change.

The expansion of extractive activities –sugarcane, African palm, hydroelectricity, mining, etc.– has restricted rural communities' access to natural resources even further, exacerbating degradation and fueling the intensification of conflicts for control of land, water and forests, in addition to weakening local-territorial governance systems.

The impacts associated with climate variability and change have multiple territorial expressions in the region. For example, on the Pacific side, the Central American Dry Corridor stands out: stretching from Guatemala to Panama (including what is known as the "dry arch"), climate conditions of drought there affect the production of basic grains and repeatedly threaten the food security of a significant portion of the population. The 2018 drought caused losses on 281,000 hectares of corn and beans in Guatemala,

Honduras and El Salvador, affecting the food security of more than 2 million people (FAO, 2018). But excessive rains also affect this area: in El Salvador alone, three events with excessive rain between 2009 and 2011 meant US$ 1.267 million in losses and damages, equivalent to 6% of Gross Domestic Product (MARN, 2012; PRISMA, 2019d).

On the Caribbean side, hurricanes Eta and Iota, in November 2020, struck Central America –mainly Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala– leaving in their wake nearly 10 million affected people, considerable damage and losses, and many communities destroyed, cut off and inaccessible due to severe flooding and landslides, effects that were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020) and conditions of vulnerability. This comes on top of the impact of hurricanes Mitch (1998), Stan (2005) and Felix (2007), which also had substantial impact, in both loss of human life and harm to production, the economy and infra-structure. In addition, the rising sea level has meant that the Guna people of Panama have already had their first group of climate-displaced people, as they were forced to relocate to the mainland eight communities located on various islands. This affected their traditional livelihoods (eco-tourism, fishing and traditional crafts) with clear implications for their conditions of autonomy, culture and forms of organization (Ambientum, 2019). In the Honduran Muskitia, flooding systematically results in crop loss and affects fishing activity, which together are the foundation of livelihoods for the population, most of whom live in poverty (MFEWS, 2015).

In light of these climate change challenges, countries have not been effective in articulating proposals and policy frameworks focused on vulnerability. These national climate initiatives feature an overriding interest in taking advantage of financing opportunities linked to climate change mitigation, which reinforce investment strategies in sectors such as energy, in detriment to vigorous adaptation actions, despite the region's extremely low contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, these adaptation policies carry less weight in the country's proposals and, in general, fail to consider the complexity of the dynamics of exclusion and degradation or socio-environmental conflict prevailing in the territories.

Responses from the private sector are mixed and contradictory. On the one hand, it appears that most of their investment and natural resource exploitation projects fail to contemplate climate change or sustainability criteria. On the other hand, some private-sector actors see in climate change mitigation new investment opportunities, as reflected in some renewable energy investments –such as hydroelectricity or agrofuels– which creates social conflictivity that ends up undermining possibilities for adaptation. These new private-sector investment opportunities are part of their business model adjustments and are often presented as social and environmental responsibility actions. They enable them to access new channels of financing, to legitimize their economic activities and to maintain their presence in spaces where climate change responses are discussed (PRISMA, 2021). These contradictions reflect one of the most significant climate change-related tensions in the region.

Expansion of territorial control by illicit actors

In recent years, Central America has also been consolidated as a corridor for illicit activities, most notably human trafficking, arms trafficking, smuggling and especially drug trafficking (mainly cocaine), coming from producing countries in South America and heading toward their principal market, the United States. Aspects related to cocaine include production, transformation, transit, sale and money laundering. It is well known that production and transformation take place mainly in South America: since the early 2000s, Central America has become an increasingly important region for transit, sale and money laundering, which represent the main drug trafficking activities in the region (PRISMA, 2019c).

Drug trafficking is transforming territories. For example, the "narco-deforestation" dynamic explains the loss of large expanses of forest in Alta Verapaz, Petén, Olancho, the Honduran Muskitia, and the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, and there are more recent signs of possible impact in Panama. These are all places where the pressures are extreme and include dispossession and violence against local, small-scale farming, indigenous and forest communities

(PRISMA, 2019c). Illicit actors linked to drug trafficking deploy control and authority strategies in the territories (sometimes related to paramilitary tactics), as well as implementing money laundering operations that include their own strategies of economic investment in crops such as African palm and livestock (McSweeney et al., 2017).

In Guatemala, territorial control by local agents collaborating with cartels has created a continuous territorial control and authority system over the last 15 years (PRISMA, 2019b). A recent study focused on the Caribbean Coast of Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica found that corruption, electoral competition and the politicization of security are factors that define the kind of relationship the organized criminal groups establish with a particular government and the main strategy they use (co-optation, collusion or evasion), which in turn explains the differing levels of drug trafficking-related violence in Central America (Blume, 2022).

The enormous profits of this type of business have enabled these groups to increase their investments, di-versify their activities, penetrate new market niches (legal and illicit), achieve control of new territories and craft new relationships in influential political and business spheres, giving rise to a new dynamic that affects local economies, while along the way sowing a climate of insecurity and violence in the region. As illicit economies enter territories, the illicit co-produces and subsidizes the licit, clearing the way for legal economies in which to invest, launder and increase drug money reserves (Sauls et al., 2022). Thus, the expansion of livestock production and African palm crops is also associated with hefty investment in other crops (e.g., melons), tourism, real estate and gaming (casinos, gambling, lotteries, etc.) as ways to launder money and establish territorial control (PRISMA, 2019c).

Rule of law, participation and the exercise of power

The institutional changes promoted in the region following the end of the armed conflicts in the 1990s

sought to establish a minimum baseline for democratic coexistence, meaning a framework of human rights protection and opening up opportunities for social and political participation for sectors historically excluded from decision-making spaces and mechanisms. At the same time, there was an expansion of land rights for indigenous populations in countries such as Honduras and Nicaragua. However, official rhetoric around rights in general and territorial rights in particular contrast with the notable setbacks these face in practice. The cases of Nicaragua and Honduras are emblematic of this situation. In both countries certain indigenous populations achieved significant victories with the recognition and titling of their collective lands. However, both States have lacked the political will to implement these rights in practice, especially due to the lack of procedures for stopping and reversing the invasion of those lands. In light of the presence of violent actors who invade and usurp lands, indigenous organizations need State backing to enforce the collective land titles.

In general, a trend can be observed toward hollowing of real meaning the rights won in prior periods, and the development of regulations that seek to restrict, impede, repress or control types of social and community organization is beginning to be documented. This trend is seen most clearly in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In Nicaragua, dozens of civil society organizations are being declared illegal. In Guatemala, the State criminalizes social leaders, and the same has been happening in Honduras. Also, in Guatemala and Nicaragua, laws have been passed restricting non-governmental organization (NGO) activity. In El Salvador, laws have been prepared seeking greater control over NGOs, and the state of exception, initially adopted to respond to an emergency, has been extended six times. The exceptions in this landscape continue to be Costa Rica and Panama, but both countries show growing levels of socioeconomic inequality that are eroding the legitimacy of their institutions. Panama has come through a year marked by significant social protests, and results are pending from the national dialogue process currently underway, which features the participation of social and indigenous sectors. Costa Rica is experiencing a full readjustment of its party system, in a

context in which speech justifying arbitrary or personality-based forms of exercising political power, based on arguments of efficiency or urgency, is increasingly visible.
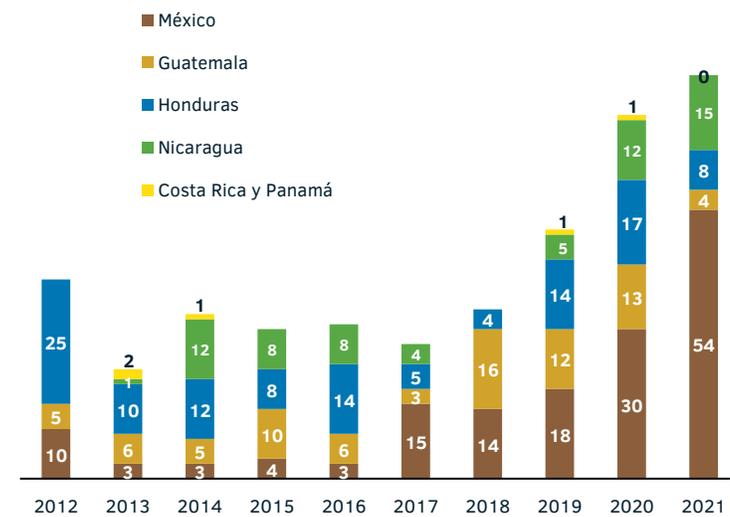
In sum, several countries are already experiencing, or are about to experience, a break with the rule of law. The main factor behind this trend is the type of influence that, in terms of the State, is exercised by economic elites, whose interests are tied up with those of regional and transnational capital. A historical feature of States in the region has been their co-optation by power groups who intertwine their specific interests with the daily operation of State agencies. This gave rise to an institutional framework with a patrimonialist logic, i.e., where officials, aware of their key role in intermediating between elites and the State, determine institutionality as if it were their own personal patrimony. In other words, the phenomenon of "corruption" is not something that can be understood absent those historical elements and the role of the economic elites. In addition to the historical continuity of the traditional elites' influence, new actors have appeared who are linked to illicit activity, mainly drug trafficking; they take advantage of this patrimonialist culture to establish ties to the State, including at the highest political levels. These actors also deploy diverse territorial control strategies. Dynamics such as "narco-ranching" and "narco-deforestation" are examples.

Regionally, the capture of the State is manifest in various phenomena. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, corruption cases have led to political crises of differing significance. Political parties organized around ideological tendencies (classified as left or right) are losing relevance. This facilitates the appearance of political movements where the figure of a "caudillo" or charismatic leader takes precedence over ideological or programmatic orientations. Even ideological parties like the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) in Nicaragua show this tendency. In El Salvador, a new political-economic power group today has control over the whole apparatus of government, prompting

realignment among traditional elites. In Honduras, while legal actions have been undertaken against the framework of corruption inherited from prior governments, the influence of the Olancho elites has made the current government legitimize what is known as the narco-highway, a road built illegally by interests linked to narco-ranching in the heart of the Muskitia. In addition, the Panama Papers international scandal revealed the mechanisms used by global and regional elites to evade taxes and launder money. It was precisely corruption and mistrust of the political-business elite that was one of the triggers of the mid-2022 protests in Panama.

This has serious implications for the legitimacy and representativity of the countries' political systems. The population perceives that institutions –from local government and political parties to justice systems and national governments– openly act as tools in the pursuit and exercise of power, losing credibility. Lacking adequate ability or legitimacy, the State addresses social and territorial conflicts using its coercive apparatus, repressing and criminalizing social and community leaders (see Figure 3). Similarly, the de facto powers have begun to use these same instruments to harass those who have exposed kleptocratic

Figure 3:
Environmental and land defenders killed
in Mesoamerican countries (2012–2020)

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information from Global Witness

networks: journalists, opinion leaders and even judicial personnel who spearheaded advances against impunity. Furthermore, expressions of diversity are attacked, and citizen participation spaces and mechanisms are shut down.

Despite attempts to move toward a culture of peace, using specific institutional spaces such as truth commissions and Human Rights ombudsmen, violence has never stopped being a tool for social control wielded by diverse actors in the region. In certain territories, the presence of illicit and extractive activities leads to an easy availability of weapons and the presence of specialists in violence. In addition, the militarization of civil security is normalized by the State apparatus. Worrying trends are also observed in popular culture, where the figure of the drug trafficker who flaunts his money and power becomes a model for young people's expectations and life projects. The daily presence of images of violence and armed agents fosters a feeling of helplessness that hampers or impedes democratic, sustainable territorial governance.

One of the key factors behind the normalization of violence is the lack of interest by elites in investing in public security and the legal system to sustain a State that exercises a monopoly over violence that is, in addition to effective, legitimate. To the contrary, often these elites prefer to cede governance in some areas to actors of the illicit economy, or they themselves participate in the violence to defend their privileges, or it is the State itself applying coercion mechanisms in ways that are in opposition to rights (Pearce, 2018).

Together with coercive violence, a roll out has also been observed of new, more "refined" or sophisticated forms of social control that make use of communications media and social networks. These technologies foster the generation and dissemination of fake news on digital platforms, used to influence opinion trends and electoral results. The extensive use of information and communication technology (ICT) also facilitates the use of technology for spying on opposition figures, social activists and journalists (Forbidden Stories, 2021).

These trends are observed, in turn, in the context of weakening international systems of governance. In the past, different international treaties and organizations for the protection of human rights and the environment have played an essential role buttressing the demands of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples and of other sectors of the population whose rights have been threatened. The crisis of organizations such as the UN, the Organization of American States (OAS) or the Central American Integration System (SICA) directly affects possibilities for advocacy by civil society organizations and territorial and communal governments.

These contexts of violence, corruption, impunity and erosion of the rule of law stress and impact territorial governance systems, and key capacities for supporting livelihoods and sustainable nature resource management practices are being lost. Local and territorial actors are not only actors in sustainable production or environmental protection; many also play a key role in the territories' social cohesion, identity and institutional life, as an integral part of civil society, together with other non-governmental and nonprofit organizations.

Territorial actors, social movements and civil society

The region's social movements have dramatically changed in recent decades. In the 1980s, these movements were characterized in some cases by socioeconomic demands and in others by seeking a radical transformation of the State. With the end of the civil wars and the opening up of democratic spaces, new civil society organizations and social movements flourished (Munck, 2021). Many NGOs arose on the initiative of professionals or activists, while new movements sprung up, such as feminist and environmental movements. Other movements reinvented themselves, as in the case of indigenous movements, which in addition to fighting for their cultural rights began to demand the right to their own territoriality and multicultural inclusion policies; or even some campesino movements that in the late 1990s began to question the agro-industrial model through a re-

covery of traditional knowledge or new sustainability-related paradigms. In contrast to the 1980s, these movements are not interested in "taking over" or radically transforming the State, but that does not mean that they are disengaged from it, since they do manage to promote legal re-forms in favor of their rights.

In this process we see territories being redefined as the basis for identity and a source of livelihoods, along with the attempt to build institutional arrangements that make them participants in a territorial governance that they seek to make inclusive, sustainable and democratic. The interest of powerful economic groups in driving accumulation strategies in these territories has increased socio-environmental conflicts, particularly where higher levels of organization are seen among indigenous, Afro-descendant and small-scale farming populations. These rural territorial actors are precisely those who are "on the front lines" of fights against the deepening of the neoliberal model, in recent years putting the defense of their rights to access, use and control over land and other natural resources (territorial rights) on center stage and promoting concrete actions in favor of socio-environmental sustainability (PRISMA, 2019e, PRISMA, 2020b). External observers have sometimes noted the environmentalist or ecological vein of these movements, although their demands are not always expressed in environmental vocabulary (Hurtado y Lungo, 2007; Cartagena, 2017; Cordero, 2017).

It is important to recognize that these territorial struggles are not focused solely on the defense of livelihoods or natural resources in the face of extractive or monoculture dynamics. Territorial actors usually address diverse questions in a parallel but integrated manner. For example, the same movements fighting for recovering or keeping access to communal lands, who defend territorial rights, also speak out and mobilize around issues such as fiscal policy or openness to globalization. At the same time, they fight for access to education in native languages, and promote cultural and artistic initiatives oriented to strengthening their identity and cosmovision. Furthermore, it is not unusual for these same rural, campesino, indigenous or Afro-descendant movements to develop rhetoric and practices that, in addition to criticizing

the logic of environmental degradation, make concrete contributions to sustainability with their own forms of agrifood production or the sustainable use of natural resources. In this process, the actors are recovering traditional campesino and indigenous knowledge, as they also often integrate knowledge from the academic world.

Thus, territorial defense in Central America is simultaneously a struggle for social and political recognition (of cultural, identity, autonomy), a struggle of an economic or distributive nature (for land, for livelihoods and for territorial rights), and a struggle for the construction of socio-environmental resilience and sustain-ability (PRISMA, 2019c). It is also important to point out the visibility and influence these territorial actors (campesinos, indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples) have acquired in the social struggles and mobilizations in the region's different countries, especially in the last decade (PRISMA, 2020b; Sáenz de Tejada, 2022).

Apart from these rural territorial actors "on the front lines," civil society in the region includes a broad range of civic, non-governmental and social organizations and social movements that concern themselves with diverse issues: local development aid to small-scale farmer production, environment, gender equity, human rights, education, health, community organizing, citizen engagement, democratization, etc. Many of these organizations are focused on responding to the negative consequences of the shrinking State driven by neoliberal policies (PRISMA, 2019c). But this specialization has also led to a high level of segmentation among different "sectors" within civil society (PRISMA, 2021).

Another trend that should be highlighted is that in recent decades, a high level of professionalization of civil society organizations has been accumulating along with this specialization. This is due to the promise of the democratization process, which offered organized citizens the possibility of influencing public policy decisions. That advocacy work led organizations to develop specialized capacities so that they could maintain dialogue with the State. However, given that spaces for dialogue and participation

in public policymaking have become uncertain, arbitrary or even completely shut down —as has happened in Nicaragua, where civil society organizations have had to close or go into exile in the face of severe harassment and repression— organizations have lost their dialogue with the State. In response, some organizations have allied with actors in their own sector to take their message to public opinion in defense of the civic space. Others have managed to keep their relevance by connecting with and directly supporting territorial actors in their defense of natural resources and their identity, while still others are only peripherally or not at all linked, despite having agendas with shared underlying concerns. Among the civil society organizations that directly support territorial actors, we see a variety of non-governmental organizations focused on specific issues and/or specialized areas; environmental defense organizations stand out, but there are also many others in areas like human rights and litigation, research, communications, technical assistance, training and capacity building.

Among those civil society actors who do not necessarily directly support the territorial actors, but who could play an important role in their defense, we find journalism and investigation organizations, as well as those that address issues of transparency and anti-corruption, peace culture and risk management, among others. Other organizations and social movements share their questioning of the hegemonic neoliberal model, but they occupy different spaces for struggle. Examples include various types of urban movements, such as those for the right to housing, or organizations focused on the struggle for recognition of identity, such as movements of the LGBTIQ+ community or some immigrant movements.

The few ties between territorial actors and these more specialized sectors of civil society is explained, on the one hand, by the specificity of their agendas, matching sectoral spaces of State institutions. On the other hand, it is also explained by the selective way the State uses harassment against civil society leaders and organizations, which disadvantages the construction of coordination processes and joint agendas. Despite the limitations, there are many networks of organizations and coalitions that build bridges among different stakeholders, issues and spheres belonging to civil society.

Finally, it is worth warning that there is also a pernicious increase in anti-rights groups, who develop hate speech and who tend to take advantage of social fears with a populist or clientelist rationale. In the Central American context, in most cases this involves groups supported by the State "that position themselves as part of civil society but attack fundamental and universal human rights" (CIVICUS, 2019). In recent years, their tactics have multiplied and become more sophisticated, turning into yet another source of repression of civic spaces and of harassment, particularly against traditionally excluded groups (ibid.).

DYNAMICS AND GOVERNANCE IN CENTRAL AMERICAN TERRITORIES

The trends observed in the region are increasingly complex, and they operate differently in the territories depending on the specifics of the local context, the capacity of territorial actors and governance systems. Throughout the region, diverse territories and their ecosystems –from coastal areas to mountainous and wooded zones– are being fought over and subject to rampant degradation and exclusion processes. Some ecosystems represent the last remnants of natural wealth, including biodiversity and carbon reserves, as in the case of forests; but they also represent spaces where small-scale farming, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities "on the front lines" face different economic dynamics as a result of the expansion of extractive activities, infrastructure megaprojects, real estate tourism or the operation of illicit actors, such as those in drug trafficking.

Below we present a series of territorial cases –one per country in the region– that illustrate the diversity and complexity of the prevailing dynamics, as well as the implications for territorial governance.
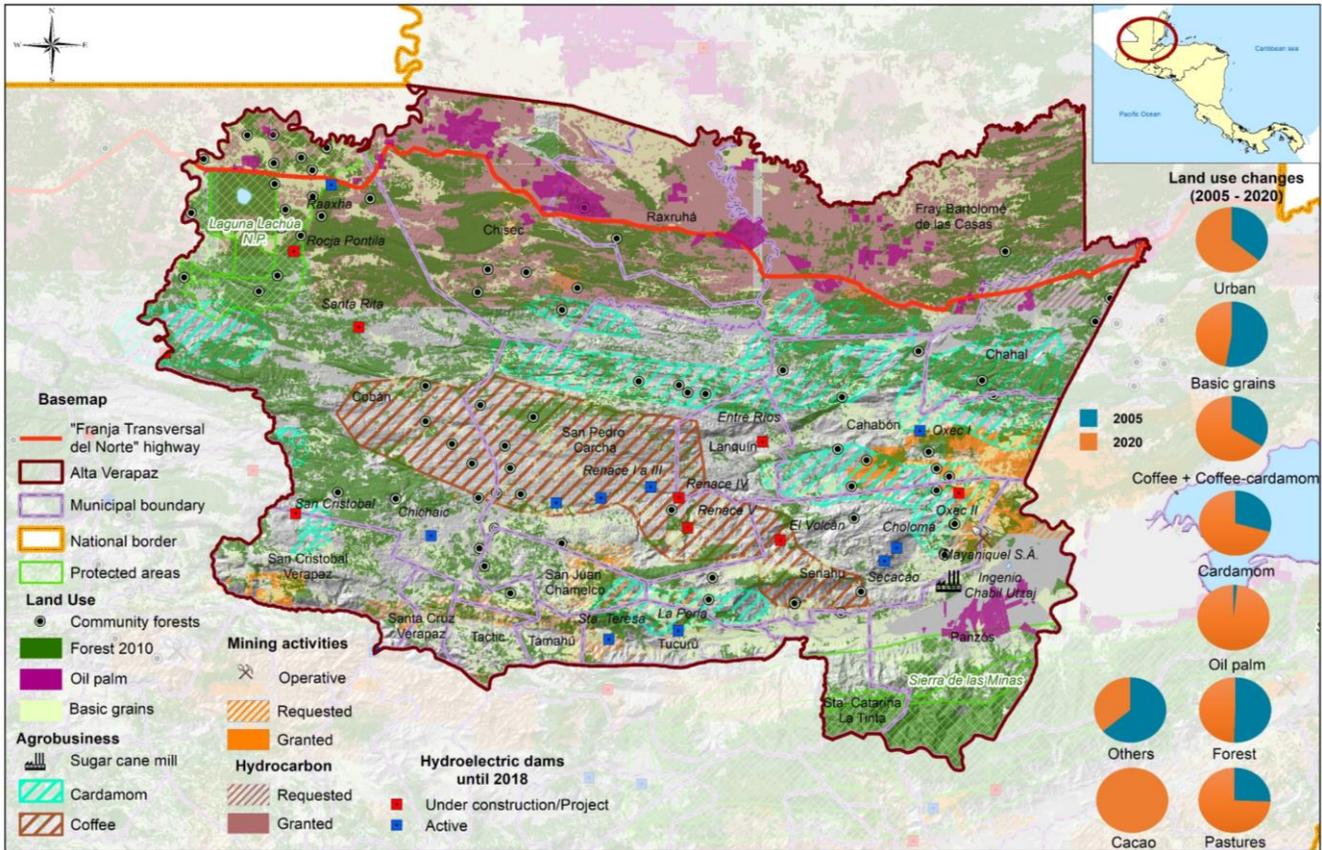
Alta Verapaz, Guatemala

The department of Alta Verapaz is located in the north of Guatemala, bordering Petén to the north; Quiché to the west; Zacapa and Baja Verapaz to the south; and Izabal to the east (SEGEPLAN, 2003). Its department capital is Cobán; it comprises 16 municipalities and has a geographical area of 8,686 km². It is a mainly rural territory, with much cultural and natural wealth; 90% of the population is indigenous, mainly Q'eqchí people. It has forests with great ecological and commercial value, mineral deposits, oil and rushing rivers. The department has important export crop production (coffee, cardamom, cacao and annatto) where small-scale farmers, cooperatives and commercialization enterprises participate, and there are also families dedicated to farming vegetables, spices and other, smaller crops, some of whom use

agroecological practices under strong leadership from women. During the last decade, the northern part of the department has seen an increase in oil palm crops, which are cultivated on large-scale farms. These are big business investments, both national and mixed (national and international). This expansion is related to violent practices usurping land used for family farming, and the crops also lead to heavy environmental impact due to deforestation and pollution (Hurtado, 2008; Fradejas et al., 2008).

Three large productive landscapes are observed: the highlands located in the southern part of the department and those in the Polochic valley; and the lowlands that are part of the Traverse Fringe of the North-ern Transversal Strip (FTN). Although the department's average altitude is 745 m above sea level, its topography is highly varied due to the presence of mountains and peaks over 2,000 m and lowlands with altitudes of just 300 m. This leads to huge variation in the climate from one place to another in the department. Alta Verapaz's climate is defined as semi-dry, very wet with no defined dry season, with average annual temperatures of 17°C to 21°C and average precipitation above 2,000 mm (SEGEPLAN, 2002). The very wet tropical forest occupies 72.37% of the territory and houses tropical species of very high commercial and ecological value. Regarding potential land use, 56.74% corresponds to non-arable land, suitable only for forest harvesting or certain kinds of crops; however, the land use is fundamentally agricultural, where 31% of use is concentrated in diverse agricultural crops, especially basic grains (18.6%) (MAGA, 2006).

Large-scale farming is defined by three agricultural products: coffee, cardamom and palm for oil production. Oil palm has seen accelerated expansion: in 2003 there were 31,000 hectares planted and in 2018 there were an estimated 163,000 hectares (Cano, 2018 and

Map 3
Territorial dynamics in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala

Source: Prepared by the authors using Infraestructura de Datos Espaciales de Guatemala (2022); Geocomunes (2018); MAGA (2020)18); MAGA (2020)

Grepalma, 2020). This crop model causes heavy environmental, labor and social impact, as well as to serious conflicts due to pressures and violent coercion for the sale of lands that are used for family food production.

According to the XII Population and VII Housing Census, 2018, the department's population is 1,215,028 inhabitants (8.15% of the national population). Around 50.38% of the population is female, and of the department's total population, 68.75% live in areas considered rural. Alta Verapaz has a high percentage of young people, where 38.9% of the population is in the 0 to 14 years age range, and 29.7% in the 15 to 29 range. Over 90% of the Alta Verapaz department's total population is indigenous; the Q'eqchí people is the main ethnic group and the Pocomchí people is the second most important.

The department's social indicators are alarming: the level of general poverty is 83.1%, and it is the poorest department in Guatemala, which has a national average poverty rate of 59.3%. In Alta Verapaz, 53.6% of the population lives in extreme poverty, and according to the 2015 Mother–Child Health Survey (ENSMI), the average chronic malnutrition rate is 50%. The Food Security and Food Survey conducted by Rimisp in late 2020 showed that food insecurity in this territory is as high as 60% (Cano, 2021).

Main territorial dynamics

The department's natural wealth and productive diversity stand in contrast to the worst poverty and mal-nutrition indicators, as a result of the prevailing structure of inequality in the territory which has been taking shape since independence, when liberal

governments promoted coffee exportation, facilitating the appropriation of Q'eqchí lands by European immigrant businesspeople who took control of the region jointly with national elites using varied mechanisms such as the Agrarian Law to usurp communal and community lands (Quiles, 2019).

During the 20th century, development models continued to meet the needs of economic elites. The State produced a development agenda with regional scope in what is known as the Northern Transversal Strip,[2] which in 1954 arose as an area of high interest due to its natural wealth. The military governments drove rural colonization in this territory as an outlet for pressure from small-scale farmers over land; however, what prevailed was land appropriation and resource exploitation by business and military groups who knew of the existence of oil and minerals (Solano, 2007). The armed conflict of the 1960s halted this trend, and Alta Verapaz become an area of confrontation between the guerrilla and the armed forces. The militarization of the region resulted in numerous massacres, including the Panzós Massacre in 1973, where 53 campesinos died-men, women and children gunned down by military personnel as the former demanded land titling (CEH, 1999).

The Peace Accords (1996) opened up a favorable scenario for a new cycle of oil, mining and hydroelectric investments and cane and oil palm monocropping, as the construction of the FTN highway gained momentum under the framework of the Plan Puebla Panama and the Mesoamerican Project. These economic–political models led to agrarian conflicts and the violent eviction of the population. In 2009, the Assessment and first lines of the FTN development plan were drafted. The document acknowledged the severe territorial conflictivity, and there was further development of an interagency consultation and integration process. In contrast, conflictivity in the territory increased in conjunction with the growing extractive dynamic (Solano, 2012). The Alta Verapaz department is characterized by great productive diversity focused on the exportation and production of

food for family consumption, but there is a marked dichotomy regarding land ownership. Large land holding and agribusiness systems are dominated by economic elites (Sosa, 2016) that primarily produce coffee and oil palm, while small-scale family farming produces not only basic grains but also diverse crops such as fruits and vegetables, in addition to export products that include cardamom, cacao and annatto. Alta Verapaz is the main cardamom producer in Guatemala and produces 31% of cacao nationally. Public, private and cooperation organizations have contributed to the increase in high-quality production and capacity building among farmers in the department, especially in terms of cacao (Tapia, 2018).

However, family farmers linked to export chains generally depend on brokers ("coyotes") who buy their products directly on their plots and then market them to diverse buyers, including wholesalers or large wholesalers. In general, small farmers are highly vulnerable in export production chains, depending on technological packages provided by intermediaries, which they acquire on loan and often pay back with their production. Furthermore, they have little ability to negotiate the purchase price, which means they are obligated to sell at market prices set by the broker. Family farmers take on all the costs, tasks and risks of production. In recent years, fluctuation of product prices, climate impact and the COVID-19 pan-demic have affected family finances, decreasing income and producing negative impact on families' quantity and quality of food (Cano, 2021).

Family farmers are situated in productive chains as the weakest link because they lack economic incentives, systematic technical assistance, agricultural insurance and productive supports and enjoy many fewer supportive public policies. There is deep concern among families due to this situation of uncertainty, particularly among the women who are seeking more diversified alternatives to put food on the table and have various commercialization options.

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[2] It includes areas of the Quiché, Alta Verapaz and Izabal departments, a total of 13 municipalities: 4 in Quiché (Chajul, Nebaj, Uspantán, Ixcán); 7 in Alta Verapaz (Cobán, San Pedro Carchá, Lanquín, Cahabón, Chisec, Chahal and Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas); and 2 in Izabal (Livingston and El Estor).

Extreme climate events worsen socio-environmental vulnerability, affecting the rural population's livelihoods. From 1974 to 2004 the country's most severe droughts were recorded in the Alta Verapaz and Petén territories; in 2012 the El Niño phenomenon struck with a period of heavy drought in the southern territory of Alta Verapaz (GWP, 2014), then in late 2020 tropical storms Eta and Iota left serious losses and damages from flooding, affecting the production of basic grains and vegetables, a situation that gave rise to a panoply of emergency projects (Cano, 2021). In terms of COVID-19, it has had negative impact due to the restrictions on movement imposed by confinement, which interrupted commercialization, producing a drop in sales and the subsequent impact on farmers' income. This had a ripple effect on the quantity and quality of food, as well as on indebtedness, a reduction in household spending and labor migration (ibid.).

There are several active conflicts tied to the expansion of monocropping and megaprojects that seek to take advantage of the territory's significant resources and which enter into conflict with indigenous and small-scale farming communities. In the Polochic river valley, agro-industrial crops have been gaining ground, especially oil palm and sugarcane. Oil palm is expanding in the northern lowlands and the departments that comprise this region (Petén, Izabal, Alta Verapaz and Quiché). In Alta Verapaz, the expansion of palm is seen in the municipalities of Chisec, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, Panzós, Chahal and Cobán (Hurtado, 2008). In the last decade, the areas of cane expansion registered the highest number of conflicts over rights disputes.

The expansion of monocropping has been facilitated by multilateral banks and State action through a land regularization program and the creation of new mechanisms for expanding production on small-scale farming parcels with programs promoting palm production among small producers (PRORURAL) (Grünberg et al., 2012). In the northern part of the department, there are livestock expansion processes, also largely facilitated by land regularization programs. This involves a process directly linked to the increase in surface area of African palm, since ranchers sell their lands and migrate north, frequently toward protected areas (Cuéllar et al., 2012).

The monocropping expansion dynamic causes bitter disputes between two types of land appropriation and use. National and transnational economic groups seek greater profitability through the extensive use and concentration of land and water, in opposition to the territorial forms of the Q'eqchí people and campesino movements, which are subsistence-based with an informal structure of social property and community organization. These disputes for the control of natural resources previously managed by native peoples have implications for migration flows and territorial depopulation: the violence that is a by-product of the re-concentration of land leads to many rural inhabitants being forced to migrate, whether to the United States or to other parts of Guatemala.

On the Cahabón and Oxec rivers there are seven dams. Communities have opposed the channeling of the rivers due to its environmental repercussions, denouncing illegal logging and the violation of indigenous peoples' international rights, since in addition to not being consulted, the river and its forests are considered sacred, while the communities also depend on fishing and water for their livelihoods. Community resistence actions against the dams has led to the criminalization of leaders. This conflictivity explains why Alta Verapaz is one of the departments where more attacks on community and indigenous land and nature defenders are reported (De Luis R. & Rodríguez Carmona, 2016). The penetration of drug trafficking into the territory's social fabric and political life complicates this situation of violence. According to Briscoe & Rodriguez (2010), illicit groups seek to create conditions for moving freely in the territory, buying goodwill and sympathy among different actors, thus taking advantage of the land route connecting the Atlantic coast with the Mexican border.

Implications for governance

Alta Verapaz reflects critical issues for governance in Central America, which are expressed in the series of demands by campesino and indigenous organizations for the right to land, nature and food sovereignty in opposition to models that promote violent disposses-sion, exclusion and degradation, and which deepen social and environmental vulnerability, fostering in-ternal migration and emigration abroad. This con-text requires strategies that strengthen the territorial social fabric and organizations' capacity for protec-tion and resilience in the face of an adverse context. In fact, there are experiences that show how commu-nity organizations have managed to advance toward resilience strategies that enable them to overcome di-verse threats. These are organizing processes for re-covering land through community property regis-ters, community defense mechanisms against vio-lence, partnerships for generating information, pro-cesses for transitioning toward agroecology on family and community plots and the setting up of campes-ino markets. These efforts go hand in hand with com-munity empowerment, where the leadership of indig-enous women is ac-quiring greater importance.

The projects being conceived among communities and diverse local actors provide lessons for inclusive and sustainable governance, despite not receiving support adequate to the adverse climate they face. The challenge is in how to strengthen and expand these efforts, foster dialogue, stimulate shared reflec-tion on the problem, and encourage partnerships and interactions that facilitate more coordinated actions adapted to the territory's priorities.

The Atlantic Coast and Honduran Muskitia

The northeastern region of Honduras stretches from the Cortés department to Gracias a Dios and is com-posed of two key territories: the Atlantic Coast and Muskitia, where diverse dynamics and actors co-exist that affect the governance and land rights of their communities.
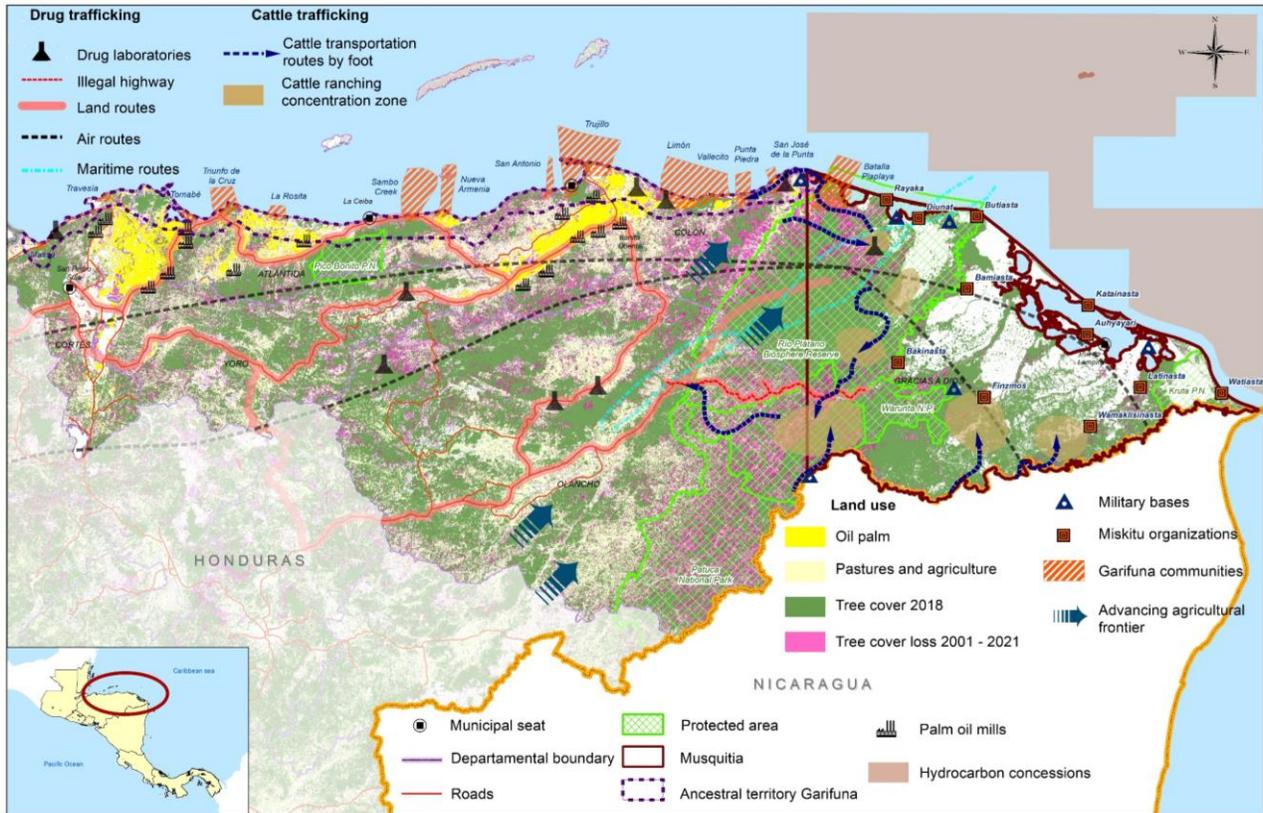
Along the Coast lives the Garifuna people, which unites 48 communities with a population of 300,000 inhabitants; only one small sector lives in the Muskitia. Recognition of their territorial rights dates back to 1885 when they received the first legal recog-nition through community titling of their lands in Santa Fe, San Antonio and Guadalupe. That point marked the beginning of the defense of their land (Oxfam, 2016), which is characterized by diverse eco-systems that have faced intense processes of degrada-tion and fragmentation with the expansion of Afri-can palm and different tourism and extractive mega-projects, in addition to the presence of illicit actors.

For its part, the Muskitia represents around 20% of national territory, possessing the country's largest protected natural area, the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve, home of the Pech, Tawahka, Garifuna and Miskitu peoples (PRISMA, 2021a). The last group represents 85% of the population, and from 2012 to 2016, the Honduran Government granted 12 collec-tive property titles, key to the comprehensive man-agement of their natural and territorial resources. Since the last decade, their territory has been consid-ered a strategic location for invasion dynamics and the pressures of de facto power (PRISMA, 2017).

Main territorial dynamics

The Miskitu and Garifuna peoples have seen an in-crease in their vulnerability as a result of the multiple pressures linked to the grabbing and exploitation of their natural resources. The absence of the State to enforce their collective rights has encouraged land in-vasion, which is one of the main dynamics jeopardiz-ing their livelihoods (PRISMA, 2021). Both territo-ries have become a strategic corridor for illicit activ-ities like drug trafficking, which simultaneously rein-forces the expansion of extractive activities such as African palm plantation and narco-ranching for money laundering (see Map 4).

Map 4
Territorial dynamics on the Atlantic Coast and Honduran Muskitia

Source: Prepared by the authors using Hansen/UMD/Google/USGS/NASA, accessed via Global Forest Watch (2022); InsightCrime (2022); PRISMA (2012); Consejo de Investigaciones del Caribe Centroamericano (CCARC) (2003); Instituto Nacional de Conservación y Desarrollo Forestal, Áreas Protegidas y Vida Silvestre (ICF) (2022)

Since the 1990s, the Garifuna have faced a legal framework[3] that promotes the commercialization, grabbing and individualization of their ancestral communal lands (Oxfam, 2016). After the banana enclave, African palm has been positioned as a "new enclave" where communities fight to keep their lands and traditional practices in the face of degrading farming processes, which have been driven by the market boom and pro-motion by the government as a fundamental component of development (Cuéllar et al., 2012). This in turn is financed by illicit capital from drug trafficking (PRISMA, 2014).

The community of Vallecito,[4] in the department of Colón, has been a key objective for the expansion of palm. In 1994, the community was affected by the appropriation of 100 hectares of ancestral lands for establishing the crop (Oxfam, 2016; EJAtlas, 2015). Currently, there are 190,000 hectares of palm on the Atlantic Coast,[5] nearly 80% of which is found on Garifuna territory (Mongabay, 2020).

In 2004, when the Vallecito community recovered its 100 ha, they were newly dispossessed, this time by illicit actors who forced the community to abandon

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[3] Counter agrarian reform, framed under the Agricultural Sector Modernization and Development Act, which allowed the sale of lands, and the Property Act, in its Article 100, allowed the possibility of terminating community titles.

[4] Vallecito is located in the municipality of Limón, department of Colón. In addition to African palm, this territory was occupied for a time by a landholder who built a landing strip for drug trafficking. Vallecito is on the frontier of African palm expansion, which reaches along the Atlantic Coast toward Muskitia.

[5] Honduras has 190,000 hectares of African palm https://www.elheraldo.hn/economia/honduras-alcanza-190000-hectareas-de-palma-africana-BNEH1193233

their territory in order to build a clandestine landing strip for drug smuggling (EJAtlas, 2015). According to Oxfam (2016), the construction of landing strips is an illegal but frequent practice in the department of Colón, one of the most used by drug trafficking.

The increase in illicit actors in Honduras is particularly attributed to the 2009 coup d'état, when they took advantage of the crisis, along with corruption and impunity within the country's security forces and elite, to accelerate their activities (InSight Crime, 2021a; Cuéllar et al., 2012). The situation worsened security in the communities, when in 2014 twenty Vallecito inhabitants received death threats and were kidnapped for hours by these actors, who were presumably trying to rehabilitate the landing strip, which had been destroyed by the army several months prior (PRISMA, 2014).

The 2009 crisis also bolstered the increase in dispossession and criminalization of the Garifuna people, through investments and the development of luxurious tourist projects, many of which were accompanied by legal distortions (OFRANEH, 2013). Such is the case of the "Los Micos Beach and Gold Resort" mega-project, today known as Indura Beach and Gold Resort in the Atlántida department. A Global Witness (2017) report revealed that the Honduran government, through the National Port Authority (ENP) continuously required the illegal eviction of the Garifuna people from Barra Vieja. The ENP brought an illegal accusation of usurpation against leaders and other members of the community. Curiously, this tourist complex is on ancestral lands covered by the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Oxfam, 2016).

This dynamic of dispossession also threatens communities in Trujillo Bay, in the department of Colón, where the development of mega tourist projects by Canadian investers has exacerbated the usurpation of Garifuna lands. As mentioned by MacNeill (2017), after the 2009 coup, the promotion of the first Economic Employment and Development Zone (ZEDE) –which would be located directly in the Trujillo region– was enthusiastically adopted.

In 2013, the organic law promoting the creation of the ZEDE was authorized. This law allows the auctioning off of strips of national territory, including areas in Trujillo Bay up to Rio Sico, where 24 Garifuna communities are located. These communities are considered under threat by the possible dissolution of their community titles, leading to the displacement of their people (IACHR, 2021). In April 2022, the new government issued a measure to Congress to repeal the law, suspending the creation of ZEDEs, although the permit for the zones is still in force in the Constitution (Los Angeles Times, 2022).

In the Muskitia, starting in the 1980s, a significant increase was seen in colonizers who came to the territory in search of land for crops and livestock (Cuéllar et al., 2012), a situation that has dramatically increased because of drug trafficking.

The presence of these illicit actors has had a huge impact on the land, driving the expansion of illegal cattle ranching as another means of laundering money and establishing territorial control (Cuéllar et al., 2012). Changes in land use related to the expansion of palm on the Atlantic Coast have created a growing migration of colonists tied to cattle ranching who come from the departments of Colón and Olancho and who often have arrived in eastern Muskitia to act as fronts for drug traffickers (InSight Crime, 2022; PRISMA, 2021).

These illicit actors are attracted by frontier spaces or by those with a certain abundance of land, such as indigenous territories and protected areas, precisely because the landholding regimes are weak and coexist with the lack of government presence (Tellman et al., 2021; Cuéllar et al., 2012). The cocaine that enters Honduras from South America crosses the Muskitia, which is where the land route begins. This path goes through the rest of the Atlantic Coast territories toward Guatemala and Mexico before reaching the United States. These actors usurp lands to create clandestine landing strips and also enrich themselves with the sale of precious woods such as mahogany and cedar, accelerating forest loss (InSight Crime,

2022); together with narco-ranching,[6] this drives the conversion of large swaths of forest into pastureland (PRISMA, 2017).

According to the Forest Conservation Institute (FCI), during the 2016-2020 period, the loss of 39,000 ha of forest has been observed, linked to illegal cattle ranching (Mongabay, 2021a). Although official figures on the quantity of livestock within the Reserve are not known, InSight Crime (2022) data estimate that around 65,000 head of cattle are being raised. This same report reveals that the cattle entering the Reserve are brought from the departments of Colón and Olancho or from Nicaragua, across the Rio Coco which di-vides the Rio Platano Reserve from the BOSAWAS Biosphere in that country. Colonists illegally cut paths or employ native people to round up the animals on journeys through the jungle that can last up to 15 days. The cattle are then sent back to Olancho and Colón, where one part is slaughtered and packed for the local market, while the other enters a smuggling route (another form of money laundering) that stretches to Guatemala and then Mexico[7] (InSight Crime, 2022).

Along with narco-ranching, another dynamic concerning the Muskitia ecosystem and its people is the construction of a "narco-highway." According to recent studies, the highway directly crosses the Rio Platano Reserve buffer zone, connecting the municipalities of Dulce Nombre de Culmí in Olancho and Wapusirpi in Gracias a Dios, thus extending a conduit for illicit actors to traffic drugs, wood and livestock (InSight Crime, 2021b; Mongabay, 2021b). The highway construction began in 2008 but accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, deforesting nearly 30,000 ha of forest in the last three years (El Heraldo, 2022a; Mongabay, 2021b). Furthermore, it is presumed that those financing the highway are business-people and politicians with ties to drug traffickers and large cattle ranching interests in Olancho department (Monga-bay, 2021b).

To ensure the execution of these activities, illicit actors turn to violence with the goal of controlling the territories to protect their interests. The levels of violence depend on the relationship between these actors and the State. As Blume (2022) points out, drug traffickers in Honduras use co-optation as a strategy, due to widespread corruption, since they must pay numerous actors to ensure their illicit route, given that the security apparatus is more fragmented. As a result, co-optation generates greater levels of violence.

In response to these illicit activities, the State approved in 2010 an aggressive military deployment, giving the army a larger role in halting these activities. During this period, 2,000 soldiers were deployed to the Atlantic Coast (Cuéllar et al., 2012). This situation is no different from the current one: according to El Heraldo (2022b), after the impact of the narco-highway was revealed in April 2022, the new government announced the deployment of 2,000 soldiers to protect and preserve the Rio Platano Reserve and other natural areas.

The fight against these illicit activities has led to the normalization of militarization within the Miskitu and Garifuna territories, which far from resolving the drug trafficking problem, are used for government surveillance of these peoples, repressing their leaders and increasing their likelihood of being criminalized (Blume, Sauls & Knight, 2022; Cuéllar et al., 2012). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has expressed its deep concern for reports of the army's violent actions against these communities. According to Global Witness (2020b), Honduras remains on the list of the most dangerous countries for environmental defense, with the highest murder rate against people who resist and defend their territories.

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[6] The relationship between cattle ranching and drug trafficking is so intimate that the communities refer to this phenomenon as "narco-ranching".

[7] According to InSight Crime, the purchase and sale of cattle is mainly done in cash, involving various intermediaries, and monitoring by authorities is insufficient for tracking the true origin of the livestock. Thus, criminal actors can inject illicitly gained money into industry with the purchase of livestock and inputs for production, obtaining legal profits with the sale.

Implications for governance

The diversity of dynamics and illicit actors throughout the Atlantic Coast and Muskitia undermines these peoples' territorial governance processes, despite enjoying the recognition of their territorial rights. The lack of State will to enforce the rights and halt the invasions is also exacerbating climate vulnerability and limiting the possibilities for building resilience.

Although the State promoted the titling of these lands, it has in parallel driven initiatives that foster land invasion and grabbing. Blume (2022) indicates that this has allowed corporations and illicit actors to get involved in the appropriation of the lands with no repercussions. Unbridled corruption increases opportunities for drug traffickers to influence municipal authorities via co-optation. For example, in the Muskitia, land invasion has been supported by the actions of local governments and their mayors, who have facilitated illegal land sales to settle invaders and promote the opening of the illegal highway (PRISMA, 2021). This has led to conflicts between municipal authorities and territorial authorities over resource governance, where both claim to be the legitimate authority. This situation has created conditions for illicit actors to finance parallel governance structures to undermine the existing ones, which they perceive as hostile, to then claim that their structure is the legitimate one (Blume et al., 2022).

In addition to this set of interactions, governance processes are limited by the deployment of militarization, which does not reflect the priorities of the communities struggling against these invasions. As a result, the peoples turn to diverse strategies to face displacement and the emptying of their communities via forced migration, particularly on the Atlantic Coast.

On the other hand, there are cases that demonstrate community actions in defense of their rights in a peaceful, open and direct manner. In Vallecito, Garifuna communities have implemented strategies that led to the successful recovery of their lands, which have been highly coveted by organized crime

(PRISMA, 2014). Furthermore, in this territory there is an emerging proposal for autonomy based on ancestral food sovereignty, with the production of coconut for the communities' diet and for processing coconut oil. Like wise, there is a proposal for ancestral wisdom in natural medicine to offer a response in managing COVID-19, via Ancestral Health Centers.

Collective rights have been key to the construction of alternatives by the communities. However, the absence of political will from the State to enforce these rights and confront the diverse dynamics of exclusion and violence continues to be lacking in practice. To defend their rights, the peoples and communities need to strengthen and create new strategies and alliances for the future of their territories.

Ahuachapán, El Salvador

The department of Ahuachapán is located in the western part of El Salvador. It borders Guatemala to the west-northwest, to the northeast with the department of Santa Ana, to the southeast with the department of Sonsonate and to the south with the Pacific Ocean.

It is subdivided into 12 municipalities: Apaneca, Atiquizaya, Concepción de Ataco, El Refugio, Guaymango, San Lorenzo, San Francisco Menéndez, San Pedro Puxtla, Tacuba and Turín. Each municipality is governed by a mayor and a plural municipal council, with representation from diverse political parties.

Currently, Ahuachapán's economy continues to be heavily linked to the agriculture sector, a feature that has characterized the department historically. For a long time, coffee was the product that defined its economy and provided employment to a significant percentage of its inhabitants. However, because of the pro-longed crisis that this crop has been going through for decades, the agricultural sector has needed to diversify. Today, sugarcane is the export crop taking hold among large-scale farmers. Livestock, along with the production of basic grains and vegetables, has also filled the gap left by coffee production in the department's economy, principally among small and medium farmers.

However, the importance of the agricultural sector has been decreasing in recent decades in favor of the service sector, consistent with changes promoted nationally by the central government since the 1990s.

This transformation has also been reflected in its population. Traditionally rural, in recent years the urban population has increased significantly; 2007 was the first year in which the department saw a decrease in rural inhabitants, while urban inhabitants doubled.

Paradoxically, dependence on agriculture and rural territory have not translated to an increase in food security for its population. Ahuachapán is consistently ranked among the top departments with the greatest rates of delay in weight and height among children (CONASAN, 2016). Likewise, as of 2011 nearly 50% of adults had a non-communicable chronic disease (overweight/obesity, dyslipidemia, hypertension, diabetes, etc.) (Romero, 2011), illnesses closely linked to food quality.

These figures are also paradoxical when contrasted with the department's natural abundance. From its coastal plains with the Barra de Santiago complex, the country's second most important mangrove forest, to the fertile lands of the central western plateau to the north, where the department capital is found; and encompassing the highlands of the system formed by the Tacuba mountains and the Apaneca-Ilamatepec range, site of the El Imposible National Park (PNEI), the country's most important protected forest. These diverse ecosystems are home to a great diversity of flora and fauna, and together they complement the livelihoods of the department's inhabitants through tourist and fishing activities, among others.

However, that diversity of altitud also divides the department into two barely interconnected regions, which has hampered intradepartmental exchanges and more equitable development of the territory. While in the north the department capital monopolizes development processes, which in turn
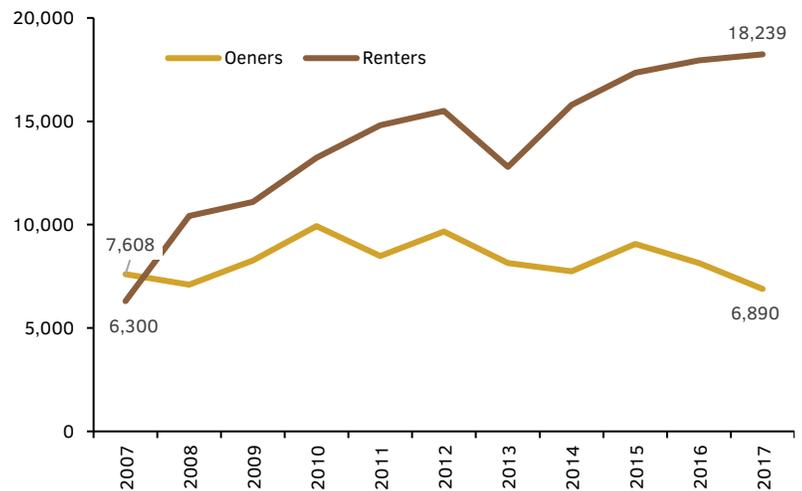
are fueled by ex-changes with the city of Santa Ana in the neighboring department of the same name, the south has the Coastal highway, the axis joining the coastal towns with the La Hachadura border to the west and the department of Sonsonate to the east.

Another important challenge for the department is climate change, which is particularly important for a farming territory. Thus, prolonged drought or even prolonged rains –linked to the upsurge in phenomena like La Niña and El Niño– threaten to destroy the livelihoods of thousands of people. Export crops are also threatened: with rising temperatures, surfaces in high areas occupied by coffee plantations decrease, and crops are more vulnerable to pests (Gay et al., 2006).

Main territorial dynamics

The complex relationship that the department has with its resources has led to diverse dynamics of conflict and pressure on them. The decline of the coffee sector and the need for farming diversification has put more pressure on the land, access to which continues to be limited. According to data from El Salvador's General Directorate of Statistics and Census (DIGESTYC), while in 2007 there were more farmers accessing land as owners than as renters, in 2017 the

Figure 4
Ahuachapán: Farmers
Owners and renters, 2007–2017

Source: Prepared by the authors based on DIGESTYC data

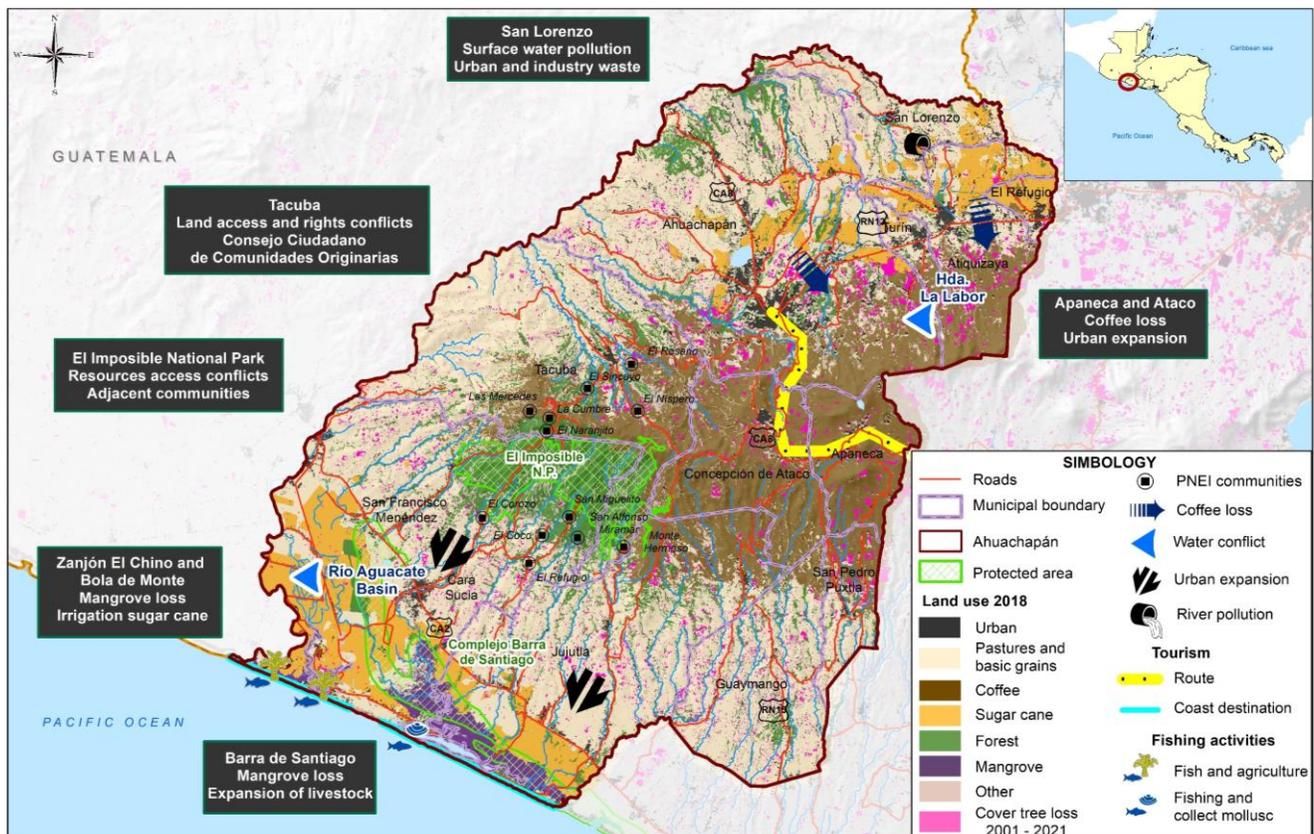number of renters had tripled, with a slight drop in the number of owners.

In addition to large landholders and medium and small local farmers, the competition for land is joined by new actors such as real estate companies who have seen an opportunity in the department for expanding their businesses by hitching themselves to existing development dynamics. Thus, in the north, there are increasing numbers of residential projects that are built on previously agricultural land, targeted to the urban population overflowing from the area's cities.

These actors also join the competition for water resources in the territory. While large-scale farmers – mainly sugarcane– dig wells and dam up rivers (occasionally illegally) to water their export crops all year round, and local communities fight to have water for their subsistence parcels and daily activities, real es-

tate developers come to fight for water for their residential projects. This conflict has escalated such that community leaders who protest against the indiscriminate use of water have been arrested and tried by government authorities who weigh in favor of real estate developments.

This conflict also has a direct impact on the area's ecology, since mangrove forests depend directly on the fresh water that comes to the coast via rivers, which maintain their salinity levels in a delicate balance that enables them to live. If freshwater decreases, the increase in salinity makes the channel waters uninhabitable for the mangrove species that sustain the ecosystem. This situation also directly affects the livelihoods of coastal communities, for whom fishing and tourism are activities that complement their family income.

Map 5
Territorial dynamics in Ahuachapán, El Salvador

Source: Prepared by the authors using CRS 2018; Global Human Settlement Layer (GHSL), 2022; Hansen/UMD/Google/USGS/NASA, accessed via Global Forest Watch (2022); Secretaría de la Presidencia (2012)

Another area where conflicts over access to resources occur is around the PNEI. There, bordering communities find themselves in a confusing situation with regard to the regulations that apply for using forest resources, such as the use of land for farming. Inhabitants have fresh memories of the time when a strict prohibition zone around the park was decreed, where any kind of activity threatening the tree cover was prohibited. However, despite this measure having lapsed, it is unclear which activities can be undertaken. This has also had implications for conservation efforts promoted by external actors interested in reforestation. Since it is uncertain whether or not the timber resources in the buffer zone can be utilized, communities prefer not to get involved in projects with non-fruit species, since that ends up reducing their farming areas and they cannot use the timber.

Ahuachapán was not spared by the COVID-19 pandemic that scourged the world in recent years. The strict quarantine measures adopted in the first months of the public health emergency in the country meant the abrupt and absolute suspension of the flow of tourists who choose the department's coastal-marine or high-land areas. Likewise, it was impossible for fishers to leave their communities to market their marine products.

Implications for governance

Faced with these conflicts over livelihoods, different responses staked on governance are connected with diverse dialogue mechanisms or coalitions on different scales. In the municipality of Tacuba, indigenous communities have organized to work in defense of their livelihoods, as well as promoting the defense of their identity and culture. Thanks to their organized advocacy work, they have managed to establish an agreement with the Municipal Town Hall under which the latter will acquire land and turn it over to the communities under loan and restitution so that it may be farmed collectively in accordance with the communities' uses and customs. Despite this victory achieved through organizing, the situation of dispossession to which indigenous peoples have been relegated continues to be alarming.

Water defense work is also emblematic in the department's southern zone, in particular in the Aguacate River basin. Different communities have coordinated around the problem of overuse of this waterway by large-scale sugarcane farmers, a use that jeopardizes their own livelihoods. Today they have expanded their work to more areas of environmental management: in addition to having a mangrove co-management agreement, they are backing the creation and strengthening of spaces for young people, with emphasis on environmental education and defense of natural resources.

These governance processes in defense of livelihoods are also supported by civil society institutional actors from within and outside the department. Some initiatives work for the restoration of Ahuachapán's productive landscapes, with governance as a central focus. Coordinating among farmers, research centers, community development associations, water boards, etc., a network is sought that would be able to scale up and sustain over time the changes promoted –best farming practices, climate resilience, agroecology, inclusion of young people and women in farming, etc.– and that these may translate to high-quality development for rural communities and territories.

Other proposals promote opening up spaces for dialogue and action around wellbeing as defined by the people of the territory. The concept of wellbeing that has come from these spaces –or coalitions– has at its heart food security and livelihoods. Of the three coalitions configured, the two with most success were able to formulate a proposal for a Municipal Technical-Farming Unit that would aid farmers in their municipalities.

However, it is important to keep in mind that in recent years there has been a shift in priorities based on public policies related to environmental protection, farming, infrastructure development, etc. And despite certain openness from technical levels of government agencies, it is not at all clear that these local governance proposals will find resonance and backing among decision-makers at higher levels of the public institutional structure. Even in cases where mayors and town councils have been receptive, the

current situation of scarce financing for local governments imposes severe limits on the support they can offer. This disconnect between public policies and territorial initiatives increases the risk of duplication of efforts, coordination problems and finally the abandonment of these spaces.

North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (por sus siglas en español RACCN), Nicaragua
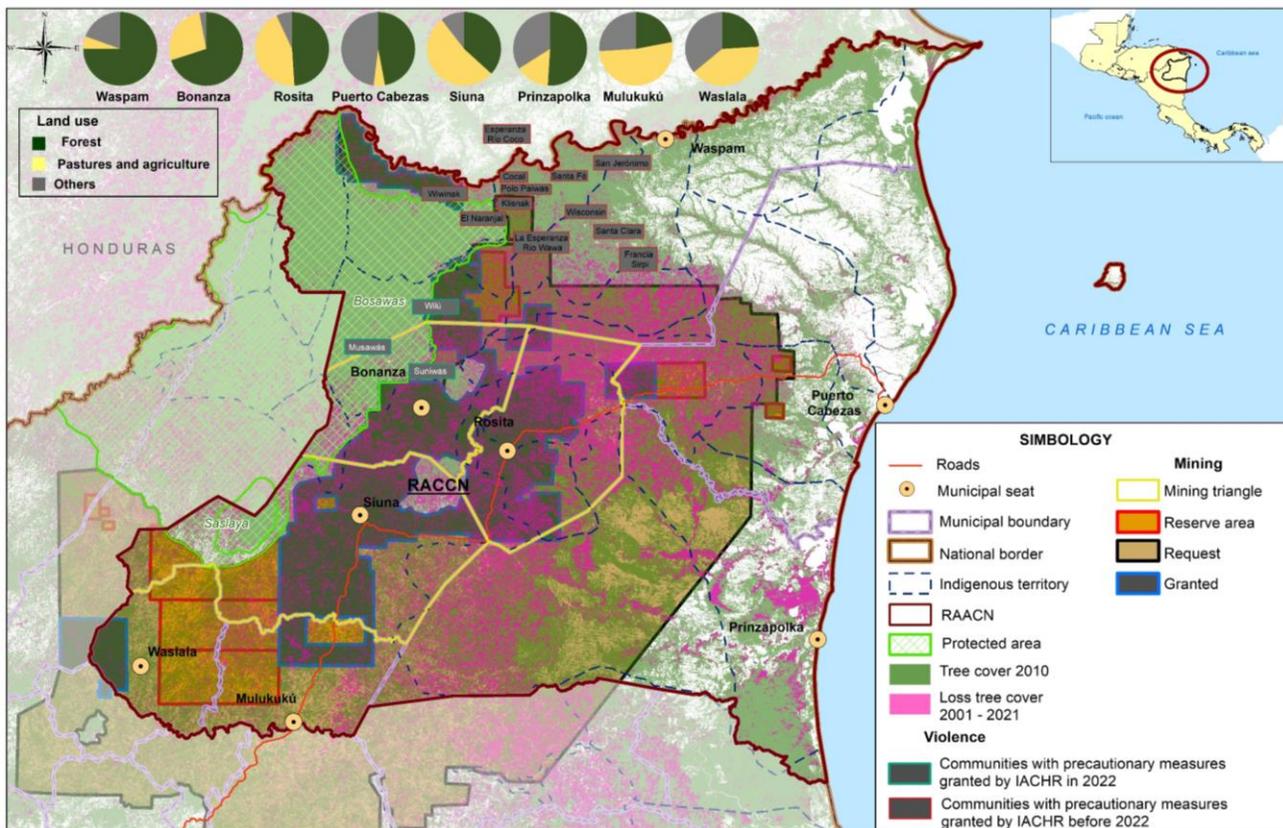
The RACCN represents 28% of national territory and 32% of Nicaragua's forest cover (GFW, 2022). Most of these forests are found in territories that have been recognized as belonging to the Miskitu, Sumu-Mayagna and Rama indigenous peoples, and to the Creole

valve for crises in agro-export activity, which is considered the country's economic engine and is concentrated in the Pacific zone, characterized by its rural population's lack of access to land.

The RACCN is characterized as a territory under heavy pressure from external actors who have set up extractivist dynamics that are damaging to natural resources. These pressures co-exist with the accelerated expansion of the agricultural and cattle ranching frontier, and with invasions by colonizers and non-indigenous who constitute serious threats to the indigenous people, creating a climate of insecurity and violence.

Land grabbing is one of the causes of the increase in violence in the RACCN, to such a degree that to-

Map 6
Territorial dynamics in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region of Nicaragua

Source: Prepared by the authors using Hansen/UMD/Google/USGS/NASA, accessed via Global Forest Watch (2022); INETER, 2022 and MEM (2021)

and Garifuna ethnic communities (PRISMA, 2014). Historically, this region has operated as an escape

gether with the RACCS, they have the highest homicide rates in the country. The Inter-American Com-

mission on Human Rights[8] has asked the Government of Nicaragua for due protection of the indigenous and Afro-descendant communities that continue to face a widespread situation of violence from colonizers and third parties invading their ancestral territories, acting with the permission and tolerance of the State and incentives from the private sector (IACHR, 2021) (see Map 6).

Main territorial dynamics

The optimism stemming from Law 445 concerning the Communal Property Regime of the Indigenous Peoples, which regulates communal property on the Caribbean Coast,[9] has been ebbing because of the ineffectiveness of enforcing the tenure rights. The prevailing dynamics of land invasion and violence faced by communities is the main obstacle. Despite the fact that the Law establishes that the historical rights of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities override other titles granted to third parties, the phase of clearing titles of inhabitants from outside the territory, as well as of corporations that use the territories without legal title or a lease from the community, has failed to be undertaken.

The central government, far from providing due protection to local RACCN communities, has fomented a constant flow of colonizers and extractive industries, threatening the rights to communal lands and the autonomy regime, which has been exacerbated in recent years with an increase in murders and kidnapping (The Oakland Institute, 2020). From the last decade of the last century up to now, the different governments of Nicaragua have worked tirelessly to turn the country into an attractive site for investment, such that multiple international and transnational companies have settled in the RACCN, principally in areas such as mining, the forest sector and livestock.

In 2020, Nicaragua exported US$ 828 million in gold, which thus became its main export product (OEC, 2022). In 2017, the Assembly approved the ENIMINAS Nicaraguan Company Creation Act, which enabled the participation of the State in the mining business. Within the first month of the new law, the total sur-face area of the country under mining concessions increased from approximately 1,200,000 ha to 2,600,000 ha (a surface area larger than El Salvador), placing more than 20% of Nicaragua's land under mining concessions. Approximately 853,800 ha of this land are in the BOSAWAS Reserve buffer zone (The Oakland Institute, 2020).

In the RACCN, gold mining has a long history, where industrial mining coexists with artisanal mining. It is most concentrated in what is known as the Mining Triangle (Triángulo Minero), the country's most important gold deposit, which is located in the municipalities of Bonanza, Siuna and Rosita. This region is characterized by high levels of poverty, social problems and an intense degradation of natural resources.

The growth of the mining sector has been taking shape due to the weakening of the environmental law framework and the violation of the rights of vulnerable populations (Centro Humboldt, 2019), which allows companies to evade liability for land grabbing and the subsequent harm to indigenous communities. Land occupation and gold mining by colonizers have transformed the community economy. Indigenous peoples have lost control of the land as a means of production and income generation, being instead forced to abandon their homes and worsening their poverty conditions.

Caliber Mining Corp., B2Gold Corp., Royal Road Minerals and Golden Reign Resources, Oro Verde from Australia, Condor Gold from the United Kingdom and Hemco Nicaragua S.A. from Colombia.

According to Global Forest Watch (2022), the RACCN is the region with the most forest cover in the country. It has 2.42 million ha, which are the

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[8] Since 2015 the IACHR has granted interim measures of protection to 15 indigenous communities belonging to the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCS). On February 23, 2022, it granted such a measure to three communities in the Mayagna Sauni As territory (CEJIL, 2022).

[9] Since 2007 more than 16 indigenous territories have been titled in the RACCN, representing an area of over 2.5 million hectares (CONADETI, 2013).

backbone and livelihood for indigenous families living in the region (Camino, 2018; Cuellar et al., 2012). In the 2021–2022 period, the RACCN lost approximately 650,000 ha, which is equivalent to a reduction of 27% in its tree cover. The main engines of forest loss are concessions for forest harvesting and the livestock boom, generating a source of conflicts over land use and other natural resources.

In the forest sector, PRONicaragua, the state agency for investment and export promotion, has undertaken an intense tax incentive campaign, offering more than 3.9 million ha ready for forest plantations like teak and mahogany and non-timber products like rubber and cacao, among others. Private-sector plans involve reaching a critical mass of 120,000 ha, due to which investment opportunities in the sector are broad and the Government's support for this kind of initiative is evident (PRONicaragua, 2022).

Investment from forest projects in the RACCN is presented in various forms, some of which have to do with agroforestry projects like the expansion of teak and cacao plantations undertaken by companies like MLR Forestal and Norteak Maderas, both affiliated with HEMCO.[10] Between the two companies, HEMCO manages 11,700 ha of land in the municipalities of Siuna and Bonanza. In addition, the damages caused to the forest ecosystem by hurricane Felix in the RACCS[11] opened the door to the emergence of other companies like MAPIINICSA and AlbaForestal for harvesting downed lumber. In both cases, benefits were promised to inhabitants, as well as creating some infrastructure such as access roads; however, the results were negative for the communities, since in the end those projects produced increased forest cutting and better access for new extractives actors and activities.

Nicaragua is Central America's main meat exporter. Its exports increased from 60% of total production in 2006 to more than 95% in 2019, a larger percentage than for any other country. The main destination is the United States, although other Latin American countries also import meat and dairy products from Nicaragua (OEC, 2022). The autonomous regions have the highest concentration of livestock. According to the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), the RACCN, RACCS and Department of Rio San Juan (bordering the RACCS) produce 46% of all Nicaraguan dairy and meat (The Oakland Institute, 2020).

The rapid expansion of cattle ranching is deforesting the RACCN, particularly in the BOSAWAS Reserve, which between 2015 and 2019 lost nearly 35,000 ha of forest to grazing plantation (InSight Crime, 2022). Low-yield animal husbandry, which bases its profits on the incorporation of new areas, is devastating for the protected area, since cattle ranching is used as a front for land trafficking. Colonizers who migrate from the country's center seeking land rely on these trafficking networks that usurp land where only indigenous peoples have their rights recognized (InSight Crime, 2022).

The logic of expanding cattle ranching in BOSAWAS, like in Honduras in the Rio Platanos Reserve, is to feed the cattle smuggling route from Central America to Mexico. According to recent estimates by InSight Crime (2022), around 370,000 head of cattle are raised in BOSAWAS. Once the livestock is ready for sale, it is moved from the reserve on foot and then loaded on trucks headed for slaughterhouses near Managua. Another part of the cattle is moved on foot across the Rio Coco toward the Rio Platano Reserve, becoming part of drug trafficking money laundering strategies and as a front to hide clandestine landing strips.

While BOSAWAS is the land traffickers' main target for the expansion of illegal cattle raising, this activi-

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[10] The HEMCO company has mining investments and also executes agroforestry projects with a significant component for conservation, expanding biological corridors and carbon capture. In the social realm, projects propose benefits for communities, such as education, farming infrastructure and roads. MLR Forestal has received financing from FinnFund and the Netherlands Development Financing Company for US$ 10 million, respectively.

[11] According to the assessment of damage to the forest ecosystem caused by hurricane Felix, of October 2007, in the RAAN 1,166,579 ha were affected, and a surface area of 512,165 ha was identified as a highly affected area. In this area, 951 ha of pine forest and 509,813 ha broadleaf forest were directly affected (Kreimann, 2010).

ty also has a strong tie to the illegal wood trade. As InSight Crime (2014) mentions, the location of BOSAWAS at the tip of the RACCN and near the border with Honduras makes it particularly vulnerable to this kind of activity. Organized crime in Honduras has increased its participation in the trade, moving some of their armed groups to Nicaragua to harvest precious woods. Likewise, the RACCN has become an important transfer point for drugs coming from South America. Local criminal groups, in both the RACCN and the RACCS, take advantage of fast motorboats that move drug shipments along the Caribbean Coast, offering a variety of services to traffickers, including refueling, maintenance, storage and intelligence (In-Sight Crime, 2013).

Drug traffickers implement different strategies to conduct their illicit activities in Central America, depending directly on the relationships established with the kind of State prevailing in each country. In the case of the Autonomous Regions, organized criminal groups exercise collusion strategies that cause lower levels of violence as compared to Honduras, where drug traffickers practically operate via co-optation and violence to control the territory (Blume, 2022).

Implications for governance

The RACCN is immersed in a dynamic of resource degradation, losing large expanses of forest and seriously affecting its biodiversity and its inhabitants' livelihoods. Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities are reacting to such situations by deploying diverse strategies, sustainable farming practices and land-use planning, as well as monitoring and surveillance brigades, resulting from their cosmovision and traditional institutions. However, their actions systematically face a series of obstacles for the adequate governance of their own territories (PRISMA, 2015).

Despite progress in the country in terms of institutionalizing the autonomy regime and the recognition of indigenous peoples' cultural and territorial rights to the land, the demarcating and titling process is plagued with contradictions and does not advance with the expected agility, principally in the clearing stage, which includes removing colonizers and external industries from their lands. One of the reasons can be found in the origin of the autonomy process, which dates back to the 1980s, when the Nicaraguan Caribbean region experienced a growing indigenous insurgence. With the establishment of the autonomous regions, new political-administrative borders were established in the Nicaraguan Caribbean, but others were kept, such as municipal divisions. In this sense, the autonomy process also took on non-indigenous regional administrative forms that were mixed with formal electoral institutions and with that, the patronage-based rationales that characterize political party dynamics. Ultimately, personal and party interests have biased and undermined the constitution of the indigenous territorial governments (ITG) and governance of the territory in general (Baracco, 2018; Larson & Soto, 2012).

Both Law 23 concerning the Autonomy Statute of the Atlantic Coastal Regions and Law 445, as well as the demands of multilateral agencies like the World Bank and international cooperation, are clear examples of the problem created in the RACCN by adapting blueprints or practices more adequate to modern states than to indigenous communal institutions. Administrative procedures with market rationales can instill values far from the peoples' cosmovision, where mutual aid and reciprocity are main characteristics.

In addition, within the ITG there are gaps in knowledge and abilities of a technical character. There is little clarity around the roles of the territorial authorities and their coordination with other administrative entities like municipal town halls, the army or executive-level agencies such as the Ministry of the Environment in management of the BOSAWAS biosphere reserve.

In the economic realm, the autonomy process excludes the issue of resource extraction, a role assumed by the Central Government, under which a strategy of incorporating the region into globalization has been implemented, benefitting actors who are not from the territory by using incentives and concessions to the private sector and direct foreign investment.

Guanacaste, Costa Rica

The province of Guanacaste is located in northeast Costa Rica and belongs to the so-called Chorotega Region within the country's planning framework. Administratively, it is subdivided into 11 cantons (municipalities). It is a broad region of 10,140.71 km2, representing 20% of Costa Rican territory. To the north it borders Nicaragua; to the east, the provinces of Alajuela, Puntarenas and the Nicoya Gulf; and to the south and west, the Pacific Ocean. It is located in the North Pacific climate region, which is characterized by having a well-defined dry season and rainy season. In the last decade, the El Niño phenomenon caused a prolongation of the dry season, decreasing sources of water and hampering agrifood production and tourism (Porras, 2018).

The province has large plains and productive activity linked to agriculture and livestock. That characteristic landscape gave rise to the nickname "Guanacasteca Pampa" (Porras, 2018). At least three decades ago, Guanacaste began a profound transformation in production and has been increasingly targeting tourism and services. This change was accompanied by significant public investments in infrastructure that were larger than those received by other peripheral provinces such as Puntarenas and Limon. However, this model has not resolved the problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality. Furthermore, it has maintained a recurring state of conflict around water distribution between the interests of tourism investments and the population's basic needs.

According to the 2017 National Household Survey (ENAHO), 377,241 inhabitants reside in the province, with a population density of 37 inhabitants per square kilometer. Twenty-six point nine (26.9) percent of households in Guanacaste are poor, and average per capita income is below the national minimum wage (INEC, 2021). It is estimated that 117,610 households live there, 40% of which are female-headed households, the highest percentage among the regions (Programa Estado de La Nación, 2000).

Regarding land use, of the total area dedicated to agricultural activity, 28.03% is occupied by pastures, 19.84% are forests, 4.03% is arable land, 7.59% is occupied by crops, 17.11% by national parks and 23.39% by other uses (MAG, 2020). The region is characterized by its broad swaths of protected areas, 48 in total. It is the province with the most restored forest cover in the country in recent decades. Its natural wealth is also linked to energy production, being the main province providing energy from the use of natural hydraulic, geothermic and wind resources. Three hydroelectric plants located in the province (Arenal, Corobici and Sandillal) represent 45% of the installed capacity of the Costa Rica Electricity Institute (ICE) for national hydroelectric generation. All geothermic and wind power produced in the country is generated in the province (Programa Estado de La Nación, 2000).
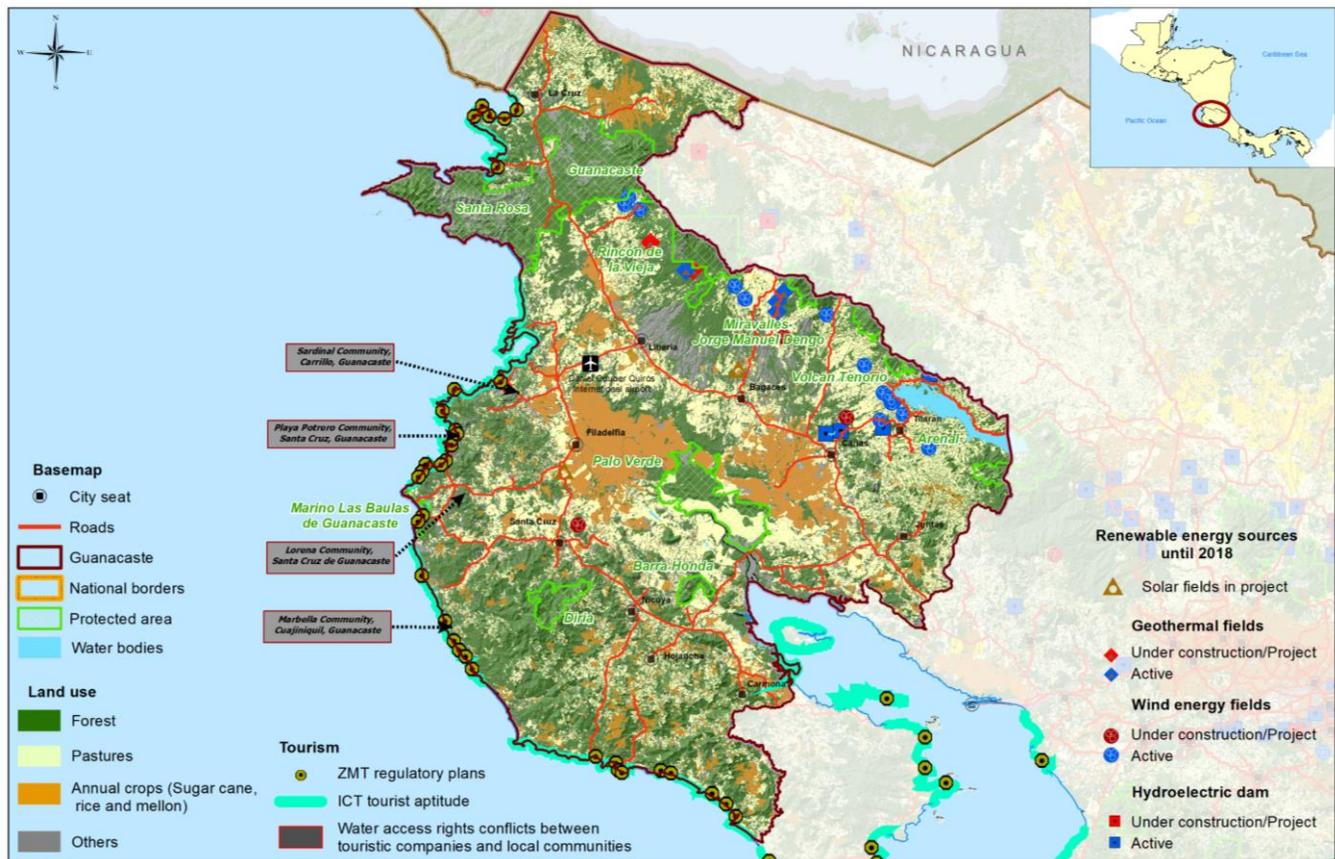
Main territorial dynamics

Until the mid-20th century, Guanacaste was mainly home to large, traditional farms dedicated to meat livestock for sale in national and Central American markets, an economy co-existing with small-scale farming for self-consumption, whose surplus was sold locally.

In the 1950s, the territory's first major change took place when import substitution and agricultural diversification policies modernized the old farming systems, especially meat livestock and sugarcane for export. In addition, rice, cotton and sorghum production were promoted for national markets. This productive dynamic was rolled out under the guidance of the regional development approach, in which the State took on a key role, giving rise to large public investments in diverse sectors. In the decades from 1950 to 1970, projects were undertaken for road improvement, hydroelectric dam construction and the first phase of the Arenal-Tempisque Irrigation District (DRAT).

In the 1980s, tourism and crop diversification became increasingly relevant, in parallel with an increase in social investment with the construction of schools, clinics and hospitals (Blanco, 2019; Programa Estado de la Nación, 2000).

Map 7
Territorial dynamics in Guanacaste, Costa Rica

Source: Prepared by the authors using Sistema de Información Territorial SNIT (2022); Hansen/UMD/Google/USGS/NASA, accessed via Global Forest Watch (2022) and Geocomunes (2018)

In the 1990s, the situation changed, mostly due to the collapse of international markets for traditional ex-port products. Services, especially tourism-related, occupy an increasingly important place in the model of trade openness. Meanwhile, modernization in the agricultural sector was stimulated with only a few farming activities: sugarcane, rice and melons, crops that use low-skill migrant labor. At the same time, there was a drop in livestock and production of basic grains (Blanco, 2019; Programa Estado de La Nación, 2000).

Changes in the region's economy are reflected in employment: agricultural activities dropped from 25.3% in 2001 to just 13.6% in 2016, while employment in hotels and restaurants linked to tourist activity grew from 9.4% to 12.8% in the same period. One sector that has grown significantly is domestic service, in-creasing from 3.5% to 10%, which offers an alternative for women's labor integration but is marked by job precariousness and low salaries (Programa Estado de La Nación, 2017).

In the agricultural sector, Nicaraguan immigration has served as a mechanism to meet labor demand and keep salaries low (Acuña, 2011). Nicaraguan workers constitute 41% of the labor used in sugarcane production and 32% in melon farming in the Pacífico Seco and Chorotega regions (Programa Estado de La Nación, 2000).

The spread of tourism in Guanacaste is another of the principal territorial dynamics. The State has maintained continuous support for tourism growth: starting in the 1970s the Papagayo Gulf tourism project was proposed, and it was consolidated in the 1990s. This decade also saw the opening of the Daniel Oduber International Airport (Blanco, 2019). By the

2000s, the Province of Guanacaste had positioned itself as Central America's main tourist destination, principally in the sun-and-surf segment, thanks to its over 700 km of Pacific coast and heavy public and private investment. The tourism-related real estate supply is targeted specifically to people who mostly do not live permanently in the region and consists of summer homes, gated condominiums, marinas and golf courses, among other amenities, reflecting intense interest in the development of the coastal real estate market (Cañada, 2013; Román, 2012).

The roll out of real estate tourism and large resort projects leads to concerns for their disconnection from local livelihoods. Their development has meant the reorganization of traditionally rural space, concentrating the supply of tourist services in certain locations and creating infrastructure that enables its expansion: highways, power generation and its distribution network, water wells and aqueducts, etc. These investments have ended up negatively affecting the livelihoods of rural communities, due to land dispossession, privation or scarcity of water and degradation of marine ecosystems (Arroyo, 2022; Cañada, 2019; Vargas, 2013). The issue of water has been the principal cause of conflict and concern among communities, environ-mental groups and real estate developers (MIDEPLAN, 2018; Sanabria, 2022; Silva, 2022).

Since the 2001 real estate market explosion, water management and access have become one of the critical limitations on tourism-residential development, while its overuse could represent a clear risk for the local population (Girardi, 2009; Van Noorloos, 2013). In addition, there is no appropriate disposal of solid waste. By 1996, half of the solid waste generated by businesses and the population was not collected by public services, affecting the area's natural resources, especially water resources (Programa Estado de La Nación, 2000).

When the local population's basic needs and tourism–residential investment interests collide over water scarcity, intense socio-environmental conflicts arise (Cañada, 2019; Girardi, 2009; Vargas, 2013). The impact of tourism sector investment on local livelihoods leads to multiple social ills and problems:

transforming neighborhoods to serve tourists, massification and privatization of public spaces, increased cost of living, reduction in housing supply for residential use, saturation of public transportation, increase in noise and loss of quality of life. All of this generates certain protests against and rejection of tourism, as well as deepening dependency dynamics (Cañada, 2019).

The conflicts around tourism express the contradictions of the territory's economic growth model. Tourism-linked real estate investments, the roll-out of infrastructure and agro-industrial investments are new areas of economic activity that have not succeeded in integrating left-behind sectors of the population, instead reproducing patterns of inequality such that, despite the constant flows of investment, unemployment, low-quality jobs and socio-environmental conflicts continue to affect the region.

In the case of employment, the change in occupational structure has not been accompanied by an improvement in the quality of jobs created. The unemployment rate in the Chorotega Region is 12.4%, slightly higher than in other planning regions. The population with informal employment is 50% of total employed persons (INEC, 2022). Tourist activity does not necessarily promote full-time jobs; most hotels cut back on staff during the low season, which means that between 50% and 70% of staff are laid off. The jobs created by new agricultural activities show the same characteristics as traditional employment —seasonality and instability— while being highly dependent on migrant labor, especially by Nicaraguans, who work under extremely precarious conditions. According to Baumeister (2021), 54% live in multidimensional poverty conditions, with 50% being informal workers. In other words, the new investments are not translating to increased quality of life for most of the population (Programa Estado de La Nación, 2017).

The economic model has produced heavy environmental impact and has implications for the territory's climate vulnerability. The haphazard growth of residential tourism is due in large part to the lack or weak-ness of environmental regulation measures.

Building permits are still granted without environmental im-pact studies, giving rise to the exploitation of aquifers and mishandling of wastewater and of solid waste disposal.

The expansion of agro-industrial crops has been linked to a sharp increase in the use of pesticides (Baumeister, 2021). Costa Rica is one of the countries with the highest pesticide consumption rates per cultivated hectare in the world, affecting soil and contamination, as well as harming biodiversity (Arroyo 2022; Cañada, 2019; Girardi, 2009).

Guanacaste is a region vulnerable to climate change due to its tourism, agricultural, agro-industrial and energy development. According to MINAE (2021), the higher frequency of extreme phenomena, droughts, hurricanes, storms and rains affects farming sectors, but also the population's livelihoods, especially families living in poverty.

Guanacaste's climate vulnerability is influenced by factors stemming from the lack of inclusive territorial environmental management, such as the presence of poor households in risk areas that are subject to the problem of ever-increasing flooding. The various conflicts over water access between communities and tour-ism developers and highly water-intensive agro-industrial farming are dynamics that increase pressure on a scarce resource, in a region that still lacks effective tools for territorial planning and risk prevention. If these conditions persist, it will be affected by the potential impacts of climate change: food insecurity, scarcity or deterioration in water services and greater propensity to damage from extreme climate events. It would also compromise the competitiveness of the agro-industrial and tourism sectors.

Implications for governance

In Guanacaste's territory a society with many actors has been forming: historical residents, labor migrants, residential tourists, etc., with conflicting interests and serious inequalities that make territorial governance complex. While different types of local organization exist, local governments are of little importance and have low interaction with the population (Van Noorloos, 2013). In addition, there seems to be a lack of sustained, coordinated action among actors that could influence decision-making around the development of their territory (Programa Estado de La Nación, 2017).

In the last decade, regional planning strategies and mechanisms have had a comeback, stimulating participatory spaces, as in the case of the Regional Development Council (COREDES) of the Chorotega Region. This council comprises local governments, private actors, community civic organizations, the academic sector, the environmental sector and representatives of the Territorial Rural Development Councils, where projects have been defined for water provision, commercializing family farming and infrastructure (MIDEPLAN, 2018). These kinds of official mechanisms are important for channeling the population's participation in decision-making, but the challenge for territorial governance is for the population to take ownership of these spaces and get actively involved in the definition of their own paths to wellbeing, including addressing and negotiating conflicts.

For territorial governance to progress in a society with such diverse and unequal actors, it becomes important to better understand the characteristics and priority interests of social organizations, municipalities, academia, businesspeople, farmers, young people, women and in general of the complex territorial social fabric, as well as promote forums and regional cooperation spaces with a proactive character to promote a vision of development that addresses the territory's problems based on its inhabitants' ways of thinking.

Attention to territorial inequalities is another key element for governance, since it is important to promote effective actions that improve the conditions of vulnerable groups such as migrant workers and people living in high-risk areas. Regarding the migrant population, during the COVID-19 public health crisis, concern over ensuring the 2020–2021 agricultural cycle led the State and agro-related chambers of commerce to formulate different initiatives to guarantee labor. Campaigns for legalizing Nicaraguan workers were waged, and a bi-national agreement was established with the Nicaraguan government that enabled

the formal entry of workers (Baumeister, 2021). But in addition to resolving the concerns of businesspeople, it is important to guarantee the human and labor rights of the migrant population, with policy measures that ensure their labor and migration stability (Acuña et al., 2011).

Finally, it is essential to consider that social effort in territorial governance would facilitate better coordination and territorial chains, especially between the economic, social and environmental dimensions, which would lead to greater effectiveness in facing socio-environmental vulnerability and the remaining social gaps.

Darien Region, Panama

In a limited sense, we consider the Darien region to be the Panamanian territory composed of the Darien province (with the Wargandí district to the north), the Guna Yala comarca and the Emberá Wounaan comarca. However, in broad terms it includes territories of the province of Panama, as well as towns in the north of the Colombian department of Chocó.

Governance in the above-mentioned administrative divisions varies significantly according to their nature. While the province of Darien is administered by a governor appointed by the central government, the indigenous comarcas and collective lands enjoy some autonomy to govern themselves in accordance with their customs and institutions. The indigenous comarcas were recognized after the Guna people's struggle for independence during the Dule revolution in 1925 and formalized in Law 16 of 1953. They are governed by their elected traditional authorities according to their traditions: the Sailas Dummagan in the case of the Guna people, and the General and Regional Chiefs in the case of the Emberá and Wounaan peoples. Collective lands are regulated by Law 72 of 2008, which establishes the procedure for the Land Award of collective property of lands traditionally occupied by indigenous people and communities who are outside the Comarcas.

This region is home to what is commonly known as the "Darien Gap," meaning the dense tropical jungle that dominates the landscape and blocks continuous conventional land transportation to the south and southeast, toward Colombia. It marks the territory because it has the only unbuilt section of the Pan-American Highway, which was projected to unite the continent from Alaska in the north to Argentina in the south.

The Panamanian Darien is characterized by being the least densely populated area in the country (Castillo, 2020). Its inhabitants belong mainly to the Emberá, Guna and Wounaan indigenous ethnicities, in addition to mestizos and Afro-Darienites, the latter two groups mainly found in the province of Darien (F-ODM, 2010).
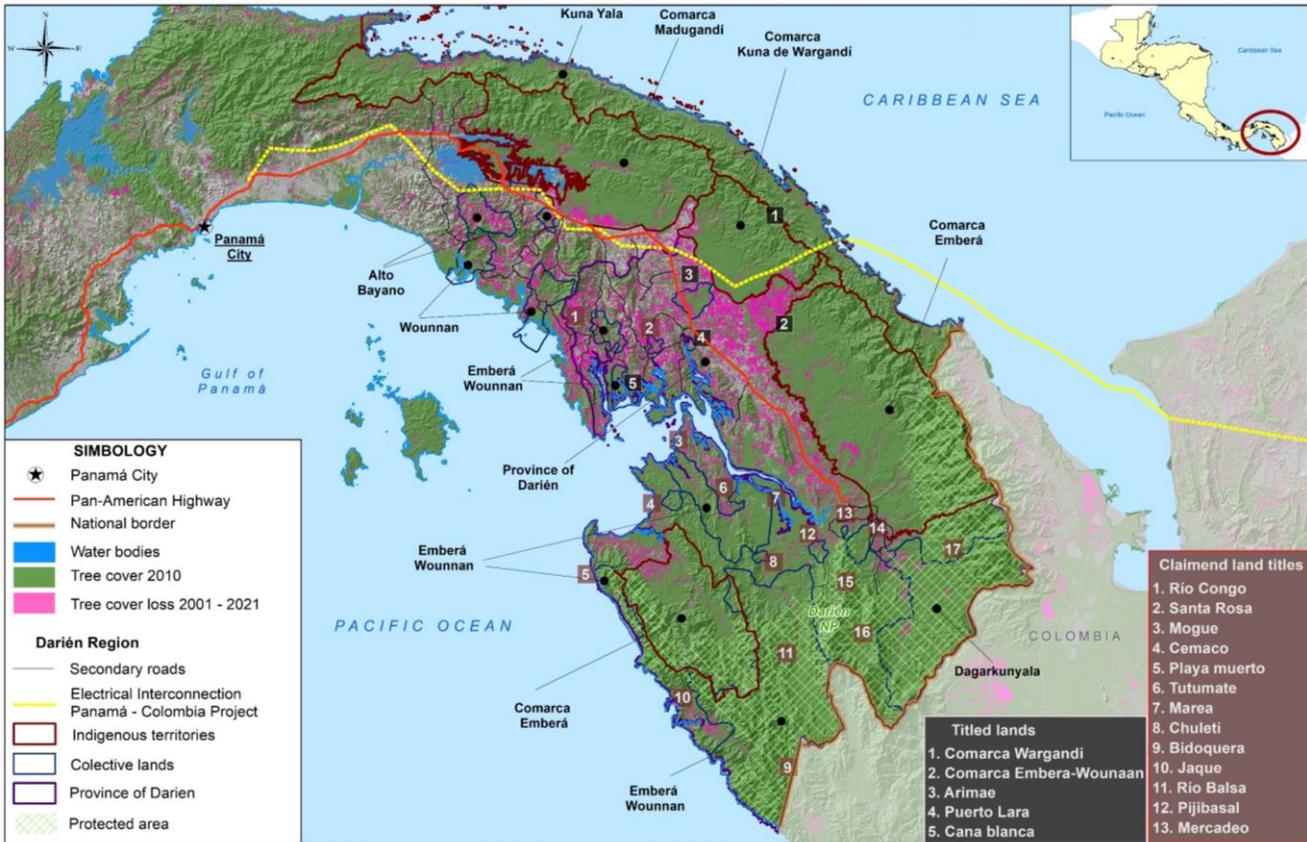
Economically, Darien Province is the most left behind in the country. It contributes just 0.3% to the national economy. Furthermore, despite having a fairly low unemployment rate –just 2.8%– it has high levels of informality and poverty (60.7% and 43.1%, respectively), which reflects a situation of precariousness for a significant proportion of its inhabitants (CAD, 2018). However, the agricultural sector is identified as a possible engine of development, given the province's comparative advantages over others, betting on the integration of technology and improvements in livestock performance (ibid.).

In the indigenous comarcas, farming production is geared to self-consumption, where crops like corn or yam predominate. But they also produce crops that enter commercialization channels, such as coffee, avocado, otoe and plantains (F-ODM, 2010). Other economic activities include timber –and its permits– as well as the production of traditional crafts and molas[12] (ibid.).

In terms of infrastructure, the main path of land communication is the section of the Pan-American Highway that reaches the town of Yaviza. This stretch reflects some of the serious contradictions facing this region: on the one hand, creeping deforesta-

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[12] Colorful handmade fabric unique to the Guna culture.

Map 8
Territorial dynamics in the Darien region, Panama

Source: Prepared by the authors using Hansen/UMD/Google/USGS/NASA, accessed via Global Forest Watch (2022); Rainforest Founda-tion US (taken from https://es.mogabay.com/2019/06/indígenas-panama-darien-video/) and Colectivo Darién (2021) and EPR (2014) recovered from https://www.eprsiepac.com/contenido/interconexion-panama-colombia

tion benefitting cattle ranching and timber extrac-tion; and on the other, the poor condition of the road itself (Ficek, 2021). Beyond that, river and air transport using small planes and crude dirt landing strips are the main means of transportation.

The region also has significant potential for tourism. In the 1980s, important foreign investments at-tempt-ed to stake a claim in San Blas Bay, within the borders of the Guna Yala Comarca. However, the re-gional authorities identified an incompatibility of these investments with local community uses, and they intervened to end the investments. The Pana-manian government has also proposed large projects, of which none have come to fruition because they

failed to secure the consent of comarca authorities (Martínez Mauri, 2010). Today, it is the Guna Yala people, via the Secretariat for Tourism Affairs, sub-ject to the Guna General Congress, which coordinates the sector's initiatives, respecting their own values and headed by local inhabitants who see in the sector a complement to their traditional activities (Mar-tínez Mauri, 2010).

Ecologically, the Darien region is covered by approx-imately 1.3 million hectares of tropical forest (Mateo-Vega et al., 2019), which represents 24.44% of Pan-ama's forests. [13] Due its size, it is considered one of the 5 Great Forests of Central America. In addition, is a high-value site thanks to its biodiversity and the

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[13] According to data from Panama's Environmental Ministry shared in the 2021 Forest Cover and Land Use Map, there is a total of 5,117,364 hectares of forest cover in the country.

quantity of endemic species. Among the noteworthy fauna we can mention the jaguar, the white-lipped peccary and Central America's most important area for harpy eagles (WCS, n.d.).

A recent study on the levels of carbon present in aboveground vegetation shows that the region's forests are among the most carbon-rich in the tropics, but they also have a large wealth of tree species, which makes Darien a key area for both the fight against climate change and the conservation of biodiversity (Mateo-Vega et al., 2019).

However, it is the region of Panama that has most reported deforestation in recent years. According to Global Forest Watch (2022a), tree cover nationally decreased by 8.2% from 2011 to 2021 (466,000 hectares); three provinces caused 52% of the loss, with Darien showing the greatest loss at 111,000 hectares, which is equivalent to a decrease of 9.8% of its tree cover for that period.

Main territorial dynamics

Due to its location, the Darien region has always been influenced by the dynamics of geographic integration. Although the Darien Gap was never formally opened, mere anticipation of its opening in the 20th century caused population displacement, land speculation, cattle ranching migrations and logging-related conflicts (Graef et al., 2022).

More recently, in 2016 the project for electrical connection between Colombia and Panama was reactivated; this would unite the two countries' electricity markets, and also join them to the Central American Electric Interconnection System (SIEPAC) and the Andean Electric Interconnection System (SINEA). This progress in the interconnection between the two neighbors reopens the possibility of a land connection through Darien (Colectivo Darien, 2021; Testa, 2022). Beyond the expansion of the Pan-American Highway, in re-cent years a series of formal highways has been developed, promoted by the agriculture ministry, as well as informal ones related to trafficking (Colectivo Darien, 2021).

The opening of roads has led to an increase in deforestation, which is estimated at a loss of 40% of forests over the last 30 years. In the last 10 years, 90% of forest loss is attributed to illegal logging (Colectivo Darién, 2021). Around 2015, there was a particular spike in illegal logging of cocobolo precious wood, connected to a spike in demand from China (Vanderman & Velásquez Runk, 2020).

Illegal wood trafficking mixes in Darien with other illicit activities that benefit from the territory's remote nature and remaining tree cover, such as human trafficking from Colombia, drug trafficking, illegal gold mining and arms trafficking from the north toward Colombia (Colectivo Darién, 2021).

Due to its border status, the region sees significant migrant flows pass through the territory. While until a few years ago it was mainly people coming from Colombia fleeing the violence of the armed conflict, starting in 2016 it is increasingly people passing through Darien in route to North America from different parts of the world: both countries in the region such as Haiti or Venezuela, and even Asian and African countries like Bangladesh, Uzbekistan or the Democratic Republic of Congo (IOM The Storyteller, 2022). As of mid-2022, Panama received 48,430 migrants via the Darien jungle (UN, 2022), of whom up to 15% are children and young people (UNICEF, 2022); and 2021 ended with 133,000 people (IOM, 2022).

The region is also affected by the consequences of climate change, in particular by climate variability related to droughts and changes in rain patterns that affect agriculture. Another risk of major importance for coastal populations and island residents in particular is the rising sea level, which has been estimated at 19 cm between 1990 and 2020, with a projection of between 0.55 and 0.75 m from now to 2100, which threatens these populations' way of life (Ros García et al., 2020).

Implications for governance

The increasingly notorious presence of smuggling, jointly controlled by Mexican and Colombian cartels, is generating new patronage relationships between

them and the local population. These relationships are attractive because they offer opportunities for higher income than legal activity, but in many cases they are also coerced by the "money or bullets" policies imposed by the cartels. These new patronage-based relationships also arise with public security officers involved in various acts of corruption and arms trafficking (Colectivo Darién, 2021).

The response of the State to the presence of organized crime cartels has been mainly militaristic. In 2008, the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), a public security agency, was created. On the one hand, it has developed patronage-based relationships by providing services to the population outside its remit and, on the other, it has perpetrated crimes against the rural population that have gone unpunished (Colectivo Darién, 2021).

In this difficult context, the indigenous comarcas play an essential role, not only because of their collective landholding institutions and their governance systems based on territorial authorities, but also because they have managed to develop community life projects that successfully preserve their cultural and natural diversity. One example is the role that community forestry enterprises have played in protecting the forest, as well as in generating opportunities for socioeconomic development. Up to 2015, more than one quarter of the surface area of the Emberá Wounaan comarca was under community management (PRISMA, 2015). The benefits of this sustainable management were felt in the strengthening of the comarca's institutional structure and governance, as well as in the improvement of access to basic infrastructure for local communities (PRISMA, 2015).

Sustainable forest management and, in general, the effective exercise of territorial rights by the comarcas translates to a clear benefit in terms of conservation. Between 2001 and 2021, in the Emberá Wounaan, Guna Yala and Guna de Wargandí indigenous comarcas, very low rates of tree cover loss were seen, ranging between 2% and 3%. These rates are much lower than the rate reported in the rest of Darien (9.8%). The territorial governance exercised by these peoples is as efficient or more so for forest conservation than the protected areas managed by the State.

In Alto Darien and in Darien National Park, there was a deforestation rate of 4% and 0.54% respectively (Global Forest Watch, 2022a).

Indigenous governance is also critical to ensuring the comarcas' resilience against external shocks, like the COVID-19 public health crisis. The Guna Yala comarca was noteworthy in particular for its low virus rates, much lower than the national and departmental averages (WHO, 2022). Thanks to its level of autonomy, the comarca's authorities were able to apply early, culturally appropriate measures that have enabled this area to be among those least affected by the virus (Martínez Mauri, 2020).

In the face of even greater shocks like those related to climate change, the Guna Yala comarca has also been preparing for 10 years for the imminent rise in sea level, by developing a plan to resettle island communities on the mainland, accompanied by efforts to strengthen farming production to ensure food sovereignty (Davis et al., 2021).

Robust community governance also enables indigenous authorities to negotiate with public authorities. In the case of the electricity interconnection between Panama and Colombia, the Guna General Congress has successfully started a free, prior and informed consent process, given that the interconnection will cut through the Guna Yala comarca (El Capital Financiero, 2021). In other cases, there is still a standoff be-tween the indigenous authorities and the government, as occurred recently when the National Coordinating Body of Indigenous Peoples in Panama (COONAPIP) was able to open a dialogue table to discuss, among other issues, the titling of collective lands and government support for stopping land invasions and illegal logging by third parties on comarca lands (Crítica, 2022).

Despite the preeminent role of indigenous governance to mitigate the impact of the above-mentioned territorial dynamics, indigenous peoples continue to be marginalized and stigmatized in news coverage on the region. Academic studies based on the systematization of news reports reveal a bias in highlighting indigenous ethnicity in cases of collaboration with

different kinds of smuggling, although as we have seen, this is often coerced.

Another important challenge for territorial governance in Darien is the role that the Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) mechanisms and other mechanisms for the sale of carbon credits will play. The process was halted nationally in 2012 due to irregularities in the UN-REDD program with respect to the consent of indigenous peoples (Cuéllar et al., 2013). However, interest from private actors has recently resurfaced for buying carbon credits directly from the comarcas (ANPanamá agencia de Prensa, 2022). Recently the government has also been seeking to create a national carbon market (Chandiramani, 2022), which would also be an opportunity for territorial financing for indigenous comarcas, though it is also a risk if not accompanied by adequate safeguards.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AN AGENDA
OF STRATEGIC SUPPORT BY CIVIL SOCIETY
FOR TERRITORIAL ACTORS

Central America is going through a series of dynamics that exacerbate historical patterns of exclusion and environmental degradation. Various countries around the region are already experiencing or are on the threshold of a break with the rule of law. Civic spaces and those for citizen participation have been closed or diminished in the context of accelerated processes of concentration of power, which in turn are the result of the influence exercised by groups that entangle their interests with the actions of State agencies. In several countries in the region, in addition to the historical influence of traditional elite groups, new actors linked to illicit activities—mainly drug trafficking—take advantage of the culture of patrimonialism to establish ties to the State, but they also deploy new strategies for territorial control, such as "narco-deforestation" and "narco-ranching."

Dynamics like these also converge with renewed economic interest in natural resources, as well as the growing, severe impact caused by climate variability and change in a region characterized by its high vulnerability.

The region is going through a crisis of political parties and with it, a lack of development proposals and projects capable of driving substantive socioeconomic and environmental transformations by the State. Legal systems are increasingly controlled and used against sectors and organizations that, for example, demand rights; in several countries there simply no longer exist spaces for participation in public policy development and implementation; increasingly the public opinion space is being co-opted through the control and imposition of narratives favorable to power groups; civil society organizations are harassed, persecuted and criminalized for their defense

work and actions in the civic space; and finally, environmental and territorial leaders are being persecuted and assassinated.

Taking all this into account, we can say that region's rural, small-scale farming communities, indigenous people and Afro-descendants are facing threats to their lands, their livelihoods and their rights as has never been seen before, except during war conditions. The mere decision to wish to live a dignified life on their lands and to maintain their rights to natural resources has become an extremely dangerous option, as a result of the insecurity, co-opting or destruction of local governance systems.

The territories and their organizations are "on the front lines" of harassment from governmental and eco-nomic (national and transnational) actors, as well as organized criminal groups. At the same time, the territories and their organizations also represent one of the essential "final frontiers" for resilience. Although it is in rural territories that the natural resources are found and the key ecosystemic services are generated for resilience, it is the indigenous nations, Afro-descendant peoples and local communities—to the extent that they maintain their capacity to decide over natural resources, their livelihoods and their forms of organizing in their territories—who are the ones building the local and territorial governance systems capable of put-ting these natural resources and ecosystemic services in benefit of their communities' resilience and that of societies in general.

The Central American region has a huge variety of experiences of this kind, such as community forest management that enables the reconciliation of forest conservation with community development; the advance of agro-ecology as a basis for food security and sovereignty; and the restoration of critical resources

like water, as well as a broad diversity of ancestral strategies for managing natural resources by indigenous and Afro-descendant communities and peoples. Most of these initiatives are of limited scale, but they represent valuable productive, organizational and institutional proposals and innovations that foster synergies between the agendas of climate change adaptation and mitigation, while diversifying local economies, contributing to generating economic opportunities and territorial cohesion. This is possible thanks to the leadership role that these actors have in the territories' institutional life, alongside other non-governmental and civil society organizations, strengthening platforms and governance systems.

However, the challenges these dynamics impose on the region are of such magnitude and complexity, that no territorial actor, rural community or indigenous authority can confront them alone. The contexts of violence, corruption, impunity and erosion of the rule of law stress and destroy territorial governance systems, losing key capabilities for driving –for example– the scaling up of sustainable natural resource management practices. Thus, the importance of building resilience based on the defense of first-generation hu-man rights (right to life, political and civil rights) as well as second- and third-generation rights (socioeconomic, cultural, territorial rights and the right to self-determination) (PRISMA, 2021).

In this context, it cannot be expected that transformative answers be spearheaded by the State, nor by the private sector. In fact, diverse efforts and initiatives by civil society exist in support of the actors defending natural resources and territories "on the front lines," which have been important and indispensable, but also insufficient and fragmented in light of the increase and deepening of the multiple threats they face. Thus, civil society organizations can play a key role strengthening the voice and power of local and territorial actors if they recognize the complementary natures of their objectives; if they coordinate efforts to achieve long-term synergies; and if they successfully articulate convincing and hopeful narratives in the face of an extremely adverse context.

Our primary hypothesis is that a meaningful concerted effort within and between the different thematic areas in which civil society organizations conduct their work would enable the co-construction of a common agenda that contributes to strengthening their social cohesion and which strategically consolidates their knowledge, capabilities and collective impact. At the same time, this entails the need to more strategically link spheres of civil society work that have historically been separated.

For territorial governance to be democratic, inclusive and sustainable, it requires territorial actors who are strengthened in their political and civil rights, as well as in their socioeconomic, cultural and territorial rights and their right to self-determination. Therefore, any attempt to strengthen territorial governance must also include strengthening the social fabric, including a deliberate effort to foster strategic coordination and collaboration within and between civil society organizations' different fields of work in support of territorial actors.

There is no recipe for what kinds of collaboration are necessary for effectively defending the rights and livelihoods of territorial actors, or for strengthening their capacities for political advocacy, leadership and management. This will vary according to the specific dynamics that the "front line" communities and actors face in the different territories.

There is a broad range of civil society organizations with different approaches, fields of work and specializations. Based on the dynamics and challenges in different territories like those presented in this report, it is possible to identify a series of areas for support that would be strengthened by the construction of strategic collaborations between diverse civil society organizations. These collaborations could happen, for example, in the following areas of support:

- Improve knowledge and reading of the context, both of what is happening in the territories and of the regional and global contexts and trends that shape the territories, to thus inform the actions, processes and strategies of "front line" actors.

- In the area of <u>litigation for protection</u>, contribute to overcoming gaps in existing institutional structures to protect different kinds of rights. There is greater development of frameworks for the defense of civil and political rights (currently threatened), which contrasts with the lack of institutional instruments for the defense of socioeconomic, cultural, and territorial rights and the right to self-determination. Nonetheless, there are diverse arenas for the defense of these rights, from national courts to courts of conscience, where it is possible to use different protection frameworks (national laws, international conventions, social and environmental safeguards, trade and investment regulations and treaties, certifications, codes of ethics, etc.) in a more coordinated fashion.

- Strengthen initiatives for <u>sustainable management of natural resources and resilience-building</u>. This field of work is linked to technical assistance targeted to diversifying or strengthening livelihood and production strategies. The importance of these initiatives goes beyond connections to the market, since while they represent alternatives to extractive activity, they become reference points for sustainable management and production to scale up environmental restoration and resilience in the territories.

- <u>Strengthen communication</u> to highlight and denounce harassment and stalking of territorial actors; to question the hegemonic development rhetoric and paradigms; and to bring to light and position narratives of hope that encourage collective action, illuminating routes toward more democratic, sustainable and resilient governance systems being built by the territories.

- <u>Education and training</u> of different kinds, which seek to fill gaps in specializations (technical, legal, communicational, administrative, for research, etc.), while building capacities for organizational, leadership and governance development in a new generation of territorial leaders with the capability for critical reading, representation and spokespersons, political negotiation, etc.

Through these and other areas of collaboration (recovery of identity and culture, organizational strengthening, development of productive alternatives, etc.) it is possible to connect new actors heretofore disconnect-ed from supporting territorial actors. For example, actors defending democracy and the rule of law could connect to the area of territorial defense to assert the rights to participation and collective property; or else, knowledge management organizations connecting with investigative journalism organizations and others for legal defense to strengthen fights against the trampling of rights caused by extractive activities.

These kinds of collaborations, to the extent that they contribute to building bonds of trust and working relationships, not only pool efforts and build capacities among communities, territories and civil society organizations, but also are one of the most important paths to channeling a social power that could confront the dynamics threatening the foundations of democratic and sustainable governance in the territories.

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