Consejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura Sostenible

PRISMA
Programa Regional de Investigación sobre Desarrollo y Medio Ambiente

Halting deforestation requires territorial governance

Lessons from Mesoamerica to guide public policies and investment in the conservation of forest territories



Photo: CCMSS

Introduction

Mesoamerica offers a wealth of experience and important lessons for addressing the global challenge of halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation. These processes remain one of the primary sources of greenhouse gas emissions, pose one of the greatest threats to global biodiversity, and disrupt ecosystem functions that are essential to societies, including climate regulation and local hydrological cycles. Global deforestation is estimated to account for 11% of total worldwide greenhouse gas emissions.[1]

Despite their strategic importance for addressing climate change, conserving biodiversity, and sustaining the livelihoods and ways of life of millions of people, forests continue to receive low priority within climate action, accounting for only 0.3% of global climate finance.[2] Furthermore, international forest-related commitments to address the climate crisis coexist with policies and subsidies for sectors and economic activities that intensify environmental degradation, social exclusion, and cultural disruption in forest territories.

In contexts marked by territorial tensions and conflicts, Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples and Local Communities (IPAPLC) have preserved and reproduced nature-based livelihoods, as well as their own forms of organization and governance over their territories and commons. These practices have been crucial to protecting large forest landscapes and contributing to global climate change mitigation.

[1] IPCC. (2023). Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)].

[2] Forest Declaration Assessment Partners. (2026). Forest Declaration Assessment 2026. Climate Focus, coordinator and editor. Available at: www.forestdeclaration.org.

The contribution of IPAPLC has been recognized by numerous civil society organizations and multilateral cooperation agencies, including the United Nations in its Strategic Plan for Forests 2017–2030.[3]

Although Mesoamerica accounts for a relatively small share of the Earth's land area, it contains one of the highest proportions of forests under the collective ownership or use of IPAPLC.[4] More than 65% of the region's forests are under some form of collective ownership or use, and several thousand communities have developed collective management, conservation, and restoration initiatives.[5]

For decades, a considerable number of IPAPLC in Mesoamerica have achieved recognition of collective rights and strengthened robust territorial governance frameworks to, among other things, manage the territory and its natural resources. In some cases, this has been accompanied by innovative public policies and institutional arrangements, both in the creation of financial mechanisms and in the development of support and technical assistance programs.

The results have been diverse, and not all experiences have been successful or sustainable. However, this body of experience constitutes an exceptional wealth of lessons for critically evaluating what happens when investments strengthen existing territorial capacities versus those that fragment or weaken them.

The experiences in Mesoamerica offer something far more useful than a formula or recipe to be replicated: they present evidence regarding which conditions enable the recognition and implementation of territorial rights, the strengthening of local forms of governance, and the financing of socio-environmental solutions. These experiences and their lessons can be relevant to other key tropical forest regions such as the Amazon, the Congo Basin, and Southeast Asia.

Halting deforestation requires more than increasing investment in the forest sector. It also requires political, institutional, and economic conditions that enable IPAPLC to continue exercising their rights and governance over their territories, especially in the current contexts of territorial disputes over geostrategic resources.

Why Mesoamerica?

The region combines three characteristics rarely found together at this scale and in this configuration: extraordinary biological and cultural diversity; a high concentration of territories under distinct forms of ownership, use, and collective governance by IPAPLC; and decades of experience in building institutional arrangements to govern, manage, and conserve these territories. At the same time, the region has been the site of geopolitical conflicts and tensions, including disputes over the control of commodity flows and human mobility.

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[3] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat (New York, 2026). The Global Forest Goals Report 2026.

[4] Rights and Resources Initiative. (2025). Seeds for reform: Global land and forest tenure rights tracking. https://rightsandresources.org

[5] Torres Rojo, J. M. (Ed.). (2015). Desarrollo forestal comunitario: La política pública. Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE).

Building institutions for territorial governance in Mesoamerica

Mexico and Central America have extensive experience in developing institutions and mechanisms for governing, managing, and conserving forest territories. These experiences are the result of historical processes of political organization and mobilization by IPAPLC, as well as the interaction among their initiatives, public policies, civil society organizations, and international cooperation.

Among the most relevant processes are:

- **Recognition of territorial rights:**
  Agrarian reforms, titling processes, and the recognition of the collective rights of IPAPLC, driven by their struggles and mobilization.

- **Development of community institutions:**
  The creation and strengthening of governance arrangements, communities' own authorities, territorial organizations, mechanisms for monitoring and defending the territory, as well as community enterprises for the sustainable use and transformation of natural resources.

- **Public policies and forest incentives:**
  Initiatives such as the Pilot Forestry Plan, the Community Forestry Development Program (PROCYMAF), and Payments for Environmental Services (PES) programs in Mexico; the Forest Incentive Program (PINFOR) and the Incentives Program for Small Landholders with Forestry or Agroforestry Vocation (PINPEP) in Guatemala; and the National Forestry Financing Fund (FONAFIFO) in Costa Rica; contributed with different scopes and results to strengthening local capacities for the management, use and conservation of the forests of IPAPLC.

Also notable is the support provided by civil society organizations, universities and research centers in processes of assistance and technical training, strategic litigation for the defense of human and collective rights; and organizational strengthening for territorial management.

This accumulated experience is one of the region's principal assets in combating deforestation. Collective rights, territorial and traditional forms of organization, and certain public policies have served as enabling conditions that must be recognized, protected, and strengthened. The challenge lies not in promoting new initiatives but in preventing the weakening or disappearance of the territorial governance structures that IPAPLC sustain.

Mesoamerica serves as an ecological bridge between North and South America and constitutes one of the planet's major biodiversity hotspots.[6] It is home to between 7% and 8% of the world's biodiversity, with a high concentration of endemic species.

Its importance transcends its borders: the region's forests form extensive corridors that connect both continental landmasses. The migratory routes of Nearctic-Neotropical birds illustrate this interdependence: numerous species breed in the northern part of the continent and depend on Mesoamerican forests during other phases of their life cycle.[7]

The importance of these forests is not limited to their biological richness. They form part of territories that shape landscapes: mountains, watersheds, rivers, wetlands, mangroves, and coastal zones, all fundamental for water capture, regulation, and provision. The continued existence of these territories is closely linked to the IPADCL who inhabit, govern, protect, and defend them.

A wide range of experiences demonstrate that, where there are recognized and exercised territorial rights; and legitimacy in local governance and management systems, the PIPADCL have the capacity to lead effective efforts to conserve forests and sustain livelihoods compatible with their care and permanence. These experiences allow for a comparison of different institutional arrangements and identify the conditions that favor or hinder the conservation and stewardship of forest territories. In this regard, the region offers the rest of the world four key lessons for tropical forest conservation.

Four lessons from Mesoamerica for halting deforestation

1 Territorial rights must be recognized and guaranteed

Mesoamerica's experiences demonstrate that the recognition and legal protection of the territorial rights of IPAPLC create favorable conditions for the stewardship and conservation of forests and other ecosystems.[8] As various tropical regions seek to advance the recognition of territorial rights, one of Mesoamerica's most valuable lessons is the diversity of institutional pathways through which these rights have been recognized, each adapted to its particular historical, political, and environmental context.

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[6] The forests of Mexico and Central America contain considerable biological diversity associated with the region's variety of climates, landforms, and ecosystems. The region is the world's leading center of pine diversity (Pinus), containing 50 of the 121 species recognized in a global study. See Sáenz-Ceja, E., Arenas-Navarro, M., & Torres-Miranda, A. (2022). Prioritizing conservation areas and vulnerability analyses of the genus Pinus L. (Pinaceae) in Mexico. Journal for Nature Conservation, 67, 126171. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnc.2022.126171

[7] Taken together, the Maya Forest, the Moskitia, Indio Maíz-Tortuguero, La Amistad, and the Darién, Central America's five great forests, form a living bridge. This territory provides habitat not only for migratory birds, but also for jaguars, scarlet macaws, and tapirs. For birds that travel thousands of kilometers every year, these forests provide irreplaceable resting sites and winter refuges. Cornell Lab. (2025).
https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/central-americas-five-great-forests-lifelines-for-migratory-birds.

[8] FAO & FILAC (2021). Forest governance by indigenous and tribal peoples. An opportunity for climate action in Latin America and the Caribbean

From Mexico to Panama, IPAPLC hold legally recognized collective territorial rights over 45% of the land[9] and approximately 65% of the region's forests, a proportion far higher than in other tropical regions.[10]

Although essential, the legal recognition of territorial rights is only a starting point. These rights yield results when they can be exercised by IPAPLC, turning into concrete rules and practices of territorial governance. Furthermore, the exercise of these rights constitutes an expression of the autonomy and self-determination of indigenous peoples, whose recognition and guarantee cannot be subordinated to state strategies or environmental outcomes.

The following provides a brief overview of some of the processes undertaken in the region for the recognition of collective territorial rights:


Photo: CCMSS

- **Mexico:** Agrarian reform in Mexico enabled the recognition of collective ownership over extensive forest territories. It did not, however, automatically grant ejidos and agrarian communities' control over the management and use of their forests. For decades, forest resources were subject to concessions granted to private and state-owned enterprises, limiting community participation in decision-making and in the benefits generated by forest use. It was through organized action, particularly in the 1980s, that numerous ejidos and communities were able to directly manage their forests, strengthen their technical and organizational capacities, and establish community forestry enterprises.

- **Belice:** Decades of organization by the Maya people in Toledo, Belize, led to progress in the legal recognition of their collective territorial rights. Judicial rulings recognizing ancestral communal property constitute an important precedent for the protection of Indigenous territories. This experience illustrates how social organization can transform the recognition of rights into effective instruments for territorial defense.[11]

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[9] Rights and Resources Initiative. (2023). Who owns the land in Mesoamerica and South America? https://rightsandresources.org/wp-content/uploads/EN-JUNE-12-Mesoamerica-flyer-v3.pdf?swcfpc=1

[10] RRI 2014.What Future for Reform? Progress and slowdown in forest tenure reform since 2002. Washington DC: Rights and Resources Initiative

[11] The struggle of the Maya people in Belize led to recognition that ancestral communal property carries the same constitutional weight as private property. This represented an important milestone in giving practical effect to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). It became the first precedent worldwide in which a national high court used the Declaration as a basis for a binding judgment, transforming it from a political text into a legal instrument with real-world application and accelerating its evolution toward customary international law.

- **Guatemala:** Communities in northern Petén secured recognition of their right to maintain traditional livelihoods through forest concessions to sustainably harvest timber and non-timber forest products. Numerous studies show that this model has significantly reduced deforestation and generated broad socioeconomic benefits at the local level.[12]

- **Honduras:** In the Honduran Moskitia, the Miskitu people obtained recognition in 2016 of their collective rights over more than 1,346,000 hectares of land, benefiting more than 17,000 families. This recognition created opportunities to develop instruments for the administration and conservation of natural resources. However, the absence of mechanisms to implement these rights has weakened such initiatives in the face of pressures from colonization, cattle-ranching expansion, and the illegal exploitation of natural resources.

- **Panama:** The Guna Yala Comarca in Panama is notable for the degree of autonomy it has achieved in relation to the Panamanian State. This has enabled the Guna people to exercise effective control over their territory and maintain social, cultural, and jurisdictional self-government. In this case, territorial governance is not limited to forests. It encompasses a territory connecting terrestrial, coastal, and marine ecosystems, demonstrating the importance of understanding conservation through an integrated territorial approach. As of 2020, stable forest cover in Panama's Indigenous territories was twice that found in protected areas and other unprotected lands.[13]

These specific experiences demonstrate that recognizing territorial rights, guaranteeing local governance, and strengthening community institutions are essential components of any strategy to halt deforestation. They also underscore the importance of creating enabling conditions through appropriate public policies and financing mechanisms.

2 Governance and collective action are indispensable to the exercise of territorial rights

The recognition of territorial rights should not be considered a static or definitive achievement. They are constantly under threat from the expansion of extractive and agricultural industries, energy and infrastructure megaprojects, and, in many territories, the interference of criminal groups. Experiences in Mesoamerica demonstrate that the recognition of rights s insufficient if states do not guarantee

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[12] Hodgdon, B., Hughell, D., Ramos, V. H., & McNab, R. (2015). Tendencias en la deforestación de la Reserva de Biósfera Maya, Guatemala (p. 14).
Radachowsky, J., Ramos, V. H., McNab, R., Baur, E. H., & Kazakov, N. (2011). Forest concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala: A decade later. Forest Ecology and Management, 268, 18-28.
Fortmann, L. (2014). Assessing Factors that Contribute to Reduced Deforestation and Successful Community Forest Management in Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve. Ohio State University.
Grogan, J., Free, C., Morales, G. P., Johnson, A., & Alegría, R. (2016). Estado de conservación de las poblaciones de cinco especies maderables en concesiones forestales de la Reserva de la Biosfera Maya, Guatemala. 314.
Monterroso, I., Sauls, L., Davis, A., & Martí, M. (2018). Deforestación y políticas públicas: Trayectorias históricas y perspectivas para la gobernanza de los bosques del Petén. Fundación PRISMA.
Martí, M., Davis, A., & Sauls, L. (2020). Bosques, incendios y cambio climático en Guatemala: Opciones e implicaciones para el cumplimiento de la contribución determinada a nivel nacional (NDC). Fundación PRISMA.

[13] Alejo, C., Ortega, M., Leung, B., Coomes, O. T., & Potvin, C. (2025). Diverse values regarding nature are related to stable forests: The case of Indigenous lands in Panama. Ecology and Society, 30(1). https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-15540-300124

IPAPLC the exercise of these rights and the free development of their own territorial governance arrangements. The region's history shows that many existing territorial rights are the result of long processes of social organization and mobilization. In Mexico and Panama, the recognition of rights emerged from revolutions and far-reaching social struggles that, more than a century ago, laid the foundations for agrarian reform in the former and for legislation establishing Indigenous comarcas in the latter.

More recently, in post-conflict contexts, Guatemala and Nicaragua made progress toward community concession models and the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' territorial claims. In Honduras, broad social mobilizations influenced the State and led to the titling of collective lands belonging to the Miskitu, Pech, Tawahka, and Garífuna peoples of the Honduran Moskitia.

Social mobilization and collective action have been essential to sustaining territorial rights over time. In Mexico, the community of Cherán was able to halt deforestation caused by illegal logging after rebuilding its own institutions.[14] Defending its environment was, above all, a process of rebuilding the social fabric, which also secured recognition of the community's stewardship of the territory.

Rights become concrete when collective capacities exist to translate them into decisions and actions within the territory. Mesoamerica offers a wide diversity of governance forms: Indigenous authorities and normative systems, community organizations, community forestry enterprises, co-governance schemes, multi-stakeholder platforms, and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms. **There is no single model.**

3 Forest conservation is sustained when it is connected to territorial economies

Mesoamerica has extensive experience in community forest management, one of the most consolidated expressions of territorial governance. More than just a harvesting technique, community forest management is a form of governance through which communities themselves plan, regulate, and sustainably use their forest assets to keep their territorial economies alive.

The territorial economies led by IPAPLC seek to preserve dynamics that are not exclusively monetary. They also support family and community livelihoods, strengthen capacities within communities, and facilitate the exchange of goods, services, and knowledge; promoting the well-being of local populations through food sovereignty, access to water and construction materials for housing, and the preservation of traditional medicines, among other benefits. Such processes are often led by women, who play an essential role in transmitting knowledge and including new generations in territorial processes.

The community forest enterprises of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca demonstrate that forest management can become the foundation of sustainable local economies. At the same time, ejidos in the northern Mexican states of Durango and Chihuahua show that communities can compete in forest-product markets without compromising conservation.

[14] Torres-Mazuera, G. (2018). Violencia, elecciones y autonomía municipal: El caso de Cherán. Contemporánea. Toda la historia en el presente, (9), 45-62. https://revistas.inah.gob.mx/...

In Mexico alone, the model has reached a considerable scale. Approximately 80% of the country's forest area belongs to ejidos and agrarian communities, encompassing more than 8,000 forest-based agrarian communities, some 12 million people living in these territories, and more than 2,300 community forest management enterprises.[15]


Photo: CCMSS

In Guatemala, the community forest concessions of Petén have maintained the lowest deforestation rates in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, estimated at 0.1%, while also strengthening community organization, institutional capacities, and the local economy. This arrangement enables more than 15,000 people to participate actively in strategies for the use and management of forest territories. These include timber and non-timber forest use and the management of community enterprises linked to forest-based value chains. Approximately 70,000 people benefit indirectly.[16]

The experiences of both Guatemala and Mexico also served as important references for advances in South America, particularly the development of Colombia's community forestry program as a strategy for implementing territorial peace.[17]

Community forest management therefore makes it possible to link conservation, livelihoods, and governance within a single long-term strategy. A number of IPAPLC have combined traditional economic activities connected to the management and use of their territories with new technical capacities, organizational arrangements, technologies, and market strategies. Through processes of adaptation and innovation, they have maintained relationships between productive activities and the conservation and restoration of natural environments, while generating socioeconomic benefits in the form of employment, income, participation, organization, and collective capacities.

The lesson from Mesoamerica is not simply that communities can use forests sustainably. Rather, conservation efforts are more likely to endure when they form part of territorial economies that generate fair and equitable benefits for the people who inhabit, care for, and govern those territories.

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[15] Los bosques y selvas en México. Los retos y perspectivas actuales del manejo forestal comunitario, 2024 Consejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura Sostenible.

[16] Stoian, D., Rodas, A., Butler, M., Monterroso, I., & Hodgdon, B. (2018). Las concesiones forestales en Petén, Guatemala. Un análisis sistemático del desempeño socioeconómico de las empresas comunitarias en la Reserva de la Biósfera Maya (p. 8). CIFOR. Detlefsen, G., Ruano, S., & Camacho, A. (2026). Rethinking Forest Conservation: The Genesis and Evolution of Community Forest Concessions as a Socio-Ecological Governance Model in Guatemala's Maya Biosphere Reserve. Global Journal of Human-Social Science - B: Geography, Environmental Science & Disaster Management, 26(1), 22-34. https://doi.org/10.34257/GJHSSB255639

[17] FAO (2021). Manejo forestal comunitario en Guatemala y Colombia. FAO Open Knowledge.
Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible & PNUD (2018). Manejo forestal sostenible a través de la forestería comunitaria.... PNUD.

4 Public policies and financing generate more lasting results when they strengthen territorial governance

Public policies and financial instruments can considerably expand their impact when they recognize rights and community governance arrangements, strengthen existing capacities, and respond to priorities defined by IPAPLC.

Mexico was a pioneer in this field. The Quintana Roo Forestry Pilot Plan, launched in the 1980s, showed that public policies aimed at recognizing rights and strengthening community capacities could help dozens of ejidos build organizations capable of managing their forests in the long term. Subsequently, the Community Forestry Development Program (PROCYMAF) placed capacity building—and not just the provision of productive subsidies—at the center of forestry policy through technical and organizational support for community processes.[18]

In Guatemala, the advocacy of community organizations helped transition from incentive programs concentrated on forestry producers toward mechanisms such as the Forestry Incentive Program for Small Landholders with Forestry or Agroforestry Aptitude (PINPEP), which expanded access to financing for small producers and communities for sustainable forest management. [19]

Within a framework of secure land tenure and community governance, Mexico's Payments for Environmental Services program showed that economic incentives can contribute significantly to conservation. In Costa Rica, the Bribri and Cabécar Indigenous Peoples have influenced the national Payments for Environmental Services program so that it recognizes traditional uses of natural resources and allows program benefits to be invested both in conservation activities and in strengthening Indigenous governance structures.

These experiences differ in important respects and have produced varying results. Nevertheless, they share a common lesson: public policies and financing generate more durable outcomes when they strengthen existing territorial processes by guaranteeing collective rights, recognizing community governance arrangements, and strengthening local livelihoods.

The greatest contribution public policy can make is to create conditions that strengthen community institutions and expand their capacities to manage, conserve, and defend forest territories. This lesson is particularly relevant given the need to direct greater financial resources toward halting deforestation. The amount of finance mobilized matters, but it is equally important to determine who receives it, through which mechanisms, and which capacities it helps strengthen.

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[18] Rodríguez, J. (2007). Aproximación a un modelo de atención para promover el manejo de los recursos forestales de propiedad común. Estudios agrarios.
Rodríguez, J., Anguiano Martínez, J., & Bray, D. (2015). Chapter 5. La creación del PROCYMAF, como estrategia de apoyo al desarrollo forestal comunitario en México.
Torres Rojo, J. M., & Callejas, J. A. (2015). Chapter 7. Importancia de los apoyos destinados a promover el desarrollo forestal comunitario en el desempeño de las empresas forestales comunitarias y las comunidades forestales.
Reyes González, J. et al. (2012) Potencial de servicios ambientales en la propiedad social en México.

[19] Von Hedemann, N. (2020). Transitions in Payments for Ecosystem Services in Guatemala: Embedding Forestry Incentives into Rural Development Value Systems. Development and Change, 51(1), 117-143. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12547

Growing pressures threaten Mesoamerica's accumulated experience

IPAPLC face threats that place their governance systems and their strategies for territorial management and stewardship at risk. Recognized territorial rights, community institutions, forest management capacities, and territorial economies, all built through long processes of social organization and mobilization, face mounting pressures. These pressures jeopardize both forest conservation and the capacity of IPAPLC to govern their territories.

A substantial threat stems from the expansion of extractive industries, agribusiness activities, and large energy and infrastructure projects. Growing demand for land, minerals, water, hydrocarbons, and other natural resources intensifies disputes and conflicts over control of the territories that remain conserved, many of which are IPAPLC territories. Adding to this threat is the rise of illegal economies—often linked to these industries—and the presence of criminal groups that exert control over territory and, in many cases, exploit the natural resources of IPAPLC. These dynamics, in addition to causing deforestation and environmental degradation, restrict the autonomy of IPAPLC, weaken community institutions, and drive dispossession within contexts of violence and insecurity.

One of the gravest manifestations of these threats is violence against people who defend territories and natural assets. According to Global Witness, 124 land and environmental defenders were killed worldwide in 2025, 33 of them in Mexico and Central America.[20] Beyond constituting violations of fundamental rights, these attacks weaken community organizations, restrict the exercise of their rights, and facilitate the advance of interests seeking control over their territories.

This occurs within a context of weakening government institutions, policies, and public resources that, in many cases, contributed to community governance for land management and forest conservation. Contradictions persist within government policies themselves: while some programs promote conservation, others favor activities and sectors that accelerate damage to the forest territories of IPAPLC.

The insufficiency of financial resources is another factor threatening the continuity of territorial governance processes. According to 2023 figures,[21] global forest finance amounted to approximately USD 84 billion, of which only USD 2.9 billion was international public finance for forests. Of the latter amount, approximately USD 362 million, or 12.5%, was associated with projects involving IPAPLC. This does not necessarily mean, however, that IPAPLC received or directly managed these resources.

Regional distribution also reveals substantial inequalities. Latin America received approximately USD 753 million in international public forest finance, equivalent to 26% of the global total. Five South American countries, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Argentina, received 69% of these resources. This concentration raises questions about the level of financing reaching Mesoamerica.[22]

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[20] Global Witness (2026). The struggle for protection for land and environmental defenders.

[21] United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). (2025). State of Finance for Forests 2025: Unlock. Unleash. Realizing Forest Potential Requires Tripling Investments in Forests by 2030. Nairobi: UNEP.

[22] The available information does not make it possible to determine how much financing is specifically allocated to the Mesoamerican region.



Taken together, these pressures threaten to erode institutional and territorial capacities built over generations. The current challenge is not only to expand conservation initiatives, but also to prevent and remedy the weakening of the community governance arrangements that have made it possible to sustain extensive forest areas across Mesoamerica.

Recommendations

As 2030 approaches, it is increasingly urgent to translate international commitments to halt deforestation and conserve forests into public policies, investments, and concrete action.[23] Mesoamerica's experience offers important lessons. The objective is not to replicate particular institutional models, but to recognize the enabling conditions needed to sustain results: **guaranteed collective rights, territorial governance arrangements, and territorial economies compatible with conservation.**

In particular, governments, international cooperation, and funds should:

- **Affirm and strengthen the responsibilities of national States to guarantee the effective exercise of collective territorial rights.** Governments must strengthen legal certainty and create the conditions necessary for IPAPLC to consolidate their territorial governance systems and participate in decisions that may affect them. This requires public policies that support community institutions, as well as effective action to protect territories from illegal activities that cause dispossession and socio-environmental harm. Governments must also ensure that agricultural, energy, infrastructure, and economic development policies and projects guarantee IPAPLC collective territorial rights.
- **Recognize the strengthening of territorial governance as a climate and conservation investment.** This means financing processes that recognize territorial rights and build the capacities needed to exercise them, address socio-territorial conflicts, implement inclusive strategies for collective territorial management, and support the sustainable use of natural assets.

[23] Iniciativas como la "Hoja de Ruta para Detener la Deforestación y la Degradación Forestal", los compromisos del Forest Tenure Funders Group y del Forest Climate Leaders' Partnership y la construcción del Tropical Forest Forever Facility.

- **Support territorial economies compatible with conservation.** These include community forest management, traditional agri-food systems, and other systems developed and adapted by IPAPLC, so that ecosystem conservation and the adoption of improved practices generate greater benefits for local populations.
- **Increase financial resources allocated to Mesoamerica** in order to recognize and strengthen IPAPLC efforts to conserve forest territories, financing long-term processes rather than only short-term projects.
- **Advance toward evaluation frameworks that recognize both environmental results and processes that strengthen territorial governance.** Such frameworks should incorporate indicators related to rights effectively exercised, social benefits, and the resilience of territorial processes, among other dimensions.

Conclusions

Mesoamerica has relevant experiences to inform international efforts to halt deforestation. Over generations, IPAPLC have developed their own forms of territorial governance and organization, systems for the use and management of territories and natural assets, and strategies for defending their rights and livelihoods. These experiences, which continue to adapt to increasingly complex challenges, demonstrate that forests can be maintained in the long term when those who inhabit these territories have recognized rights, functional and resilient governance arrangements, and the effective capacity to decide on their present and future.


Photo: ACOFOP

These advances, however, are not guaranteed. The expansion of extractive and agro-industrial activities, the growth of illegal economies associated with criminal groups, and the weakening of public policies and institutions threaten to erode capacities built over decades. In addition to jeopardizing the collective rights and livelihoods of local populations, this trend compromises the conservation of ecosystems that are strategically important for biodiversity, water provision, and climate regulation. Given international commitments to halt and reverse deforestation by 2030, Mesoamerica's experience points to a clear priority: protecting and strengthening the governance systems that have made forest conservation possible. This requires States to guarantee the effective exercise of collective rights, public policies to be consistent with conservation objectives, and international finance to provide direct, long-term support for IPAPLC territorial processes.

The continued presence of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples and Local Communities in their territories, together with the strengthening of their livelihoods, ways of life, economies, and forms of organization, are essential to halting deforestation and building resilience.