



WORLD
RESOURCES
INSTITUTE



Laudato Si'
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

REPORT

Faith-based participation in natural- resource governance

Communities defending life and territories
in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico

Séverine Deneulin, Luiz Felipe Lacerda, María Barrera, Araceli Téllez Haro, Carrick Reddin, Carlos Zepeda, Javier Warman, Sarai Rodriguez, Jordano Buzati, Pamela Saavedra



AUTHORS

SÉVERINE DENEULIN | Principal Investigator, LSRI

Contact: severine.deneulin@campion.ox.ac.uk

LUIZ FELIPE BARBOZA LACERDA | Brazil Consultant

MARIA BARRERA | Colombia Consultant

ARACELI TÉLLEZ HARO | Mexico Consultant

CARRICK REDDIN | WRI
Contact: carrick.reddin@wri.org

CARLOS ZEPEDA | LSRI

JAVIER WARMAN | WRI

SARAI RODRIGUEZ | WRI

JORDANO BUZATI | WRI

PAMELA SAAVEDRA | WRI

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

SHANNON COLLINS
shannon.collins@wri.org

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was led by the WRI Faith and Sustainability and Laudato Si' Research Institute teams and produced in collaboration with WRI Brasil, WRI México, and three researchers from Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. The research was made possible thanks to the contributions of time and experience from the communities where the case studies took place, which we thank for their trust, collaboration, and support: Apodi Rural Workers Union, Assembly of God Church of Altamira, Baptist Church of Apodi, Black Women's Movement of Altamira, Catholic Church of Apodi, Comisión por la Vida del Agua, Compañía de Jesús, Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame, Diaconia Network and the Municipal Secretariat of Agriculture of Apodi, Diocese of Xingu, Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas, Franciscan Sisters of Altamira, Gobiernos Comunitarios, Hermanas del Divino Pastor, Indigenous Leaders of the Juruna Peoples, March 8 Feminist Center, Misión de Bachajón, Modevite Chiapas, Movement of People Affected by Dams of Altamira (MAB), Paiacu Indigenous Center, Pastoral Land Commission of Altamira (PA) and Apodi (RN), Universidad Iberoamericana, Women's Movement of Altamira (PA), Xingu Movement Alive Forever, Xingu Riverside Council.

Financial support from the Ford Foundation made the study possible.

We are pleased to acknowledge our institutional strategic partners that provide core funding to WRI: the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

REVIEWERS

The authors would like to thank the experts who reviewed this report, formally or informally, at different stages throughout its development process (in alphabetical order): Andrew Gomez-Suarez, Anthony Bebbington, Caesar Monteverchio, Carlos Muñoz Piña, Celina Salcedo-La Viña, Cosmas Ochieng, Gerard Powers, Hector Miguel Donado, Itza Castañeda, Liz Moses, Mariana Oliveira, Natalia Valdivieso Kastner, Pilar Galvis.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Deneulin, S., L. F. Lacerda, M. Barrera, A. Téllez Haro, C. Reddin, C. Zepeda, J. Warman, S. Rodriguez, J. Buzati, P. Saavedra. 2024. "Faith-based participation in natural-resource governance: Communities defending life and territories in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico." Report. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute. Available online at doi.org/10.46830/wri rpt.22.00132.

VERSION 1

June 2024



CONTENTS

3	Foreword	71	Water, land, and the defense of life in Apodi, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil
5	Executive summary	72	Introduction
6	Context	74	Fieldwork methodology
7	About this report	76	Faith communities' participation in civil society
9	Mapping the role of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes	85	Conclusions
10	Key findings	89	The defense of life and territory in Chiapas, Mexico
12	Recommendations	90	Introduction
15	Introduction	93	Fieldwork methodology
21	Conceptual background	94	Faith communities as social subjects
22	Faith communities	104	Conclusion
28	Natural-resource governance disputes	107	Common Insights
31	Methodology	108	Introduction
32	Case selection	108	Analysis of social reality
35	Data collection and research ethics	111	Intersecting scales
37	Oil and the defense of the life of water in Caquetá, Colombia	113	Valuation of nature and alternatives to development
38	Introduction	115	Heterogeneous faith communities
41	Fieldwork methodology	117	Women and leadership
42	Faith communities as agents of change	118	Conclusions
50	Conclusions	121	Conclusion
53	Water, land and the defense of life in Altamira, Pará, Brazil	122	Main lessons
54	Introduction	125	Areas of intervention
57	Fieldwork methodology	128	Appendices
59	Faith communities' responses	134	List of abbreviations
69	Conclusions	135	Endnotes
		140	References
		149	About WRI
		149	About LSRI



Foreword

Today, the world is facing challenges of biblical proportions for people, nature, and climate—and it requires a new level of imagination and collaboration to solve it. The solution requires the work of more than just scientists and diplomats. As Pope Francis has said, “If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it.”

Today, over 80 percent of the global population identifies with a religion. As social and environmental challenges become increasingly interconnected, the role of these faith communities in advocating for a more just and sustainable world has never been more critical. Yet, faith leaders and their communities are often overlooked actors in the defense of human rights and environmental protection.

There is a particularly urgent and promising opportunity to mobilize faith communities in Latin America. This region, rich in biodiversity and natural resources, is also one of the most dangerous for environmental defenders. Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico have seen alarming rates of violence against those fighting to protect their land rights. They were among the top deadliest countries in the world for environmental defenders last year.

Faith communities, driven by a profound care for nature and human well-being, are already developing innovative strategies to defend human life and the natural environment under threat from extractive industrial and development projects. This report examines four case studies in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico that showcase their unique and effective approaches driving local change.

Together, their advocacy presents alternative models of development that emphasize the inseparable flourishing of humans and ecosystems. By integrating various symbolic, spiritual, community-centric, and socio-political dimensions, they establish a holistic narrative of locally led sustainable development. To protect their lands and futures, faith communities are effectively leveraging valuable wisdom that extends beyond the traditional hard science. The research finds that Christian—and in particular, Catholic—communities are largely driven by a desire to protect people and their land as an integrated and interconnected whole, rather than to protect the environment as if it was an external setting in which humans live.

In addition, a spiritual connection with the land and water itself has proved critical in bringing communities together and offering them motivation and hope at moments when their territories and futures are threatened by extractive or mega-infrastructure projects.

The examples in the report also underscore the critical leadership role women play in these communities. Despite often being underrecognized in formal religious structures, women are essential in both defending human rights and protecting land. Recognizing and supporting their leadership is crucial for safeguarding the rights of rural, low income, and Indigenous communities while also addressing the crises of inequality, biodiversity loss, and climate change.

It is imperative that international organizations, governments, civil society, and other stakeholders explicitly recognize, learn from, and engage more effectively with faith communities. Learning to speak each other’s language is critical to finding long-term, equitable solutions that work for communities on-the-ground and scaling real impact across the world.



ANI DASGUPTA
President & CEO
World Resources Institute



CELIA DEANE-DRUMMOND
Director, Laudato Si’ Research Institute, Campion Hall
University of Oxford





Executive summary

Faith communities are pivotal yet often overlooked actors in socio-environmental disputes. This report highlights their unique role in defending life and territories through spiritual, community, and socio-political strategies, advocating for development models that prioritize human and ecological well-being. Recognizing and supporting their contributions is crucial for achieving sustainable, locally led development.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Faith communities are important yet often neglected actors in socio-environmental disputes. For Christian communities and the Catholic church in particular, our research highlights that they understand their actions as defense of life and territories rather than participation in natural-resource governance.
- Faith communities deploy strategies of defense that integrate a symbolic-spiritual, community, discursive, and socio-political dimension and that shape the search for alternative socioeconomic development models aimed at human and ecosystem flourishing.
- Faith communities are highly heterogeneous in their involvement in socio-environmental disputes. Among the most influential factors for positive involvement are being part of the lives of local communities, understanding ecological commitment as an expression of faith, and providing formation that links spirituality with social realities.
- Women play a leading role in defending life and territories, but their leadership is not given due recognition in ecclesial structures. Formally recognizing women's leadership in faith communities is key for protecting the rights of rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities in socio-environmental disputes.
- This report recommends that international organizations, governments, civil society, and other stakeholders explicitly recognize faith communities and their members as important environmental defenders and adopt a community approach to protecting them and supporting their visions for locally led development.

CONTEXT

With more than 80 percent of the world's population estimated to be affiliated with a religion, international development organizations have increasingly acknowledged the importance of religious actors in development policy and practice, including in health, education, climate change, and environmental issues. But the dynamics between religious actors and development processes at the local level and their dynamics of interaction with other actors in contesting or shaping development discourse and policies remains little understood. This report unpacks these dynamics within four local territories that are being profoundly transformed by an infrastructure or extractive industry project driven by certain narratives of social and economic development. The report does not purport to be yet another study of socio-environmental conflicts. Rather, it is a study of religious actors themselves, on their role in socio-environmental conflicts and the strategies they deploy toward what they understand as a peaceful resolution. What are the factors that lead religious actors to develop strategies to defend the rights of rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities in socio-environmental disputes, and how do they do so? This is the question this report seeks to answer in four territorial contexts.

The reason we selected Latin America and the countries of Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico to answer our research question is based on the economic, political, and religious context of these countries. Critically, for the coming decades the region contains a large amount of the minerals and natural resources needed for renewable energy. Civil and political rights have also deteriorated, and Latin America is now the most dangerous region to be an environmental defender, with Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico ranked among the countries with the highest murder rates of defenders, according to the latest data from Global Witness. The region remains the one with the largest Catholic population globally, with a growing Protestant population. Latin America has been the site of a large Indigenous social movement demanding ways of expanding economic and social opportunities without ecological destruction, which the movement has called "buen vivir" (good living), and which is based on a non-separation among human and other forms of life and the life of spirits. These social movements have also advocated for rights of nature beyond human rights. It is against such a background that we have chosen to focus our research to seek a greater

understanding of the role that faith communities play in defending life in territories affected by extractive and infrastructure projects.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report aims to shed light on the strategies that religious actors develop to find peaceful resolutions to socio-environmental disputes in selected Latin American territories. The focus of the study is on Christian communities in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, but the relevance of this research extends beyond these countries and beyond Latin America and Christian communities and organizations. This is the first cross-country comparative study of how religious actors shape the civic space for, and motivate the actions of, local communities in protecting human and other forms of life in territories affected by infrastructure and extractive projects. By bringing new insights to how religious actors are engaged in environmental protection and human rights promotion, the present study seeks to illuminate the work of civil society actors elsewhere who are involved in similar actions and who similarly bring a religious dimension to their actions to contest decisions taken by other actors that negatively affect their lives. The report also aims to provide a better understanding of the critical role of religious actors in development and sustainability debates. For, as the case studies show, beyond seeking a peaceful and just resolution of socio-environmental disputes, many seek most of all to articulate a new narrative around “development” in public debates and policy circles, one that guarantees the reproduction of life itself in all its forms, including fish stocks, animal and plant species in all their diversity, and human life itself. Across all of our cases, we found that religious actors involved in the disputes did not seek a greater redistributive model of extractive and mega-infrastructure-led development, as may happen in some other cases of socio-environmental disputes in Latin

America and elsewhere, but a new model of socioeconomic development altogether that is an alternative to extractive- and capital accumulation-based models.

The research builds on the expertise of the World Resources Institute (WRI) in natural-resource governance and faith action on sustainable development, drawing participation from the Faith and Sustainability Initiative, WRI Brasil, WRI Colombia, and WRI México. The team included experts from the Laudato Si’ Research Institute (LSRI), who brought years of academic research experience on faith-based engagement in the grass-roots efforts of groups across Latin America to strengthen the leadership and voice of local communities in defending their territories and lives. The research was supported by the Ford Foundation under its Natural Resources and Climate Change portfolio.

This report uses the broad category of faith communities to refer to religious actors, for it is the concept of faith or spirituality which is appealed to. Such spirituality, which animates these actors and motivates them, inextricably links the relationship to God (or spirits) with the relationship to the Earth. These relationships are mediated via a community from which civic engagement emerges and takes place. This study focuses on two aspects of faith communities: (1) discourse, teaching, symbols, practices, and rituals; 2) organizations and leadership structures that produce this discourse and practices and act upon them. In analyzing faith communities as civil society actors, this study adds a normative-spiritual and relational-community dimension to conventional understanding of the civic space, for these are the foundational dimensions through which faith communities engage in the discursive and socio-political realms.

The case study selection was guided by our research question. A fundamental aspect of the selection was a perspective on the negotiation of differences of the valuation of nature and understanding of what counts as development. This led us

The focus of the study is on Christian communities in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, but the relevance of this research extends beyond these countries and beyond Latin America and Christian communities and organizations.

to choose cases that controlled for these differences and that showed how the differences were negotiated, how they could be overcome, and which role faith communities might play in these negotiations. For each country, we drew an initial list of six potential cases that all experienced various forms of violence, whether direct—such as intimidation, physical repression, or land dispossession—or indirect—such as social, economic, and political marginalization. We identified cases in which faith communities were active in addressing these forms of violence in one way or another. A second selection criterion was the participation of faith communities as civil society actors in the dispute and the different types of actions they were undertaking. We also sought case studies that involved a local, national, and international scale.

We selected the following four cases (see map):

- The oil bloc El Nogal in the department of Caquetá in the Colombian Amazon region: Caquetá is the region with the highest deforestation rate in Colombia. Our research was greatly supported by the Vicaría del Sur of the Archdiocese of Florencia.
- The Belo Monte hydroelectric dam in the Brazilian state of Pará in the Amazon (with a focus on the municipality of Altamira). Belo Monte is the world’s fifth-largest dam. Faith communities associated with the social movement “Xingu Vivo Para Sempre” (Xingu Forever Alive) were essential for access and security.
- The diversion of the River São Francisco in the Brazilian Northeast (with a focus on the Apodi branch), which is a water infrastructure project in a semi-arid region. Our research was facilitated by the Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra) and the Rural Workers Union (Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais) in the area.
- The “Carretera de las Culturas” (Highway of Cultures) in the Mexican state of Chiapas from San Cristóbal de las Casas to Palenque, which is a road infrastructure project. The Jesuit Mission Bachajón and the Movement in Defense of Life and Territory (Movimiento en Defensa de la Vida y el Territorio, or Modevite) was our research host.

In each case, we endeavoured to adopt a participatory research methodology in which research participants were full subjects and owners of the research. The research findings of this report have been discussed throughout the writing

FIGURE ES-1 | Map of the four case-study locations.



Source: Authors.

process with the research participants themselves and the local organizations that facilitated the research. A constant priority that guides the entire research process has not only been the search for a better understanding of the role of faith communities in defending life in territories affected by extractive or infrastructure projects, but also what other faith communities and civil society organizations facing similar challenges elsewhere can learn from the experience of the communities studied in this report.

The research provides evidence of the key role that faith communities play in natural-resource governance, a role that should be used to strengthen partnerships between all stakeholders working to protect the lives of peoples and ecosystems. Stakeholders include civil society organizations,



faith communities, Indigenous peoples, local communities, and other actors seeking to promote sustainable and equitable resources use, as well as those working at the intersection of faith and sustainable development. The research provides guidance and insights to governments, foundations, academics, and other stakeholders seeking innovative and impactful approaches to addressing natural-resource governance at local, national, and international scales. Finally, the research serves as a catalyst for partners seeking to act on the recommendations, training, and other interventions to support faith communities and civil society organizations in defending human rights and preserving land and territory.

We made the decision not to conduct research where faith communities were involved in furthering one of the previously mentioned forms of violence due to safety concerns. Given the possible threats to the lives of our research team and informants, we could not go that route without employing other research methodologies. We do hope to conduct further research in that area in the future.

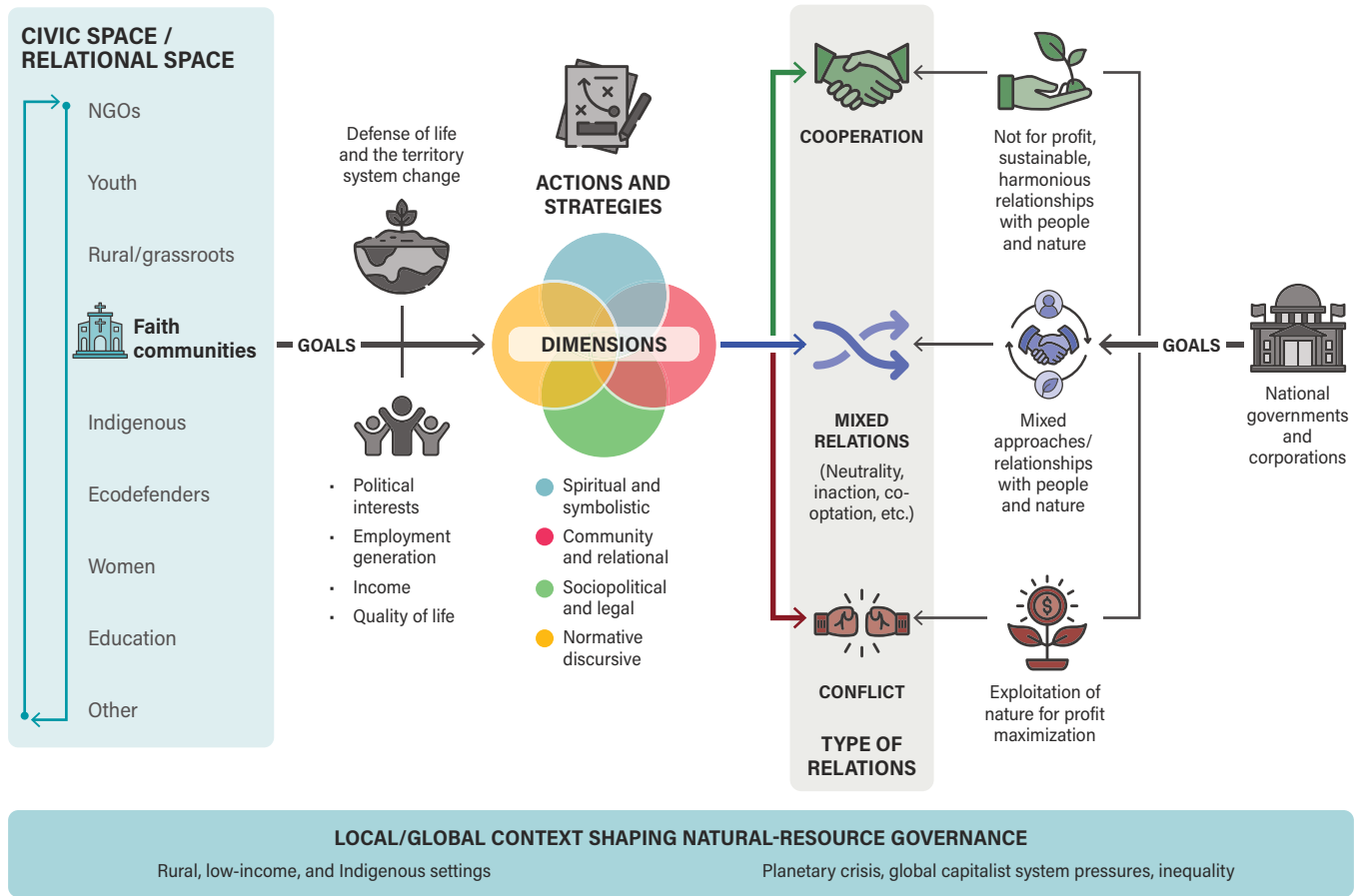
This research report is primarily based on interviews and focus groups with faith communities, linked to the Christian tradition that sought to defend human rights, land, and territories. Given the purpose of the research, which is to understand how faith communities participate in socio-environmental disputes, we did not seek information as to why some leaders and members of faith communities get more involved than others or why Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, or neo-Pentecostal communities have different modalities of involvement or why there may be differences

within the same Christian denomination. However, our research does highlight some elements indicating what may trigger involvement of faith communities and their members in socio-environmental disputes and in defending the rights of local communities and their land. These elements could point to some areas of intervention in contexts where faith communities have shunned involvement.

MAPPING THE ROLE OF FAITH COMMUNITIES IN SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL DISPUTES

This research addresses the role faith communities play in socio-environmental disputes and the mechanisms through which they influence dispute resolution, whether through their organizations or individual members. What are the factors that lead some faith communities to develop strategies to defend the rights of rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities; and how does faith influence their strategies? The aim of the project is to seek a greater understanding of faith communities as civil society actors in socio-environmental disputes, drawing on four case studies from Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. Figure ES-2 shows a simplified graphical summary of the question that this report seeks to address.

FIGURE ES-2 | Summary of the research question



Source: Authors.

KEY FINDINGS

- Each case study details how the community-building efforts of faith communities historically were the foundational ground for social mobilization and collective action today. Each case, although some more than others, emphasizes the role of spirituality, conceived broadly as connection with the rivers and the forests and as motivating ground for undertaking action and persevering when their actions fail in their goal of defending life. Faith communities drew their actions from their specific normative underpinnings, especially biblical interpretations, which gave them a framework to diagnose environmental harms and human rights violations, analyze their causes, and take actions to address them. In all case studies, the majority of faith communities involved sought to build alternative ways of expanding economic and social opportunities for local communities, rather than achieve more equitable outcomes of extractive or mega-infrastructure-led projects.
- We observed during our research that faith communities nurtured a sense of commonality among their members, such as “being affected by mega-corporations,” “being Amazonian,” or a collective identity around the memory of those who have defended local communities and their land, sometimes at the cost of their lives. This can become a powerful driving force for collective action, uniting individuals, and organizations, of diverse faiths and backgrounds in the protection of land and defense

of human rights. It is therefore essential to strengthen the local capacity among faith communities for conducting critical analysis of the social reality, whether that be through increased awareness and skills, human or financial capacity, or coordination among different stakeholders. Our research shows that faith communities play a pivotal role in equipping local communities with the tools to assess their circumstances comprehensively.

3. Faith communities' involvement in socio-environmental disputes occurs at the intersection of various scales, from local to global. Recognizing the lived experiences of their members and making these experiences visible at different scales is essential for meaningful change. In the case of the Catholic church, its unique leadership structure of being a global institution operating at the local level allows faith communities to bring attention to local issues on the global stage. The recognition of the Catholic church's actions at the global level was mentioned as giving moral strength and support. This recognition also enables financing, communications, and support mechanisms that bring needed attention and capacity to movements on the ground. Such global-local connecting of dynamic of faith communities is of particular importance as the natural-resource disputes that take place in local territories are often influenced by global dynamics of international commodity markets.
4. Our research points out that it is essential to acknowledge the diversity across and within faith communities, within the same Christian denomination and across denominations. Different denominations and groups exhibit varying priorities and approaches. Shared challenges and common values, such as those of the "life of water," a "river alive forever," "protection of a common home," and human rights, unite faith communities and beyond and form the basis of faith communities' defense strategies. These values serve as a unifying force for collective action. In cases where we observed little or no involvement of some faith communities, our findings suggest that the training of pastors and strengthening a sense of common experiences of harm can help members of these faith communities join actions in defense of human rights and environmental protection.
5. When analyzing what leads faith communities to develop strategies of defense of life, one could not ignore women's leadership in human rights and environmental



defense. Even if all the appointed religious leaders of the faith communities researched in this study were males, women's leadership played a critical role at the local level. It is therefore vital to support the training of women and enhance their capacity for social analysis, as well as develop specific mechanisms of protection against gender violence. This is not only a matter of gender equity but also a strategic move toward more comprehensive and effective action for the protection of the rights of local communities affected by infrastructure and extractive projects.

6. The active participation of younger generations is a cornerstone of the continuity and sustainability of the struggle in the defense of life. Despite attempts to reach out to the younger generation across our case studies, the membership of organizations and movements in defense of life, land, and territory is middle-aged and older. One major challenge for youth is alcoholism, recruitment in organized crime, and lack of employment opportunities in the regions studied. Any intervention oriented at increasing youth participation in strategies of defense of life and territories need to take a multi-dimensional approach, addressing employment and human rights training jointly, as well as youth migration in the case of Mexico.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Deeper insights into the role of faith communities in fostering alternative socioeconomic development models rooted in the inseparability between human and ecosystem flourishing will bring about new models of sustainable development and forest protection. Our research underscores the emergence of new economic and social models within faith communities centered on environmental care. Further research is needed to understand the search for these alternative development pathways and the role of faith communities and other stakeholders in shaping them. Encouraging and supporting these pathways stands as a primary responsibility for both national and local governments. Redirecting international finance toward development aligned with local worldviews and priorities is crucial. Already evidenced in Colombia through peace agreements and government-backed territorial development programs, this collaboration between national-local authorities and faith communities highlights the implementation of alternative development practices. Brazil showcases strides in promoting a new Amazonian economy centered on agroecology and ecosystem restoration. These models prioritize environmental responsibility and social welfare and resonate with faith communities and Indigenous beliefs. Governments hold a pivotal role in nurturing these initiatives, and forging alliances with initiatives led by faith communities can magnify the impact of agroecology and solidarity economy endeavours led by governmental bodies.

Governments and other stakeholders must champion legislation that considers ecosystems and nonhuman species as subjects of rights, known as rights-of-nature legislation, as well as other legal and policy frameworks that protect the rights of environments and local communities. Our research has perceived that the local practices and strategies of these communities are in sync with broader agendas within different territories in Latin America and more widely. Rights-of-nature legislation has been identified by numerous informants as a crucial foundation for environmental preservation. Colombia's landmark recognition of the rights of the Colombian Amazon, for example, sets an inspirational precedent, despite implementation challenges. Such declarations acknowledging the inherent value of natural ecosystems and the rights of nature provide legitimacy in strategies for local environmental protection. Moreover, there is an urgent need to protect human rights, particularly those of local communities and environmental defenders, by championing

frameworks such as the “Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean,” known as the Escazú Agreement, which seeks to “ensure the right of all persons to have access to information in a timely and appropriate manner, to participate significantly in making the decisions that affect their lives and their environment, and to access justice when those rights have been infringed” (UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2018). It also means enforcing existing international human rights legal frameworks, such as those that afford people the right to clean environments.

To leverage the experiences of faith communities that are actively involved in socio-environmental disputes and in defending human rights and environmental protection, our findings recommend targeted financial support and resource mobilization. This includes forming and equipping these faith communities with the necessary knowledge and analytical and practical skills. Our case studies have highlighted that investment in community formation, information, exchange, and monitoring helps to effectively address the dynamic nature of socio-environmental conflicts amid shifting policy landscapes. Audiovisual materials serve especially as a conduit for disseminating knowledge. It is critical for



faith communities to learn from and collaborate with similar groups facing comparable challenges. In this pursuit, promoting religious inclusion and interfaith collaboration is essential. International development and financial institutions can significantly contribute by supporting interfaith and environmental defender networks, thereby facilitating collaboration and knowledge exchange that transcend geographical and belief boundaries. Our evidence shows that community infrastructure for learning and communication enables better knowledge sharing and enhances learning opportunities.

Recognizing women as eminent leaders within faith communities is paramount. Across all the cases, informants consistently highlighted the prominent role of women in defending life and territories. Yet they could not access formal leadership positions in the faith communities of which they are members, especially in Catholic contexts. Empowering women not only in environmental leadership roles but also in addressing underlying structural issues—such as lack of access to information, access to justice, and limited participation in decision-making—is crucial for protecting the rights of rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities.

Substantively working with youth is critical to long-term success. Given the pivotal role of younger generations as future custodians of environmental protection, concerted efforts are needed to involve them actively in the defense of

life. Initiatives like the Vicaría del Sur's Youth Organizations Network in Colombia and Modevite's "Youth Recreating Autonomy" in Mexico demonstrate focused engagement and training of youth on human rights, environmental issues, and peace-building, rooted in faith perspectives. However, challenges persist, particularly highlighted by weakened youth involvement due to the pandemic and concerns about their vulnerability to crime and exploitation in certain regions. Urgent interventions must bolster youth participation, addressing multifaceted challenges like employment, rights training, migration, and societal vulnerabilities.

Amid the alarming rise of organized crime in the Latin American region, including the case studies, research on how to address better the protection of environmental defenders becomes imperative. The communal approach adopted by faith communities in their territorial defense could provide important insights in that regard. There is also a need for further empirical research on the influence of these criminal groups on both faith communities and the defense of territories and protection of rivers and forests. This exploration could help curb the encroachment of organized crime and provide a safer environment for environmental defenders in accessing information and justice and participating in decisions.







Introduction

Religion has been integral to human societies for millennia, shaping cultures and influencing development. This study explores the role of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes in Latin America, examining how they mobilize spiritual and communal resources to defend territories and advocate for socio-environmental justice.

What we today call religion has been part of the fabric of human communities for millennia. Throughout the history of humankind, there is evidence of the quest to relate to a transcendental and encompassing reality, something beyond the visible. The Neolithic ceremonial site of Stonehenge in England, the Olmec temples in Mexico, the cathedrals of medieval Europe, and the rituals that have been passed on through centuries are all examples of an enduring institution. Despite its overarching presence in human societies—with nearly two-thirds of the global population predicted to be either Christian (31 percent) or Muslim (30 percent) in 2050, and 13 percent with no religion (Pew Forum 2022)—the study of religion’s role in processes of social change is relatively recent.

It is at the turn of the millennium that interest in the role of religious actors as civil society actors emerged prominently in the academic literature (Clarke 2006; Clarke and Jennings 2008; Deneulin and Bano 2009; Deneulin and Rakodi 2011), although religions have long played a role in development before global development institutions started to recognize their influence (Calderisi 2013; Marshall 2013). This interest was spurred by a growing recognition among international institutions and development organizations of the presence of religious institutions among poor communities and their role in poverty relief, education, and health provision. This led to the multiplication of collaborative initiatives of international development organizations with faith communities (Tomalin 2019; Tomalin 2021). More recently, there has been a growing momentum of interest in the role of religious actors in addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and

Throughout the history of humankind, there is evidence of the quest to relate to a transcendental and encompassing reality, something beyond the visible.

environmental degradation more generally (Köhrsen et al. 2022; Lacerda et al. 2023; Öhlmann and Swart 2022).¹ There has also been growing interest in the role that religions and Indigenous spiritualities might play in shifting an instrumental human-nature relationship toward one of reciprocity in order to address the climate and ecological crisis (Kopenawa et al. 2013).

Such engagement with religious actors, both at the academic and policy level, has however overlooked gender inequality within religious communities and their dynamics at the local level. Academic research and policy engagement have tended to focus instead on the discourse produced by (male) religious leaders and sidelined women leadership in local communities (Tomalin 2018). Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler (2020) further noted that over the last two decades, the engagement between international development organizations and religious institutions often reinforced gender-biased and gerontological hierarchies at the exclusion of women and youth.

Despite a large volume of literature today on religion and development within the field of development studies, few studies have researched how faith communities and organizations at the local level interact with other actors in their territories in contesting or shaping development discourse and processes or how they interact with wider structures and institutions at the national and global level. This present study will seek to unpack these dynamics within four local territories that are being profoundly transformed by an infrastructure or extractive industry project: the state of Pará (municipality of Altamira) in the Brazilian Amazon, the state of Rio Grande do Norte (municipality of Apodi) in the Brazilian Northeast, the state of Caquetá in the Colombian Amazon, and the state of Chiapas in Mexico.

In the field of political ecology, religious actors have yet to receive the same attention as in development studies. Even in the so-called “new” political ecology, which is particularly sensitive to cultural mobilization and its role in environmental politics and access and control over natural resources (Peet and Watts 2004), religion is sidelined.² In a review of the presence of religion in the political ecology literature, Wilkins (2021, 276) argued that the marginalization of religion has led to “incomplete conceptualizations of interpersonal power relations.” This neglect of religion is somewhat a blind spot given that, as he argues and as this present report documents, “religious organizations influence not just ideas

and beliefs but are themselves material actors controlling vast amounts of resources, land, and capital” (Wilkins 2021, 277). Moreover, a large number of religiously motivated actors are part of organizations and social movements worldwide. Even when the political ecology literature has mentioned liberation theology as inspiration for civil society actors in Brazil like the Landless Rural Workers Movement (or MST in its Portuguese abbreviation) or the Pastoral Land Commission (or CPT in its Portuguese abbreviation), Wilkins (2021) concluded that its influence has not been critically assessed. As he notes, “By ignoring religious institutions, movements, and actors such as those involved with liberation theology,³ political ecologists miss a great deal of how people engage with each other and the ecologies they are enmeshed within” (Wilkins 2021, 281).

It is mainly on the topic of mining in Latin America that one finds references to religious actors in political ecology accounts of natural-resource conflicts and how they mobilize religious beliefs, discourse, organizations, and networks. Bebbington et al. (2019) note the role of the Catholic church in the mining moratorium in El Salvador. Javier Arrellano-Yanguas (2014; 2016) analyzes the role of religious actors as civil society actors in mining conflicts in Peru. There is emerging ethnographic work on mining conflicts that similarly account for the role of religious actors, positive or negative, in resisting land dispossession, environmental remediation, and conflict resolution. Teijlingen (2022) critically examines how Catholic discourse on being a “Church of the poor and the earth” are played out in the Mirador mining project in Ecuador. In her ethnography, she warns of the reinforcement of patriarchal power relations and essentializing of elements of Indigenous cosmologies such as “Mother Earth” (Pachamama) in the Catholic church’s involvement in the Mirador case and its defense of human and territorial rights. Teijlingen also highlights the tensions and ambiguities regarding religious discourse, such as those around “God’s gifts,” which are mobilized for justifying both the protection and exploitation of natural resources. Other work on religious actors and mining is emerging at the conceptual level within the field of peace studies. Montevicchio and Powers (2021) examine how religious actors theorize peace in conflicts generated by mining projects and propose the idea of “integral ecological peace.”

It is to these two literatures—that of “religion and development” in development studies and political ecology—that this present report seeks to contribute. In the first, it aims

at shedding light on the interactions among the local, national, and global scales of faith communities and on how religious actors themselves frame development discourse, mobilize that discourse, and organize and participate in civil society. This analysis pays special attention to female leadership and the construction and conceptualization of human-nature relationships. Overall, this research seeks to move beyond “religion and development” toward a socio-environmental justice research agenda that is inclusive of a religious dimension.

Within the field of political ecology, the report seeks to contribute to a nascent literature on the role of religious actors in environmental politics and natural-resource governance. The present study does not purport to be yet another study of socio-environmental conflicts.⁴ Rather, it is a study of religious actors themselves, of their role in socio-environmental conflicts, and of the mechanisms through which they influence it. What are the factors that lead religious actors to develop strategies to defend the rights of rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities; and how do they do so? This is the question this study seeks to answer in four selected territories in order to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which religious actors influence natural-resource governance. One limitation of the research is that we conducted interviews and focus groups only with faith communities that were developing such strategies of defense, and these were mainly linked to the Catholic church. We did not seek to understand what led some faith communities or some members of those communities not to undertake actions, although our informants mentioned some factors when they spoke of why other members of their faith communities were more lukewarm or disagreed with their actions, such as a political polarization or how a person understands “faith in action.”

The focus of the study is on Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, but the relevance of this research is, we hope, beyond these countries and beyond Latin America. To our knowledge, this is the first cross-country comparative study on how religious actors shape the civic space for, and motivate the actions of, local communities in protecting human and other forms of life in their territories affected by infrastructure and extractive projects. By bringing new insights on how religious actors are engaged in environmental protection and human rights promotion, the present study seeks to illuminate the work of civil society actors elsewhere who likewise bring a faith dimension to contest decisions that are taken by other

actors and that negatively affect their lives. The study also hopes to provide a better understanding of the critical role of religious actors in development and sustainability debates. For, as the case studies will show, beyond seeking a peaceful and just resolution to socio-environmental disputes, the faith communities analyzed sought most of all to articulate a new narrative around development and sustainability in public debates and policy circles—one that guarantees the reproduction of life itself in all its forms, including fish stocks, animal and plant species in all their diversity, and human life itself. Even in cases where faith communities were involved in demanding nonviolation of environmental regulations and more just compensation measures, they did not demand a greater redistributive model of extractive and mega-infrastructure-led development, but a new development model altogether.

Religious actors are in no way homogeneous. In some of our case studies, especially in Brazil, our informants pointed out disagreement between different Christian denominations regarding modes of engagement in the socio-environmental dispute; and some pointed out differences within the same denomination. Each case study will detail these heterogeneities further and what may possibly underpin them. Notwithstanding these differences, there is something distinctive about civil society actors who bring a faith or spiritual dimension to their civic involvement, which this report aims to show through its four case studies. With regard to Indigenous communities, who also bring a spiritual dimension to the civic space when they bring their distinctive worldview about nature and spirits, we have chosen to follow a contextual approach of whether to include them or not as part of our wider encompassing term of “faith communities.” As the case studies illustrate, in some contexts like that of Chiapas, Indigenous communities are not distinguishable from faith communities, and their cosmovision is intertwined with Catholic discourse and symbolism in the civic space. In other contexts, like Brazil, they are more distinct. Organizations linked to faith communities, such as the Indigenous Missionary Council, which is part of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Brazil, do advocate Indigenous rights without meshing Catholic discourse with Indigenous discourse as in Chiapas.

This research report is structured as follows. The section titled “Conceptual background” clarifies the key terms of the research. It makes the case for referring to religious actors with the broad term of “faith communities” rather than the

more commonly used term in the literature of “faith-based organizations.” It broadens the concept of civic space to add a community and spiritual space when accounting for faith communities in socio-environmental disputes. Given the integration of human and other forms of life in a territory in faith communities’ defense strategies, we have chosen to use their own terms of “defending life and territories” instead of the concept of “natural-resource governance” used in the academic literature. The section titled “Methodology” describes the process through which we selected the four case studies, the research ethics protocol we followed, and the methodology used to answer our key research question across the four cases:

- “Oil and the defense of the Life of Water in Caquetá, Colombia” analyzes the role of the Vicaría del Sur and its “Life of Water” commissions in the Catholic archdiocese of Florencia and its response to the oil extraction project Bloque El Nogal.
- “Water, land, and the defense of life in Altamira, Pará, Brazil” focuses on the case of the Belo Monte dam in the Brazilian Amazon and the mobilization of faith communities around the dam project in the municipality of Altamira, especially the Movement Xingu Vivo para Sempre.
- “Water, land, and the defense of life in Apodi, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil” analyzes the mobilization of civil society actors around the diversion of the São Francisco River in the municipality of Apodi in the Brazilian Northeast, especially the Pastoral Land Commission and the Rural Workers Union.
- “The defense of life and territory in San Cristóbal de la Casas, Chiapas, Mexico” details the case study of the infrastructure project “Cultures Highway” (Carretera de las Culturas) and the role of the Movement in Defense of Life and Territory (Movimiento en Defensa de la Vida y el Territorio, Modevite) and the faith communities who compose it.

All four cases are similarly structured. They start with describing the territorial context and the project that is being disputed by different actors, how it emerged, its territorial impacts, and the positions and interests of each. After presenting the fieldwork methodologies, each case study analyzes the various interconnected dimensions that faith communities bring to their responses to the dispute, namely



a community, spiritual, symbolic, discursive, socio-political, and legal dimension. Each case study also pays special attention to gender and power dynamics, how different positions are negotiated, and how the different actors in the territory articulate different development narratives and views of nature. Each case study concludes by summarizing the role of the faith dimension in the mobilization of civil society actors in the cases studied and how that dimension does or does not contribute to shaping collective action efforts toward dispute resolution about the use and governance of natural resources.

Finally, the section titled “Common Insights” discusses a set of common features across the four cases in the actions of faith communities to defend human rights and sustain human and more-than-human life in the territories they inhabit. The “Conclusion” summarizes our main research findings and draws some implications of the research for faith communities, civil society actors, governments, and businesses.





Conceptual background

This chapter clarifies key terms such as *faith communities*, *civic space*, and *natural-resource governance* as they apply to socio-environmental disputes. By understanding these concepts, we explore how faith communities shape development discourses and defend territories.

The present research is not bereft of contested concepts. The terms *sustainability*, *socioeconomic development*, or *sustainable development* all have different meanings for different actors and are often conflicting. All four cases selected manifest this divergence at their rawest. For some actors, the infrastructure projects are an expression of development that generates employment and provides a large array of social services for local populations. For others, infrastructure projects are an expression of environmental destruction, disruption of livelihoods, forced displacement, land dispossession, and destruction of a culture and way of life. We have chosen not to enter these conceptual debates and let them be defined by the actors in the case studies themselves. There are however three concepts which are constitutive of our research question, and which need to be clarified beforehand. These are the concepts of *religion* itself and what we understand by faith-based participation in the title of this report, *civic space*, and *natural-resource governance* disputes.

The first section argues for using the broad term *faith communities* and discusses our rationale for choosing that term throughout the report. Second, given that our research is about how faith communities act as civil society actors, the means and channels of influence they deploy, and the resources they mobilize, our understanding of civic space adds a normative-spiritual and relational-community dimension to conventional understanding of the civic space. Third, given how faith communities integrate the human and other forms of life, we decided against using the terminology of natural-resource governance whenever possible and refer to the term used by faith communities themselves as the defense of territory and all the life it contains.

Seeking harmony and relating well with God is synonymous with seeking harmony with the surrounding ecosystem and not disrupting its balance.

FAITH COMMUNITIES

In its most general form, religion has been understood in the social sciences as a set of beliefs in god(s). Yet, for many people, their relationship to the unseen world—or spirits or god(s)—is not a matter of beliefs they choose to adhere to or not, but a way of life, a way of understanding the world and being in it. It has now been well established that seeing religion as a set of beliefs that one could accept or reject as an option among others is a product of Western modernity (Taylor 2007), with some, such as Asad (1993), urging that there be no attempt at defining religion. This is why the consensus is now for avoiding an essentialist definition of religion and for taking instead a particular position, given the research subject and context (Fountain 2013). In their edited volume on *Religion and Social Conflict in Latin America*, Berry and Albro (2020, 8) consider religion “at once as an institutionalized political actor, an arena of cultural contestation, and a symbolic resource for social mobilization.”

Following this non-essentialist approach to religion, our analysis will refrain from using the terms *religion* or *religious actors* and refer to faith communities and their multiple organizations instead. Our rationale for doing so is threefold. First, in their mobilization to defend their territories and secure land and human rights, it is the concept of faith or spirituality, and at times cosmovision, that is appealed to. Such spirituality, which animates these actors and motivates them, inextricably links a relationship to God (or spirits) with a relationship to the Earth. Seeking harmony and relating well with God is synonymous with seeking harmony with the surrounding ecosystem and not disrupting its balance. Second, in Latin America, such faith or spirituality is not only connected to global institutionalized faith traditions, like Catholicism, but also to Indigenous cosmovisions that are institutionalized locally through rituals, practices, and stories. Third, maintaining a relationship to God (or spirits) is never an individual affair but always linked to a community. As the case studies will show, it is from that community soil that civic engagement emerges and takes place. Thus, broadly speaking, we will be using the term *faith community* to encompass people who belong to a community bound by certain discourse about spirit(s) or god(s), and in relation to the question, “Where does this community draw its transcendence from?”

This study focused on two aspects of faith communities: (1) discourse, teaching, symbols, practices, and rituals; and (2) organizations and the leadership structure that produce the discourse and practices and act on them. We will highlight how the discourse, practices, rituals, and organizational structures are in constant evolution with the context in which they are framed and developed. For example, as all four cases will illustrate, the practice of pilgrimages has taken a rather different meaning and purpose in the context of ecological destruction; and the leadership structure of the Catholic church in its Latin American Bishops' Conference, has been key in orienting the actions of faith communities regionally.

Discourse, symbols, and rituals

Over their centuries of existence, faith and Indigenous communities have developed a certain discourse about spirits or god(s). The discourse includes, in the case of Indigenous communities, creation narratives and other oral narratives about the actions of spirits. In the case of globally institutionalized faith communities, the discourse includes the interpretation of biblical texts in the documents they produce. In our case studies, one document features prominently in the Catholic church, namely the document of the Latin American Catholic bishops who gathered in 2007 in the Brazilian city of Aparecida and which sets the mission of the church in Latin America as being about defending human rights and denouncing injustices (CELAM 2007). That document builds on earlier documents from the Latin American Bishops' Conference, namely Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1978. The lead writer of the Aparecida document was Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis. The Aparecida document influenced the documents and discourse of his papacy, such as *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Francis 2015), and *Querida Amazonia* (Francis 2020), which follows from a gathering of the Catholic bishops of the Amazon and other groups in October 2019 in Rome, known as the Amazon Synod. All these documents are a follow-up of the Second Vatican Council.⁵ In all four cases, the Second Vatican Council, which took place between 1962 and 1965, has contributed to the organizational and mobilizing ground upon which current actions to defend life are taking place, as will be discussed in greater detail in the case studies.

This discourse is closely connected to sets of rituals and symbols, which, as this research will show, play a role in mobilizing for social action. Arrellano-Yanguas (2014)



mentions, for example, a Eucharist (a ritual of thanksgiving) celebrated on an open-pit mine in Peru to highlight in a symbolic way the destruction that humans were inflicting on God's gifts of creation (water, soil, air, and more broadly the ecosystems that sustain human life) and the responsibility of humans to respect them. In our Colombian case study, the ritual of baptism is serving as a mobilizing discourse around the sanctity and protection of water. In our Mexican case study, the practices of pilgrimages and Indigenous harvest rituals mixed with Catholic liturgies are mobilized to organize collective action for respect of the rights of Indigenous peoples and the protection of ecosystems, or Mother Earth as they call it. In some cases, however, rituals and liturgies can be used to legitimize infrastructure or extractive projects, such as blessing ceremonies of trucks or earth ceremonies before extraction begins, although we did not encounter such instances in our four cases.⁶

Organizations and their actions

Each faith community has its own way of structuring itself and contains organizations that perform different functions. Within the literature, organizations linked to faith communities have been known as faith-based organizations (FBOs) (Clarke 2006; Clarke and Jennings 2008; Clarke and Ware 2015; Heuser and Koehrsen 2020). We have found the term *FBOs* to be problematic for our research. First, so-called FBOs employ staff who do not necessarily belong to the faith community to which the organization is connected. Second, members of faith communities, such as catechists, can be members of secular organizations and bring their values and motivations derived from their faith community to that organization (such as the Rural Workers Union in our Brazilian case study). Or an organization born within a faith community can give rise to an organization well beyond the boundaries of that community, such as the Pastoral Land Commission (linked to the Catholic bishops in Brazil) giving rise to the Landless Rural Workers Movement (Pinto 2015). Finally, there are many organizational structures of faith communities that are not civil society or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). For example, the Holy See is a diplomatic actor in international relations. A Catholic religious order can be an institutional investor as can a diocese or church pension fund. The Pastoral Indígena and Pueblo Creyente in Mexico, or Pastoral Social in Colombia are projects of the ecclesial structures of the Catholic church but do not qualify as FBOs as they encompass liturgy, spirituality, human rights training, social services provision, and legal services among others.

A further reason for avoiding the umbrella term *FBO* is that the norm throughout our case studies is multiple communities of belonging. An environmental defender can belong to an Indigenous community and share its beliefs about spirits and simultaneously be a member of an organization linked to the Catholic church or participate in its events. We can cite here Patricia Gualinga who is both a leader of the Kichwa Saryaku Indigenous community in the Equatorial Amazon and vice president of the Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America (Gualinga 2023); Honduran Lenca Indigenous activist Berta Cáceres who participated in the World Meeting of Popular Movements led by Pope Francis in the Vatican in 2014 and whose civic leadership mixed Indig-

enous spirituality (Gandolfo-O'Donnell 2023; Maher 2019; Méndez 2018). Mouly and Hernández Delgado (2019) have called this drawing from spiritual resources to defend rights “spiritual resistance,” which we prefer to call spirituality-based mobilization to defend a territory and its life.

When discussing organizations linked to faith communities in socio-environmental disputes, this research paid particular attention to their leadership, especially in relation to gender, and their heterogeneity with respect to divergence of views about the expression of faith. Even if faith communities may be bound by a common discourse, like Catholic communities bound by the analysis and teachings of *Laudato Si'* (Francis 2015) or *Querida Amazonia* (Francis 2020), the ways in which community leaders and members understand this discourse and act on it varies. Our study therefore looked at internal dynamics that lead some members to undertake actions in favor of Indigenous rights and biodiversity preservation and others to be indifferent or discourage participation in these actions. We are not assuming that faith communities universally support environmental sustainability, empower defenders, or expand civic space. There is a large diversity among actors, with some actively supporting ecological destruction and others changing their position across time from political engagement in the 1970s to political disengagement today, as the two Brazilian case studies will discuss. We also analyzed changes in faith communities' positions and what led to these changes, from avoidance of getting involved to accompaniment of affected communities and advocating for their rights and vice-versa. When analyzing different organizations, in addition to leadership structures, we sought to bring out how the local, national, and global levels interact in the many actions they carry out, such as offering a space for mediation; providing alternative environmental impact assessments, legal services, and human rights training; arranging spiritual and pastoral support for those who have suffered human rights abuses; getting involved in political advocacy, media campaigning, and awareness building; or refraining from political involvement altogether.



Civic space

Seeking to answer the central question of the role of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes and which factors may lead them to develop strategies to defend the rights of rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities implies answering the associated question of their role in shaping the civic space in which these disputes are negotiated. A starting point for our analysis is the definition of civic space by the United Nations *Guidance on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space* as “the environment that enables people and groups to participate meaningfully, online and offline, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies, within which people express their views freely and without fear, assemble peacefully, associate and engage in decision-making processes in relation to issues that affect their lives” (UN 2020, 3). Two components in that definition are critical for our research. First, basic civil and political rights are constitutive elements of the civic space. Our case studies therefore focus on how faith communities contribute to the right to information, expression, and assembly. The more these rights are protected, the larger the civic space. The civic space shrinks when these political and civil rights are undermined. As the UN *Guidance* notes, “A vibrant civic space requires an open, secure and safe environment that is free from all acts of intimidation, harassment and reprisals, whether online or offline” (UN 2020, 3). Given that Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico are among the most dangerous countries globally in which to be an environmental defender (see the section on Methodology), we have added the protection of the lives of civil society actors themselves as another basic component

of the civic space (Menton and Le Billon 2021) and analyze how faith communities are responding to intimidation, harassment, and death threats.

A second component in the UN definition that is important in the present study is its emphasis on both online and offline forms of meaningful participation in the life of faith community societies. This is why our analysis is not only based on interviews with key actors, but also on digital material and online communication.

This section discusses the UN *Guidance* definition of the civic space within the context of faith communities and the means they use to shape that space.⁷ As the four case studies illustrate, faith communities do shape the civic space also through normative discourse, narrative building, and value production, for better or for worse. The narrative of using “God’s gifts” can for example be used to justify both the exploitation of rivers and forests for economic purposes and for their protection. A faith community leader may preach the legitimacy of an infrastructure project, thereby shaping local population views and influencing the civic space through which community members participate in society. It is therefore important to keep in mind that some faith communities may contribute to shrinking the civic space not only by their non-involvement in human rights promotion but also by their support of government decisions that undermine rights.

Access to information, freedom of expression, and meaningful participation

Starting with access to information, faith communities shape the civic space by gathering and communicating information about what is happening in the local territories selected. For example, this would include a radio they may operate, such as the radio Sutatenza in our Colombian case, which played a significant part in mobilizing rural communities about their rights historically, or the local radio Andaquí, which broadcast programs about the protection of water in the department of Caquetá. Guaranteeing the right to freedom of information also includes the financing of independent environmental impact assessments to give a different perspective to those commissioned by businesses or states. In her study of participatory institutions that communities use to mobilize and challenge extraction, Jaskoski (2022) singles out the environmental impact assessment (which needs to take place prior to projects going ahead) as an important area of contestation, with local communities organizing assessments to offer a social and environmental evaluation of impacts of a project independent of business and state interests. In the Colombian and Brazilian cases, faith communities have played a role in providing alternative assessments through mobilizing their national and international networks.

One could include in the promotion of access to information the work of faith communities in the areas of civic education or human rights education, or what could be more broadly conceived of as capacity development. The Panamazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM in its Spanish acronym) has created, in partnership with the Inter-American System for the Defense of Human Rights, a School of Human Rights, which is aimed at equipping local actors with legal knowledge and tools to speak up and denounce human rights violations (see Colombian and Brazilian case studies). In the Mexican case study, the pilgrimages organized by faith communities also involve human rights training workshops and other forms of capacity building and civic education.

Closely linked to access to information is the freedom of expression to which faith communities can contribute, often as an amplifier of the voices that are rarely heard in national and international policy arenas. In each of the case studies, we examine how the voices of local communities are amplified by faith communities at the national and international level or sometimes silenced or co-opted. Within the Catholic church, one could mention the Amazon Synod, which



sought to bring the voices of Indigenous communities in the Amazon to shape global Catholic theological discourse and influence global policy platforms (Deneulin 2021b). However, faith communities are not homogeneous, and some groups, even within the same faith community, can amplify or silence some voices.

The promotion of access to information, freedom of expression, and meaningful participation, whether online or offline, is not the only component of the civic space through which people “engage in decision-making processes in relation to issues that affect their lives,” as per the UN *Guidance* definition. Other components are specific, although not restricted, to faith communities’ civic involvement. These are ones that pertain to the normative, including spiritual and relational dimensions of the civic space, which the UN *Guidance* definition omits.

Spiritual and normative dimension

In our research context, a fundamental normative question being disputed is about the meaning of development and which objectives governments should pursue. Each of the case studies in this report describe how faith communities bring these normative questions into the civic space at the local and national level and, for some, at the global level. All of our case studies highlight the centrality of the spiritual dimension in the mobilization of faith communities to defend life in their territories and to protect the rights of local populations. Their social and political actions derive from the spiritual dimension and the inseparability of the material world and the invisible world of spirits or the divine. Spirituality is a driver to transform realities in a way in which all life, human and other forms of life, is better protected. It motivates action so that ecosystems can flourish; animals, plants, and trees can continue living; and humans can continue residing in their territory. In an online exchange seminar between all movements analyzed in this report (see Appendix F), this element of spirituality—understood as a connection with rivers and forests, with their ancestors and God (which they saw as all interconnected)—was highlighted as the most important. Without nurturing that connection, the communities across our four case studies concurred that they would not be able to sustain their actions. However, as the Brazilian case study will show, faith communities are heterogeneous; and those who endorse a separation of the realm of the soul with the realm of physi-

cal life in territories advance a different normative vision of desirable social change in the territories and may eschew such transformation of realities and remain silent or even support the destruction of life, especially through so-called “prosperity Gospel” discourse.

In the four cases, we analyze how stakeholders and policy actors are shaped by how the faith communities they belong to articulate their valuation of nature and their conception of progress or development. We critically examine the role of faith communities in forming and motivating civil society actors, and how they may provide a space in which civil society actors draw inner strength in the face of adversity, intimidation, harassment and even death threats. In their discussion of nonviolent action and civil resistance, Mouly and Hernández Delgado (2019, 230–1) talk of “intangible factors of resistance” to refer to religious celebrations as means of counteracting attempts at undermining the civic space. They note that there has been little theorizing of how Indigenous worldviews and spirituality more generally can act as a “power within” to strengthen the political voices of local communities against powerful actors. From the case of the Lenca community in Honduras and other cases in Colombia, Mouly and Hernández Delgado (2019, 232) argue that spirituality “made these indigenous groups more resilient and provided them inspiration to innovate tactically in the face of new challenges raised by their state and private sector opponents.” Our four case studies bring to the fore how faith is intimately linked to hope. Even if there are no immediate results of the actions taken, and destruction of life continues despite the mobilization to defend it, faith communities persevere.

Community and relational dimension

One important element of the civic space that characterizes faith communities, although not unique to them, is that of global solidarity networks among different social classes and national boundaries. These solidarity networks are critical when power inequalities stifle the voices of rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities, as has been noted earlier. In an analysis of the varying roles the Catholic church might play in fostering solidarity in the context of mining, Miller (2021) argues that, by being present at all levels of stakeholders—local communities, multinational companies, government institutions—and by uniting those affected by

extractive pursuits with those consuming or benefiting from the extracted material, the church can leverage a significant potential to deepen relationships of responsibility and solidarity. In their report on how extractive industry and infrastructure are drivers of deforestation and rights violations in Mesoamerica, the Amazon, and Indonesia, Bebbington et al. (2018, 38) similarly noted the role of religious organizations in linking local realities with national processes of policy decision-making and in building legitimacy with regard to the grievances of deforestation-affected communities. Bebbington et al.'s report also highlights how these organizations often link the question of natural-resource governance to more fundamental questions about what constitutes progress, human flourishing, and the place of the human being in the universe.

Another aspect of the relational dimension of faith communities' civic involvement is that of accompaniment of marginalized communities. This often takes the form of facilitating the social and political organizing of these communities to make their voices heard and the formation of civil society leaders in human rights advocacy (Deneulin 2021a, 78–85). Within the Catholic church, Pope Francis has often emphasized the need for disadvantaged groups to organize themselves in social movements to press for structural change (see, among others, Francis 2020, 116). On the basis of Pope Francis's writings and discourse, theologian Stephen Pope (2019, 138) defines accompaniment as about "forming relationships of mutual trust based on equal dignity" and then "mov[ing] to a shared commitment to promote agency." All the case studies in this report highlight the importance of the Catholic church's role in accompanying vulnerable communities, and in facilitating the creation of community organizations. This nurturing of relational space and community building is, we argue, a critical aspect of faith communities in capacity building to advance the rights of rural, low-income, and Indigenous populations and defend their lives and territories. We note that this has more to do with closeness to the lives of local communities and with the Second Vatican Council of a church who takes the "griefs and anxieties of people as its own" (Paul VI 1965, 1) than institutional structures as such. This also raises important questions regarding gender dynamics as women are mostly at the forefront of the collective mobilization at the local level (Koster and Deane-Drummond 2023), yet they are often excluded from recognized leadership positions at higher levels. In all of our four case studies, women are the main

protagonists leading the defense of life and territories but remain excluded from recognized religious leadership in the Catholic church and in other Christian denominations too.

NATURAL-RESOURCE GOVERNANCE DISPUTES

When we started to delve into our analysis of faith communities' involvement in socio-environmental disputes and do some preliminary interviews with some key actors, it soon became clear that the term *natural-resource governance* was alien to them and that this was not how they framed their approach to the dispute. Our informants talked of "defense of life" in the face of decisions that threatened the support basis of their lives. However, there are some features of conventional definitions of natural-resource governance disputes in the literature, which remain relevant for our research. These are a territorial and actor perspective, a focus on power dynamics, and the local-national-international interaction. We add to these a focus on the valuation of nature itself, as the disputes are often about diverging views on human-nature relations and the development models derived from them.

A territorial perspective

In a textbook on natural-resource governance, Arrellano-Yanguas and Dammert (2020, 14) define natural-resource governance as a "system of decision-making and coordination among different actors," which "includes decision and coordination processes which affect extractive [and infrastructure] projects and the management of the various impacts that these projects generate (political, fiscal, social, ecological, etc.)." They highlight three essential aspects of natural-resource governance: a territorial perspective, taking into account power relations (which are nearly always asymmetrical), and the dynamic and changing nature of governance and how national and international economic and political contexts change decision-making systems.

When discussing our case-studies selection and which resources we would concentrate on for comparative purposes, we concluded that a territorial rather than a natural-resource perspective would be the best way forward. This is because the civil society actors who are involved in natural-resource governance disputes did not speak the language of natural-

resource governance and rejected the very term *natural resources*. It is the life of an entire territory they seek to defend: the fish on which they feed themselves; the water of rivers that allow them to live and in some cases, rivers that they view as imbued by the spirits and part of their own lives and which they value more than electricity; the medicinal plants in the forest upon which their health depends; the endangered species that the infrastructure or extractive project threaten with extinction, and so on. Notwithstanding these concerns, across all our cases, disputes involved water and forests, for they are the essential elements of a territory that local populations seek to defend and which they often view as sacred. A central element of contention across our cases is the valuation of nature itself and the limited view of water and forests as a set of resources that humans can exploit to their own ends, disregarding their sacredness and the balance between human and other forms of life.

A valuing nature perspective

A report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES 2022, 8) distinguishes four different (and often combined) ways of relating to and valuing nature: (a) “Living from nature,” which views nature as providing resources for sustaining human life; (b) “Living with nature,” which views nature as a set of “life-supporting processes in connection with other-than-humans”; (c) “Living in nature,” which views nature as a set of places where human lives, histories, and cultures evolve; and (d) “Living as nature,” which views nature as part of human life

itself, physically, mentally, and spiritually. The IPBES report concludes that policymaking has privileged mainly the value of “living from” at the expense of other views. Power asymmetries far too often influence whose values count and which form of valuing takes priority in policy. There is a critical need to establish institutions where the different ways of valuing nature identified by IPBES can be considered so that conflicts can be mitigated. Our case studies will point out how faith communities might play a role in creating such institutions to mediate disputes between different valuations of nature and promote peace in the short and long term.

We therefore understand natural-resource governance disputes in the way our informants themselves understand them, that is, disputes about the valuation of nature and conceptions of progress or development. For them, their actions are not as much about seeking greater participation in the governing and use of natural resources as about defending life in a given territory from government decisions that threaten life in the territory and advancing new modes of relations between humans and other forms of life. This is why we added to the official title of this research project the subtitle “Faith Communities Defending Life.” The mobilization of faith communities across all four case studies was articulated on the basis of the defense of life, as the name of three movements analyzed in this report demonstrates: Commission for the Life of Water (Comisión por la Vida del Agua) in Colombia, Movement for the defense of life and territories (Modevite) in Mexico, and Xingu Forever Alive (Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre-MXVS) in Brazil.

We therefore understand natural-resource governance disputes in the way our informants themselves understand them, that is, disputes about the valuation of nature and conceptions of progress or development.





Methodology

Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico were selected for studying the role of faith communities in defending human rights and the environment due to their economic reliance on extractive industries and significant social and political dynamics, as well as the strong role of religion in local communities. The research involved data collection through public sources, interviews, and focus groups, adhering to ethical guidelines and emphasizing a participatory approach with close partnerships with local faith communities.

CASE SELECTION

The reason we selected Latin America and the countries of Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico to answer our research question on the role that faith communities might play in defending human rights and protecting the environment in territories affected by infrastructure or extractive projects is foremost empirical and based on the economic, political, and religious context of these countries. Over the last two decades, Latin America has followed what has been called an extractivist development path (Svampa 2019), irrespective of the political orientation of governments. Latin America has remained a leading destination for mining investment (Arsel et al. 2016; Gudynas 2021; Riofrancos 2020), which continues to deepen the trend initiated in the 1990s.⁸ Critically for the coming decades, Latin America contains a large amount of the minerals and natural resources needed for renewable energy, such as lithium for batteries (with Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina estimated to contain 70 percent of the world's reserves) and copper for electro-mobility (with Chile, Peru, and Mexico estimated to contain 40 percent of the world's reserves) (Purdy and Castillo 2022).

Industrial mining concessions are estimated to cover 18 percent of the territory of the Amazon region and affect 20 percent of protected Indigenous lands (WRI 2020). To this, one needs to add the infrastructure projects that often accompany these extractive activities. Roads are needed to bring the extracted mineral to the coast for export. Electricity is needed to power the machinery, and water is needed to extract the minerals from the subsoil.⁹ The continent's economy is also largely oriented toward the exportation of agricultural products, especially in Brazil and Argentina.¹⁰ Agriculture similarly needs roads to export the goods to ports, water to grow crops and breed cattle, and electricity to process these products for export. These extractive and infrastructure projects are a major driver of deforestation in the region (Bebbington et al. 2018). Moreover, these economic trends have led to deep social and political fractures. Civil and political rights have deteriorated, with the region seeing its greatest decline since the end of the dictatorships in the late 1980s (Human Rights Watch 2022). Latin America is now the most dangerous region to inhabit as an environmental defender with Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico leading, along with the Philippines, in terms of killing environmental defenders. In 2022, Colombia was the most dangerous country in which to be an environmental defender, with

60 killed, followed by Brazil (34) and Mexico (31). Ninety percent of environmental defenders killed globally were in Latin America, and a fifth in the Amazon region (Global Witness 2023), with Indigenous communities most at risk.¹¹ The Latin American Observatory for Mining Conflicts (OCMAL 2023) identifies more than 250 conflicts that involve some form of violence with Colombia numbering 19 conflicts, Brazil 26, and Mexico 58 at the time of writing.

In response to this context, Latin America has been the site of large Indigenous-based social movements that demand alternatives to development that take harmony between human and ecosystem flourishing as their end. Those movements have often mobilized under the discourse of good living (“buen vivir”) and advocate for rights of nature beyond human rights (Follmann 2020; Lacerda 2020; Lacerda et al. 2022; Raftopoulos 2018; Vanhulst and Beling 2014; Villalba-Equiluz and Etxano 2017). Thus, Latin America provided an interesting empirical ground to examine the role that faith communities and Indigenous cosmovisions could play in disputes around extractive or infrastructure projects and their impact on human and more-than-human life. One could probably advance that it is in the debates around nature as the subject of rights and conceptions of progress known as “buen vivir” that social movements and communities in Latin America have contributed most and that these have been one of their greatest social and legal innovations for environmental protection in the region, as many of our informants have expressed.

Another factor in our case selection is that Latin America remains the continent with the largest Catholic population, with 40 percent of the global Catholic population and 69 percent of the continent's population declaring themselves Catholic with a rising Protestant population (Pew Forum 2014). The continent has also experienced an original reception of the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960s onward in response to its political and socioeconomic context, what has been known as liberation theology. This nurtured the ground for innovative religio-social-political experiments, such as the base ecclesial communities in many countries, the Pastoral Land Commission and the Missionary Indigenous Council in Brazil, the Pastoral Indígena in Mexico, and the Pastoral Social in Colombia and other countries. As mentioned earlier, the Latin American Catholic Bishops



Conference set the defense of human rights and the denunciation of injustices as the core of the church's mission on the continent (CELAM 2007).

It is against such an economic, social, political, and religious landscape that Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico have been selected to seek a greater understanding of the role that faith communities play in territories affected by extractive and infrastructure projects. A case study of socio-environmental dispute was then selected for Colombia and Mexico, and two for Brazil, given the size of the country, on the basis of their relevance for answering our research questions.

A first selection criterion was the presence of structural violence.¹² The cases identified needed to have the following components: (a) symbolic and cultural violence (e.g., destruction of sacred sites or undermining of cultural practices); (b) economic, social, and political violence (e.g., dispossession of livelihoods); and (c) ecological violence (e.g., destruction of natural habitats). Some cases could also include aspects of gender-based violence, although this aspect was often entangled with other forms of violence.¹³ For each country, we identified cases in which faith communities were active in addressing these forms of violence in one way or another.

Due to safety concerns, we did not select cases where faith communities were involved in furthering one of the above forms of violence, such as a case in Mexico in which a faith

community argued that a wind energy project was “God’s will,” or a case in Colombia in which some faith community members were connected to organized criminal networks. Another reason for excluding negative experiences of faith communities’ involvement in natural-resource governance disputes is because of the aim of this research project: to seek a better understanding of the role of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes so that other civil society actors and faith communities that are faced with similar challenges in other places can learn from our research.

A second selection criterion was the participation of faith communities in the dispute and the different types of actions they were undertaking, such as actions at the discourse level (e.g., narrative building, ecological education, value formation, and other actions aimed at nurturing the normative-spiritual and relational-community dimensions of the civic space); protest actions (e.g., marches, civil disobedience, non-cooperation); or actions at a constructive or restorative level (e.g., creating information centers, financing of independent impact environmental assessments, or policy advocacy). A third criteria was that of scale and the presence of local, regional, national, and international elements.

TABLE 1 | Case identification matrix

CRITERIA CATEGORY	VARIABLES (AND WEIGHT)
Case identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation of local or Indigenous communities in the dispute (weight x 2) • Participation of faith communities in the dispute (weight x 3) • Presence of multinational companies, investors, and government (weight x 3) • Visible socio-environmental impacts (deterioration of health and/or ecosystems, cultural autonomy and self-determination, fragmentation and division of the community, changes in ways of life) (weight x 2) • Presence of local, national, and transnational actor and scale of affected population (weight x 2)
Faith communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of symbolic resources (discourse, interpretation of texts, rituals, symbols, etc.) • Variety of organizations (parishes, service delivery, advocacy organizations, social movements, religious orders, etc.)
Civic space and governance conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith communities and civil society taking actions to protect civil and political rights • Value conflict between actors (how nature should be valued, the conception of development, and visions of progress, etc.) • Construction of relational space (actions of solidarity and accompaniment, building of trust and commitment) • Protection of self-determination rights of Indigenous communities (including their right to life): legal and social actions to guarantee the right to free prior and informed consent • Protests
Additional criteria numbered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global pressures: participation of foreign actors and global demand pressure • Intensity of violence: criminalization of civil society actors, protests, and discrimination • Women's participation • Danger of conducting fieldwork in the area • Availability of existing information and research on the case
Additional criteria not numbered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict still ongoing or closed • Size of territory • Existing contacts in the territory to facilitate collaboration

Source: Authors.

On the basis of these criterion, we established a table with the following selection categories (Table 1) and assigned a number of 1 to 5 to each selection variable, with 5 being the highest score. Some variables were weighted more than others to reflect research priorities.

After this scoring exercise, interviews with selected members of faith communities (Catholic and Protestant), and of Indigenous communities in the case of Brazil, were conducted to inquire about their opinions on the relevance of our selected cases and the feasibility of conducting research in the territories, especially safety concerns.

The following cases that obtained the highest scores were determined to be most feasible for empirical research:

- The oil bloc El Nogal in the department of Caquetá in the Colombian Amazon region: Caquetá is the region with the highest deforestation rate in Colombia. It was

a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, by its acronym in Spanish) stronghold during the civil war; it has a large involvement of “Vicaria del Sur” of the archdiocese, which established “Comisiones por la Vida del Agua” (Commissions for the Life of Water) in various municipalities in response to oil exploration in the region.

- The “Carretera de las Culturas” (Highway of Cultures) is a road infrastructure project in the Mexican state of Chiapas and is introducing a variety of industrial, extractive, and other infrastructure projects in the region. The project has given rise to a large faith-led social movement “Movimiento en Defensa de la Vida y el Territorio” (Movement in Defense of Life and Territory, Modevite), which includes Indigenous Tzeltales, Tzotziles, and Ch’oles of 13 municipalities of the region and which is part of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas.

- The Belo Monte hydroelectric dam in the Brazilian state of Pará in the Amazon (with a focus on the municipality of Altamira) is the world’s fifth largest dam and has given rise to a large faith-led social movement, “Xingu Vivo Para Sempre” (Xingu Forever Alive).
- The diversion of the River São Francisco in the Brazilian Northeast (with a focus on the Apodi branch) is a water infrastructure project in a semi-arid region and has witnessed cooperation between organizations linked with the Catholic church (Pastoral Land Commission) and Protestant organizations to defend the rights of affected communities.

DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH ETHICS

For each case study, data were first collected from publicly available information so as to obtain information on discursive practices deployed by faith communities in their online and offline everyday interactions across the four territories identified. These practices involved letters or public advocacy statements; visual, symbolic or artistic manifestations of ideas; and narratives used by faith communities to advance their claims.

Research ethics approval was granted by WRI’s Research on Human Subjects Department and the Research Ethics Committee of the Oxford Department of International Development in May 2023. The empirical research followed the research ethics protocol of these organizations. Interviews, focus groups, and participatory observations were held across the four sites in June and July 2023. [See Appendices A and B for a list of the interview questions and structure of focus groups, which were translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and Indigenous languages (for Mexico) and were adapted to country context.] All research participants have been anonymized.

For each case, we sought to interview government representatives, business employees, civil society actors, and members (including leaders) of faith and Indigenous communities and locally affected communities. It is telling that in none of the four cases did government representatives and business employees agree to be interviewed, despite efforts made by the country researchers. The research participants were approached through a snowball technique, thanks to our collaborating organization in each site: the Misión Bachajón of the Jesuits in Chiapas, the Vicaría del Sur of the Archdiocese of Florencia in Colombia, the Movement Xingu Forever Alive and the Catholic diocese of Xingu-Altamira, the Pastoral Land Commission of Mossoró, and the Rural Workers Union in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte. Whenever possible, we sought gender balance. (See Appendices C, D, and E for a list of research participants and their organizations.) Organizational membership was the main guiding criterion for research participant selection, rather than ethnicity or age. We also conducted additional fact-checking among human rights organizations in each country in order to back up claims of the faith communities about harassment, repression, or threats. For claims that we were not able to verify, we framed the claims using language emphasizing that these were the experiences of the research participants. The burden of proof is often higher for those with less power, those who have been systematically marginalized, and those whose experiences are invalidated by those in power.

A participatory research methodology was adopted throughout. The research findings presented in this report have been discussed throughout the writing process with research participants and the local organizations that facilitated the research. Representatives of these organizations across the three countries met in an online platform to respond to this report and share their experiences about what they most learned from their struggles to defend human and more-than-human life in their territories.

It is telling that in none of the four cases did government representatives and business employees agree to be interviewed, despite efforts made by the country researchers.





Oil and the defense of the life of water in Caquetá, Colombia

In the department of Caquetá, Colombia, faith communities have emerged as key actors in defending human rights and the environment amidst the impacts of extractive industries. This chapter explores the historical, socioeconomic, and political contexts that have shaped Caquetá, focusing on the role of the Vicaría del Sur and its Commissions for the Life of Water in resisting oil exploitation and protecting the Amazonian ecosystem. Through a combination of spiritual motivation, community organization, and socio-political actions, these faith communities illustrate the profound impact of faith-based mobilization on socio-environmental disputes.



Landscape in Caquetá. (Credit: María Paula Barrera.)

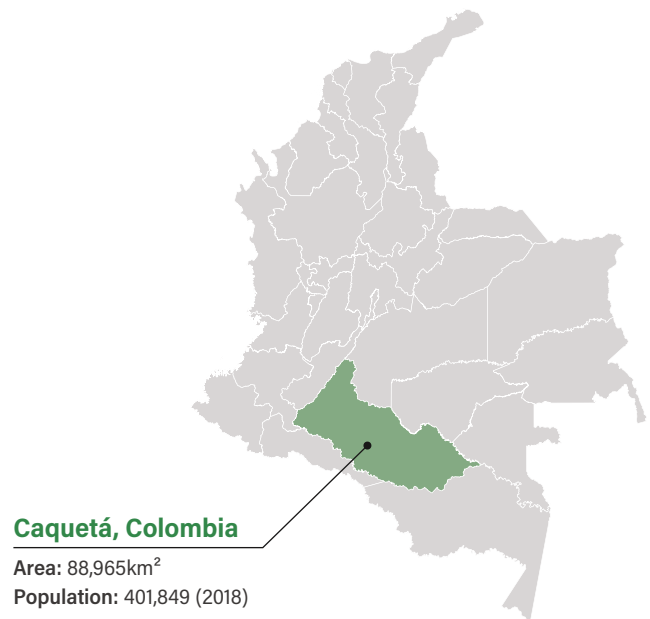
INTRODUCTION

Caquetá is one of the six departments of the Colombian Amazon (Figure 1). It contains 35 protected areas, 5 of which have the status of national parks. Caquetá has long been criss-crossed by a history of colonization and exploitation. The first colonizers entered the territory with the Franciscan missions in the late 17th century. The arrival of the missionaries began a long history of natural-resource extraction in the region (Niño et al. 2002). These colonial processes, both missionary and extractive, led to the decimation of the region's original residents.¹⁴ Since then, Caquetá has been marked by processes of migration, colonization, and extraction-based economies in the Amazon forest.

The Colombian state has been the main actor behind this colonization and agricultural expansion and is a main driver of deforestation in the area.¹⁵ According to Global Forest Watch (2023), Caquetá has the second highest deforestation rate in Latin America, losing 485,000 hectares of forest cover between 2000 and 2021. The process of agricultural and extractive intensification which fueled this deforestation led to displacement of existing residents and the arrival of agricultural settlers from neighboring departments.

The civil conflict that has engulfed Colombia over the last 60 years led to the emergence of coca production and the arrival of narco-trafficking activities in the department in the 1970s. The period between 1978 and 1982 saw the height of violence, which became known as the “Caquetá War”

FIGURE 1 | Geographical map of Caquetá, Colombia



Source: Adaptation from Google Maps and Pining.

(Niño et al. 2002). Caquetá was a place where the FARC held political and military power and where the second failed attempt at dialogue and peace negotiations with FARC and the government took place.¹⁶ The dispute around territorial control between guerrillas and paramilitary and narco-trafficking networks, including contested access to coca cultivation and narco-trafficking routes, gave rise to years

of violence, massacres, forced displacement, and civil disappearances.¹⁷ Caquetá has been one of the areas most affected by the violence in the country, and the 16 municipalities that constitute the department were designated as part of the 170 priority municipalities of the Peace Agreements territorial development program (PDET).¹⁸

At the end of the 1990s, government-sponsored peace attempts, such as “Plan Colombia,”¹⁹ led to the arrival of oil companies, which decades of violence had prevented from entering the department. The governments of Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) and Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018) promoted foreign investment in the extractive industries sector and loosened environmental regulations. Under Santos, these policies were known as the Mining–Energy Locomotive. This shift in national policy led extractive companies to become more interested in Caquetá. According to the National Hydrocarbon Agency, Caquetá contains important oil reserves (Díaz 2019). It is for that reason that the Santos government (2014–2018) attempted to withdraw 14 municipalities of the department from the Amazon region in its National Development Plan so that they would fall under looser environmental regulations (Díaz 2019). The next government reversed the decision in its development plan following pressure from local communities.

Actions from faith communities started to emerge against that socioeconomic and political background. The Vicaría del Sur was founded in the 1980s with the aim to create a

“Pastoral Rural y de la Tierra” (which translates in English as a church ministry oriented toward social affairs in rural areas) and whose activities were oriented toward improving the quality of life of rural populations and their agricultural activities while respecting the Amazonian ecosystem and its native seeds. The Vicaría del Sur has been responsible for organizing peasant communities since 1992. The creation of the Vicaría is situated within a longer involvement of the Catholic church accompanying rural workers in Colombia.²⁰

In 2012, the Vicaría organized a forum on “Oil exploration in Caquetá” following the arrival of two oil companies (Emerald Energy and Pacific Rubiales) in two municipalities of the department, which raised concerns among local communities.²¹ This forum led the Vicaría to create in 2012 a Commission for the Life of Water (Comisión por la Vida del Agua, hereafter CVA in its Spanish abbreviation), in the municipality of Belén de los Andaquíes where the Vicaría had then its head office. When the company Emerald Energy, a subsidiary of the Chinese company Sinochem, entered two other municipalities (Valparaiso and Morelia) in 2014, following agreements signed in 2012 between the Ministry of Mines, Ecopetrol, and the Chinese government to attract investment to Colombia in the hydrocarbon sector, the creation of the CVA in the department laid the groundwork for mobilization around the oil project. If fully completed, the project, named El Nogal Oil Bloc, would be the largest oil exploration in the Colombian Amazon, covering 239,415 hectares.

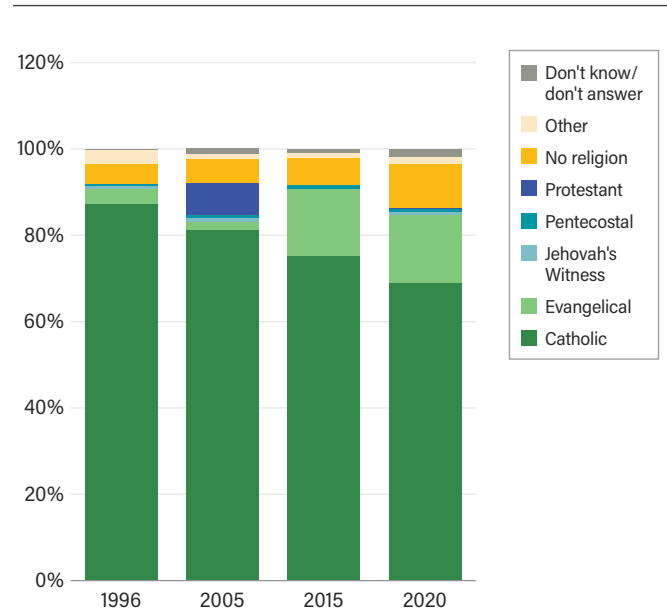


Finca Amazónica. (Credit: Facebook of CVA.)

When the oil exploration was announced, the two affected municipalities feared that it would affect water sources and soil quality and that it would bring new waves of violence. Two new CVAs were then created in these municipalities. To date, six municipalities in the south of Caquetá have a CVA. The CVAs are nonformal, do not have a hierarchical organizational structure, and do not have a physical office. Their leadership changes depending on the issue at stake. In this case study, we examine the resistance actions of the CVA to the El Nogal project since 2015 after Emerald Energy's first seismic studies.

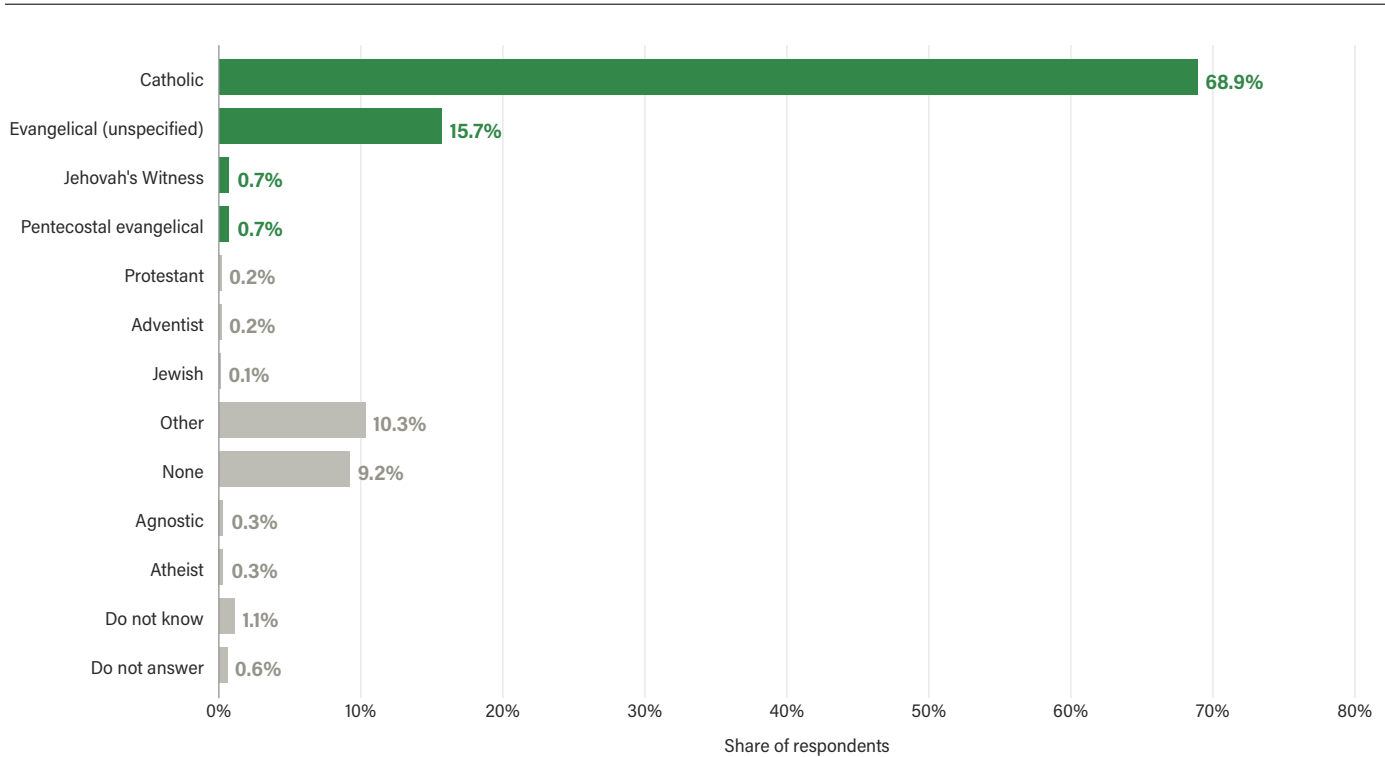
Overall, the case study of the oil bloc El Nogal and the work of the CVAs provide several insights on the actions of faith communities in developing innovative resolutions to socio-environmental disputes. The faith communities discussed are predominantly Catholic, as it is the largest denomination in Colombia (Figures 2A et 2B),²² and in Caquetá. But as we will see, the CVAs include members from other denominations and have mobilized beyond religious boundaries.

FIGURE 2A | Religious affiliation in Colombia from 1996–2020



Source: Latinobarometro Colombia.

FIGURE 2B | Religious affiliation in Colombia as of 2020, by type



Source: Latinobarometro Colombia.

After describing the methodology for data collection, we analyze the strategies deployed by the Vicaría Sur and its CVAs. We start by discussing how a spiritual dimension is leveraged through various symbolic actions and examine how these actions serve as a motivating and collective mobilizing platform. We then analyze how this spiritual dimension has led to constructing a distinctive moral discursive space and underline the critical role of relationship and community building as a strategy of defense. By being rooted in these dimensions—spiritual, moral, and community—actions in the socio-political and legal sphere then take place. We conclude by summarizing some of the main characteristics of faith communities, “involvement in socio-environmental disputes that can be derived from the experience of Caquetá, noting some of the challenges in sustaining their work in the long term.

FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

The case study selection was based on a wider literature review and national mapping of cases of socio-environmental disputes where faith communities played an active role in accompanying local communities in defending their rights (see the section “Methodology”).²³ The selection of this case follows the selection criteria described in Table 1, as well as security considerations for fieldwork. These security considerations led us to discard a potentially insightful case where some faith communities were involved in fueling a conflict by participating in narco-trafficking (a Mennonite occupation of agricultural land in Puerto Gaitán, department of Meta), and other faith communities (a Catholic religious order) were defending the right of Indigenous communities threatened by agricultural expansion.

Fieldwork was conducted in the department of Caquetá in July 2023, following preliminary online interviews with key social actors in order to guide the case selection (Appendix C). The data presented below are based on 21 semi-structured interviews (10 women, 11 men). Sixteen interviews were conducted with organizations involved in the case (Figure 3), including leaders of the CVAs across six municipalities: four with representatives of the Vicaría Sur, including its network of youth organizations; one with a representative of the Departmental Roundtable for the Defense of Water and Territory (Mesa Departamental por la Defensa del Agua y

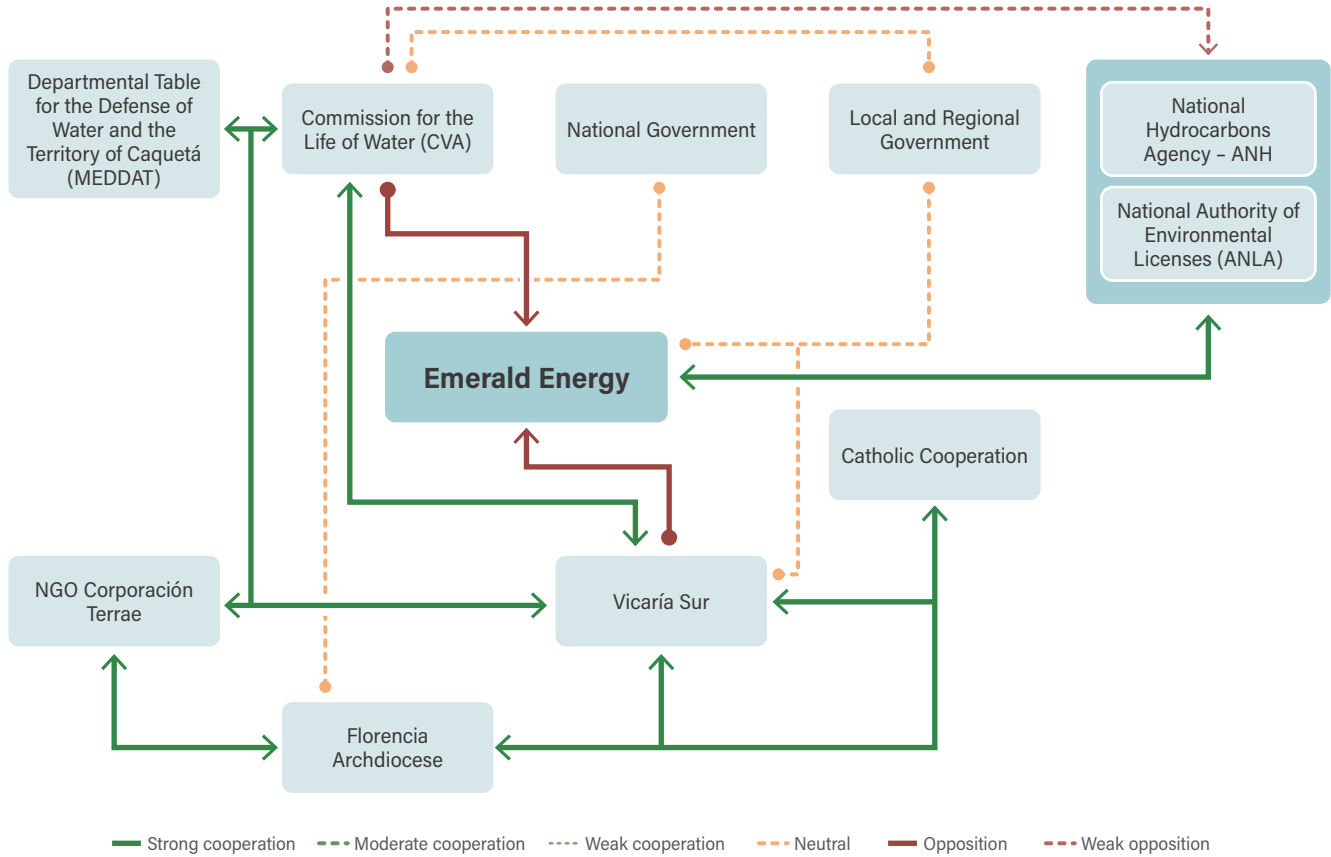
Having a common axis
with which everyone
identifies, such as water,
is also essential.

el Territorio—MEDDAT); and one with the NGO Corporación Terrae. (See Appendix A for the interview guide and Appendix C for the list of interviews.)

Two focus groups were also conducted, one with representatives of the Vicaría Sur and the second with CVA representatives of the municipality of Valparaíso, where the activities around the oil bloc El Nogal are concentrated. (See Appendix B for a description of the focus group and Appendix C for its participants.) Participants were asked to develop their own timeline of the dispute, which highlighted some major strategies of defense, such as the bridge blockade in 2015 and the Public Audience in 2018, described further in this report. Participants were then presented with a hypothetical letter sent from another faith community that asked for advice on how to mobilize in a similar situation. The participants responded by highlighting the importance of starting with analyzing the situation so that local communities feel the need to act. The exercise also pointed out the importance of community formation and working from an integral vision of faith, that is, a faith that is put into practice in environmental, social, and political issues. Having a common axis with which everyone identifies, such as water, is also essential. Finally, the focus groups recommended working on convincing people that the most important element is the defense of life in all its aspects, that is, the protection of human health, livelihoods, culture, ancestral knowledge, ecosystem balance, and animal species. One focus group also highlighted the importance of being united and having a vision of the whole territory and, above all, being united in faith and trusting that God will help them.

In addition to interviews and focus groups, data were gathered through participation in the regional meeting of the CVAs in the municipality of Morelia in July 2023. The meeting started with a reflection on the Bible in light of processes of resistance. Participants reflected on community unity and love of God as important aspects of the defense of

FIGURE 3 | Map of social actors in Caquetá, Colombia



Source: Authors.

their territory. The meeting also included a presentation of partial results of the community monitoring of water, which concluded with the proposal to create a community (water) monitoring school.

It is worth noting that despite attempts to interview company representatives and government officials, we were not able to secure any. Emerald Energy is involved in other conflicts in other areas of the department, and its representatives were not open to interviews to discuss the conflicts that their activities are generating. Moreover, the company had no office in the municipalities where fieldwork was conducted, despite its activities in the territory.

FAITH COMMUNITIES AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Leveraging a spiritual and symbolic dimension

The core of the Vicaría Sur strategy has been centered around achieving a strong moral influence in the defense of all life through connecting spirituality with environmental protection and human rights. The strategy has been articulated around the axis “faith and life” and three thematic areas: living faith (spirituality), the Amazon (care of the territory), and human rights (defense of the territory and rights of the rural communities). For the Vicaría, spirituality is understood as a way of transforming a tangible reality via an invisible reality through the use of symbols and images and building a collective identity around a common cause, namely protect-

ing water and life in all its aspects. The naming of a commission “for the life of water” instead of “for life and water” evidences a commitment to recognize that nature and its other forms of life are as important as human lives and not two separate entities. As one CVA representative mentioned at the experience exchange meeting in April 2024, “We are water. The human body is 75 percent water.” This statement represents an attempt to overcome an anthropocentric way of seeing the world and the human-nature dichotomy in the wake of “buen vivir” and “rights of nature” discourse. Such commitments emerging from the Latin American grass roots are making their way into the wider global Catholic community through Pope Francis’s documents *Laudato Si’* and *Querida Amazonia*, but are not necessarily shared by all or by other Christian denominations.

The Vicaría’s view of spirituality as transformative practice to protect life in all its aspects is inclusive, it is seen as “the force, the faith that we have in God that we can transform reality, independently of our creed, political colour, or race” (Vicaría Sur 2023, 101). The inclusiveness of such an understanding of spirituality has facilitated and welcomed into the CVAs other Christian denominations, such as the Gregorian²⁴ and Evangelical churches. Some of our informants from the Gregorian church expressed that they had been making intercessory prayers in their temple for the work of the Vicaría and its lawyers. Participation of these denominations in the CVAs has, however, been more at the individual than institutional level. As a representative of the Gregorian church puts it, “In itself, religion requires of me not to get involved in these themes, but I did because it sprang within me that I had to do it.” In some cases, pastors of Evangelical churches have limited the participation of their members in activities of the CVAs.

Some informants saw prayer as a supporting strategy that links a spiritual universe to the transformation of earthly realities. “I asked my God” was an often-recurring phrase in the interviews with prayer as a form of moral support in difficult circumstances. Beyond moral support, prayer was also an integral part of some strategies of defense of the territory. Cultural festivals for the life of water, pilgrimages, and ecological stations of the cross during Lent were all strategies to link faith with socio-environmental issues. These actions also maintain a sense of social cohesion in the midst of violence. As one Vicaría representative puts it: “All this walking that we have done through the pilgrimages for the life of water is a way of being motivated, of being enlightened from a bibli-

cal perspective, but also from an environmental, social, and political perspective; and this is what has left people with a certain conscience and led to certain commitments.”

Interviews emphasized the critical role of the spiritual dimension in making people aware of the dangers for water of oil exploitation and in motivating action to protect water. The idea in Spanish of “iluminación” was mentioned several times by people from different Christian denominations to express how the invisible realm of faith can enlighten and motivate one’s actions. In the case of the Vicaría, our informants mentioned how they illuminated the reality from the message of Jesus, from the Bible as a guide to reflect upon their experience. In that sense, this reflects the Second Vatican Council and the Catholic social tradition, which seeks to illuminate current realities from the perspective of the Gospel (Otano 2018). It is in that spirit that the Vicaría Sur was founded, with its aim of transforming rural realities from the perspective of human dignity.

The concept of life as human and more-than-human has been central to the work of the Vicaría since its inception, but it became more significant and took a stronger ecological turn with the arrival of oil companies in Caquetá during the governments of Uribe and Santos. Caring for life is caring for nature, which the Vicaría see as a gift from God that humans need to handle responsibly.

Through a discourse of “Water is Life” and naming its commission “for the life of water,” the Vicaría has constructed a moral or normative space that provides an alternative valua-



March for the Life of Water. (Credit: Facebook of CVA.)

tion of nature from that of natural resources to be exploited. As we discussed in the section “Conceptual background”, faith communities as civil society actors play a distinctive role in shaping the civic space from a normative perspective. It is not only about defending human rights, which arguably can be seen as a classic normative space around which civil society organizations mobilize, but about defending life more generally, including the life of aquifers and rivers. The Vicaría also constructs this moral space by charging it with symbolic and ritualistic elements like the Eucharist. In one Eucharist during a CVA event, the discourse of the homily evolved around water and how caring for it was putting into practice one’s faith in God:

What does water mean? We need to recall that water also represents purification and life. [...] We cannot forget that one of the seven words of Jesus on the Cross was: I am thirsty. That we can give water to drink to people around us, first with our Christian commitment but also with our commitment to the environment. [...] Today we have gathered so that it is a moment where there are no political divisions, we are all united for a common cause, which is the care of nature. I invite you all to take part in the blessing of the water.²⁵

Another symbolic element to which the Vicaría refers is the presence of the dead who have lived an exemplary life—that is, the saints, within earthly realities. “Here on earth, there are many saints” has been referred to by many informants in relation to the memory of Father Arnulfo and Sister Clara Lucia, who founded the Vicaría Sur and were also protagonists in founding the CVAs. They both died unexpectedly in 2016.²⁶ Their images are always present in meetings and events organized by the Vicaría. Both are recognized as inspiring spiritual leaders who led by example through their lives. One current CVA leader expressed how they had been inspired by Father Arnulfo and how they would “copy him a lot” in the way he communicated and framed the need to defend their territories. This was also evidenced in the content and tone of the radio programs of this CVA leader in the community radio, Radio Andaquí.²⁷

Constructing normative discourse

All social relations between human beings in their local and global spaces contain discursive narratives that are used as a means to influence change. Faith communities intersect with wider forms of discourse on nature, its sacredness, and the place of human life within all other forms of life. In so doing, the communities generate and use specific discursive narratives that frame the way they see, understand, and respond to their particular contexts. This is illustrated in the CVAs’ discursive framing around “defense of the territory,” which they conceive of as resistance struggles against the imposition of utilitarian and extractive patterns of exploitation of nature. The CVAs contest a dominant national development narrative that legitimizes the exploitation of nature under a discourse of economic prosperity and social improvement as this was especially the case under the national development plans of the governments of Uribe (2002–2010) (Pérez 2014) and of Santos (2010–2018) with their incentives to encourage foreign investment in oil, mining, and agro-exports (see Santos’ Energy-Mining Locomotive policies mentioned earlier). This has led the CVA to substitute a framing of nature as “natural resources” that need to be governed with that of nature as life that needs to be nurtured. These narratives are often framed within a biblical language of God’s creation that humans have the responsibility to care for and leave for future generations, but they are also inclusive of other social actors who can share in the narrative that nature is life and that whatever undermines nature, undermines life.

These inclusive discursive narratives of defense of territory and life open up dialogues with a wider array of social actors on the valuation of territories and nature. This contributes to the construction of a civic space at the moral level. These narratives question the reduction of nature as a set of resources to be valued for its use and exchange value. One of the CVAs most used slogans is “More water, more life; Caquetá is Amazon.” The first part of the slogan makes visible the value given to nature, specifically water, where water and nature itself are equated to life and that relates to one of the most powerful elements of CVA discourse, namely the idea of the life of water. On the one hand, it refers to the fact that water and nature are living beings, which is part of recognizing other nonhuman forms of life and the intrinsic value of nature. On the other hand, it is also consistent with the declaration of the Colombian Amazon as a subject of rights, which, based on an ecocentric viewpoint, recognizes

the life of the Amazon as valuable in itself.²⁸ Although this declaration is not particularly visible in CVA discourse, the discourse of “water is life” and rights of nature are aligned.

The second part of the slogan is based on the CVA’s mobilization around the Amazonian identity of Caquetá in order to counteract government attempts to withdraw several municipalities of the department from the legal Amazon and to counteract the perception among new migrants in the area that the Amazon is an Indigenous territory to which they do not belong. As a peasant and resident of Caquetá puts it, “We were not sure that this was Amazon territory. I was born, grew up, and live in this region, but I felt a bit surprised when we were told that we were Amazonians. I thought that this was too Indigenous, that being Amazonian was being someone living in the midst of the forest. Today, we are proud to be part of the Amazon, to say that we are Amazonians because, before, we didn’t see it as something good.”

The CVA discourse on the Amazonian identity is shaping and is itself shaped by a wider ecclesial discourse within the Catholic church adopting an “Amazonian face.”²⁹ This discourse has been initiated by REPAM, a network of dozens of organizations that was established in 2014 to coordinate action across national borders to protect the Amazon forest and the life of its people (Caritas n.d.). The Vicaría Sur is part of REPAM. The network recognizes that the Catholic church has not always protected Indigenous peoples and forests in its history. The Franciscan missionaries in the 17th century did indeed bring with them the colonization and exploitation of the territory, and the church itself needs a conversion process to embrace the plight of the forest and its peoples and make it her own. In the words of a representative from the Vicaría, “We wanted to show the church with an Amazonian face because, in its history, the church has facilitated the extraction of gold and quinine and has destroyed the original peoples. It has interfered in its culture in order to extract wealth. We want to show that this was one moment of history, and now is another moment.”

The idea of the church with an Amazonian face responds to the integral ecological conversion of the church, which Pope Francis is calling upon in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, but is also the result of the experience of local communities in appropriating the Second Vatican Council in their own context and the guidelines of CELAM (1968, 1979, 2007). It is about shaping the structures of the Catholic church and orienting its activities toward social and ecological transfor-



Demonstration against El Nogal Project. (Credit: Facebook of CVA.)

mation so that all can live in dignity. In this regard, we can see a critical component of the Catholic church with social movements at the grass roots shaping the teachings and orientations of the church regionally and globally via the structure of ecclesial leadership in regional bishops’ conferences and the institution of the papacy. As we will see later, not all members of the Catholic church and its current national leadership agree with such re-orientation. The archbishop of Florencia, who exercises authority over the Vicaría Sur, has apprehensions about faith communities taking more direct political actions for socio-ecological transformation.

In conclusion, by putting the concept of life central in its mobilizing discourse, the CVA constructs a moral space for civic action that veers toward an ecocentric perspective on nature but does not entirely overcome anthropocentrism. Even if the CVA rejects an extractive position, nature remains for local farmers a means of livelihood. To foster socioeconomic development in the region, the Vicaría is currently pioneering the implementation of an Amazonian farm initiative (see later discussion) that seeks to expand economic and social opportunities for farmers based on a non-extractive and -exploitative view of nature.

Nurturing the community basis

The work of the CVAs critically depends on including local actors and organizations in their strategies to construct a robust civic space and normative discourse. This is why one of its key challenges is strengthening community mobilization, particularly when local communities have experienced

social disintegration after decades of armed conflict. It is a challenge to reignite the social fabric of community activism when leaders have in the past been oppressed or silenced. The violence exercised by public authorities in response to peaceful demonstrations, as in the case of a response to the blocking of a bridge (see later discussion), made some informants express that they were reliving the violence of the years of the civil war. Defending the life of water has therefore been a common uniting force, and faith has been a central element in strengthening a collective commitment to protect the life of water from external threats. The strategy of the Vicaría has been to confer “spiritual value to the territory in order to take root in it” (Vicaría Sur 2023, 234) so as to enable the community to stand firm in its defense. Defending life in their territory becomes not just a manifestation of their collective resistance, but also a public expression of their faith.

The current processes of defense of the territory in Caquetá were not the result of a one-off event. While the El Nopal oil bloc has been a recent rallying point, these processes have spanned several decades. Since its creation, the Vicaría has undertaken different strategies of territorial protection, including preserving native seeds, promoting food security and sovereignty, and supporting human rights education and women’s empowerment. The latter constitutes a significant facet of the Vicaría’s work. To counteract dominant patterns of gender exclusion, the Vicaría has put gender equality and female leadership at the top of its priorities (Vicaría del Sur 2023).

The participation of women in the Vicaría has grown significantly since its inception. It is now predominantly composed of and led by women. The emergence of female leadership within the organization has had an impact within the com-

munities themselves. Having a leadership position within the Vicaría has led women to assert themselves more at the personal, family, and community level. An example of this is the strategic creation of peasant markets in which women sell their products and are given leadership roles. This enhances their economic autonomy and gives them greater confidence as active citizens. Despite the fact that female leadership is predominant in the Vicaría and its CVAs, decisions are still made by men, specifically male priests. Because this ongoing tension is continuously evolving, it will not be discussed in this report due to human subject research protocols.

The value of unity against adversity has been pivotal in strengthening community relations and building a sense of collective identity. The Vicaría acknowledges that sustaining this cohesion is a substantial challenge, particularly when community engagement remains passive. In response, the Vicaría has formulated strategies that aim to celebrate collectively the achievements made throughout this journey of defending the territory. One such strategy is the Festival for the Culture and Life of Water in which water is conceived of as a unifying principle for collective action. Through offering a communal meeting space, the festival serves to strengthen collective bonds and reinforce the commitment to protect the life of water in the region.

Cultivating a shared sense of vulnerability in the face of a common threat has also helped build unity. One such strategy is the strengthening of the identity of the Amazon peasant (*campesinado amazónico*) as a new political subject not only to oppose extractive development policies but to propose alternatives such as the Amazonian Farm (*Finca Amazónica*). The *Finca Amazónica* initiative was created in 2003 to implement forms of regenerative agriculture through new sowing, production, and consumption practices (Vicaría del Sur 2018a). The farm is oriented toward “good living” or “buen vivir” (see the section “Methodology”) and is based on traditional agricultural practices in harmony with nature. The Amazonian Farm project is part of the organizational basis of the CVAs and involves training in agricultural techniques applied to the Amazon. It also includes activities related to alternative energy, waste management, agroforestry, and conservation of native seeds. It is interesting to highlight its spiritual elements, where “the rescue, conservation, production, and exchange of seeds has been assumed as an institutional policy oriented from faith, as an inheritance from God for humanity” (Vicaría del Sur 2023, 160). The Amazonian

The value of unity against adversity has been pivotal in strengthening community relations and building a sense of collective identity.

farms themselves are seen as a gift from God. In 2021, there were 469 family farms linked to the *Finca Amazónica* initiative in Caquetá.

Additional strategies for strengthening a communal space include the exchange of experience and community monitoring. The former entails facilitating visits to sites where the detrimental impacts of extractive projects are evident so that farmers can see what is happening in places where oil projects have taken place. These visits dispel false expectations disseminated by oil companies about the benefits of such projects and garner greater support for an anti-extractive stance. Those who visit such sites share their experience within their communities, which has a multiplier effect. Another way of enlisting community support is through community water monitoring. This is an initiative pioneered by Corporación Terrae, an NGO that works closely with the Vicaría. (The NGO conducted a technical evaluation of the environmental impact assessment presented by Emerald Energy. The evaluation was financed by Caritas Germany.)³⁰ Such monitoring enables communities to establish a baseline for the condition of water within their territory. Both men and women are actively involved, dividing responsibilities to manage various tasks. While this monitoring exercise is currently restricted to the municipality of Valparaíso, the positive outcomes and its transformative potential have prompted its broader application in other municipalities and the creation of a community monitoring school.

The degree of solidarity created by these community processes is substantial. A threat faced by one municipality is a threat to all. As a farmer reflects: “Here in Caquetá, there is that process of union, of being in solidarity for the defense of something. We have been very committed through communal action and also with the support of the church; and if people believe anything, they believe the priests because of faith. The Catholic religion still continues to resonate, and that call is in each one of us.”

The faith community emerges as a key element in preserving social cohesion. Building unity is a fundamental strategy that has given rise to other critical mechanisms, including collective leadership through which one avoids putting the spotlight on single individuals to protect their lives. Responsibilities are collectively taken on the basis of the premise that being a good Christian is being a good citizen who works for the good of the community. Spirituality is thus profoundly linked with the transformation of social and ecological realities. This has led to significant actions in the socio-political and legal dimensions.

Acting in the socio-political and legal domain

Faith communities in Caquetá have had to develop a collective process of awareness-raising and training (legal and ecological education, formation in leadership, and decision-making, among others) to create alliances and mobilize public support for their positions at the local, national, and



Festival for the Culture and Life of Water. (Credit: Facebook of CVA.)

international level. Their socio-political actions, and sometimes legal actions, have evolved around making visible their positions on development and their valuation of nature. The long-term struggles of the CVAs demonstrate a strong political engagement to challenge the different drivers of oil exploitation. As mentioned earlier, rather than being a sudden, reactive response to oil exploitation, the CVAs came as a gradual collective process of discernment, reflection, and dialogue about how to respond to the local context. Through the Vicaría's training and capacity building work—such as on the rights of Amazonian peasants, the rights of women, and rights in the context of extractive industries (like the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent)—local communities integrated legal and institutional knowledge with their faith. In other words, the CVAs synthesized faith-based perspectives and wisdom together with ecological, political, and social knowledge and more operational concerns.

By the time Emerald Energy entered the south of Caquetá in 2014, there was a vibrant civil society in which faith communities had built critical awareness of the threats of oil exploitation. There was already an organized political engagement in defense of their territories across various population groups. A Vicaría representative underlined that the CVAs were not only an expression of organized resistance, but also supported “training and education with women, youth, and children so that they would strengthen the issue of resistance because the resistance was not done by the CVAs only but by the groups that had already received all that training and that started joining the movement.”

This organizational dynamic allowed the CVA to become visible and gain wider support in its actions.³¹ In one of its first actions, members of the CVA chained themselves to a bridge in 2015, which became the most iconic moment of the struggle. It has now been commemorated with a statue of one of the resistance leaders on the bridge. Over 62 days, people took turns being chained to prevent the oil company trucks from passing. Even if there were some violent reprisals,³² and the trucks did eventually pass, people continued to chain themselves as a symbolic act of resistance in order to gain media attention. This made the conflict visible at the national level. In 2022, the bridge was renamed “Bridge of Resistance.”

Another action has been the granting of a public audience with the National Authority of Environmental Licenses [Autoridad Nacional de Licencias Ambientales (ANLA)]

in May 2018 following a petition from local communities and the Vicaría. The audience gathered more than 2,000 participants and included all the main actors linked to the conflict, government, business, and civil society. Participants carried banners with messages, such as, “No to energy mining extractivism in the Amazon” (“No al extractivismo minero energético en la Amazonía”). It was a space where all the parties could publicly express their position, proposals, and arguments in relation to the El Nogal bloc and the development of energy mining in Caquetá. The divergence of interests based on different valuations and visions of nature was obvious. The position of the government (at the time of Iván Duque) revolved around prioritizing mining and energy development on the ground, promising that these investments would bring employment and improvements in health and education for local populations. This was also the main discourse of companies, namely that they bring social investment to the region and that opposition to their activities would be detrimental to local communities.³³ The position of the local government was less clear. According to some of our informants, it participated and supported the defense movement, but others said it was neither siding with oil companies and the national government nor supporting the defense movement.

During that audience, the technical evaluation of the environmental impact assessment was presented by the Corporación Terrae, which carried out the evaluation in collaboration with the University of the Amazon in Caquetá. The Vicaría facilitated funding of the evaluation through its REPAM contacts, and Caritas Germany funded the evaluation (Jaskoski 2022, 106–10). This international collaboration enabled the gathering of data to evidence the shortcomings of the company's impact assessment and therefore strengthened the position of the resistance.³⁴ While ANLA still proceeded to grant Emerald Energy the environmental license to construct 10 exploratory oil platforms in September 2018, the public audience is perceived in the collective memory as a moment of triumph and empowerment. Some of our informants recalled with pride the confusion of representatives of Emerald Energy and ANLA when they were presented with the technical argument of Corporación Terrae and the support they had from civil society organizations, academia, politicians, the media, and the Catholic church.

In 2019, CVA representatives intervened at the Departmental Assembly, where they proposed the creation of the Departmental Roundtable for the Defense of Water and

Territory (Mesa Departamental para la Defensa del Agua y el Territorio, MEDDAT) in order to organize civil society at the department level and encourage various movements to join efforts.

As evidenced above, this process of resistance has spanned local, national, regional, and international scales: the financing of technical support from Caritas Germany; the debate about the regional development model at a departmental roundtable, which included various civil society actors; national visibility associated with the Corporación Terra-e partnership and through the protests on the bridge; and finally, the CVAs, via the Vicaría, acting as a part of REPAM, which connects its local resistance to other places in the Amazon.

The resistance against the El Nogal project also took on a legal dimension. Populations who have been at the margin of the law for decades saw legal struggles to demand respect for human rights, land rights (including legal recognition of their land titles), and rights of nature as empowering. Moreover, the legal route was perceived as a safer strategy than risking one's own life. The legal actions were managed by the Vicaría's legal services, as expressed by one farmer: "The Vicaría had an important role as they were managing the legal part [of the defense process...]. They know that farmers do not have the tools in the legal area."

One such legal action was a "popular action," which is a legal strategy in Colombia to protect constitutional collective rights, following a seismic survey conducted by Emerald Energy in two municipalities in 2015. The collective demand for precautionary measures to suspend seismic activities and withdraw machinery was directed at Emerald Energy and the National Agency for Hydrocarbons and Corpoamazonia (Vicaría del Sur 2018b, 58). There was also a public consultation process, called "Morelia free of oil exploitation," which gathered more than 700 signatures.

Although the communities saw this as a success, the court subsequently passed a law (Sentencia SU095), which prohibits municipalities from conducting popular participation as a mechanism to decide on extractive projects in their territories. One cannot fail to note some contradictions with the peace agreements. On the one hand, Caquetá is benefiting from the agreements' territorial development programs (PDET). For example, the PDET of the municipality of Valparaíso proposes biodiversity conservation and reparations for victims of the armed conflict. On the other hand, limiting

popular participation and curbing mechanisms to oppose energy and mining projects can give rise to social conflict. This situation is seen as a dilemma in Caquetá: peace or oil.³⁵

As mentioned earlier, the public audience was one of the main milestones of the process of the defense of life in the territory of Caquetá. As a constitutional mechanism of participation, it helped expose the situation with regard to the El Nogal oil exploration and its impacts. Despite all the data and evidence gathered on environmental damage, the environmental license was granted. With the support of the Vicaría and a team of specialist environmental lawyers, local communities demanded the withdrawal of the license. At the time of fieldwork, there was still no response to the demand.

Another legal action dealt with protecting one farmer affected by the seismic activity, seeking support for his rights which had been violated with the destruction of his house and livelihood (Vicaría del Sur 2018b, 60). This was however refused as Emerald Energy asked for proof that the damage incurred was caused by the seismic activity. Finally, a normative popular initiative³⁶ was undertaken in order to seek protection of environmental patrimony, specifically water in three municipalities. This initiative did not progress due to difficulties with state administration.

Despite the mixed success of the actions just mentioned, the CVAs made the dispute visible at the regional, national, and international level, and that has attracted wider support and new allies. However, these actions have also created tensions. According to one Vicaría representative during a focus group discussion, oil companies "started to feel that the church and the Vicaría concretely are an obstacle to their entry." She also added that the anti-extractivist position of the Vicaría has created some tensions with the hierarchy of the Catholic church. As the Vicaría depends on the Archdiocese of Florencia (the capital city of the department), its survival and that of the CVAs depends on decisions taken by those higher in hierarchy (Vicaría Sur 2023, 53), who hold more traditional and diplomatic positions to avoid conflicts. As one Vicaría member expressed it: "The relationship is that between authorities which have power, thus these actors are interested in maintaining the status quo and being recognized in the region, moreover because the church is to accompany everyone and not only some." There are also tensions at the local level between leaders and members of various denominations who believe that faith has no public role and is better expressed through rituals and devotions than a

social and ecological commitment. There are also some tensions related to a perceived lack of ecumenical formation and misunderstanding of other denominations.

Despite these tensions, the Catholic church, through its international networks, continues to finance the works of the Vicaría with the aim of fulfilling Pope Francis's mandate of being a church of the poor that accompanies those at the margins. During our fieldwork, none of our informants mentioned the national Colombian Catholic Bishops' Conference, which suggests that they had no active part to play in the socio-environmental dispute in Caquetá and that the relation has been mainly among the Vicaría, the Archdiocese of Florencia, under whose authority the Vicaría is, and international Catholic bodies such as REPAM or Caritas Germany. The funding sources of the last 10 years include organizations from Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Austria, and Colombia.³⁷ The Vicaría continues to be supported by the archbishop of Florencia, despite some tensions mentioned by one focus group participant. He wrote, for example, the preface of the Vicaría's *Pedagogical Booklet: To Love Our Common Home (Cartilla Pedagógica Amar la Casa Común)*, which has been published by an organization linked to the Colombian Bishops' Conference (Caritas Colombia). In it, the bishop "invites the community in general to fall in love each day more with our beloved Amazon. [...] We need to know her, be willing to respect her, care for her and fill her as part of ourselves" (Caritas Colombiana 2020). And at the national level, the Catholic church has established "alternative economic models that contribute to peace and the care of our common home" (Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia 2022) although we found no evidence of a direct relationship between the Colombian Bishops' Conference and the Finca Amazónica initiative in Caquetá.

CONCLUSIONS

The Caquetá case study highlights some key aspects of the participation of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes and their role in consolidating the civic space and protecting human rights and territories. A first aspect is that faith is a transversal dimension of these communities' territorial defense strategies. It motivates social and ecological transformation, gives perseverance and strength to carry on despite adversity, and is foremost expressed in the protection of the life of water on which all life depends. In the words of a Vicaría representative: "To care for the Amazon

is a practice of faith because to care for creation is to care for life." As an expression of that faith, the Vicaría has led individual and community capacity building, from biblical formation to training about human rights, Amazonian citizenship, land titling, the Peace Agreements, and others. This linking of faith and life as the Vicaría's central axis is a direct consequence of the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent Latin American Bishops' Conferences (CELAM 1968, 1979), which have set the orientation of the Latin American church toward justice and peace and the promotion of human rights.³⁸ The creation of the Vicaría is part of this church orientation. More recently, environmental protection has been emphasized as an integral component of the expression of one's faith by the Catholic church at the global level in Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, although our research participants emphasized that *Laudato Si'* only strengthened their discourse and actions rather than being a source and inspiration in itself. They spoke of *Laudato Si'* legitimizing and giving visibility to their local struggles at the global level.

A second aspect is the nonviolent response of collective action. All the protest actions of the CVAs were symbolic or pacific ways of influencing the government decision to let Emerald Energy enter Caquetá and exploit oil. The CVAs engaged in public discourse, slogans like "more water, more life; Caquetá is Amazon", in songs, sit-ins, pilgrimages, marches, prayers, and liturgies, among others. There were also actions of civil disobedience, such as the human chaining to a bridge, and other non-violent protest actions like hunger strikes. As has been highlighted, set against a background of social fragmentation caused by decades of civil war, these nonviolent actions rested on a strong, inclusive, and participatory community base that the Vicaría has built over the last 30 years, including earlier work, under the leadership of Bishop Serna in the 1970s, in defending the human rights of peasants and other population groups affected by the war (Arquidiócesis de Bogotá 2023). The church was also involved in mediation work in 1996 between peasants cultivating coca and the government wanting to eradicate coca.

This leads us to a third aspect of the role of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes, namely building social cohesion and relationships of trust. In a history where peasant communities were held responsible for deforestation and narco-trafficking, the Vicaría viewed these trends as the result of national development strategies of agricultural expansion and pressure by illegal groups to lure poor peasant



communities in the absence of economic livelihood alternatives. The importance of maintaining relationships of trust has been mentioned several times in the interviews. This trust repairs the disrespectful and damaging attitudes of the early missionaries in the region. The fact that faith communities and their work in the territory predate the arrival of oil companies means that their support is not conjectural but long term. As one Vicaría representative explains: “I believe that one has to start processes of resistance with communities that one has accompanied, if not, one ends up like these parachute organizations who take advantage of the moment and then ‘*ciao*.’” This echoes similar findings on participation of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes as the result of a long history of close relationships with the territory and its residents (Arellano-Yanguas 2014). It is also something that emerges from the other three case studies in this report.

A final aspect of the participation of faith communities in the socio-environmental dispute in Caquetá is their orientation toward justice and peace as a unified horizon, which is also referred to as “integral ecological peace” (Montevecchio and Powers 2021) or “environmental peace” in the Colombian context of the peace agreements, that is, “an opportunity to confront the structural causes of the armed conflict, from a perspective of environmental protection” (Urzola 2022, 50). The search for “good living” (*buen vivir*) for the rural populations of the Amazon who have been historically marginalized is integral to the search for peaceful solutions

to socio-environmental disputes. As one Vicaría representative explains: “[P]eace is not only the absence of armed actors, peace is that basic needs can be met, that there can be economic opportunities, and that people can live tranquil lives.” The work toward an integral ecological peace is not unique to Caquetá but reflects a wider trend throughout Colombia (Polanía-Reyes and Henao 2021). Currently, the Vicaría is exploring new actions in relation to the so-called green economy, such as payment for ecosystem services and eco-tourism.³⁹ It has also increased its work in the formation of the Amazonian peasant as a political subject to amplify marginalized voices in the transformation of dominant development narratives (Vicaría del Sur 2023, 193).

At the time of writing, it has been eight years since Emerald Energy entered Caquetá. Despite receiving its environmental license, it has not been able to carry out exploratory studies beyond seismic studies. As the license expired in September 2023, it is very likely that such explorations will not take place. Other oil and mining companies have attempted to enter the south of the department since then, and the work of the CVAs and the Vicaría continues. The transformation that they foremost seek is the replacement of an extractivist development model with an alternative development model that cares for the life of water and the life of the humans and nonhumans that depend on it. Faith has been a motivating factor of the actions to implement that alternative model, expressed in an inclusive way, by holding life as the ultimate motivating and unifying force.





Water, land, and the defense of life in Altamira, Pará, Brazil

In Altamira, Pará, faith communities have played a pivotal role in resisting the socio-environmental impacts of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam. This chapter delves into the historical and socio-political landscape of Altamira, highlighting how faith-based organizations, particularly the Catholic church, have mobilized local communities to defend their rights and protect their environment. By integrating spiritual motivation with community solidarity and socio-political actions, these faith communities illustrate the profound influence of faith in fostering resilience and collective action against large-scale infrastructure projects.

INTRODUCTION

Altamira is the largest municipality in the state of Pará in the Brazilian Amazon (Figure 4). According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, Altamira has an estimated 126,279 inhabitants, of which 6,194 are Indigenous,⁴⁰ although the official data are likely to be grossly under-reported (IBGE 2022). Forty-three percent of the population report themselves as Catholics, and 21 percent Evangelicals (IBGE 2010), which are roughly similar proportions to the rest of Brazil (Figures 5A-C). The main economic activities of the region are based on the cultivation of rice, cocoa, beans, corn, black pepper, and nuts; the extraction of rubber; and livestock grazing. The municipality is crossed by the Trans-Amazonian Highway and the Xingu River, a tributary of the Amazon.

In the municipality of Altamira, the “Great Bend of the Xingu” starts. This is a series of waterfalls and river bends, which is considered a sacred place for Indigenous peoples. At the end of this great bend, the Brazilian government decided in the late 1970s to build a hydroelectric power plant, today known as the Belo Monte dam, to meet Brazil’s energy demands for its socioeconomic development. As one engineer involved in the construction reportedly said: “God only makes a place like Belo Monte once in a while. This place was made for a dam.” (quoted in Taylor Klein 2022, 38). After many contestations (described later) and legal battles, including two court rulings of withdrawal of company license to operate, which were then overturned, the construction finally started in 2011. The dam started to operate in 2016 and became fully operational in 2019 to become the world’s fifth largest dam.

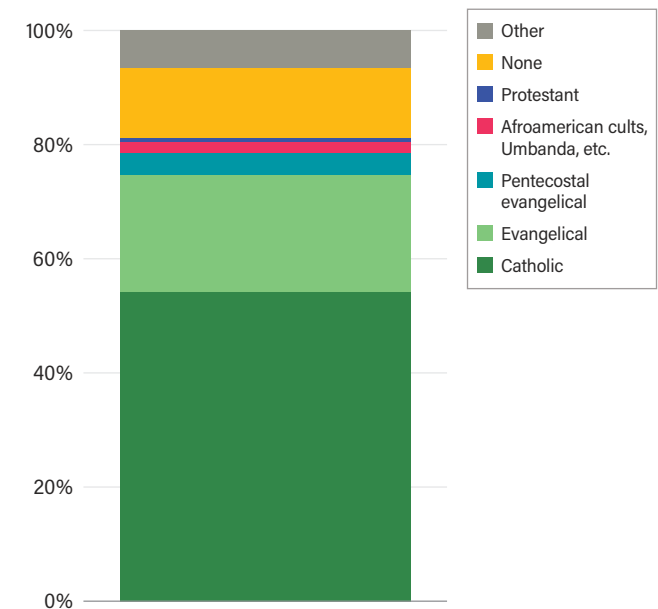
The dam’s construction led to the arrival of more than 35,000 people in Altamira, doubling in five years the number of residents in a city that was already struggling with insufficient urban infrastructure. In 2015, the year when the plant’s operating license was signed, Altamira was the most violent city in Brazil. The dam led to the flooding of Indigenous land and displaced more than 40,000 families, including farmers, fishermen, and *ribeirños* communities.⁴¹ Many are still waiting to this date for adequate resettlement. Those who have been resettled in the so-called collective urban resettlements routinely lack access to water, transportation, health, education, security, and energy. The dam construction has also led to severe environmental damage, leading local fishers to talk of “the dam killing off the river” (Guimarães 2023).

FIGURE 4 | Geographical map of Altamira, Brazil



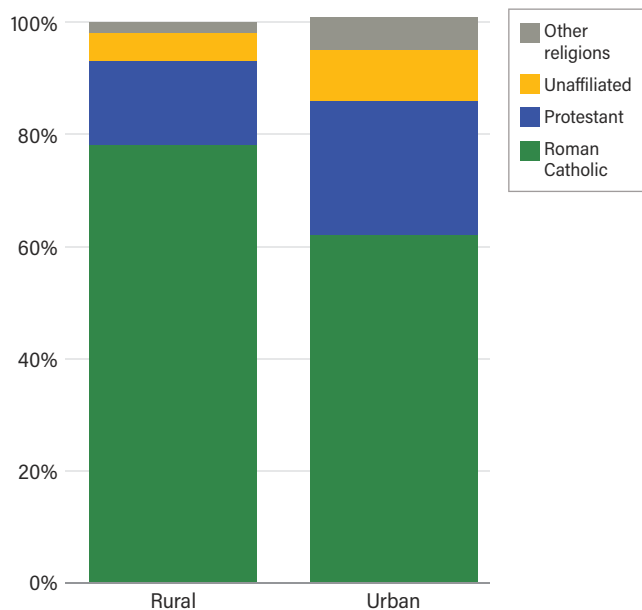
Sources: Tallman et al. 2022; Wikimedia.

FIGURE 5A | Religion affiliation in Brazil as of 2020, by type



Source: Brazil census; Pew Research; Gomez da Paixão.

FIGURE 5B | Religious breakdown of rural vs. urban Brazilians, 2010

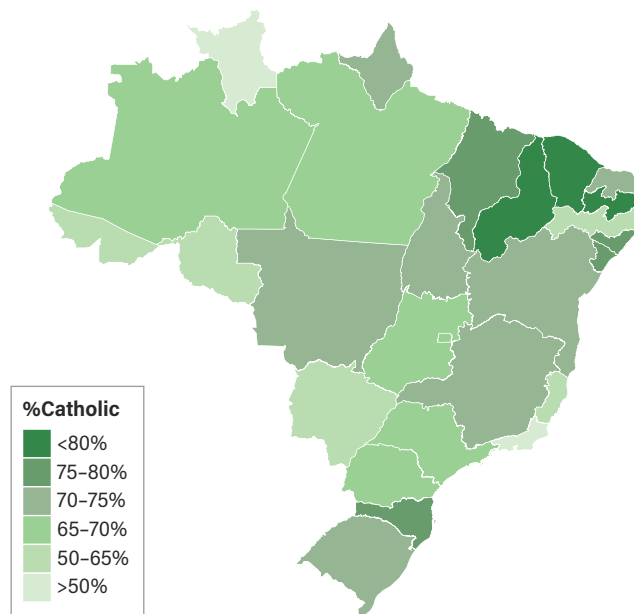


Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.
 Source: Brazil census; Pew Research; Gomez da Paixão.

The construction of the hydroelectric plant has been marked by numerous judicial processes. The Federal Public Ministry filed a public civil action in March 2016, requesting an emergency stop to construction due to noncompliance with basic sanitation conditions. In August 2016, the Federal Regional Court granted an injunction to suspend the operating license until full compliance was achieved. This was followed by another 21 lawsuits that resulted in precautionary measures but which were ultimately revoked by the Supreme Federal Court. The State Public Ministry of Pará has, to date, filed 29 lawsuits questioning the license and the socio-environmental impacts of the plant. These impacts were only officially recognized by the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) in 2019.

One of the first and largest mobilizations in response to the news of the dam construction was initiated by the Kayapó. This mobilization culminated in the first meeting of the Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu in February 1989. It took place in the Training Centre of the Prelature of Xingu (the Catholic bishopric headquarters) in Altamira. As we will see, the Catholic church and its Indigenous missionary council, which are linked to the Brazilian Catholic Bishops Confer-

FIGURE 5C | Map of proportion of Catholics by Brazilian states (2010)



Source: Rodrigo Gomez da Paixão (2010).

ence, have played a key role in accompanying local communities in their mobilization. The meeting garnered massive media presence and brought together multiple environmental and social movements. After the event, the Catholic bishop of Xingu, Dom Erwin Kräutler, went to Switzerland to defend Indigenous peoples at a World Bank meeting. The World Bank subsequently withdrew its financial support of the dam due to human rights violation concerns (Taylor Klein 2022, 38).

The 1989 meeting achieved notoriety when a Kayapó Indigenous woman stood up from the audience and brandished a machete against the face of the president of Eletronorte, one of the companies of the energy consortium behind the dam. She said, “You are a liar. We don’t need electricity. Electricity won’t give us food. We need the rivers to flow freely. Our future depends on it. We need our forests to hunt and gather in. We don’t want your dam” (quoted in Taylor Klein 2022, 57). The scene received international media attention. In retaliation, the government announced that the dam would be called Kararaô, a Kayapó war cry. This generated strong national and international opposition. The construction plans were subsequently revised, the dam size reduced



Belo Monte Dam. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

by two-thirds from the original plans, and the government renamed it Belo Monte. The 1989 meeting ended with the Indigenous Declaration of Altamira and with the launch of the National Campaign in Defense of the People and the Amazon Rainforest, which called for the review of development projects in the region.

The first meeting of the Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu is considered a milestone of socio-environmentalism in Brazil. Through this process of social mobilization, which extended throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, the Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre (Xingu Alive Forever Movement, hereafter MXVS) was born. The MXVS, which brings together Indigenous and local populations, other social movements, religious organizations, and civil society organizations, has become the most significant and representative platform for socio-environmental mobilization in the region. Many studies have been conducted about the Belo Monte dam and the mobilization it generated.⁴² However, what has not yet been explored is the role of faith communities in supporting this mobilization. As we will see, faith is a constitutive element of such mobilization, its discourse, and actions. Among the hundreds of socio-environmental disputes in Brazil,⁴³ the Belo Monte case was selected for this research

because it is Brazil's most emblematic and one in which faith communities have played a critical role, but this role has not been examined yet in the literature on the Belo Monte dam.

This case study is structured as follows. After some methodological considerations, we examine community-building and social cohesion as the central axis for the defense of territories affected by the Belo Monte dam. We then analyze how a spiritual and symbolic dimension permeates this cohesion and how it supports or, in some cases, undermines the struggles against Belo Monte. One important mobilizing area is at the level of discourse, especially around development narratives and the valuation of nature. We discuss how local communities mobilize against certain development narratives and conclude with a discussion of the strategies deployed by faith communities to defend human rights and land. At the time of writing, plans for new dams on the Xingu River are under way. Negotiations have also been initiated between the Brazilian federal government and Canadian mining company Belo Sun Mining Corp to start in the region one of the largest gold extraction operations on the continent. The struggles of the local communities to defend life in their territories thus continue beyond the Belo Monte dam project.

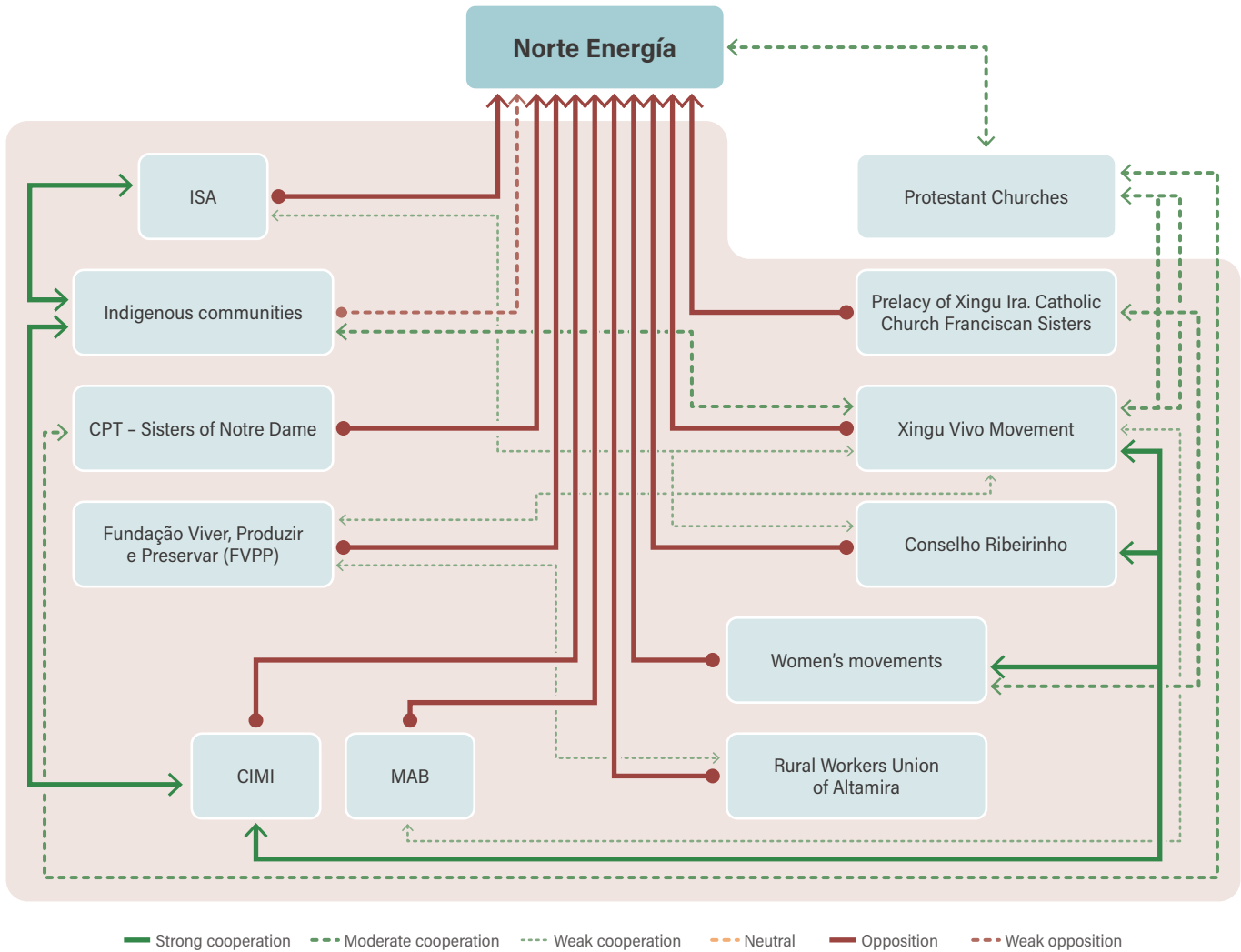
FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork was carried out in Altamira in June 2023 with the support of MXVS. The fieldwork covered three rural communities, the territory of the hydroelectric plant, the city of Anapu, and the region of the Ressaca community. Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with organizations active in the dispute (Figure 6), including leaders of the Catholic church, Pentecostals of the Assembly of God, neo-Pentecostals of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Indigenous and riverine community leaders, the Indigenous Missionary Council, the Altamira Women's Movement, the Black [People's] Movement, the Environmental Movement, and the Movement of People Affected by Dams (see Appendix D). The interviews were structured around questions related to the history of the organization, communities, or movements and the impacts of the arrival of the dam (see Appendix A). Questions were asked about their mobilization strategies, the narratives they construct, and the symbols they evoke, as well as about their main institutional alliances. It is worth highlighting the difficulty in obtaining interviews with representatives of organizations that are the initiators and executors of the project, in this case the energy consortium Norte Energia and the federal government. Interviews were sought but required a prohibitively long process of securing permissions, which could not be accommodated within the time frame of the fieldwork.

Three focus groups were carried out with members of faith communities and social movements (see Appendix D). Participants were presented with a timeline of the conflict and were invited to fill it with memories, learning, and feelings (see Appendix B for the focus group structure). The majority of participants highlighted lessons learned from collective work, including the importance of consolidating the civic space to make the social movement more organized. This timeline exercise was followed by a presentation by the major actors involved in the dispute, namely government; businesses; social movements; communities; Indigenous, riverine, and other affected peoples; the Catholic church; and Protestant churches. One focus group included the women's movement. Participants were asked to choose one or more of these actors and describe their positions, interests, needs, and strategies. Finally, participants read a hypothetical letter to another community seeking guidance on how to mobilize for



FIGURE 6 | Map of social actors in Altamira, Brazil



Source: Authors.

defense of their territory. The letter recognized the struggle of the people of Altamira against Belo Monte and asked for advice. Once again, participants emphasized the importance of organizing grass-roots communities and building awareness of their rights. The group then moved to a discussion about the role of faith, the place of nature in their worldview, and the impact of Pope Francis's apostolate. The responses were unanimous in affirming that faith is fundamental in

their struggles against extractivist development paradigms. It encourages them to move forward even in the face of defeat. The word *hope* was mentioned many times. The focus groups concluded by inviting participants to say a word that they saw as best representing the discussions. Struggle, faith, resistance, hope, and justice were the words most often highlighted.

FAITH COMMUNITIES' RESPONSES

Building the community base

The community dimension is the central axis for understanding civil society involvement in socio-environmental disputes in the region. The Xingu River basin has been occupied by Indigenous and riverine communities who have over centuries developed a reciprocal and balanced way of life with the river. This is evidenced in the way they fish, build their houses, cultivate food, and adapt their livelihood strategies in response to seasonal variations in river flows. The region's community networks are based on kinship and friendships that span generations and constitute the local social fabric. Local communities view the Belo Monte dam as a threat to their way of life.

The construction of the dam necessitated the flooding of extensive areas. Our research participants expressed that a variety of methods, ranging from financial incentives to emotional and occasionally forceful tactics, have been employed in the eviction process of communities living in the to-be-flooded areas. This has led to a significant rift within these communities, causing divisions between generations and altering their connection with nature. As a leader from a riverine community in Altamira reports:

In the communities it was a fight. Some wanted and accepted the compensation money; others did not. There was a lot of confusion. People disintegrated. There was a rupture. In a community that was united, each one began to think only of themselves. There was a community where everyone was from the same family, and even then, there was a lot of confusion. They (those in charge of the compensation scheme) attacked the leaders to weaken them; they negotiated with everyone except the leaders. Then the people realized that they were calling family by family to negotiate to weaken the movement, but by then it was too late.

In an interview for this research, a leader from the MXVS emphasized the inadequate compensation process: "Families were forcibly expropriated and thrown to other places anyway, in the city with no way to farm to survive, without knowing anyone or in other riverbank areas, without energy, without anything." People from the same community, and

sometimes from the same family, had different outcomes in their negotiations with Norte Energia. Those who lived in houses built on stilts near the city experienced forced displacement and were mainly transferred to the urban community resettlements where social disintegration, violence, and lack of basic services are a constant reality. Those who lived in rural areas were randomly relocated to other islands and areas. The mixing of these new residents with existing ones created tensions, given the increased pressure on already inadequate social services. Finally, those who did not accept being resettled received unfair amounts of compensation, and some migrated to Brazilian cities.

According to a representative of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), in the case of Indigenous populations, who legally enjoy some recognition and protection of their territories, some divisions started to appear after the implementation of the so-called Environmental Emergency Plan, which was a remediation initiative from Norte Energia that involved injecting large amounts of financial resources into each community via their leaders. As a consequence, this CIMI representative noted that there was a multiplication in the number of communities and leaders, many of whom were vying to acquire resources made available through the initiative. Even traditional codes of recognizing chiefs were altered.

Despite this scenario of community fragmentation, it is also in the community dimension that articulations of resistance begin. Local leaders who were interviewed evoked many different forms of local mobilizations, such as marches, public demonstrations, people's assemblies, public letters, roadblocks, and occupations of construction sites. According to a leader of the Riverine Council, these actions were not strategically planned. "We did not have a single or predefined strategy. The fight came and we went to all fronts, to the Public Ministry, to the press, to the street, to the highway, to the school. We had already experienced that process of opening the Trans-Amazonian Highway, there was already a popular body created for the fight. When they started, they realized that it was not going to be easy to silence us."



Ribeirinho community in Altamira. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

Given this significant community mobilization, the Xingu region is recognized in Brazil as one of the most consolidated and dynamic regions in terms of resistance movements, spanning from the 1989 meeting to a large set of organizations and movements, such as the Socio-Environmental Institute (Instituto Socioambiental, ISA), Riverine Council, Pastoral Land Commission, Altamira Rural Workers Union, Women's Movement and Black Women's Movement, Live-Produce-Preserve Foundation, Movement of People Affected by Dams, Indigenous Missionary Council, Indigenous associations, and the MXVS, which is the largest and has the greatest level of local coordination (Figure 6).

In the context of these social movements, the fundamental role of women is widely acknowledged. Our informants often said, "The face of the resistance in the Xingu is feminine." As a Catholic priest interviewed expressed it: "Women took a lot of leadership in these demonstrations. They began to gain a volume that reached within schools, families, homes. They were the seed." These movements led by women add a specific dimension to the defense of life and territory as women look at issues in a transversal way. They go beyond land rights to include women's rights and children's rights, and access to education, health, and social assistance. Several research participants concluded that women's participation makes the struggle against Belo Monte diverse and multidimensional.

Within this community dimension, the Catholic church built its legitimacy. The church has been active with local communities in the region since the founding of the Prelature of Xingu in 1934. With the creation of Base Ecclesial Communities in the 1960s, the church consolidated its profile and reemphasized its commitment to the most vulnerable, specifically by focusing on the capacity development of local residents, the strengthening of community associations and rural unions, and the organization of meetings to build links between communities and social movements. This work of the church situates itself within a wider ecclesial context of the Second Vatican Council, liberation theology, and the Latin American Episcopal Conferences of Medellín (CELAM 1968) and Puebla (CELAM 1979), which led the church to take a preferential stance toward serving the poor, defending human rights, and promoting justice and peace. In Xingu, this commitment to the poor and defense of human rights and land has been symbolically personified in the figures of Dom Erwin Kräutler, an Austria-born missionary priest who arrived in Xingu in the late 1950s and later became the bishop of Xingu), and Dorothy Stang, a US-born missionary nun who was murdered in 2005.

In the case of Belo Monte, the Catholic church is a predominant actor in supporting a vibrant civic space, and has consistently put its financial, physical, and human resources at the service of the resistance of the local people. Our informants highlighted the training of community leaders as a continuation of the church's work of articulating and orga-

nizing the social fabric, with methodologies linked to Base Ecclesial Communities. As a representative of the Catholic church in Altamira explained, “The strategy has always been to bring together people to put pressure on the authorities. Don Erwin had a lot of charisma with the people; his figure brought people together; he was a symbol of that commitment and the image of a church of Christ, which denounced and sought support throughout the world for the cause of the local people.”

Within the Protestant community, there is a minority associated with historical Protestant churches (Baptist, Lutheran, Adventist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and others) who view with a critical eye the consequences of the Belo Monte dam. They sometimes rely on scientific arguments about its environmental impacts, and they criticize the development model promoted by the Brazilian state in the Amazon region (see detailed discussion later). They have, however, not developed actions at the institutional level nor organic action in local communities to mobilize against the dam development.

A second Protestant group, namely Pentecostal churches such as the Assembly of God, act in the form of a community brotherhood. They tend to privilege the needs and demands of their members. Often, Pentecostal pastors take positions that seek to guarantee benefits to their churches. They regard the hydroelectric power plant as unavoidable and do not seek to question or resist it.

A third group, neo-Pentecostal churches such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, absent themselves from political participation and public debates in the Belo Monte dam dispute.⁴⁴ They develop actions that deal with relieving the consequences of the dam, such as working with young people involved with drugs, prisoners, and the unemployed, by offering clothes and food and providing emotional and social support.⁴⁵ It is not uncommon for these neo-Pentecostal churches to pronounce themselves against community articulations of resistance and to discourage their members from participating in them. In the words of a leader of a riverine community, “What we perceive is that these churches are more concerned about their own people. They do not get involved in public debate; they take care of the faithful, supporting families with basic food baskets, drug problems, or even those who were forced to leave their community. Many pastors tell people not to go to association meetings, that this is a communist thing, a Lula thing, etc....”

Despite these different positions across Christian denominations, there is one striking element that overcomes differences among the members who become involved in the dispute, which is the category of the peoples “affected by mega-corporations,” that is, people whose lives have been undermined by large infrastructure and extractive projects. When faced with the impending impacts of a certain project, mobilizing around a common experience helps foster community cohesion and brings members from different Christian denominations together. Even if a pastor may discourage members of a church from attending dam-related meetings, we encountered among our informants several instances where Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal members got involved. This has been the basis of the work of the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB) in Altamira, whose majority base is people who declare themselves evangelical (that is, both Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals). As a representative of MAB explains, “We work like this, we go to the communities and gather the affected people, we listen to their demands, and we build roads alongside them. We call it the base group. And I tell you that the majority within our base groups are evangelicals. They have a lot of presence in communities and in times of need. No one wants to talk about Catholics or evangelicals. Those who are in the territory want to survive.” This work of constructing unity has been especially highlighted in the online exchange seminar among all the movements studied in this report. Even if unity is difficult to achieve, one MXVS representative stressed that it was unity that made the difference and that it was critical to overcome the challenge of community division. For the MXVS representatives present at the exchange seminar, the main strategy of defending human rights and protecting territories was to unite local communities on the basis of what is common, and faith could be an important unifying element among various local communities.

Nurturing a spiritual and symbolic dimension

In the Altamira region, this community mobilization has also been characterized by a spiritual dimension. Local communities have historically been constituted and accompanied by the Catholic church since rural settlements in the region began in the 1930s. Many bear the name of saints, and the celebrations of their feast days are among the greatest local mobilizations in the region. Faith is one of the elements that weave social relations at the local level. This faith dimen-

sion today serves as an important unifying element in the strategies of defense and a critical source of motivation and strength and courage to carry on. The faith and belief in the resurrection of Christ, that death and destruction do not have the last word, is fundamental in the defense of human rights and territories. This hope that situations can be transformed stands out as central to faith communities involved in social movements. Martyrs, that is, those who have been killed for defending nature and the rights of peoples, represent a particular symbolism in the Amazon. The ultimate sacrifice of their lives is also a symbol of love and transformation of death into life. The symbolic reference to the crucified Jesus who gives himself up and is killed for his denunciation of the oppressive institutions at the time and who has risen to life is a strong idea in the popular imagination among Catholic faith communities in the Amazon. At times, people connect with Jesus's pain on the cross; other times, they connect with the hope that life will triumph over destruction. As a Catholic priest puts it, "The Amazon is a region of martyrdom, of many people who gave their lives for the people's struggle. The Amazon bears the symbol of Christ's blood on the cross. With this perspective, many priests arrived here at the beginning and entered the most distant places to meet and support the people."⁴⁶

Our informants also point out that, even when losing a battle or facing intimidation and threats, it is their faith in Christ that gives them courage to continue. As a social movement leader puts it: "We always work from looking at the word of God, the New Testament, and compare it with our reality.

This is what we have learned in the Base Ecclesial Communities. It is a Christian faith centered on citizenship. It is seeking the example of Jesus in the struggle for justice. This generates hope." The public dimension of this faith is also materialized in the use of chapels and churches as places where people gather not only for prayer and worship, but also for meetings, reflection, training, and organizing. Places of worship thus also become places of struggle and resistance.

The practice of such incarnated faith—a faith that is expressed in actions of defense of human rights and environmental protection—is indicative of a certain code of conduct that has been adopted by the community over time. The Beatitudes, for example, are part of the ideals of how a good citizen should live in a community.⁴⁷ It is within this religious context that local ties of solidarity are built and underpin a collective commitment toward supporting those affected by large projects. Here another central concept stands out: justice. Justice has often been invoked among our research participants as a justification for collective participation. Promoting justice is about following the example of Jesus Christ, persecuted and crucified.

This commitment to solidarity and justice as integral to the practice of faith is linked to wider orientations of the Catholic church being a "church of the poor." This is the case both at the Latin American level and at the global level with Pope Francis. And as noted in the Colombian case study, this relationship between actions of local Catholic communities and discourse of the Catholic church at the regional and global



One of the oldest churches in Altamira. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

level is a two-way one; that is, local experiences inform global Catholic discourse which in turn influences actions at the local level. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, which sets out the horizon of his pontificate, Francis (2013, 20) talks of a church “which goes forth from its comfort zone to reach the peripheries which need the light of the Gospel.” This echoes the 2007 declaration of Latin American bishops gathered in the Brazilian city of Aparecida:

Faith in God who is Love is manifested in the mature faith of many of the baptised and in popular piety, which expresses love for the suffering Christ, the God of compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation [...] the God who is close to the poor and to those who suffer. It is also expressed in the charity that everywhere inspires deeds, projects, and paths of solidarity with the most needy and defenceless. It is also at work in consciousness of the dignity of the person, wisdom about life, passion for justice, hope against all hope, and the joy of living even under many difficult conditions that move the hearts of our peoples (CELAM 2007, 7).

The figure of Jesus is most prominent in people’s faith in Altamira. His life, attitude toward others, and deeds are seen as examples of how people should act. The practice of “seeing, judging, and acting” in light of the Gospel, which has been a foundational methodological process of Base Ecclesial Communities (Schickendantz 2023), remains a strong base for the strategies deployed by social movements in the Xingu region. The symbols of patron saints exert a significant influence on community cohesion and mobilization through the processions and celebrations in their honor. The saints’ exemplary lives in following Christ bring people closer to a reality full of joy, hope, and life in contrast to the current situation of suffering, pain, and destruction.

Another strategy of community mobilization, which strengthens civic action and animates popular faith, is the commemoration of the martyrs who died defending the land and its peoples, who have become known as “eco-martyrs” (Gandolfo-O’Donnell 2023). Dorothy Stang is one of the most notable female eco-martyrs in Latin America, together with Berta Cáceres who was murdered in Honduras in 2016. Sister Dorothy was murdered in February 2005 for denouncing illegal logging and training and organizing local farmers (Murphy 2007). Her legacy is remembered, among other events, through an annual “pilgrimage of the forest”

in her honor. Such commemoration encourages a sense of commitment and generates greater resistance and perseverance in the struggle for justice. As a church representative comments, “The Catholic church is a follower of Jesus and has a preferential option for the poor. The church of Jesus must be against injustice. We, those of the Catholic faith, have always worked to commemorate our past, our martyrs, the lives who died in the fight. Remembering in a formative way, not letting people forget the past, this is what feeds hope in the face of the fight.” The figures of some people who are not martyrs, but who have dedicated their lives to the peoples of the Xingu, are also systematically evoked in the collective memory as symbols of a persistent, just, hopeful, and supportive faith. In Altamira, the greatest example of this is undoubtedly the figure of Bishop Erwin Kräutler, who is often described as the pastor of a church who took care of its people.



Image of Sister Dorothy. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

It is worth mentioning that the local Catholic population has perceived a change in the profile of its leaders in the region over the last two decades, especially since the retirement of Dom Erwin in 2015. Unlike older missionaries who provided a more combative and critical vision of social contexts and were involved directly with local communities in their struggles, the new generation assumes a more diplomatic position. They focus on works that are more liturgical and devotional without linking them to a strong socio-ecological commitment. A hypothesis that has been advanced among the informants to explain this change is the training of priests from the 1990s onward. During the papacy of John Paul II, topics like liberation theology and popular education were removed from the curriculum of priestly formation. Another explanatory factor that was mentioned is new technologies and social media and the risks posed to religious leaders who speak out on controversial issues in a politically polarized national context. The growth of neo-Pentecostal churches has also led some Catholic priests to adopt a less socio-politically engaged position in line with evangelical pastors.

The rise of the Protestant faith is one of the most prominent social phenomena of the last 30 years in Brazil. The presence of neo-Pentecostal Protestantism of a fundamentalist nature is growing significantly, especially in remote places and in the interior of the country. Neo-Pentecostal communities tend to construct moral discourse based on fear, prohibitions, and discipline, which makes interaction with actors of other Christian denominations complex to the extent of even forbidding ecumenical or community dialogue on socio-environmental matters. As one member of a neo-Pentecostal church of Altamira expresses it, “Here we are God-fearing. We all know that what will save us is the discipline of the Holy Scriptures and the commandments. The Apocalypse already says that this world is condemned to burn in fire. We must, through the discipline of loving the neighbor and God, walk the path to save our souls.”

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, there are Pentecostal churches that hold a middle ground. They also refer exclusively to the Bible, but they leverage their political influence to support the needs of their faithful who have suffered the impacts of Belo Monte. They help only their own, and this vision is therefore very attractive to those who suffer many impacts. This is one reason why more and more people in Brazil feel welcomed and supported in these religious spaces. In the words of a Pentecostal pastor, “[I]n

Protestant doctrine, the main symbol is Jesus. And he was the first Protestant, the first to protest against the injustices of the empire. I tell our faithful that we are losing the character of protesting, of being critical and to take care of each other, to see our interests as people of God.” His words somewhat illustrate the ambiguous position of Protestant churches regarding the Belo Monte dam. According to some of our informants, some Pentecostal churches participated in marches, public demonstrations, and meetings to oppose the project. However, with the perception that the project was inevitable, they abandoned this position of opposition and began, in a resigned manner, to negotiate benefits, with a mind-set that “we tried to oppose the project, but since we are not going to win, what can we win from this project?” Neo-Pentecostals similarly accept the idea of a Jesus who protests against the empire and injustice, but they do not act in today’s reality in the same way. They focus on spiritual aspects without socio-political involvement. At the national level, there is an alignment of these neo-Pentecostal sectors with large businesses operating in the Amazon.

Finally, in the context of Indigenous peoples in the Altamira region, the spiritual and symbolic dimension of their struggle is manifested as something hybrid, maintaining some traditional beliefs and rituals mixed with the Christian faith. They evoke their traditional spiritual and symbolic narratives in their struggles against Belo Monte, but they also evoke Jesus and biblical figures, especially when they are in the presence of a priest or pastor. This hybridity of faith is typical of peoples who have been forced to adapt their cultures to avoid being decimated during the colonial process and who, today, also perceive churches as an important ally. In that regard, the work carried out by the Indigenous missionary council has to be highlighted. Its religious dimension does not appear in a symbolic nor discursive way. It focuses instead on community organizing among Indigenous peoples, technical advice, and socio-political intermediation with other political and social actors. As expressed by one of its representatives in the region, “Our work with Indigenous communities is totally different from that of these evangelical churches, because we are not there for the spiritual part, we are there to fight with them for the land, for education, for rights. We do not affect their customs, we do not say that they stop doing something. On the contrary, we want them to invite us to do what they do culturally and from there to dialogue about the challenges.” At the other extreme, neo-Pentecostal churches require the conversion of Indigenous peoples to Christian

beliefs and the abandonment of their traditional practices and customs. As resilient and strategic survivors, Indigenous peoples emphasize their faith opportunely according to the interlocutor and the situation, generally even making more allusion to the history of struggle of their ancestors than an image, a saint, or a specific religious leadership.

One also needs to reflect on how different faith communities perceive nature, including symbolically and spiritually. In Altamira, only Indigenous peoples hold a non-anthropocentric vision and see nature as a living being, which is sentient and endowed with some wisdom. Nature is commonly referred to as a mother who assumes the role of nurturing and caring for people, based on relationships of reciprocity that imply care and dedication. A quote from Kayapó leaders in the Altamira Indigenous Declaration mentioned earlier, expresses it as follows: “Nature is life, she has sustained us until today, so we have to defend her as the father and mother that gives us life” (Kayapó et al. 2010). Other faith communities, even those that discursively cite *Laudato Si'*, refer to nature when developing strategies of defense, but nature’s importance is always linked to the maintenance of human life and next generations. However, during the online exchange seminar among the different movements across our four case studies in April 2024, MXVS representatives men-

tioned communication with nature and all the life it contains as the strongest motivation for their struggle. According to one representative, it is precisely because “people couldn’t communicate anymore with the river,” due to the dam and its consequences—fish dying, loss of livelihoods, skin diseases, agriculture affected due to changes in water flows, river water no longer drinkable—that the mobilization emerged. She summarized the spiritual dimension of their socio-environmental action as follows: “The connection with life is the source of hope to reconstruct what has been destroyed. Without that connection, that strength coming from connection with forests, rivers, and ancestors, there would be no motivation for the struggle. [...] If we lose nature, we lose ourselves too. Our struggles are survival struggles. Rivers and forests are everything. Without them, there is no life.”

Mobilizing discourse

The mobilizing role of faith, understood as connection with rivers and forests, exhibits both a religious and non-religious character at the discursive level; that is, at times it directly refers to God, the Bible, Jesus, or other religious language; and other times, it refers to “life” and rights in general, human and more than human. The opposition to



Indigenous community in Altamira. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

the Belo Monte dam is based at times on arguments related to the defense of human rights and the fundamental rights of affected populations and at other times on the social teachings of the Catholic church in support of the defense of Creation and the most vulnerable based on the figure of Jesus. As a Catholic priest summarizes it, “The people have rights. It is written in the constitution, and those rights are being violated; and we are the church of the people, of Jesus. Our duty is to support them.” This line of argument is also expressed in letters, demonstrations, and community discourse. Biblical passages, the life of Jesus, martyrs and ancestors, and the history of resistance in the territory generate a sense of resilience and commitment to confront mega-projects and their sponsors. These references are then connected to human rights, rights of nature, and the defense of life. As evidenced in the focus group discussions, keywords used in this discourse are faith, hope, justice, companionship, prophecy, love, courage, and moving forward.

The discourse of faith communities involved in resistance movements reveals their position against development models that commercialize nature and threaten all her forms of life. Several of our informants voiced their disappointment with the Brazilian federal government. Even under the premise of democratic and progressive discourse, some of our informants thought that the government has continued to forcibly implement projects resulting in fractured communities and in placing the Amazon region at the service of international commodity markets, all under the promises of better quality of life and employment creation for local communities. The speech by President Lula in 2010 in Altamira is a clear example of this. He affirmed that the project would bring “money that the state of Pará has never seen, to take care of social issues,” money “to improve the life of the riverine communities, to improve the life of the Indigenous people, to improve the life of the farmers” (International Rivers 2010). Governments linked to the Workers’ Party have shown greater concern about the impacts of these

infrastructure and extractive projects on local communities, opening inter-ministerial lines for mitigation programs, such as income redistribution and access to housing, health, and education. However, despite these mitigation measures, left-leaning governments have continued to push national and international economic development policies on the Amazon. In the case of the right-wing government of Bolsonaro, this position was aggravated by explicitly declaring Indigenous and traditional communities as obstacles to development and “defending land for Indians” as “nonsense” (Survival International n.d; Rapozo 2021). As a leader of a riverine organization indignantly expresses: “They lied to us. They came promising many things and ended up taking us out of the territory, killing everything we knew, ruining our way of life. They lied!”

Leaders of the MXVS state that violence is another important element of the discursive dimension that they are facing. It is not uncommon for communities to report threats to their assets and livelihoods with claims of government or company representatives trying to persuade them to sell their land in the face of imminent expropriation. Some of our research participants shared stories of persuasion that presents residents with an apparently irremediable and desperate situation and that hides from them the constitutional right to prior consultation. At times, this violent and persuasive discourse takes the form of death threats, putting leaders and communities in a permanent state of tension. In that regard, local communities see themselves as environmental defenders; they defend a way of life, a way of relating to nature, which they seek to defend against external threats.

Among some Protestant sectors, there is an alignment with national development policies that is reproduced at the local level in discourse of intolerance against Indigenous and traditional peoples. This was evident during the Bolsonaro government and its support from the Ruralist, Industrial and Agro-industrial Caucus, which was enmeshed in networks

As a Catholic priest summarizes it, “The people have rights. It is written in the constitution, and those rights are being violated; and we are the church of the people, of Jesus. Our duty is to support them.”

with neo-Pentecostal pastors. Within historical Protestant and Pentecostal communities, there is a more critical discourse toward large businesses wherein their negative impacts are acknowledged, but these faith communities privilege attending the needs of affected communities above taking a position with regard to government policies, as mentioned earlier. As a Pentecostal pastor explains, “When these people (Belo Monte officials) came, they broke up the community; they took people from one place to another. It has to do with power. Here power enters very strongly. So people need shelter. In their pain, there are many people with drug problems, alcoholism, violence. We have a strong axis of work in the recovery of these brothers. Here our dialogue with the people is very simple, we are a church of the poor. So when the poor see this power coming, they cannot fight and go to negotiate.”

There is an evident conflict of policy narratives between government and businesses who promote a certain idea of progress and local and faith communities (though not all) who see in this progress a threat to their way of life. The most symbolic conceptual distinction of these two narratives is that of their valuing of nature. One policy narrative works discursively with the idea of natural resources that must be protected and exploited; the second refuses to understand nature as a resource, generally applying terminologies such as defense of life or defense of territories. One leader of MXVS mentioned that the name of the movement comes from writing a letter, “SOS Xingu,” as if the river were speaking to the community. One member of a riverine council talks of the government and companies taking the place of God, becoming the master and destroyer of nature rather than its custodians: “Our river is dead and full of corpses at the bottom. The river is our mother, our father, our life. They changed everything. They played at being God.” Through this type of discourse, of connection to life, to rivers, and all the life they contain and support, community mobilization usually occurs and generates a basis for the construction of strategies of defense.

Constructing strategies of defense

Local communities build alliances in order to amplify their strategies to defend life in all its forms and to address the social and environmental harms created by large infrastructure projects. These alliances help them achieve greater visibility and build a stronger and more influential presence

in national and international communication and debates. In the case of communities affected by the Belo Monte dam, their main socio-political ally is the Catholic church. As mentioned earlier, community associations, rural unions, and other grass-roots organizations were formed with the political and financial support provided by missionaries in their countries of origin, especially European countries. Today, the Catholic church is still active at the local level but no longer through the actions of missionaries. Its support mainly comes from national and regional actors, such as the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM), which is partially funded by European foundations. Currently, the Indigenous Missionary Council and the Pastoral Land Commission (see Apodi case study, p. 70) are the major actors in communicating nationally and internationally on the social and environmental issues affecting the Xingu region. The work of these two organizations includes facilitating the participation of local people in meetings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the United Nations Human Rights Commission, as well as strategic engagement with the legal, legislative, and executive branches of the federal government in Brasilia, especially on issues of land rights, a work that is carried out especially in Brazil by the CPT. Such mediation between local communities and national and international arenas is critical for actions in defense of life and territories to take place.

The presence of official representatives of the Catholic church, such as bishops, priests, or nuns, in demonstrations, marches, and public events alongside affected communities has been an effective strategy in mitigating potential violence directed toward these groups, who might otherwise face retaliation for their actions. Frequently, our informants mentioned that their presence has lessened the repressive actions of security forces by amplifying the visibility of the demonstrations on both national and international levels. In this regard, faith communities serve as a protective barrier for the lives of those affected. As a Catholic nun testifies, “Because you think we are going to go to the front with the people, we sleep on the side of the road with them because if there are no people from the church there, then they are going to kill them. With our presence, people are afraid. They know that we have contacts and visibility throughout the world, after Dorothy then and with these years of Dom Erwin’s struggle, they have seen that the church echoes the voice and struggle of the people.”

With the notoriety of the Belo Monte case, many environmental and human rights organizations began to operate in the region, and the Catholic church is now no longer the sole supporting and mediating organization in national and international articulations of local demands. Many have joined in supporting local communities in these articulations. One notable example is the presence of independent media in the region, which produces investigative journalism, bringing news from the Xingu to national and global audiences, such as the human rights journalist platform Sumaúma. In the consolidation of the socio-political dimension, one must also mention the influence of social networks, which, when appropriately used by communities and local movements, form another set of tools to bring complaints from the local to the global level.

With the strengthening of the community dimension and local relational space, social movements in the Xingu are gradually expanding their work without the need for intermediaries. An example of this is the MXVS. It initially received support from the Catholic church but is now able to build its own socio-political strategies. According to our informants, it was through the sole support of the MXVS that the riverine communities were considered affected and received adequate support from the State Public Ministry.

These communities designed their own resettlement proposal, which is still pending implementation. As a leader of the Riverine Council explains, “Nobody wanted to recognize the riverine residents as affected by the project, neither the government, nor Norte Energía, nor the Public Ministry who had to defend us, it was only with the articulation of the Social Movement that practically forced the authorities to go to the territories to see what was happening, that the State Public Defender’s Office began to look at us.”

As for Indigenous communities, their actions were led by the National Articulation of Indigenous Peoples and its Amazon branch, the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon, supported by the Indigenous Missionary Council and other environmental and human rights organizations. The Federal Public Ministry played an important role in the defense of Indigenous communities and is the most important actor in the legal process against Belo Monte. Its arguments were based on the grounds of negligence by the Brazilian State and violation of the rights of Indigenous peoples, especially the right to prior, free, and informed consent, as recommended by Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization and which Brazil ratified in 2002.



Headquarters of the Xingu Vivo para Sempre movement, message in Portuguese reads: "We are Goddesses of the Amazon, of Waters, Rivers, Seas, Forests, In Resistance and Fighting for the Life of Mother Earth." (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda)

Due to our faith communities' focus, we have omitted in this discussion of the Belo Monte case the very complex legal dimension of the defense strategies. The entire process of licensing, construction, and operation is replete with legal documents by different actors with some defending and others condemning the project. This has led to significant disruptions in the implementation of Belo Monte that are seen as small victories by affected populations. In fact, it was only through the legal process that local communities, through their alliances, were able to establish a set of conditions to be respected by Norte Energia in order to minimize the dam's impacts. To date, 38 out of the 54 conditions have not yet been fulfilled.

CONCLUSIONS

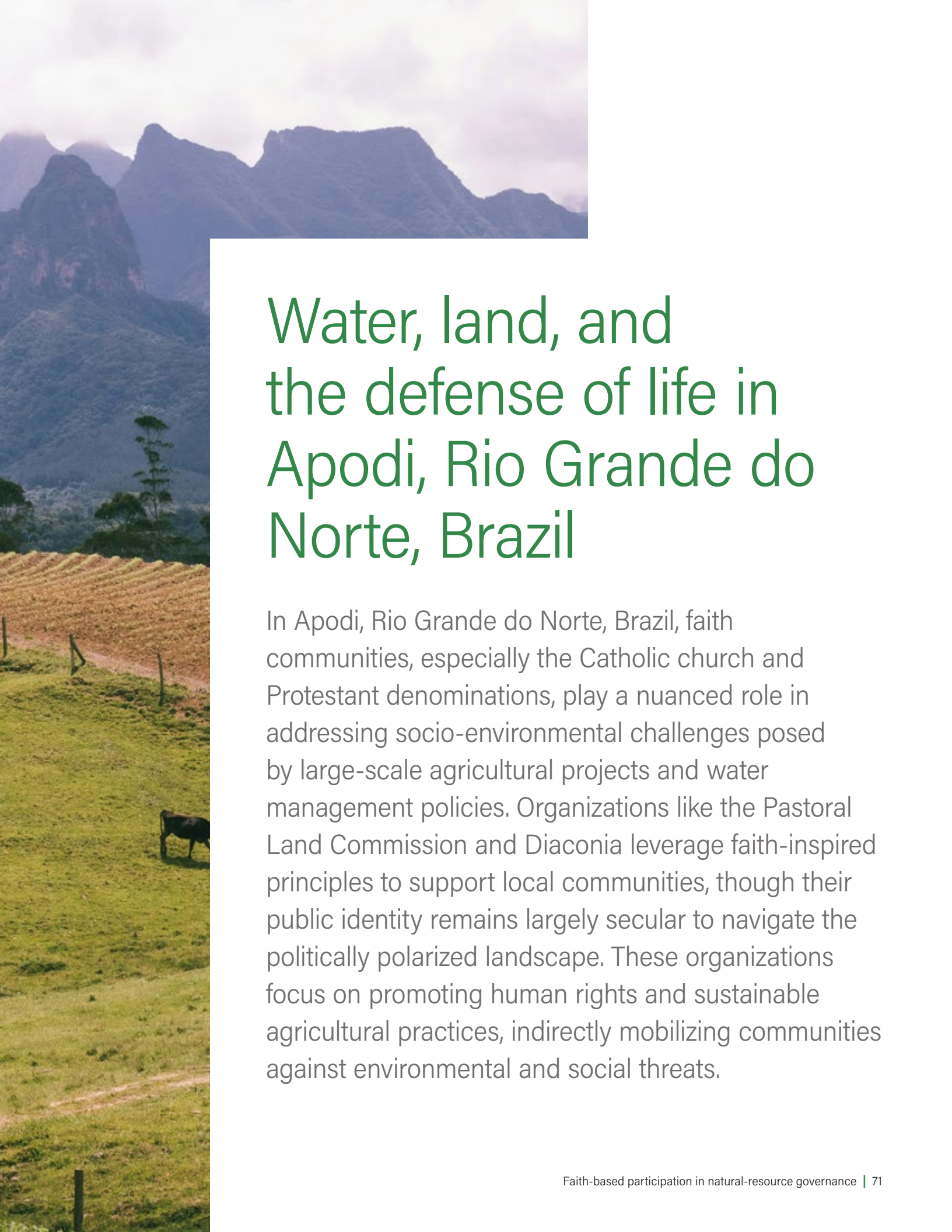
The case of Belo Monte is emblematic for understanding the strategies of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes. Faith is a constitutive element of the community dimension that permeates the daily life of local communities. When mobilized by discourse and symbols, faith offers a strong relational space from which community organizing and social movements can emerge. This in turn has the potential to overcome, even temporarily, differences that exist within local communities in search of a common ground, such as the categories regarding the affected or life as all life, including human, depends on the life of rivers and forests. As a MXVS representative highlighted at the online exchange seminar, "[T]he strategy is to unite local communities on the basis of what is common. To build solidarity links [*vinculos fraternales*] between communities to unite the people." The struggle of local communities is one of seeking to defend their ancestral lifestyles, based on a relationship of reciprocity with nature, against a vision of development that understands nature as natural resources at the service of markets. The energy and economic matrix adopted by national development policies, along with the historically unfinished agrarian reform and the ratification of Indigenous communities as subjects of rights, are the pillars that structure the socio-environmental struggles of local communities in the Xingu region.

Faith is characterized in these struggles not only as a mobilizing element, but also as a safeguard, an untouchable and unbreakable support. Faith is what keeps hope for justice active, even in the face of imminent defeats. As a Catholic community leader expressed it, "Our faith is very important,

it gives us hope to go on, even when we know that the battle is lost." Social movements and faith communities are the structuring basis of mobilization and resistance. By making alliances, social movements and faith communities consolidate the civic space at the national and international level in order to counter its fragility at the local level. Informants also highlighted that women played an important role in mobilizing and often exercised leadership in social movements. "The face of resistance is female in the Xingu" is a statement made by many people interviewed.

Faith communities, specifically the Catholic church and historical Protestant churches, support local communities in their socio-political and legal strategies and justify their actions based on the relational history with these peoples. In the Catholic case, their actions are guided by the church's social teachings, especially Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, his exhortation following the Amazon Synod *Querida Amazonia* (Francis 2020), and documents from Latin American Bishops' Conferences (CELAM 1979, 2007). As highlighted earlier, faith communities' mobilization and articulations of their actions through the lens of faith pre-dates these documents, and there is a dynamic interaction between local experiences and development of the Catholic church's social teachings. Faith communities' actions are inspired by the figure of Jesus and his attitudes toward the poorest and most vulnerable of society. The Catholic church uses its physical, financial, and human resources and socio-political influence to support local communities. There are, however, some faith communities, especially among Protestant denominations, that adopt a less involved attitude and privilege a more palliative approach to the harms experienced by people affected by the Belo Monte dam. There are some variations within these churches as a result of biblical interpretations, ranging from the progressive and social spectrum to a more conservative and atomized one. We have also observed some differences in the positions of the leadership and the membership of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. Some members are affected by the impacts of the dam construction and are therefore driven to engage in resistance strategies and join social movements, despite being discouraged to do so by their leaders. As we have pointed out, the category of "those affected by large businesses" is capable of overcoming denominational differences and fostering community cohesion and collective action. But it is the faith dimension which ultimately allows the struggles for the defense of life to carry on despite setbacks, disappointments, and failures.





Water, land, and the defense of life in Apodi, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil

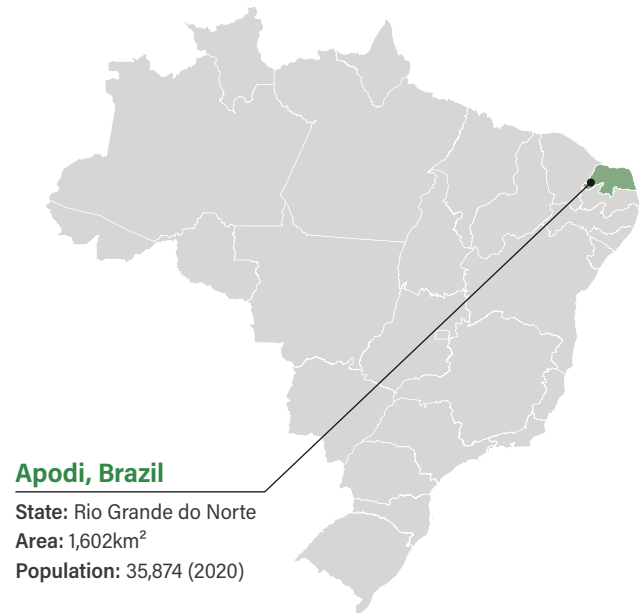
In Apodi, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, faith communities, especially the Catholic church and Protestant denominations, play a nuanced role in addressing socio-environmental challenges posed by large-scale agricultural projects and water management policies. Organizations like the Pastoral Land Commission and Diaconia leverage faith-inspired principles to support local communities, though their public identity remains largely secular to navigate the politically polarized landscape. These organizations focus on promoting human rights and sustainable agricultural practices, indirectly mobilizing communities against environmental and social threats.

INTRODUCTION

The municipality of Apodi is situated in the semi-arid region of Caatinga in northeastern Brazil (Figure 7). In 2021, its population was estimated at 35,904 people, of which 79.59 percent identified as Catholics and 14.44 percent as Protestants (IBGE 2022). Its economy is based on seasonal fruit monocultures (mainly melons), which is the largest source of employment in the region, followed by public administration, family farming, and services. The region has long been experiencing periods of drought. To address water scarcity, the government has plans for a huge water infrastructure project that would divert the São Francisco River to support a large-scale export-oriented agro-economic sector. Talks about the project started in 2010 and gained significant momentum during the governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff as the Workers' Party used the project to represent symbolically its commitment to the people of the northeast where it has its largest electoral base. The river diversion is fully subsidized by the federal government. The Apodi branch of the diverted river would bring water to 32 municipalities and benefit 478,000 people.

The city of Apodi is home to the Santa Cruz dam, the second largest reservoir in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Built between 1999 and 2002, the dam promised to end water insecurity in the region. However, some local leaders interviewed in this research reported that many localities still have difficulties accessing water. The main socio-environmental problem of the region arises in this context of water use and the advance of monocultural agricultural activities. Although the diversion of the São Francisco River in the region has not yet happened, there are serious concerns about its potential impact. Many monoculture companies from the neighboring state of Ceará are already migrating to the region in search of greater access to water. According to our informants, there are already signs of water depletion due to excessive water use and lack of regulations and controls, high demand among agribusinesses for extracting groundwater, and unregulated use of agrochemicals. Furthermore, according to leaders of the Rural Workers Union of Apodi, the financial speculation undertaken by these businesses encroaches on family farms and significantly accelerates the sale of land belonging to small-scale farmers. Current disputes relate to the contamination of the Apodi lagoon; the intensive use of agrochemicals; the risk of drinking water depletion and contamination; the loss of family farming

FIGURE 7 | Geographical map of Apodi, Brazil



Source: Marques et al. 2019 and Wikimedia.

land; the weakening of the local economy; the loss of farmers' purchasing power due to increases in intermediaries; the transgenerational dismantling of communities; unhealthy working conditions; the advance of so-called renewable energies, mainly wind parks; and the lack of accurate impact assessment on human health and local ecosystems.

Due to financial and political factors that caused delays in channeling the waters of the São Francisco River to the region, in 2012 the government initiated the Santa Cruz do Apodi Irrigation Project, also known as the Irrigated Perimeter. The project was led by the National Department of Works against Drought and would have involved the expropriation of 13,855 hectares of land. Local residents and social movements in the region called it the Death Project. The mobilization against it significantly consolidated the civic space and gained international support. The mobilization was led by the CPT, the Rural Workers Union, and other organizations. Eventually, the federal government abandoned the project, despite having already executed some expropriations. While some CPT and union leaders attribute the decision to a lack of financial resources, others point to political motives and the formidable pressure applied by local communities.



Construction for the São Francisco River diversion. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)



Disputed area of the Santa Cruz do Apodi Irrigation Project. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

Despite having been predominantly occupied by large estates, the region of Apodi saw the emergence of a movement for the popular organization of rural workers in the late 1970s and early 1980s supported by the Catholic church. At the time, the church adopted a clear position in favor of the agrarian reform and against the military dictatorship and offered its financial, human, and physical resources at the service of democratization, workers, and rural social movements. This mobilization resulted in the establishment of 15 rural settlements following the agrarian reform. The Rural

Workers Union transitioned from military oversight to community management, becoming the primary force behind community mobilization and socio-political coordination in the area. This organizational foundation serves as a crucial repertoire of local mobilization strategies against the Irrigated Perimeter project. Presently, the Rural Workers Union aims to restructure its capabilities to offer alternative modes of agriculture to those of monoculture-based agribusinesses.

In such context, there exists a similar pattern of engagement by Christian communities to that observed in Altamira. Drawing from historical missionary efforts, influential documents like those of the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops Conferences of Puebla and Medellín, alongside grass-roots practices of Base Ecclesial Communities, the Catholic church emerges as a pivotal player in organizing community associations and social resistance movements. Notably, the work of the CPT has been active in the Apodi region for over four decades.⁴⁸ Regarding Protestant churches, there is also a pattern parallel to that of Altamira. Historical churches, like the Baptists and Lutherans, voice concerns about the impacts of agribusinesses, albeit without specific institutional actions to counter them. Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assembly of God, primarily focus on their members' welfare, and occasionally take on a political stance. On the more conservative end, such as the Church of Christ, there is a lack of engagement with social issues. Within this Protestant landscape, one organization stands out, Diaconia, a consortium comprising historical, Pentecostal, and neo-Pentecostal Protestant churches.⁴⁹ Diaconia actively supports local communities in organizing efforts, engages in political advocacy, provides technical guidance, and endeavors to raise awareness among Protestant groups about socio-environmental concerns.

Our research provides evidence that faith plays a constitutive role in constructing a relational space and community-building and shaping the ways in which local communities live and organize in Apodi, although the different Christian denominations do so in various degrees and shapes, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Within the denominations which take a stand with regard to the river diversion project and the growth of agribusinesses and monocultures in the region, faith serves as a source of resilience and hope in facing challenges. Like in our first Brazilian case, rural communities in Apodi often bear names of patron saints with their religious festivities serving as significant community rallying points. In addition to faith communities linked

to Catholic and historical Protestant churches and those supported by Diaconia, women's organizations, like the 8th March Women's Centre, also play a large role in the defense strategies against the advance of agribusinesses and promote the formation of women's groups. Community associations of family farmers, which are the foundation of the Apodi Rural Workers Union, also contribute significantly to the social landscape of the region.

However, in contrast to Altamira, where long-standing conflicts have been overt and ongoing, there is currently no apparent conflict in Apodi. The social and political landscape appears peaceful on the surface, as the full impacts of the proposed project are yet to materialize. Representatives of the Rural Workers Union mentioned that entire communities are already experiencing evident consequences, such as pesticide inhalation, skin allergies, digestive troubles among workers caused by handling chemicals, and declining populations of bees and birds. Local communities have not experienced harm to the extent of substantively altering people's daily lives and galvanizing a widespread popular organization and resistance movement to the project to divert the São Francisco River; whereas there was such a movement in response to the Irrigated Perimeter in 2012.

This case study is structured in a similar way to others in this report. After a brief description of the fieldwork methodology, we analyze the role of faith communities in this latent socio-environmental dispute across four dimensions. We first examine community mobilization in the region and then examine the role of faith communities in fostering relationship-building and community cohesion, although not directly leading to mobilization. Third, we explore how faith communities and their associated representative organizations construct alternative narrative discourse, indirectly drawing upon their spirituality. Fourth, we investigate the organizational mechanisms employed by local communities to resist the expansion of export-oriented monoculture in the context of a semi-arid region. We conclude by comparing and contrasting the roles of faith communities in our two Brazilian cases.

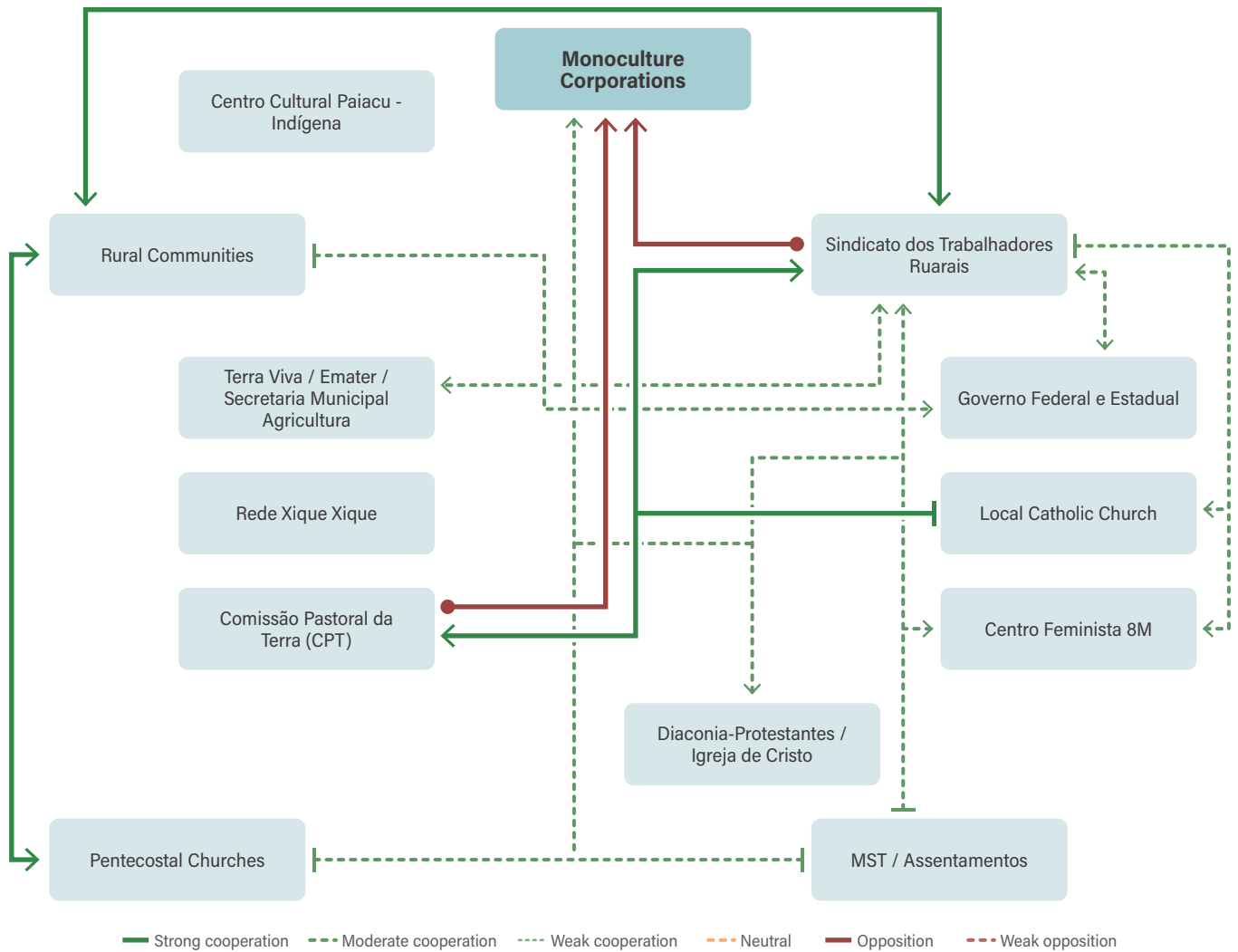
FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork was carried out in late June and early July 2023 with the support of the CPT and the Rural Workers Union with social actors involved (see Figure 8). The fieldwork covered an area of about 100 kilometers between the cities of Mossoró and Apodi, encompassing the Santa Cruz dam, the region of the Irrigated Perimeter, the federal university, and six rural communities. Fourteen semi-structured interviews and two focus groups were conducted. (See Appendix A for interview questions and Appendix B for focus group structure.) The interviews included leaders of the feminist movement, the CPT, representatives of the Catholic church, family farmers, settlers of the agrarian reform, leaders of the Rural Workers Union, representatives of the municipal secretariat of agriculture, Indigenous leaders, representatives from the São Francisco River basin, leaders of the Baptist church and of the organization Diaconia. (See Appendix D for a list of interviews.)

Interviews were structured around questions related to the history of the organization, communities, or movements, and the impacts that have been observed since the announcement of the river diversion project. Interviews also explored mobilizing narratives and the symbols evoked, strategies of defense, as well as questions about institutional alliances. Each interview lasted for about an hour and was subsequently transcribed and catalogued within the keywords of this research: the spiritual-symbolic, community, discursive and socio-political-legal dimensions, as well as categories about relational and civic spaces and conceptions of nature and gender-based violence. It is important to note that, as in the other cases, it was not possible to obtain interviews with representatives of agribusinesses. They required a formal protocol to request communication and visit the facilities, which was a lengthy process and could not be secured within our timetable.

Two focus groups were conducted with representatives of social movements, including from the CPT, Rural Workers Union, and the Women's Movement (Appendix D). The group was invited to fill in a timeline of the socio-environmental dispute with memories, lessons learned, and feelings. The majority of participants reported lessons learned from their collective organizing work and the social movement in which they had participated. We then presented a list of

FIGURE 8 | Map of social actors, Apodi, Brazil



Source: Authors.

actors in the conflict, namely the government, companies, social movements, affected communities, the Catholic church, and evangelical churches. Participants were asked to choose one or more of these actors and describe their position, interest, needs, and strategies. In the third part of the focus group discussions, we presented a hypothetical letter from another community requesting advice. The letter recognized the struggles of the Apodi communities against the Irrigated Perimeter and the arrival of large monoculture companies and asked for guidance on how best to combat such forms of encroachment and development. Once again, participants emphasized the importance of organizing grass-roots communities and ensuring that they had prior

knowledge of their rights. From this dialogue, we moved to discussing the role of faith in these struggles, the place of nature in their worldviews, and the impact of Pope Francis’ apostolate on their struggles. The responses were unanimous in stating that faith is fundamental in their fight against mega-corporations. Faith encourages them to move forward even in the face of defeats. The word *hope* was mentioned many times. Focus group participants were then invited to reflect and say a word that best represented the discussions. Struggle, faith, resistance, grass-roots organization, joy, motivation, and courage were most highlighted.

FAITH COMMUNITIES' PARTICIPATION IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Community organizing

The municipality of Apodi has long been occupied by communities of family farmers who, over generations, have developed strategies for survival in the semi-arid region, such as rainwater harvesting, community environmental sanitation, water reuse for production and small-scale irrigation, agroforestry management, and others. The municipality has been recognized regionally and nationally for the diversity of its production chains developed in family and community production systems. However, the region has also been historically characterized by a sort of indentured servitude through which families worked land, generally large estates owned by third parties, in exchange for a place to live and keeping a small percentage of the production for their needs. It was only around 1980 that these communities mobilized and demanded agrarian reform to guarantee land ownership. This led to today's community family farming landscape in the municipality.

In such a context, community cohesion is composed of kinship or neighborhood relationships that have been woven together for at least two generations. This has consolidated a relational space and strengthened a common sense of belonging to the place. Representatives of the CPT and Rural Workers Union clarify that it is precisely on these community pillars that agribusinesses are currently exerting disruptive pressure, either by taking young laborers away from family farming for temporary jobs and leaving the elderly looking after family agriculture or by speculating with the purchase of land. For example, it was common for each community to have a collective sowing space where they met every week to share food, exchange dialogue, and work the land in a collaborative manner. Our informants reported a significant decrease in these spaces. As a family farmer comments, "I think people are more individualistic nowadays. To each his own. There is still the issue of the community, the association mobilizes when needed; but it was once active. We even had a collective planting field. Today there is no more; and also, as all the young people go to look for work in these companies, only the elderly are left to take care of the orchard. Then it becomes more difficult." The history of

collective mobilization of the 1970s and 1980s, transmitted by the elderly, is also fading among the young generations.

Three elements currently stand out as community mobilizers: First, there are community associations that meet about once a month and are organized by community producers' associations linked to and supported by the Apodi Rural Workers Union. They discuss the events, training, activities, and problems they are facing, such as noise and dust from business activities, poison odors, the decrease of bees, and the increase of intermediaries in the commercialization of their products. Our informants saw in these associations a way to exchange information on planting strategies, learn to deal with differences, practice democracy in a generally peaceful manner, and take their demands to municipal authorities.

A second community mobilizing element is the presence of representative organizations, such as the Rural Workers Union, which raise local demands to the municipal and regional level. The union enjoys a good reputation and convenes local meetings, often to address issues related to the rights of rural workers and information on new projects or policies coming to the region. The union's strong legitimacy in representing local communities stems from the fact that



Workers Union ornament. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

it was the rural workers themselves who emancipated the union from its previous military government oversight. As one of its most long-standing members explains:

I think people respect it because of the history of struggle, which strengthened the identity of the workers. [...] I think the union is strong because there are people who are strong, who believe in family farming, and who do not want to leave the countryside and want to live with dignity there. And there is only one way to come together and have collective representation in the institutions, whether it is a community association, the union. The associations, they came through the union, the labor movement within the union, and the union has been having this debate for a long time. [...] Today we are more than 20 years old. A family farming forum that brings together 40 community associations you have here. I think this has to do with being present at the grass roots in the community, doing trainings, holding debates.

Besides the Rural Workers Union, another notable representative organization is the CPT, which has strong ties to the Catholic church and boasts a well-established history of monitoring in these communities. Similarly, Diaconia, linked to Protestant churches, contributes to community mobilization by focusing on technical support, particularly in enhancing production chains and facilitating community certification of organic products.

It is noteworthy that these organizations often employ locals who, over time, have developed familiarity, received guidance, and undergone training through their association with these entities. This enhances grass-roots support and the effectiveness of these organizations. The Union, CPT, and Diaconia also prioritize a predominantly collective and community-centered approach in their technical assistance—an approach that differs from government agencies, which, while occasionally providing crucial technical support, might not emphasize community mobilization to the same extent. As one family farmer linked to the local Catholic church states, “[T]he work of the government is different. They don’t see it much in the community itself, unless the association asks for something and manages to articulate it, but generally they focus more on one family or another.”

An additional crucial aspect of community mobilization is the religious facet. Worship services, meetings, and gatherings organized by Pentecostal pastors effectively rally and engage local communities. Despite a downward trend in the number of Catholics and the absence of a permanent presence of an appointed religious leader,⁵⁰ the Catholic faith functions as a community mobilizer when a priest visits for masses, weddings, or collective baptisms or when patron saints of the communities are commemorated and celebrated. In both cases however, there is no political dimension of faith; that is, when the community comes together for these celebrations, they do not usually address socio-environmental issues that affect the region. They are exclusively focused on worship, rituals, and popular piety. This trend mirrors an overall shift in the leadership landscape and a departure from missionaries who were aligned with the Second Vatican Council and the documents of the Latin American Bishops Conferences of Medellín and Puebla (CELAM 1968, 1979) and who had access to financial backing in their home countries.

Our informants were unanimous in pointing out that the national polarized political situation was an element that hindered community mobilization and generated disagreements, mistrust, and fragmentation. These national political divergences were present in local communities where fieldwork took place. Catholics and Protestants were often on opposite ends of the political spectrum, although generalizations should not be made as we found both denominations supporting both sides of this polarization. A family farmer who attends the neo-Pentecostal Church of Christ comments, “Some churches were no longer as involved in community issues; it was more for prayer. Those who were involved withdrew a bit from this political turmoil of late. It was Bolsonaro on one side, Lula on the other. Even within the community association, things slowed down, everyone was afraid to fight.”

The role of women stands out in community mobilization and territorial articulations in Apodi. They are protagonists in organic plantation projects and often manage family gardens while their husbands and sons work for agribusinesses. Through their mobilization efforts at local, national, and international levels, women have significantly affected the decision to suspend the Irrigated Perimeter project, a point that will be later elaborated. Additionally, our sources highlighted women’s significance in passing down ancestral knowledge related to medicinal herbs and other plants,

directly contributing to the health and well-being of the community. As a CPT technician who used to participate in the Rural Women's Association in her community recalls, "Women have always been in the struggle, against the Death Project (Irrigated Perimeter). Women wrote at the time handwritten letters, by hand. They made 2,000 letters written in pencil to Dilma saying that she could not do the Death Project because they were going to lose their backyards, lose medicine, and end their lives. And they got a bar blocking, they didn't let the company's technicians in, they put padlocks on the front door, etc...."

Unlike in the 1970s and 1980s, the faith dimension does not appear to be a dominant element today in community mobilization and promoting strategies to defend life and territories in Apodi. Mobilizations are now articulated through external organizations that did not emerge from the community itself. According to our interviews, faith-based community mobilization has been losing strength in the last two decades, and its role is limited to relationship building without a socio-environmental dimension. A family farmer linked to the Catholic church and an emblematic figure of the Union comments "Churches gather a lot of people, for parties, for weddings, but to engage with the problem, less and less. It's different from the old days when we came with the Bible, we reflected on our problems, we read the Bible, we had a dialogue. Today it seems that people are a bit paralyzed. People have to come here from the Union, from the CPT, to shake people up; they have to unite again around a struggle, like we did in the 1970s and 1980s."

Spirituality and relation-building

Although faith plays no explicit role in community mobilization in Apodi, it does play an indirect role through the building of social relations. Faith communities construct a relational space even if they do not directly articulate the demands of local communities in their disputes with government projects and agribusinesses. There are also transgenerational differences, since for older generations, the Catholic church was an important actor in the creation of community associations, and this memory is being lost among younger generations. As a Rural Workers Union representative observes, "[W]hen you walk through the communities, people remember those old priests who lived with the people, who helped to build the associations; now it is difficult to find these references."



Catholic Church in Apodi. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

Faith acts today in a more symbolic than practical way. Evoking biblical narratives and the figure of Jesus offers local populations some guidance for action and creates a moral code of conduct in everyday life. Similarly, the symbolism of patron saints and sometimes the figure of Pope Francis are elements that bring a community together and help them face everyday challenges, even if it does not guide communities toward concrete actions of resistance. As a representative of the Union explains, "I think Pope Francis has an important symbolic role [...] I even remember a while ago he spoke about the importance of trade unions. People here are very religious, these things are good for them." And a family farmer comments, "My faith helps me to have hope when things seem difficult, because everything is difficult for us. Faith gives you a path to follow, even if you don't see it at first."

It is worth noting that, unlike in the other Brazilian case, the figure of the martyrs is not something that is recurrently evoked to generate community mobilization. The exception is that of Zé Maria Tomé, a member of the MST⁵¹ who was murdered in 2010 in Chapada do Apodi, for his struggle against aerial spraying of pesticides. Today, a law banning aerial spraying in the state of Ceará is named after him. But the figure of Zé Maria does not appear as a symbolic element that mobilizes the struggles. Organizations linked to faith communities such as the CPT and Diaconia put their religious foundations in the background and focus on technical action. Local populations often refer to them as civil society



organizations and rarely view them as being connected to a Christian denomination. As an Apodi farmer tells us: “Here in the community, in addition to Diaconia, the Union and the CPT have always been great allies. These people don’t present themselves much as being from the church. They are more like technical advice.” Such positioning is in fact deliberate on the part of these organizations. Given the polarization of the political and religious field in Brazil, placing their religious identity at the forefront of their work would detract from their mobilization work with local communities.

Nevertheless, both CPT and Diaconia ground their actions and involvement in people’s causes, as well as their mobilization strategies, in principles derived from their respective religious affiliations. For instance, CPT justifies its commitment based on the concepts presented in the Latin American Bishops’ Conference of Aparecida (CELAM 2007) and Pope Francis’s *Evangelii Gaudium*, advocating for a “Church which goes forth from its comfort zone” (Francis 2013, 20), with a clear commitment to serving the poor. As a CPT trainer explains, “[W]e are not there to catechize the people. Our role is to help them in the demands of everyday life, in the struggle, but if you see why there is a CPT, how we conceptually structure the work, you will see that it is an organism of the church that executes the preferential option for the poor and for the care of the common home, as the social doctrine of the church teaches.” Similarly, Diaconia aligns its work with documents from specific Protestant churches, particularly those associated with historical Protestantism such as the Lausanne Covenant (Padilla 1976), where a commitment to human rights and the environment is explicitly articulated. As a Diaconia representative explains, “Diaconia is an organization that provides technical support to the communities; but in our precepts, our lines of action

are based on the guidelines of the Protestant churches that make up our council where they will find support to work on human rights, care for the land, and all these other issues.”

While faith may not directly mobilize local communities to address socio-environmental issues, these representative organizations effectively navigate these connections. They leverage their extensive church-based national and international networks to give visibility and support for local communities. The hierarchy of the Catholic church in the diocese of Mossoró where Apodi is located can therefore remain more diplomatic without having to adopt a confrontational stance in socio-environmental disputes and let the CPT act on its behalf. As one Catholic leader in Apodi points out:

We don’t have any other church organization that focuses more specifically on the field. It’s more the CPT itself that has to feel a presence in the region, a voice that articulates, that aggregates. [...] You have to have a counterpoint; otherwise you don’t have a voice that stands up, that questions. [...] I think that the CPT has been able to do this from the beginning, when there was talk of the Irrigated Perimeter, the CPT called the whole diocese, the bishops of the region to participate in the movements, and I also accompanied as vicar general. So, in this way, the CPT is able to make this articulation.

As previously mentioned, our informants highlighted a shift in the profile of religious leadership, moving away from missionaries and toward less confrontational approaches, akin to the scenario observed in Altamira. They also indicated political polarization and the fear of social media exposure as hindering religious leaders from adopting a more assertive

stance in socio-environmental disputes. As a local Catholic priest explains, “Priests today have changed their profile, first because they are afraid of what people record, put on social media, so that they no longer deal with controversial issues in public. Then there is this whole issue of abuse, harassment, and finally the advance of the evangelical church; and the adherence of people to this shows them that people want something more clerical, more religious, and not so social. To a certain extent, this is correct because people confuse the church with the state; and this cannot be. First of all, the church offers a spiritual service.” Thus, there may be a critical discourse at the level of the global church about the impacts of agribusinesses on communities, as in Pope Francis’ *Querida Amazonia* (Francis 2020), but this position is not publicly articulated by church leaders in Apodi and does not trigger concrete actions apart from the CPT. However, it is fair to say that most of the work of the CPT is subsidized by the local diocese, which supplies its offices and pays for its staff and its car.

As for Protestant leaders, there is a similar pattern as in Altamira and elsewhere in Brazil. Historical churches adopt a critical analysis of socio-environmental issues, based on a biblical perspective, but do not take actions at the institutional level. As a Baptist pastor expresses it, “The need to look at the environmental issue is in the gospel. You’ll find that the Bible itself leads you to care about this. [...] [Man] was to have dominion over the animals, but at the same time this dominion was not a dominion for the extermination of the fauna and flora. [...] [A]s a Baptist church, we don’t get directly involved in conflicts, or in some form of

judicialization,⁵² but in my classes and preaching we don’t spare criticism and these projects.” The organization Diacônia, which mobilizes the spiritual and symbolic dimension to sensitize evangelical leaders to become involved in socio-environmental issues, plays an important role in developing this critical analysis. However, its actions are not confrontational. They focus on promoting health, good nutrition, reforestation, and organic waste. Such awareness-raising actions do shape the discursive and moral space, as will be detailed later.

Another prominent group in the spiritual and symbolic realm of Apodi is the Indigenous community residing in the area. The Paiacu Indigenous group originally occupied the region and was nearly driven to extinction. Recent efforts have been made to reclaim the identity of this Indigenous group. The Paiacu uniquely perceive nature as a living and sentient being, unlike other groups who mainly emphasize the importance of nature for human survival. Describing nature with symbolisms inherent in Indigenous traditions, the Paiacu Indigenous leader evokes vivid imagery attributing vitality to natural elements: “In my childhood, we had another relationship with nature, this Mother Lagoon, we called her mother because we lived listening to her, talking and learning from her. She was pure and crystalline. You see our going backward? When we walk on mineral water, we can’t drink this water, which is now all polluted. I grew up in this lagoon and I saw the women washing. [...] I saw my mother, talking to Mother Lagoon. The lagoon for us has always been a mother, now it’s dead, finished; it eats the sewage from the city.” Due to colonial persecution and silencing, there exists a gap of approximately 180 years between current leaders attempting to reclaim their culture, ancestry, and identity and the last documented records of Indigenous peoples in the region. Because of this incipient process of recovery, few of our informants effectively recognize Indigenous spirituality as an active presence in the municipality. However, such a presence could potentially lead to a more public expression of faith within the political realm in the future.

In summary, the spiritual and symbolic dimensions serve as crucial elements in establishing a relational space within the communities. However, so far, such expressions of faith have not led communities to take action on socio-environmental issues based solely on discourse derived from specific faith traditions, such as biblical figures or the memory of martyrs. This is not to negate the role of a faith dimension within



Neo-Pentecostal Church in Apodi. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)



Headquarters of Indigenous Association Paiaçu. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

these strategies. Organizations associated with faith communities, such as the CPT linked to the Brazilian Catholic Bishops Conference, do support local communities, although faith is not the primary driving force.

Constructing narrative discourse

Narrative discourse aimed at mobilizing strategies to defend life in Apodi revolve around statements concerning human rights, land rights, and critique of a capitalist system encroaching on family agriculture through monoculture. As a Rural Workers Union representative comments, “The community discourse is our main aspect. Let’s put it that way. [...] Because sometimes people just lament. And we have to bring hope. We look with them to the past and see that we’ve achieved a lot, so our history mobilizes and articulates.” Like the Union, the CPT aligns its discourse with that of other social movements active in the region, evoking narratives such as how to coexist with the semi-arid region, the universal right to water, the right of family farming, women’s rights, and a critique of the capitalist system and its social and philosophical basis.

Throughout our interviews and focus groups, faith emerges as a profound source of inspiration, providing values and beliefs that bolster the resilience of these communities, even during moments when their struggles may appear insurmountable, although it does not underpin mobilizing discourse as such. Words such as hope, courage, collaboration, faith, resistance, struggle, and love are often brought up as spiritual elements that community members draw from to face these conflicts. A Catholic priest describes it as follows: “In addition to accompanying people and warning them about the risk of these projects, our role is to give comfort and hope. Our word is one of love, as was that of Jesus. The people are suffering so much, without hope in our risen Lord they could succumb. Our role is also to encourage the spirit so that they stand firm.” Faith could thus be seen as a relational mobilizer, as a subjective way of structuring of individuals and communities, even if it does not directly trigger concrete action and frame discourse.

One of the most interesting discursive manifestations of this spiritual dimension in Apodi is the strategy employed by Diaconia to encourage Protestant religious leaders, especially neo-Pentecostal, to engage with socio-environmental issues.

Referring exclusively to biblical references, the organization justifies why those who consider themselves Christians should engage with such issues. As a Diaconia representative in the region explains:

We have a whole biblical argument to convince pastors that the environmental issue is not secondary. We invite them to participate in seminars and events, so they can listen to other pastors who have already been awakened to the issue. We notice that most of them do not work on this topic due to lack of knowledge, but that quickly, with the right religious (theological) arguments, they begin to understand the relationship. Obviously, this approach does not include issues of conflict, land reform, which are controversial issues in the Protestant world due to the politicization process of recent years; but we have managed to work with them on the basis of the importance of healthy food, clean air, and an unpolluted river.

According to our informants, this strategy has had a positive effect, increasing the number of pastors interested in socio-environmental matters. Ultimately, Diaconia notes that pastors frequently refrain from involvement due to a lack of

knowledge. However, by imparting training and information on these matters, using the Bible, pastors begin to reconsider their perspectives and approaches to these issues. Nevertheless, they tend to avoid the contentious, political aspects of socio-environmental involvement.

Within the local leadership of both historic Protestant churches and the Catholic church, our informants perceived a critical discourse toward agribusinesses. However, some of our informants, especially clergy, mentioned that this discourse is silenced by threats, fears, and limitations, such as social media and a national polarized political context. Some older Rural Workers Union members believe that the Catholic church has lost its prophetic character. As for Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, there is a link between them at the national level with agribusiness and extractive industries. This generates a set of discourse that opposes the demarcation of Indigenous peoples and the protection of human rights and nature. However, this discourse manifests itself at the local level in a milder way because local pastors live daily with these communities. Some informants noted some instances where local pastors openly oppose discourse from the evangelical national political party line; in other instances, they deny that there is a conflict between local communities and agribusinesses. In both instances, they



Agro-industrial production on right; community agricultural production on left. (Credit: Sindicato de Apodi.)

develop a strong line of assistance, working with affected families, although only those linked to their churches, and provide emotional support, physical resources, and food.

It is also in the discursive sphere where the relationship between national, global, and local perspectives are clearly illustrated. A significant part of the population still seems to agree with the development discourse that underpins the diversion of the São Francisco River, the Apodi dam, and the arrival of export-oriented agribusinesses in the region. They see these projects as important for job creation and quality of life improvement in the region. On the other hand, organizations like the Union, the CPT, or Diaconia and community leaders oppose this discourse by trying to demonstrate to local residents the impacts they suffer from this type of development. In our online exchange seminar in April 2024, representatives of the Rural Workers Union and CPT shared that the main challenge they are facing is for local communities to understand the type of projects they are facing and their consequences. Explaining why it is important to mobilize and communicate what the impacts of agribusinesses are and what communities can do about it, is one of the main lines of action. These organizations underlined that women played a crucial role in this communication and the work of building awareness and capacity.

There is however no unanimity on river diversion, monoculture, the dam, or even on the Irrigated Perimeter. Not all local residents named it the “Death Project.” As mentioned earlier, mothers can participate in meetings to stop the arrival of agribusinesses, but their sons and husbands work in them due to family farming not generating sufficient income and lack of alternative economic options. There is also a division among the local population between those who believe that the river diversion will benefit the region—usually local politicians, businesspeople, and city dwellers—and those who advocate other models of water management, based on technologies for coexistence with the semi-arid region—usually people living in rural areas and the organizations that support them. These differences end up weakening or hindering socio-political articulations of local grievances in the face of divided public opinion. As a member of the São Francisco River Basin Committee states, “[T]he idea of bringing water to the people is good. It will certainly facilitate rural development in the region, but the problem is that there is no clarity about how it will be done. There is no water management plan, and people do not know whether or not they should have to pay for this water.”



Representative organizations and their actions

Despite this lack of consensus on mobilizing discourse, a significant number of organizations are involved in formulating strategies in the socio-political and legal domain. The civic landscape in the region is made up of an articulated network of organizations, including the Rural Workers Union, the 8th March Women’s Centre, the Agrarian Reform Settlements, community associations of family farming, the MST, the CPT, Diaconia, the Xique Xique Network,⁵³ the Paiacu Cultural Association, and the technical support and rural development body of the municipality and the state of Rio Grande do Norte. All seek to raise local complaints and demands to regional, national, and international levels. As the representative of the Union of Rural Workers of Apodi comments:

When the Irrigated Perimeter arrived, we had all of us joined together, and our local movement was already known with national and international support, the Catholic church through the CPT, and the women’s movement through the Women’s Day World March. There was a lot of mobilization. You can imagine that it brought together the MST, the Central Trade Union (CUT),⁵⁴ against everyone in this struggle. We went to Brasilia several times with the support of Dom Tomás.⁵⁵ Dilma did not receive us, but the head of the cabinet was Gilberto Carvalho, and they lied to our face. [...] But we didn’t give up. We went to the international arena to stop the Death Project.

Diaconia stands out among the organizations just mentioned. In addition to disseminating knowledge on socio-environmental issues within Protestant circles, it has also been active in policy advocacy in national legislative and legal matters, especially with regard to formalizing agroecological production chains, consolidating organic certification, and banning agrochemical spraying, as well as playing a leading role in public debates against the Irrigated Perimeter. Even if agroecological family farming practices are not the driving force behind public resistance strategies against the advance of large agribusinesses, they may in themselves be seen as such strategies through driving an alternative model of production and consumption to agro-export expansion. They also contribute to the legitimacy of representative organizations who defend these communities in the political realm. As the representative of the Diaconia network elaborates:

Our headquarters here in the Apodi region are 46 years old. Our flagship project in Apodi is the agroecological cotton project, from the organization of production to marketing, with participatory organic certification. This is related to Fairtrade worldwide, where producers receive the value before production. Now we are also working with sesame. [...] We are implementing more processing units in the region. In our projects we prioritize low-income families, but the important thing is that they are part of family farming; we do not accept families who sow on a large scale. In addition, we have the whole dimension of political incidence, because we understand that our work with the evangelical group in the national parliament is important. It is a voice that clashes with common sense.

During the mobilization against the Irrigated Perimeter, and in line with International Women's Day, the 8th March Women Centre promoted an international campaign called "We are all Apodi" [which in Spanish was in the feminine, *Todas Somos Apodi*]. This significantly enhanced the visibility of local populations' grievances against the Irrigated Perimeter, resulting in its subsequent abandonment, albeit not primarily due to grass-roots pressures. As a representative of the center explains: "One of the strategies was to call in experts, and they made this dossier against the Death Project. They handed it over to the Public Prosecutor's Office, but they did nothing. The only reason the work didn't come out was because of something political from above." Similarly, the CPT amplifies the risks of the river diversion project in

ecclesial, social, and political circles, such as through sponsoring exchanges among local farmers and others who are experiencing similar challenges and linking technical support with critical reflection and formation in human rights, land rights, and women's rights. By taking a clear stance against the agribusinesses in the region, both CPT and Diaconia present a certain public and political dimension of faith in that their work to promote human dignity is motivated by the biblical example of Jesus, even if their discursive line and community mobilization omit these explicitly theological aspects.

All the previously mentioned organizations make up a regional bloc that is part of the Articulation for the Semi-Arid Region (Articulação Semiárido, ASA), which is a network that defends, propagates, and puts into practice the political project of coexistence with the semi-arid region; that is, it opposes large-scale technologies of water management and promotes local sustainable management of water collection and use. ASA is made up of more than 3,000 civil society organizations that work throughout the semi-arid region defending the rights of peoples and communities. The entities that make up ASA are organized in forums and networks in the 10 states that make up the Brazilian Semi-Arid Region. ASA has been an amplifying voice of the struggle of the peoples of the Brazilian Northeast. Its emergence is directly related to the process of mobilization and strengthening of civil society in the 1990s. In 1999, in parallel with the third Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought (COP3), held in Recife, organizations active in the region launched the Declaration of the Brazilian Semi-Arid Region. The declaration is considered to be a departure from the philosophy and actions taken against drought until then that focused on using technologies brought in from outside the territories to combat drought (Calvacante et al. 2022). ASA advocates not combating drought but learning to live with it, using techniques and technologies from within the communities. One of its proposals is a program to build 1 million water tanks.

Within ASA, due to its diverse composition of actors, including members from evangelical churches, there exists a potential for inter-religious and ecumenical alliances among various organizations when addressing socio-environmental disputes in the region. However, despite the presence of religious organizations within the ASA, the demonstrations that are held do not seemingly refer explicitly to religious

symbolism or discourse. The demonstrations are based on human and land rights, the promotion of which is derived in Catholic organizations and Diaconia from biblical and theological underpinnings; for example, the final document of the Amazon Synod (2020, 70) emphasizes that “the defense and promotion of human rights is not merely a political duty or a social task, but also and above all a requirement of faith.” It is important to note that the socio-political landscape in Apodi, which has been consolidated by the aforementioned organizations that make up ASA, has its origin and inspiration in the social movements fighting for land and water in the 1970s and 1980s and that these have historically received significant support from the Catholic church in its early stages. The church-backed mobilization of local residents in their fight for rights resulted in the establishment of agrarian reform settlements in the area. This effort also led to the strengthening of community associations, paving the way for the Rural Workers Union to be taken away from military control. Nearly three decades later in this historical context of socio-political collaboration, social forces united in opposition to the Irrigated Perimeter. Today, it is precisely against this historical background that support organizations like the Rural Workers Union, CPT, Diaconia, and the Women’s Movement are once again trying to gather forces to resist the advance of monoculture and agribusinesses in the region.

Although no legal case has yet been brought against the river diversion project, it is through the socio-political dimension that strategies for the defense of life and territory most originate. Our findings lead us to conclude that this socio-political dimension is most prominent in the Apodi case. Local communities do not mobilize broad strategies for defending life and territories, even though their daily practices represent a kind of resistance. It is representative organizations, with the support of faith communities, especially the Catholic church and Protestant churches aligned to the Lausanne

Covenant, that mobilize local communities and develop actions toward peaceful resolution of socio-environmental disputes; that is, according to their understanding of what constitutes “peaceful resolution”: the safeguarding of a way of life and agricultural practices that coexist with a semi-arid region and do not go against it.

CONCLUSIONS

In the case of the diversion of the São Francisco River and the promotion of export-oriented monoculture in the Apodi region, our research points out that faith is a structuring element, albeit implicit, of the work of representative organizations of local communities in the region. Their supporting role most influences the construction of local strategies in socio-environmental disputes. While faith is an important element for the construction of a relational space, it is not linked directly to community mobilization. It is representative organizations, not born from the local territory of Apodi itself, that develop local communities’ strategies of resistance against the expansion of agribusinesses in the region. One factor that we advance for this is the political and religious polarization that Brazil has experienced in recent years. The way narrative discourse is built is an expression of this context, which is to say that this discourse is based more on civic and political lines connected to rights-based discourse than on theological arguments of following the example of Jesus in the Bible and his care for those who are dispossessed and marginalized.

Overall, the socio-environmental dispute in Apodi is still latent and is not yet directly experienced in a significant way by the population. Even if our informants mentioned cases of conflicting positions among the local population, for example whether in favor or against the arrival of agribusinesses, this

Within ASA, due to its diverse composition of actors, including members from evangelical churches, there exists a potential for inter-religious and ecumenical alliances among various organizations when addressing socio-environmental disputes in the region.

was often alluded to as justification for the current lack of cohesion and community mobilization. The potential for mobilization and resistance of local populations is still alive in the social imagination, as well the support of the Catholic church, which has played an important role in the past in mobilizing rural communities and continues to do so via the CPT. One can conclude therefore that faith is characterized in Apodi as a subjective resource for overcoming family or personal challenges, as well as for establishing codes of conduct for good community coexistence, but faith is not an explicit tool for the concrete mobilization of strategies in defense of life and territories.

Our two case studies from Brazil reveal some important similarities. First, in both cases, the communities speak to a historical and generational change in the profile of Catholic leaders who accompany rural communities. Historically, they have taken a more combative and committed stance with regard to socio-environmental issues affecting local communities. Current generations of leaders adopt a more diplomatic position. They may adopt a critical discourse toward agribusinesses and extractive industries, but they employ more conservative and diplomatic tones in order not to upset a significant part of the faithful. Another similarity between the two cases is women's participation. By consolidating

their own movements or joining local and regional collectives, organizations, or movements, women play a key role in community mobilization and in the socio-political articulation of resistance strategies in the face of the challenges that affect their local communities. Third, both cases have water disputes as a cross-cutting issue, whether in the damming of large rivers to generate hydroelectric power or in the use of groundwater to subsidize irrigated monocultures. In both, there is the perception that the origins of socio-environmental disputes are linked to economic and energy policies adopted by the Brazilian government as a development strategy, regardless of the political party in power. This adds to the fragility generated in these localities by the Brazilian state's historical negligence in carrying out a truly efficient agrarian reform and Indigenous land ratification process.

Despite these similarities and the general challenges that arise from this shared national political and policy priorities landscape, our research also reveals some significant differences between both cases. First, the ways in which government policies manifest themselves in each territory are different. According to the people we interviewed, following a regional trend in the Brazilian Amazon, large companies arrive in a more violent manner, generating forced removals and a large immediate impact on ecosystems. In Altamira,



respondents mentioned that this violence has led to significant threats to the lives of leaders, including the murder of some local and faith leaders such as Dorothy Stang. In the Brazilian Northeast, especially in Apodi, the arrival of large companies is gradual and does not involve direct violence. They install their infrastructure without effective regulation by public authorities; they gradually co-opt people and buy land from farming families, without much visibility; and, little by little, they advance on family agriculture through the purchase of land, subsidized by their significant financial power. Thus, we have, on the one hand, a significantly violent strategy employed by the Brazilian government itself in the Amazonian territories and, on the other, a gradual strategy of co-opting private companies in the Northeast, together with communities affected by large companies.

From the data we collected in our interviews and focus groups, we contend that these differences account for the differences in the profile and role of faith communities in each territory. In Altamira, local communities had been urgently provoked to articulate themselves in the face of explicit threats from Belo Monte when the plans were announced in the mid-1980s. In the online exchange seminar, a MXVS representative talked of the announcement of the construction of the dam in the territory as a “declaration of war.”



This confrontation has been going on since then and has consolidated a consistent civic and relational space. In turn, in Apodi, local communities are experiencing a slow and gradual aggravation of the problem, and they are not yet articulating their grievances nor establishing themselves in an explicit confrontation. However, they keep in their memory historical moments of community mobilization, such as in the case of the community appropriation of the Rural Workers Movement and the agrarian reform. We can expect the conflict to worsen in the coming years with a certain possibility of increased violence, which would lead to a greater need to mobilize defense strategies.

In the case of Altamira, faith is a significant element of community mobilization due to the large impacts already experienced by local communities. Faith is an aggregating, articulating, and mobilizing element among affected communities. In contrast, in Apodi, in the absence of an evident, explicit, and violent conflict in people’s daily lives, faith is more apolitical and serves to strengthen relational bonds in a community context. When faith communities do get involved in the consolidation of strategies for the defense of life and territories at the institutional and socio-political level, they do so via representative organizations, some of which are directly associated with these faith communities, like the CPT with the Catholic church and Diaconia with Protestant churches. None of them, however, bring their religious affiliation to the fore or identify themselves as faith actors. They mobilize exclusively on the basis of rights-based language without referring explicitly to religious symbolism to underpin their rights-based advocacy.

The two cases thus offer a contrasting picture of the role of faith in the development of strategies to respond to government-sponsored projects that negatively affect local communities. In Altamira, faith is a concrete and direct element driving community mobilization and playing a role in the daily life of local communities and is an integral component of their defense strategies and narrative discourse. On the other hand, in Apodi, faith operates through supporting organizations external to local communities, indirectly affecting community mobilization due to the aggregation capacity of these organizations, which act more effectively in representing institutionally affected communities in the socio-political field and in amplifying their claims and denunciations.





The defense of life and territory in Chiapas, Mexico

In Chiapas, Mexico, the Movement in Defense of Life and Territory (Modevite) opposes the “Highway of Cultures” project due to concerns about environmental degradation, social disruption, and increased militarization. Modevite, deeply rooted in Catholic and Indigenous traditions, leverages its faith-based foundation to unite communities, advocate for Indigenous rights, and promote alternative development models centered on “buen vivir.” Despite challenges from organized crime and political opposition, Modevite emphasizes peacebuilding and non-violence, inspired by its spiritual principles and the legacy of Bishop Samuel Ruiz.



INTRODUCTION

In 2008, news arrived of a mega-infrastructure project, the Integral Plan San Cristóbal-Palenque. The Plan was presented by Norton Consulting, an American tourism company, and Aldesa, a Spanish construction company, as part of a strategy to create mass tourism enclaves like those in Cancún. Part of the project was the building of a 157-km highway to connect the municipalities of San Cristóbal in the southwest to Palenque in the northeast of Chiapas (Figure 9). The Ministry of Communications and Transport was in charge of the project, together with the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of Public Security. The involvement of these entities sparked fears within local communities that the project had a concealed agenda aimed at militarizing the area and introducing extractive activities. This was because local communities we interviewed had observed that contamination, deforestation, and social divisions started to appear where similar road infrastructure projects had happened in the region. On February 9, 2009, the Ministry of Communications and Transport, with the consent of the Ministry of Tourism, gave the go-ahead to the works without prior consultation with local communities. The original route was intended to pass through some 30 indigenous communities across 10 municipalities (Frabes 2019).

One of the first communities to oppose the project was Mitzitón, as half of its territory was slated to be affected by the highway. During a demonstration against the highway in July 2009, one demonstrator was killed and five others injured (Davies 2010). An evangelical paramilitary group named “Ejército de Dios” (Army of God), which faced accusations of involvement in migrant trafficking and illegal logging (CMLK 2010; Mandujano 2009), is thought to be responsible for the violence. Another community that expressed opposition, Los Llanos, reportedly faced threats in November 2013 from a local government councilor. The councilor warned that the ability of the community to make decisions would be taken away and that the army would be summoned if they opposed the project. In response, the community filed an injunction in January 2014 against any permits or licenses issued by government authorities for building the highway within their territory without conducting a free, prior, and informed consultation. An “amparo” lawsuit, which is a legal tool in Mexico that allows for legal

FIGURE 9 | Geographical map of highway case, Chiapas, Mexico



Source: Adapted from Méndez-Gómez and Pérez 2023.

action in the face of human rights violations by public authorities, was admitted; and all permits and licenses that had been granted were suspended.

Despite this lawsuit, on February 12, 2014, President Peña Nieto announced that the highway would be one of the priority projects of his six-year term. He changed its name to “Highway of Cultures” and proposed for places to be built along the highway for local communities to sell food and handicrafts. This unleashed an avalanche of protests. Due to opposition from local populations, the initial route was modified five times in 2014. In December 2014, the then secretary of government gave assurances that by 2015, all the necessary rights of way would be obtained.

In December 2018, during the inauguration of the governor of Chiapas and in the presence of President López Obrador, the project was declared a priority for the governor’s term. However, in July 2019 López Obrador announced that a new road would not be built and that the existing road would be modernized instead (Méndez-Gómez and Pérez 2023). In March 2019, Indigenous people from the municipality of Cancuc denounced the liberation of the right of way and said that the community’s access to municipal resources was conditional on its approval of the road project. In 2023, also in Cancuc, five Indigenous people who opposed the highway were sentenced to 25 years in prison, charged with a murder for which they are innocent (FRAYBA 2023b). During the

last 10 years, confrontations have taken place between opponents and supporters of the project in other communities. As of April 2024, the project has not been built, largely due to opposition of the Movement in Defense of Life and Territory (*Movimiento para la Defensa de la Vida y del Territorio*, Modevite), which is the subject of our research.

Modevite was formally created in 2013. It builds on a prior initiative called *Pueblo Creyente* (Believing People), which was set up in the early 1990s by the then Catholic bishop of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz García. Its aim was to analyze the social reality of the diocese and to question, from a faith perspective, the conditions of poverty, marginalization, inequality, and racism experienced by Indigenous communities in the region (Modevite 2016). The *Pueblo Creyente* itself builds on earlier initiatives from the diocese to promote Indigenous peoples' rights in the region, starting with the First Indigenous Congress organized by Bishop Ruiz in 1974 (Santiago 2016). Modevite initially started as an initiative to address alcoholism within Indigenous communities⁵⁶ and soon expanded its focus to include opposition to the highway project. As one representative described the movement at the online exchange seminar, the movement is about “defending life against threats that seek to destroy life,” whether alcoholism or violence against women, and now, the latest threat, the highway, which will destroy the territory that gives life, that nourishes people. Modevite is currently present in 12 municipalities,⁵⁷ all inhabited by Indigenous Tzeltales, Tzotziles, Ch'oles, and Tojolabales.

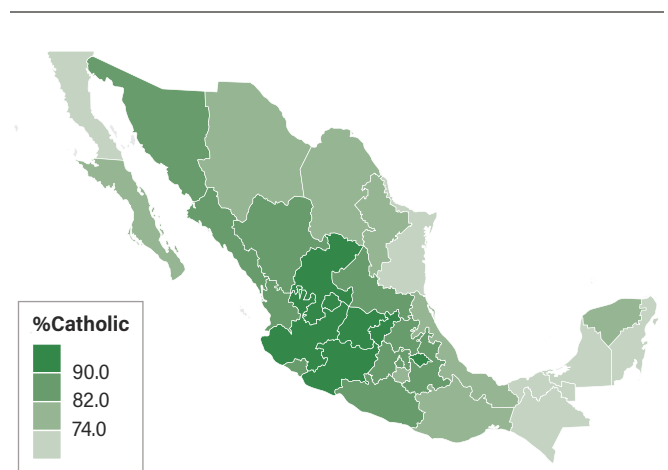
Most of Modevite's members are Catholic, although a few belong to other denominations such as the Baptist church and the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. Modevite deals predominantly with rural communities and is indigenous in its ethnic composition and organizational structures and practices, such as assembly, consensus, collective work, and shared responsibilities. The organization's identity highlights the symbolic elements of the sacralization of the Earth, which brings together Indigenous and Catholic religiosity. Modevite opposes public policies and projects that it sees as embodying a capitalist development model and seeks to promote instead a development model based on “buen vivir” (see the section “Conceptual Background”) with traditional production practices and a logic of care for the Earth. The movement is now evolving into community governments in order to address paramilitarism, which mainly originates

in political parties fighting for power and control,⁵⁸ and to ensure Indigenous people's self-determination and autonomy over their territories.⁵⁹

The strategies developed by Modevite are set within a wider context of social mobilization in the area, especially that of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN in its Spanish abbreviation), which demands not only dignified living conditions, but also the transformation of the state.⁶⁰ There are currently more than 30 autonomous Zapatista municipalities in the region, some of which coincide with municipalities where Modevite is active. The EZLN has had a political and discursive influence on Modevite that is particularly evident in its anti-capitalist narratives and the community governments initiative. Both entities share a dedication to Indigenous autonomy and the protection of Mother Earth. However, the key distinction lies in their approach: the EZLN remains an armed movement; whereas peace-building is the fundamental pillar of Modevite.

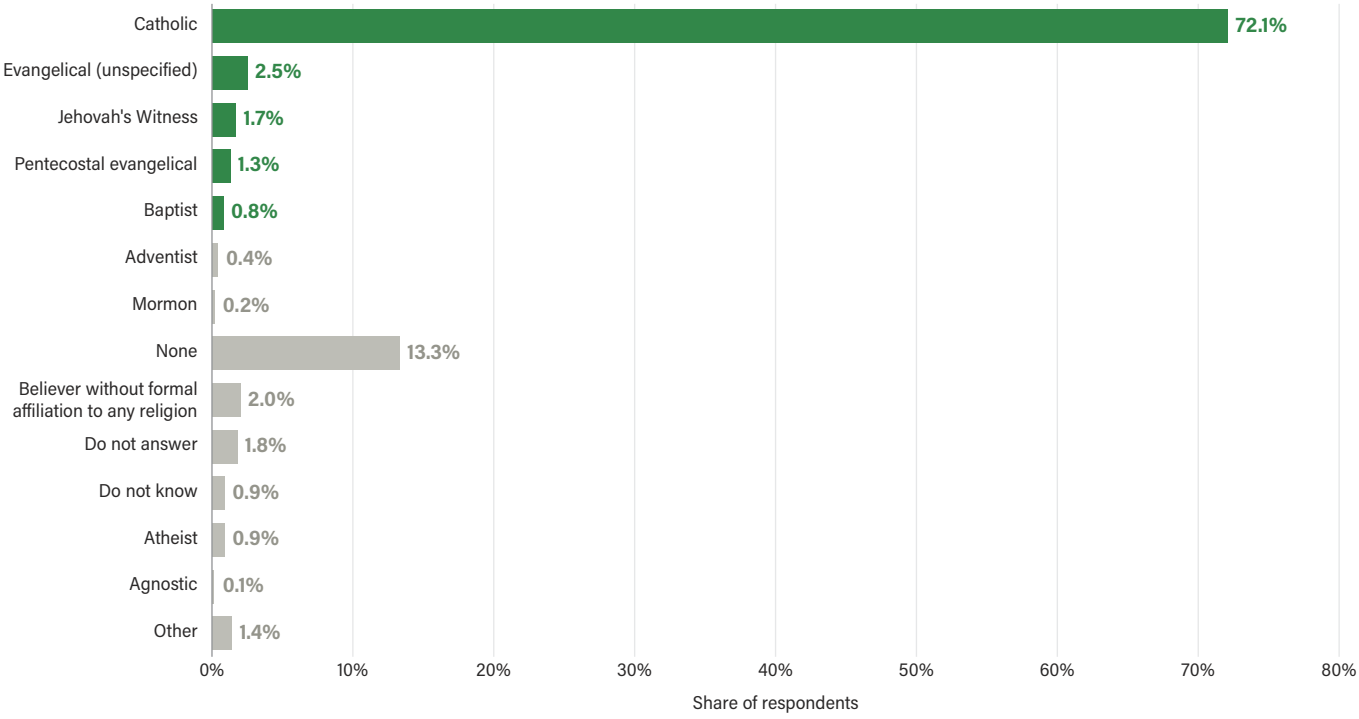
The progress of the Highway of Cultures project may have temporarily halted, but incidents of murder, shootings, house burnings, and forced displacements persist. The presence of organized crime has increased significantly in the region in recent years and has become the armed wing of extractive industries, as in the case of the municipality of Chicomuselo (CDHAL n.d.).⁶¹ In December 2022, Isabel Recinos Trigueros was kidnapped and tortured for her opposition to mining projects. Subsequently, in January 2023, over 10,000

FIGURE 10A | Proportion of Catholics by region in Mexico (2010)



Source: Biles 2010.

FIGURE 10B | Religious affiliation in Mexico as of 2020, by type



Source: Latinobarometro Mexico.



A poster placed along the possible route of the "Highway of Cultures."
 The text on the poster says: "Ocosingo. Celebrating 10 years of life of the indigenous peoples' movement. MODEVITE. No to the super highway of cultures, San Cristobal - Palenque. NO to the National Guard." (Credit: Araceli Téllez Haro.)

individuals gathered in Chicomuselo to denounce toxic mining practices and paramilitary violence, and to demand justice for Isabel Recinos. Later, in October 2023, another mobilization for peace occurred, drawing broad participation from religious groups, including Modevite. In September, the Red Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos, one of the largest human rights networks in the country, denounced the emergency situation and the violence suffered by the population of Chicomuselo (Red TDT 2023).

Modevite anticipates an escalation of socio-environmental conflicts across the region if the highway project goes ahead. In addition to the fear of increased extractive activities in the region, local communities fear increases in local inequality with the arrival of mass tourism and the precarious employment opportunities for locals in tourist resorts (Télez 2023). Moreover, with the inauguration in February 2024 of the Tren Maya, a 1,500-km train line linking Palenque in Chiapas with Cancún, the highway project would bring a full territorial integration, intertwining natural resource extraction, tourism, and migration.⁶² One informant mentioned that organized crime is currently taking control of some ecotourism projects promoted by Indigenous communities and establishing routes for undocumented migrants from Central America and creating human trafficking networks.

Modevite faces a major challenge in this scenario. Organized crime associated with businesses is often accompanied by drug and human trafficking, child pornography, extortion, and kidnapping. Moreover, conservation areas are subject to illegal logging and mining, animal species trafficking, and other related activities. In this context, one of Modevite's

primary strengths lies in its emphasis on peace-building and nonviolence. While facing some difficulties, contradictions, and internal and external conflicts like any other movement, Modevite prioritizes building collective agreement and strategies. Modevite maintains a structure with collective and rotating leadership, continuously trains its members in nonviolence, and upholds a commitment to service. The subsequent sections analyze the movement, including how it mobilizes its spiritual dimension to construct alternative development discourse and organizes communities to promote peace.

FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

In order to select the case study, we sought to find instances that connected a socio-environmental dispute in which local communities deployed strategies of environmental protection and human rights defense that featured a faith dimension in the communities' collective action. However, a major challenge arose in selecting the case for Mexico due to insufficient research on the role of faith in social action. Studies investigating cases of socio-environmental disputes often overlook the faith dimension. Despite the dearth of studies focusing on the involvement of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes in Mexico, six potential cases were identified. To explore the feasibility of conducting research in each case, interviews were held with seven Mexican experts who had some knowledge of the regions. (See Appendix E.) The potential cases identified were Modevite against the Highway of Cultures in Chiapas; Zoques in Defense of Life and Territory (Zodevite) against an oil project in Chiapas on Zoques territory; multiple communities against the Mayan train in the states of Chiapas, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Yucatán; the Council of United Peoples for the Defense of the Green River (Consejo de Pueblos Unidos por la Defensa del Río Verde) against the Paso de la Reyna dam in Oaxaca; the Save Temacapulín committee (Comité Salvemos Temacapulín) against El Zapotillo dam in Jalisco; and multiple base ecclesial communities in various states with different projects.

Cases were also identified wherein faith communities exhibited a notably adverse socio-environmental impact. One such instance involves Mennonite communities situated in the Yucatán peninsula that are allegedly involved in



Drawing made by participants in the workshops of the Bachajón Mission. (Credit: Araceli Télez Haro.)

deforestation and contamination of agricultural land. These actions have had detrimental effects on the livelihoods of Mayan communities, especially affecting their beekeeping, a crucial productive activity for them. Similarly, we examined the case of evangelical communities that are expanding their settlements in the peripheral areas of San Cristóbal de las Casas. In both cases, careful consideration was given to the potential risks associated with conducting fieldwork involving groups facing accusations of environmental damage or even criminal activities.

Given these security considerations, we chose the case that had the highest score on the selection matrix of indicators. (See Table 1.) We selected the Modevite case because of its significant impact on the construction of civic space, a strong organization and involvement of the Catholic church hierarchy in its activities, and its accompaniment of civil society organizations in defending human rights. The case was not without fieldwork risk, given the high levels of criminal networks operating in the area. However, the accompaniment of the Bachajón Jesuit Mission made safe access to the territory possible, in addition to the permanent accompaniment of a guide-translator who was an Indigenous inhabitant of the area and an active member of Modevite.⁶³

The methodology follows that of the three other cases in this report. Fieldwork was carried out from June 27 to July 8, 2023 in 8 of the 12 municipalities that make up Modevite as the most prevalent movement in the area (Figures 11 and 12 and Appendix E). For reasons of security or distance, four municipalities were not included (Huixtán, Tenejapa, Palenque, and Chicomuselo). We conducted 13 interviews with priests, nuns, coordinators, and general members of Modevite and one member of a civil society organization. (See Appendix E for the list of interviews and Appendix A for the interview questions.) Eight focus groups were carried out in the municipalities of Candelaria, Cancuc, Oxchuc, Ocosingo, Chilón, Sitalá, Yajalón, and Altamirano. The research team participated in a pilgrimage of *Pueblo Creyente* and visited the Museum of Bishop Emeritus Samuel Ruíz. The focus groups were conducted mostly in Indigenous languages (Tzeltal and Tzotzil) with the assistance of a translator and followed the methodology described in Appendix B. In all cases, Catholic church buildings provided the physical space for the focus group. The collaboration of Misión de Bachajón was decisive in the organization of the fieldwork.

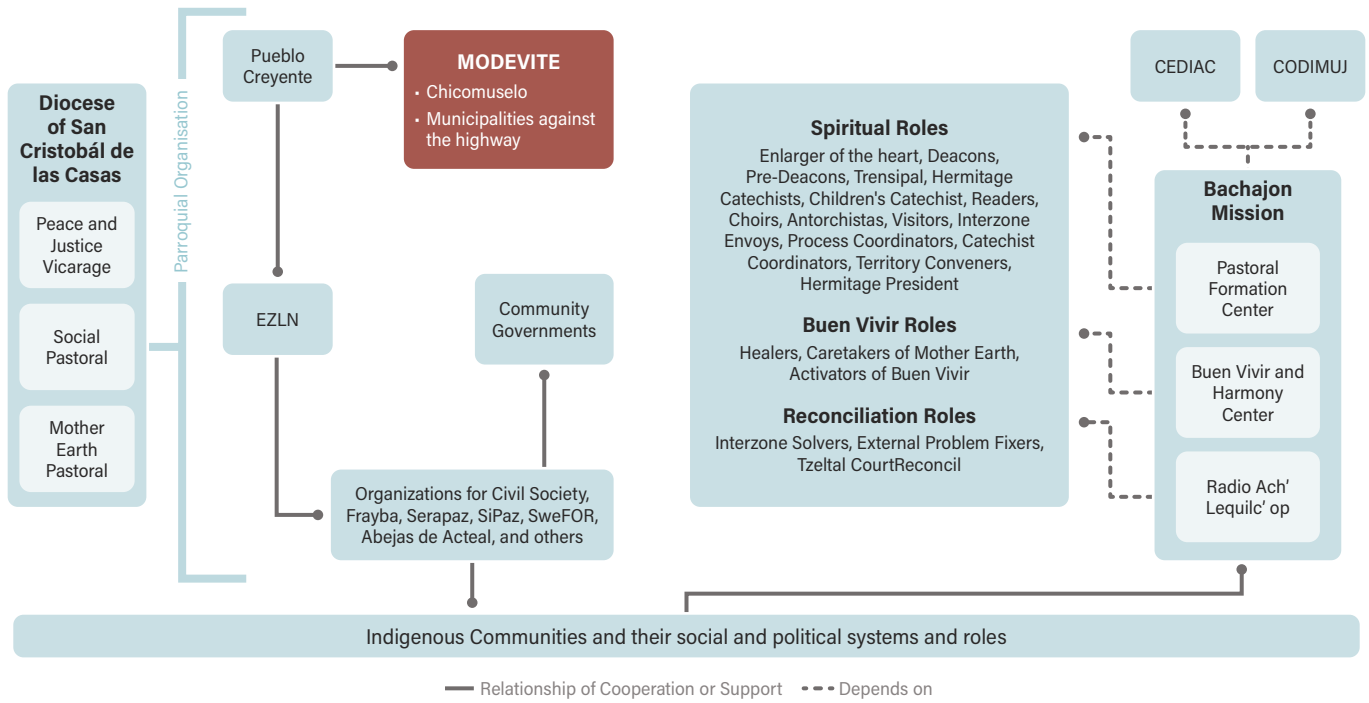
As in the other cases, it has been difficult to access interviews with government and business representatives. This was partly due to the stalled progress of the highway project and the absence of any organization openly advocating for the project. At the municipal level, efforts persist in attempting to clear the right of way. However, these endeavors are often accompanied by intimidation or violence, posing security risks when seeking information about government stances on the matter. Given evidence of association of organized crime and businesses in Chiapas (see discussion of the Chicomuselo case earlier), there were risks associated with contacting business representatives to discuss infrastructure projects in the region. Given these considerations, and given the physical nonexistence of the project, this research examines the experience of Modevite and those who accompany it in its faith-based struggles, not only against the highway, but also against extractivism and in defense of Mother Earth and life more generally.

FAITH COMMUNITIES AS SOCIAL SUBJECTS

Mobilizing a spiritual and symbolic dimension

In the complex context of violence and marginalization in Chiapas, faith in God emerged in our interviews and focus groups as a crucial aspect of social mobilization. It fortifies individuals and communities when confronting dangerous or challenging situations and enhances resilience by fostering the belief in seeking guidance or companionship from God. Modevite views the protection of ecosystems and the advocacy for human rights as manifestations of faith. As a priest linked to the movement puts it, “The project of life, of the Earth, of the defense of human rights, is God’s project, so I firmly believe in God, and I try to do what He inspires me to do, regardless [...] of what might happen to me [...] with full confidence in God [...] even if I am in danger.” A member of the Modevite Council talks in a similar way about faith giving strength when facing opposition: “But when we go with our cross, with our song, it is difficult for them to mess with us because we carry God in front of us. When you go like that, you don’t feel fear, it’s like somehow God manifests Himself in your heart and you don’t have that fear.”

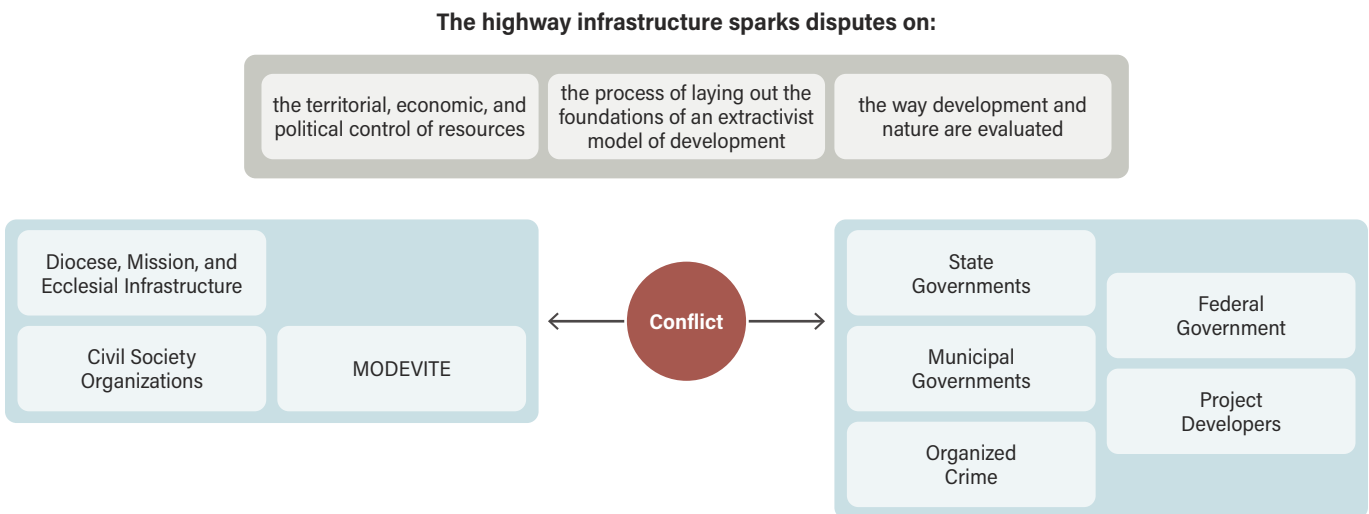
FIGURE 11 | Map of faith-based social actors involved in highway project, Chiapas, Mexico



Notes: The lines with circles denote relationships of cooperation and the lines with arrow endings denote relationships of dependency. Acronyms: Movimiento en Defensa de la Vida y el Territorio (MODEVITE), Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), Centro de Derechos Indígenas A. C. (CEDIAC), Coordinación Diocesana de Mujeres (CODIMUJ), Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (FRAYBA), Servicios y Asesoría para la Paz (SERAPAZ), Servicio Internacional para la Paz (SIPAZ), Movimiento Sueco por la Reconciliación (SweFOR).

Source: Authors.

FIGURE 12 | Map of social actors in conflict over highway project, Chiapas, Mexico



Source: Authors.

The knowledge that others are praying for them—through, for example, fasting, reciting of rosaries, liturgies—gives members the strength to continue the struggles despite threats to their safety and well-being. These expressions of solidarity and concern have a profound impact on Modevite members, even if intangible. As some focus group members expressed, “In the face of violence, do not lose faith; even if you feel that fear is winning, ask God to be able to continue” (Chilón); “Faith helps us to be positive, without faith we despair” (Ocosingo); “Just as we are an organization, we can, because we are united. So the Earth, everything that integrates it is united for life” (Yajalón).

Like the other movements analyzed in this report, Modevite roots itself in biblical teachings and a following of Christ who is close to those who live in poverty and are marginalized. Following the liberation theology advanced by German theologian Johan Baptist Metz (2013), Modevite adopts a “mysticism of open eyes” (*mística de ojos abiertos*). A priest of the movement talks of this mysticism and the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, as the Magna Carta of the movement: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was in prison and you visited me. It is like the Magna Carta for salvation [...] and many of the priests and nuns [...] understand that you cannot preach the word of God if there is not something that also has to do with bodily nourishment and the nourishment of Mother Earth.” Another priest mentions the biblical figures of Pilate and Herod: “Today Christ continues to die in the poor, in the humble, in the Indigenous people, in the peasants, there are still Pilates and Herods, Pharaohs, land grabbers, dispossessing the land.” Another one mentions the book of Exodus: “The whole struggle to defend the Earth and life has its foundation in the Bible. One of the fundamental texts is the book of Exodus. The struggle for the land, because if the peasant does not have land, he is not free. In other words, the land as a symbol and sign of freedom and the experience of life.” A Modevite leader continues with the book of Exodus: “God appointed Moses to lead them out of slavery. We are also enslaved, but in a different way, how do

we get out of that mentality that we are poor? We are not poor. They only make us believe that to keep us enslaved.” Women also reference the Bible as a tool of empowerment and seek inspiration from female prophets: “Women must fight too, not only men, but working women like Judith. We begin to listen to women and to study the word of God as the first prophets did” (focus group Altamirano). It is important to note that the practice of analyzing social realities and interpreting them in the context of the Bible is widespread throughout the movement and not confined solely to those with formal education.

This spiritual dimension motivates the members of Modevite to work toward transforming realities in the pursuit of justice and dignity for Indigenous peoples. Like Bishop Erwin Kräutler in the Diocese of Xingu-Altamira in Brazil, the figure of Bishop Samuel Ruiz is a strong source of inspiration. Under his leadership and in the context of the Second Vatican Council and CELAM (1968), the diocese took a strong pastoral orientation toward the defense of human rights and the dignity of Indigenous peoples. As the focus group of Yajalón summarized it, “As servants of the church we must not only look to heaven, but also work on Earth, in reality.” A priest associated with the movement puts it in these words: “Our commitment is not to spread Catholicism so that more people believe in what we want, but that the people who we believe are being unjustly deprived of life can have it in abundance.”

The integration of Indigenous cosmovisions with Catholic theology and biblical interpretation is a distinctive feature of the movement. This integration has led Mother Earth to emerge as a subject of care and one of the core components of the movement. As expressed in our focus groups, “The word of God unifies and speaks to the heart. What is deep in the heart of the original peoples is our Mother Earth. From the Indigenous cosmovision, there is no separation between the human being and the Earth; we are part” (Cancuc); “Here our faith was important because the structure of Modevite began to work as a pastoral of Mother Earth,

Like the other movements analyzed in this report, Modevite roots itself in biblical teachings and a following of Christ who is close to those who live in poverty and are marginalized.



Mayan-Catholic altar. (Credit: Araceli Téllez Haro.)

reinforced by the word of God” (Oxchuc). This prioritization of Mother Earth can be understood as both a consequence of historical struggles to regain ancestral territories from which they were dispossessed, and as a reaction to the looming threat of dispossession due to megaprojects: “All the organizations come together to plan what we are going to do to protect Mother Earth from the companies and the government that are destroying it. Life is a gift from God” (Altamirano); “The Earth cries out and asks for its liberation from the damage being done to it” (Sitalá).

This positioning of the Earth as Mother, as a living, feeling, and expressing entity, endows the Earth with a personality and sacredness with which the members of the movement have an intimate bond of interdependence. The defense of Mother Earth becomes a central postulate that encompasses several temporal dimensions: the defense of the collective history and memory of a people, physical and spiritual sustenance, and the cultural and social survival of future generations. A Modevite member describes these interconnected aspects: “Mother Earth is for us life, it is for us health, it is for us peace, it is for us tranquillity, it is for us medicine, it is for us food, because all of this comes from Mother Nature. [...] And nature, Mother Earth is also our grandfather, because all those grandparents are buried there, all our ancestors, and we are still in communication with them through nature.”

The defense of Mother Earth is thus not only an environmental struggle but also a struggle for physical, social, and cultural survival. The sacralization of the Earth has been a recurrent theme across our focus groups: “Chul Metic Balumilal Holy Mother Earth is sacred, generator of life” (Oxchuc); “We also feel the pain of the Earth” (Ocosingo); “We must take care of her, protect her, celebrate her, give her food, ask permission and thank God for the crops” (Yajalón); “Grandfathers and grandmothers used to pray when they did the work of sowing. When they went to sow, they prayed. They took into account the caves, the hills, the rivers, the springs, the mountains. They had a bond with the Earth, they kissed the Earth, because the Earth is the mother of all, she produces sustenance” (Oxchuc). At the online exchange seminar, a Modevite representative summarized its spirituality as “we belong to land, to the territory,” and this representative emphasized that it is this spiritual principle of belonging to the land, of being rooted in the earth, that animates the struggle: “Having this connection to Nature within us is the basis of the defense of life and territories. The spirituality that our ancestors have given us is the only thing that gives us strength. Without spirituality, we cannot walk in this struggle.”

This personification of the Earth as a Mother is congruent with efforts in various parts of the world to recognize nature as a subject with legal rights. Although not embracing

explicitly the language of the rights of nature, Modevite is transforming an anthropocentric and instrumental view of nature into one in which nature is valued for its own sake and not for humanity's sake. As one focus group expressed it: "The Earth does have its own rights because it is the source of all life, of all creatures; Mother Earth is a living being" (Cancuc).

Not everyone in the diocese of San Cristóbal endorses Modevite's existence. The focus group of Yajalón mentioned that some time ago, one previous bishop questioned Modevite during one of his visits and that a deacon was dismissed for citing the documents of CELAM (1968, 1978). The current bishop is in the line of Pope Francis and the orientations of CELAM (2007) and *Laudato Si'*. One priest in Yajalón is lukewarm regarding the teachings of *Laudato Si'*. There are other reports of some members of the Catholic and Protestant churches questioning the movement and the way that it expresses its Christian identity. As one Modevite leader shares, "We have come across Jehovah's Witnesses, they do tell us, that 'you should never mix the word of God or the spiritual part with the political-social part. No, never mix it up'. But if both are our reality, God is my reality, as well as life. Our coordinators who have positions within the Church, such as preachers, ministers, catechists, deacons, are more critical of that part. On the other hand, we do have some communities that are already with Modevite, and they are Catholic and Presbyterian; and there is no conflict."

These views that faith and socio-environmental commitment should not mix are not widespread, however. After commenting that some priests do not want to participate in Modevite, one priest affirms that the movement is part of the choices made by the diocese to accompany local communities and that in this, "one cannot remain silent in front of all the threats to Mother Earth and to the territory which affect the life of peoples." Given the common concerns of environmental damage caused by infrastructure projects, Modevite seeks to unite beyond denominational differences, on the basis of shared belonging to land. A priest talks of one pilgrimage in 2016 that gathered a large diversity of people: "They came from other denominations, from other religions, others who are atheists, others who are Seventh Day [Adventist] believers, and it's incredible." This community dimension has been one of the central aspects of Modevite's mobilization and is symbolically expressed in its slogan, "Working in one heart" [*Trabajo en un solo corazón*], from a shared love of a shared land on which all life, including human, is interdependent.



Pilgrimage November 2023. (Credit: Araceli Téllez Haro.)

Strengthening a community dimension

One of Modevite's strategies with the greatest impact has been convening assemblies through which members discuss, analyze, and address social realities. These assemblies are recurrent spaces in which information is shared and discussed, where positions are taken, and actions planned. They are held every three months, rotate their location, and are spaces where representatives of all parishes meet to discuss the threats and challenges they experience. These "reality analysis assemblies" have been held since the early 1990s, before Modevite's existence, within *Pueblo Creyente* and have involved a process of knowledge democratization. The effect of this regular exercise of the rights of assembly, information, and expression is reflected in the high level of political education of Modevite's members, who are mostly Indigenous peasants who educate and organize themselves in their own language. A Catholic nun details community awareness-building activities conducted at these assemblies: "On this occasion we had a workshop, an extended training on the subject of the highway, and the analyst who accompanied us presented the whole history of the imposition of the highway. [...] We were going to have an event for Women's Day in the different parishes and we said 'why don't we take advantage [...] to work on the issue of the highway?'" Community radio and religious and cultural events serve as additional platforms to enhance the movement's efforts in raising awareness about the impacts of infrastructure and other projects being implemented in their territories without informed consent (FRAYBA 2023a). Pilgrimages are another crucial strategy used by Modevite for gathering, sharing, and disseminating information as pilgrims traverse through different municipalities.

This community building is accompanied by a large array of social projects to address poverty. The Mission Bachajón, which is an integral social-spiritual community project run by the Jesuit religious order, includes a parish church, an Indigenous rights center, a community radio, a community development center, and a social and solidarity economy project, which has coffee, honey, and embroidery production activities. A priest involved in the project talks of “integral accompaniment” of the 400 Indigenous communities in an emancipatory process to address the structures that violate their dignity: “It is to try to accompany the communities integrally and not only as a parish sacramentally speaking, but there is a commitment to a prophetic pastoral, a pastoral of communication, a pastoral of law, [] pastoral in the sense of shepherding, accompanying.” The Bachajón project, like Modevite of which it is part, is seeking to develop an “indigenous theology” (*teología india*), which is a theological movement from the perspective of Indigenous peoples’ history, culture, and practices (Cabrero 2014, CENAMI 1990, Drexler-Dreis 2017, Levey 2021).

Our research shows that although priests and nuns do not seek to play a leading role in Modevite—it has a collective and rotating leadership so that no visible leader can be attacked—they are important in mobilizing people and serving as a source of inspiration: “The support of the parish priests was an inspiration. When faith moves the heart, you can carry on with the struggle” (focus group Cancuc). There is an emotional factor evident in the nature of the interpersonal relationships between the (Catholic) religious leadership and Indigenous populations that contributes to establishing relationships based on trust, and many members of these Indigenous communities are religious leaders themselves as ordained deacons.⁶⁴ Their public stance—efforts in enabling local communities to articulate and express their needs and enhancing living conditions—and their proximity to the cultural aspects and daily challenges of these communities position these religious leaders as cornerstones of the ongoing social process in the region.

As mentioned earlier, not all the priests of the diocese support Modevite, and this has created some tensions as the movement is arranged at the parish level. When these cases occur, parishioners continue their involvement despite opposing local leadership, strengthened by the general orientation of the diocese toward prioritizing environmental protection and the defense of human rights. During fieldwork, we also observed some behaviors at play in the



Gratitude to the Monte (mountain) for welcoming the displaced people of Chicomuselo. (Credit: Araceli Téllez Haro.)

religious leadership that accompanies Modevite, such as their speaking the local language or dressing according to local customs. These behavioral and discursive elements speak of their commitment to local populations, which contrast with the behavior of religious leaders who oppose Modevite and do not speak the local language.

Modevite’s organization is based on solidarity, and its members connect with other people who are experiencing similar adverse circumstances, thereby opening up opportunities for mutual aid and support. This is evident in its pilgrimages whereby, along a pilgrimage’s itinerary, people share their difficulties with people from other municipalities. Another example was when Modevite integrated the municipality of Chicomuselo, as the inhabitants were facing conditions of extreme violence from organized crime and mining.⁶⁵ Their incorporation occurred despite being isolated and not being affected by the highway project. In this sense, Modevite seeks to accompany groups who are facing situations of risk. There is also a degree of interdenominational solidarity. A priest mentioned the support he received from Protestant pastors: “In Simohjovel, when I was in great danger, the pastors also prayed in their temples. They prayed and came to visit me: ‘[L]ook, take heart, if there is anything, tell us and we will be there with you.’ [...] Two pastors have come here to eat with me.” This cross-denominational inclusion of Modevite has also been highlighted by one Council member: “In the organization, there are some people who are of other religions, but they are with us walking with Modevite defending [their life and territory]; we have held meetings where everyone is invited. We tell them that it is open and that there is no discrimination of religions.”

The mega-pilgrimages have been Modevite's main politico-religious events and are important channels of community building. The pilgrimages aim at evidencing the presence of the movement in the region, facilitating communication among communities, sharing their demands, and arranging collective strategies. The following final statement written at the end of a pilgrimage in 2016 expresses this:

This mega-pilgrimage strengthened our bond, our root, our belonging to the land which demands that we walk together. It is no longer possible from each municipality to address bad government, or from each trench to fight against big capital. We see it necessary for each community to feel the problem of another as its own. Community organization is our weapon against division, the cure for fear and nourishing hope among our peoples. As native peoples, we feel that our communal belonging to Mother Earth is our spirituality; therefore, we believe that we must not only denounce the destruction of our territory by the ambition of extractivists, but we must also take care of it. For this reason, strengthening our community roots is the way to take care of our common home. (Modevite 2016)

One of Modevite's greatest challenges is intergenerational transfer of roles and responsibilities, as most of its members are older adults, for "[i]f the children do not accompany us in this work today, there will be no idea of our struggle left" (focus group Sitalá). According to a representative of Serapaz (Servicios y Asesorías para la Paz),⁶⁶ and a view that has been echoed by several Modevite members in our interviews and focus group discussions, young people face many adverse conditions, including heightened migration rates and the escalating violence associated with organized crime, leading to issues like alcoholism, drug addiction, and recruitment by these criminal groups (Mandujano 2023b). Consequently, Modevite, along with several other organizations in the diocese, is implementing strategies to help children and young people navigate the challenges they face by offering such things as workshops to prevent alcoholism and drug violence.

Building alternative discourse

Modevite displays a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenges government discourse on progress and development, which frames the highway as a means of achieving greater prosperity in the region. The secretary of Public Works of

the state of Chiapas, quoted in an editorial of *AquíNoticias* (2019), declared, for example, that the road "aims to shorten travel times, [...] make the road comfortable, safe and attractive [...], unleashing the tourist beauties of the area and reactivating the economy of our native peoples."

In its discourse, Modevite emphasizes the perils of alcoholism, the hazards associated with mega-projects, and the risks linked to social programs fostering dependency and also critiques the capitalist development model, viewing it as a form of historical oppression. Faith and relationship with God and the Earth are central to its discourse, and are elements that build unity and solidarity among the movement's members, as noted earlier. During pilgrimages, members encourage each other to continue the struggle to defend life and territories despite difficulties and dangers. As one leader explains: "When there are demonstrations, we are strengthened if we go singing, praising God, praying and praying [...]. We are asking Jesus to help us more. Without prayer, without singing, if we just walked like that, I don't think we could, maybe the police would cover us in the middle of the road."

Modevite has done extensive work in documenting the socio-environmental impacts of the road through audio-visual media for wide circulation among local populations (Modevite n.d.). Its discourse seeks to bring about a change in consciousness about the relationship between humans and nature. As a Modevite Council member expressed: "They [government and business] see nature as wealth. [...] They assign it how much it costs, [...] they feel they are owners. [...] For the government, development is to have big constructions, big factories, or big businesses to generate profits. For Modevite, it is not; it is to take care of Mother Nature, to live in connection with Mother Nature. For us, development is solidarity, sharing, exchange." "We are depleting the Earth, but she continues to give. We are protectors of her. She has a right to be protected. The capitalist system has reified her as a commodity" (focus group Cancuc); "Here we learned that what the government understands as development is not the same as what we understand as development" (focus group Modevite Oxchuc).

One of Modevite's greatest strengths is its orientation toward peace-building and nonviolence, which distinguishes it from the Zapatistas movement active in the region. Although the two peacefully coexist with each other, they have similar objectives but different strategies. As a Modevite member explains, "There are many ways to defend life [...] it is not



my intention to criticize others, because as they say, when our life is in danger or that of one of our loved ones, how do we act instinctively to defend the life of the other or our own? So, I don't know what the communities are going through, so I can't criticize them for taking up arms. [...] Well, to the movement in defense of life and territory through nonviolence, that's the alternative."

The discourse and practice of nonviolence has been promoted by the diocese for many years. It has dedicated personnel who trains local populations in nonviolent responses to state and economic opposition and violence. (See later discussion.) One Modevite council member talked of the movement being seen as an enemy of the government and an obstacle to development: "The government has said that Mode[vite] is against the government. The government has said that Modevite is a delay, it is a social delay, it is a delay to development, because they think of development in the sense of bringing many projects, of how to generate a lot of wealth."

It is not uncommon to hear assertions from government officials and businesses linked to government projects claiming that it is Indigenous communities themselves who provoke conflict due to political motives or ignorance. They assume that Indigenous peoples are ignorant for not accepting this development model and that they prefer to remain in poverty. For example, in October 2023, the president of the Chiapas branch of the Mexican Association of Travel Agencies declared that, "Tren Maya will give value to this road that, now more than ever, becomes indispensable . . . a work that we are still waiting for and that is now very necessary, above all a route free of conflicts is required"

(Alvarado 2023). Another example is the statement in 2019 by an official of the Secretariat of Communications and Transport: "On the subject of the project for the extension and modernization of the San Cristóbal-Palenque highway, Coello Domínguez said that it is not viable because there are major problems to highlight, as the 229 kilometres of this road are invaded by Indigenous communities. Therefore, it is impossible to modernize the road due to the invasion of the right of way" (quoted in Leyte 2019). Such attitudes toward Indigenous peoples and accusations of them "invading" the infrastructure project is symptomatic of an underlying racism and discrimination that resurfaces every time they oppose development projects.

Constructing peace

Modevite is located in a turbulent region where state, corporate, and paramilitary violence and organized crime are fighting for control. It is also a region crossed by one Central American migration route where human trafficking is common and which is expected to intensify with the Tren Maya now in operation. As in other regions, especially in Latin America, movements in defense of Mother Earth have become one of the main reasons for the criminalization of environmental defenders (Global Witness 2023). This is true for members of Modevite. Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* has strengthened Modevite in the sense that it gives global visibility and legitimacy to the organization's actions and equips it with a further normative discourse from which it inspires and articulates its actions. *Laudato Si'* has not, however, made the defense of life and territories less risky.

In this context, faith can significantly support communities encountering opposition and dangers, as mentioned earlier, with one Modevite representative concluding that without spirituality rooted in the Earth and in the Word of God, they could not undertake actions and have strength to continue defending life and territories. One priest interviewed says that *Laudato Si'* has given Modevite members greater moral strength for their actions:

But now what the Pope says [Laudato Si'], I would like it to resonate throughout Mexico, but it is not going to resonate; it is not going to resonate even here in San Cristóbal [...]. We know that our work entails death threats, defamations, slander, so if we are not really here to serve in the spirit of Christ, we open the Bible but very superficially. [...] I think that is the difference, the commitment, how to understand God and also where God is, as Jesus came to say, he is in the poor, in the sick, in people who suffer; and sometimes we don't want to understand that because that commits oneself. [...] [I]t [Laudato Si'] gives a lot of strength, it gives a lot of credibility, it sustains, it protects, it helps us to get into more minefields, but we come out alive. [...], as Saint Oscar Romero says: If they kill me, I will rise again among the people. Jesus said: Do not be afraid of the one who can only kill the body. So it is very encouraging.

Modevite highlights some methods by which specific forms of violence are employed to undermine the movement. In response to those wielding political, economic, and armed influence, Modevite counters through collective organization, a point that was highlighted by Modevite representatives at the exchange seminar among all movements analyzed in this report. Working together from what is common (belonging to the land) was their main strategy of counteracting the multiple forms of structural violence they were experiencing. A priest interviewed talks of the importance of organizational structures and leadership training: "I don't want to minimize mobilization [...]. But then there have been moments when it has promoted the training of leaders, grass-roots training, for example. Community governments have emerged as an institutionalized political alternative. As shown by *Laudato Si'* [...] there are structural unjust processes that need to be dismantled communally or structurally, and this requires organization." This is why the violence exercised against Modevite, in the majority of cases, is aimed at destructuring or dividing the organization and thereby

undermining what it has achieved. This violence is expressed in the racism, classism, and colonialism faced disproportionately by Indigenous and peasant communities. This materializes in actions at various levels. Some of our informants spoke about bribery, manipulation of services, encouragement of alcoholism, or direct violence like the imprisonment or assassination of defenders.

A Modevite council member talks of the rise in alcohol and drug addiction: "Lately, in my region, many people have died from alcohol, eight or ten people a year, something that didn't happen before now. There are also five young people who have gone crazy because of drugs, and that had not been seen before and just when the security law with its National Guard came in,⁶⁷ that is when drug consumption and alcoholism started to increase." And a member of a civil society organization talks of the imbrication among organized crime, businesses, and government: "Organized crime came out to defend the mining company in Chicomuselo. [...] It is the same government that gives permission to organized crime to destabilize in some way. [...] They are co-opting the leaders to dismantle the organizations; and if they can't, they are criminalizing them like the five prisoners from Cancun, imprisoned for opposing the highway." Our focus group discussions mentioned some of the following instances of intimidation and violence: "The strategies of the municipal government have changed. Projects were increased, water tanks and fertilizers were distributed to co-opt and weaken the struggle and force them to sign in favor of the road with threats of suspension of support, so that three zones no longer participate in Modevite" (Cancun); "Roberto Pinto [the ex-president of the municipality of Altamirano] paid up to 5,000 pesos per vote. [...] He won the elections, but 83 communities organized to get him out. The church supported the protesters with food. [...] Thirty-nine people were held for six months on Roberto's orders. The church organized fasting and prayers to end the conflict" (Altamirano).

Women are particularly vulnerable to intimidation and violence, both externally and internally within their own communities. Addressing gender-based violence and different intersectional forms of oppression of Indigenous women in the region (such as unpaid care work, domestic violence, dependency and isolation, racism, political repression, and environmental harm) has been central to Modevite's work since its inception. Some of our informants spoke of husbands not allowing women to participate in Modevite's pilgrimages or their fear that husbands would get angry if

they went. One focus group mentioned an instance where men blocked women marching: “Some men and young people block our way, but we have to keep walking” (Ocosingo). One female Modevite leader spoke of there being “still a lot of machista ideas in both men and women. We see it in our meetings, the idea that women are better off as housewives, and that is where they are. We have to work hard on that part. Little by little, in some localities we have already worked on the idea that women have to participate and get involved, and they are already doing it; but in the other forty-odd communities there is still a long way to go.”

Spaces have been created to facilitate the active involvement of women in Modevite. While their involvement in the movement’s activities is extensive, women are not consistently engaged in decision-making processes. However, in certain municipalities, women exhibit a higher level of participation; while in others, such participation is only in its initial stages, primarily involving older women. Modevite women acknowledge that achieving greater female representation is a collective endeavor, essential for the struggles in defense of Mother Earth. As a Modevite Council member puts it:

The role of women is very important because when making the pilgrimage, the vast majority of women go out and then sometimes men take alcohol because they have that weakness; and when women think about their children, they are very interested in defending Mother Earth, in this case from dispossession, because if they are dispossessed of their land, their children are left without a plot, and the fathers do not think like that when they drink. They are capable of selling their plot for a few pesos. That is why the participation of women is very important, and yes, women do participate.

Against this background, both the Bachajón Mission and other civil society organizations making up *Pueblo Creyente*, such as CODIMUJ (Coordinadora Diocesana de Mujeres, Chiapas) and the Center for Women’s Rights (Córdova and Gómez López 2018), have implemented strategies to strengthen the economic independence and social and political voice of Indigenous women and to disseminate awareness of women’s rights. According to a Serapaz representative interviewed, Serapaz runs a program called Strengthening the Heart, which listens to women’s experiences so that they can share and process the struggles they are going through.



Pilgrimage, November 2016. (Credit: Author unknown; Source: <https://mexico.indymedia.org/spip.php?article4166>.)

The construction of peace and nonviolence is the driving force and the fundamental goal of Modevite’s social action. It is rooted in its faith-based foundation and permeates the actions and everyday lives of its members. As a nun puts it, “We don’t need to arm ourselves; we do need to organize ourselves”; and a priest, “The people who are in Modevite have the word of God and the spirit of Jesus ingrained in them, that if there is a need for revolution and scandal, it does not necessarily have to be violent, no matter how long it takes, but not to use even the slightest violent ingredients of the system, but the community organization that strengthens the heart.”

The orientation to peace and nonviolence as a response to the socio-environmental disputes in the region has been a long-standing strategy of the diocese. In each parish, there is a dedicated team of volunteers trained in reconciliation and nonviolent resistance, who exercise the service of reconciling intra-family, inter-family, intra-community, inter-community, intra-church, and inter-church problems and conflicts. There are the “jChahpanwanej” (problem solvers) and the “jMeltsa’anwanej” (reconcilers, in Tzeltal). According to one informant, the reconcilers deal with cases of conflict resolution such as women abandoned by their husbands, domestic violence, territorial invasion, and theft of backyard chickens. The jChahpanwanej deal with ecclesial problems, such as a deacon who fails to visit remote communities or who is drinking or abusing his wife.

Given the distrust with regard to the judiciary, legal strategies have not been as prominent as in the other three cases in this research. There is a marked disconnect between Modevite and the executive and judiciary. The state has systematically criminalized the social movements that have emerged in Chiapas, and conducted arbitrary arrests and unfair judicial processes. This has significantly eroded confidence in state institutions, making it challenging to anticipate positive outcomes through legal means. At times, some communities have used an amparo lawsuit. In some instances, authorities comply with court rulings, while in others, they do not. Legal or administrative tools for resolving socio-environmental disputes are therefore not the most effective in a context like Mexico, often tainted by corruption and instances of criminalization. One can recall here the case mentioned earlier about five Indigenous Modevite members criminalized in May 2023 for opposing the highway (FRAYBA 2023b).

CONCLUSION

Modevite is a Catholic and Indigenous social movement. Its actions respond to decades of social mobilization in the Chiapas region based on the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops Conferences (CELAM 1968, 1979, 2007). This has enabled the local Indigenous populations to establish a robust political foundation, acquire comprehensive knowledge of their rights, and foster extensive social cohesion. Presently, Modevite seeks to address what it views as socially and ecologically damaging models of socioeconomic development and to counter the advance of organized crime in the region. Central to its actions is a valuation of nature as a subject, as Mother Earth, drawn from Indigenous cosmovisions. Safeguarding Mother Earth and shielding her from threats encompasses not only environmental goals but also upholding comprehensive rights within a framework of reciprocity and mutual care.

Born from addressing alcoholism among local populations, Modevite has consolidated itself as a grass-roots social movement in the face of the threat of the Highway of Cultures. Given that the project would open the door to greater extractivism, Modevite not only focused on opposing the project but also on seeking to embody in its social and economic activities a more comprehensive and far-reaching alternative, namely the protection of Mother Earth and the defense of Life. This implies protecting the territory from all extractive projects, strengthening the movement's agency, and building

its own community governments so that it can develop its own model of social and economic development. These three objectives—ecological, political, and socioeconomic—are based on social processes that predate the highway project, but the project was a catalyst in strengthening the movement in its objectives of defending life and territory.

Our research sought to understand the role of faith in these processes of defense. It highlighted that faith, in this case understood as rootedness in the Earth and in the Bible, empowers individuals and communities to feel supported and confident when confronting challenges, including instances of violence. Faith fosters a sense of belonging and unity and promotes mutual support, solidarity, and long-term collective objectives. Faith sustains persistence and hope, particularly when confronting challenging circumstances, such as organized crime. For some members, faith provides the courage to risk their lives in defending life and territories. Moreover, faith underlies peace-building efforts and nonviolent responses to state violence against Modevite members when they question governmental decisions.

The Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas has played a pivotal role in nurturing the civic space in the region over several decades by offering human rights education, biblical formation, social programs, and nonviolence education, among others. This influence has been a crucial factor in the emergence of Modevite. This contribution has been particularly significant in establishing a shared leadership model that integrates spirituality, community, and peace-building and in fostering local community capacities for understanding the causes of their marginalization and for addressing them.

Modevite is currently facing a multiplicity of threats. Rueda (2024), and other reporting has mentioned that organized crime is exerting control over the population to install its own candidates in the upcoming 2024 municipal presidential elections. Given that Palenque is an important terminus of the Tren Maya, our informants have expressed fears that the plan for the highway between San Cristóbal and Palenque might be reactivated. In this scenario, alongside local government influence, Modevite might confront the formidable challenge posed by this confluence of organized crime, local government, and businesses. This escalating violence is one of Modevite's most significant challenges in implementing its nonviolent approach and fostering peace in the region.

Another pressing issue is the inclusion of young people and children in Modevite's initiatives. Currently, there is a lack of visible succession planning within the movement, and young people are grappling with severe violence issues that require immediate attention. Modevite accuses local governments associated with organized crime of using alcoholism and drug addiction as strategies for social control, which is why its initial struggle was the implementation of the Dry Law to curb alcoholism, a demand that still persists.

The case of Modevite can be considered exceptional in the context of Mexico. In most of the national territory, the Catholic church does not promote such inculturation and emancipatory processes. Rather, the church maintains a political and religious conservatism and has implemented mechanisms to demobilize the population through a religious approach oriented toward obedience, passivity, turning the other cheek, obtaining rewards in the next life

for the suffering endured in this one, or attributing the structural causes of poverty and inequality to "God's will," "God working in mysterious ways," or "God knowing why he does things." These common statements do affect people's capacity for agency and critical thinking about the current reality. In the current conditions of environmental threats and violence, the implications of such religious views cannot be underestimated. As shown with the case of Modevite, faith communities have the potential to become a social actor with the capacity to mobilize and challenge in conditions of unequal power, a development model based on over-consumption, violence, and exploitation. In the section "Lessons and Recommendations," we will further discuss the implications of our findings for the formation of religious leaders and the work of civil society organizations in unleashing the potential of faith communities in becoming agents of social transformation.





Common Insights

All the cases examined in this report involve Christian faith communities, mostly Catholic, responding to socio-environmental disputes by defending their territory and its life against perceived threats from extractive or infrastructure projects. These communities mobilized to protect ancestral lands, resources like clean water and food, and their way of life. Despite differences in context, there are common insights: faith communities use theological commitments to analyze and diagnose injustices; they build community cohesion; they operate on local, national, and international scales; they critique development models that harm ecosystems; and they emphasize women's leadership, particularly in community mobilization and education.

INTRODUCTION

All the cases analyzed in this report dealt with faith communities linked to Christian denominations, most of them Catholic, and their responses to socio-environmental disputes. The majority of them responded by undertaking actions to defend a territory and the life it contains in the face of extractive or infrastructure projects that they perceived as threats. To some, the defense was about that of an ancestral land; to others, it was about the goods that the land provides for human life, such as clean water or food; but to all who mobilized, it was about defending a certain way of life and even the possibilities of life itself for humans and other living beings and entities on that territory. There were also differences among those faith communities that undertook actions. Among others, there were differences in the relationship between Indigenous and faith communities, with a significant overlap in Chiapas where the Catholic faith community was predominantly Indigenous; there were differences in national and historical contexts, such as the legacy of the civil war in Colombia and drug violence in Mexico; or differences in the institutional, political, and legal contexts, such as the critical role of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Brazil as a mediator of local communities' grievances. Notwithstanding these differences, one can draw from the cases a set of common insights into the actions of faith communities when facing social and environmental harms caused by large infrastructure projects or extractive activities. We are aware that our findings bear on faith communities linked to the Christian tradition and experiences in the Latin American continent, but we hope that our analysis can illuminate the role of faith communities linked to other traditions in similar circumstances in other continents.

We start by discussing some of these common insights drawn from the actions of faith communities across the four cases. We start with their analysis of social realities rooted in a value-based approach drawn from their theological commitments, and which helped local populations analyze and diagnose situations of injustices. We also highlight the role of faith communities in building community cohesion. A second feature that we observed is that actions of faith communities are deployed in intersecting scales. All leverage the local and national, and to some extent, international scale to make their demands heard. Third, all cases question a certain model of socioeconomic development that the majority of our research participants perceived as based on

the destruction of ecosystems and dispossession of land and livelihoods. The four projects undertaken had all been justified by the respective governments on the grounds of bringing to the region economic prosperity, jobs, and better social services and infrastructure. We found no evidence in our cases of faith communities seeking greater redistribution of social and economic benefits that extractive or infrastructure projects may bring. They sought instead to build alternative development discourse around "rights of nature" and "good living" and sought other ways of increasing social and economic opportunities for local populations, especially through agroecology and solidarity economy initiatives. Fourth, all cases signaled some level of heterogeneity among faith and local communities and different levels of ecumenical cooperation between Protestant and Catholic denominations, often smoother at the grass roots than at the leadership level. Overcoming division and mobilizing around what is common has been an essential element of successful mobilization. A fifth common insight is the leadership role of women in all cases. This especially took form in their work as community mobilizers, awareness-raising, and education and in shaping discourse around issues that unite. However, women's leadership remains local.

ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL REALITY

Our case selection was guided by the presence of structural violence. The following forms of structural violence were expressed by research participants and found in various degrees across the cases: cultural violence such as racism; direct violence, such as criminalization or in some cases killing of those who protest against the destruction of ecosystems; social and economic violence, such as lack of economic opportunities for a decent living; symbolic violence like development discourse that undermines local forms of knowledge and ways of life; or psychological violence, such as death threats and other intimidation. Even if the term *structural violence* was not mentioned as such, our informants highlighted their understanding of the forms of structural violence that they were experiencing, thanks to the training they received in critical analysis of social realities. Informants referred to the influence of base ecclesial communities, Freirean pedagogies,⁶⁸ and popular education on human



March of United Communities for the Defense of Water and Territory in the Amazon. (Credit: Facebook of CVA, Colombia.)

rights in the 1960s and 1970s as sowing the seeds of current actions. These continue today and often beyond the realm of the faith communities from which they emerged. As a representative of the Movement of People Affected by Dams in Altamira shared, “In recent years we have focused on training youth; now in this next work plan we will focus on training leaders. We use popular education, Paulo Freire’s pedagogy, including dialogue with illiterate people. We have other methodologies than just reading material, we work with art, theater, other expressions, even the Theatre of the Oppressed. We have to pass the dialogue through the body too.” Similar comments were made among other movements analyzed in the other cases.

Several informants from civil society organizations or movements linked to faith communities, such as the CVA in Colombia, the MXVS in Altamira, and Diaconia in Apodi, mentioned how their participation and commitment were motivated by biblical accounts of creation and stories of the life of Jesus and his siding with the oppressed and marginalized. These informants interpreted the reality that they saw (soil degradation, deforestation, water contamination, dispossession, livelihood losses, lack of consultation) as contravening God’s creation and the dignity of each human being, threatening the reproduction and sustainability of life itself. In the Colombian case, one informant who participated in the pilgrimages of the life of water expressed that the biblical, environmental, social, and political were all mixed and formed the roots of the motivation of the pilgrimage’s

participants to act. A representative of the Protestant organization Diaconia in Apodi added that, “For the evangelical world, talking about the environment and climate conflict can only be inspired by the spiritual dimension, basically the Gospel, the Bible, God’s speech.” He emphasized the figure of Jesus who “stands beside the poor, the lepers.” In Altamira, a Brazilian Pentecostal pastor similarly expressed the relationship between the Bible and environmental care: “We work on the issue of the environment in the preaching of the Word of God, in the verses, in the Bible. Open Genesis and see what God said about nature. This Earth was empty; God built everything. So can you kill nature? No! Killing nature is killing God.”

Across the four cases, analyzing the present reality in the light of the Gospel was central to the civic commitments of faith communities, though, as we will discuss below, there is heterogeneity in biblical interpretations. According to a representative from the Vicaría del Sur in Colombia: “We always start methodologically from the Bible. What does the Gospel say to us, what does Jesus say [...] in relation for example to the Earth? [...] To understand what was the message of salvation of Jesus, the idea is that he came to save, to help the weak, the vulnerable, to change the relationships of domination that existed in his context [...] [T]hus the message of getting to know Jesus, follow Jesus, be like Jesus, in this context, in this moment, in this problematic [of the oil project that threatens the life of water].” Similarly in Brazil, our informants emphasized the training they received and

the importance of analyzing their surrounding reality from the perspective of the Bible. As a representative of the Movement Xingu Alive Forever (MXVS) in Altamira explains, “This whole movement started back in the 70s and 80s, when we were in the base ecclesiastical communities. The Catholic church was very active in its daily presence with the people. We held meetings, Bible circles in people’s homes, and based on the word of God we thought about our reality. Then people woke up to the injustices they suffered. I read the Bible and thought, here, how are things? How is our street? Our neighborhood?” Another representative of the MXVS continues along the same lines, “We always work looking at the word of God, the New Testament, in comparison with our reality. This is what we learned in the base ecclesiastical communities. It is a Christian faith focused on citizenship. It is seeking the example of Jesus in the fight for justice.” In our Mexican case, biblical narratives were also central to motivating Modevite’s actions. A priest summarizes that “the whole struggle to defend the earth and life has its foundation in the Bible. One of the fundamental texts is the book of Exodus. The struggle for the land, because if the peasant does not have land, he is not free; that is, the land [is] a symbol and sign of freedom and life experience.”

Faith and the transformation of social reality goes hand in hand across the four cases, although the relationship was more indirect in the Apodi case. As a document that narrates the experience of the Vicaría del Sur in Caquetá summarized it: “Understanding spirituality like a force, the faith that we have in God, that we can transform reality, independently of creed, political color, or race” (Vicaría del Sur 2023, 101). A focus group participant from the Vicaría saw environmental care and practicing one’s faith as identical and the care for life as a key motivating factor for civic involvement: “To care for the Amazon is a practice of faith because it is to care for creation, to care for life.” In Mexico, Modevite informants talked of an “incarnated spirituality,” of “taking the mystery

of the incarnation of Christ to its maximum expression” and “touching the wounds of the people.” Across all cases, there was a common understanding of spirituality as a connection with rivers and forests, which was intertwined with a connection with God. Breaking that connection to water, plants, forests, humans, and animals is also breaking that connection with God. In the exchange seminar between the movements in the four cases, all emphasized that such spirituality motivated their defense of human rights and protection of land, without which they would not be able to continue the struggle for “defending life and territories,” as they put it. In Mexico, there was a strong association between Indigenous cosmovisions of Mother Earth and Christian understandings of God. As the focus group in Oxchuc expressed it: “Chul Metic Balumilal, Holy Mother Earth, is sacred, the giver of life.”

This analysis of social realities was highlighted in our interviews and focus group discussions as also containing a community-binding element. For an agricultural worker in Apodi, the coming together to discuss common problems from the perspective of the Gospel was seen as an important element of community building: “We here learn to work by talking about the word of God and thinking about our reality. This is how we talk about the problems of the community. This is what unites people; faith is our bond.” In the Caquetá case, it was water that mobilized everyone beyond Christian denomination boundaries; for without water, no life can exist. A CVA leader expressed it, “there are Catholics and also Evangelicals, but at the time of defending the territory, they are all united as they have the same motivation to care for nature.” In the Brazilian cases, as it was the category of the “affected (by dams)” which crossed cultural, socioeconomic, and religious boundaries in Altamira, and that of a shared experience of living in a semi-arid region which shaped collective action with the ASA in Apodi. In Mexico, it was the common element of sharing life in a territory.

This building of a shared experience of suffering from an injustice and moving from victimhood to being agents of change has been a key area of the work of the movements we analyzed, and a central strategy of defense that all movements highlighted in the online exchange seminar.

This building of a shared experience of suffering from an injustice and moving from victimhood to being agents of change has been a key area of the work of the movements we analyzed, and a central strategy of defense that all movements highlighted in the online exchange seminar. Going from house to house, community to community, to explain the situation, stress the importance of preserving water and forests and denounce the injustices being carried out is an intervention that has been central across all cases, and one which has often been led by women as members of base ecclesial communities. As a representative of the Indigenous Missionary Council in Altamira details: “We [base ecclesial communities] go from house to house explaining. Sometimes it’s work with the entire community together, sometimes it’s right there in each family’s home, at coffee, at lunch.” A priest in Altamira describes the process of community building as follows: “When we arrived, there were few organized leaders, so we put together a notebook and went to all the communities doing training, talking about rights, the federal constitution, capitalism, and the exploitation of nature. [...] The new bishop has asked us to continue implementing the school of political formation in all our parishes in the Xingu. This is giving people awareness and encouragement. And it’s something that starts from their reality.”

Hope has been a cross-cutting highlight across the four case studies. In all the focus group exercises, hope was mentioned as a keyword that summarized faith communities’ strategies of defense of life and territories, despite the challenges, intimidations, setbacks, and even threats to life. Many of our informants mentioned faith as a source of resilience, with representatives of all movements even advancing, as noted above, that spirituality is the essential element of their actions without which they could do nothing. As a member of the Riverine Council in Altamira expresses it, “Our faith in God teaches us not to give up, to have hope above all else. These people and companies may have power, but God has much more.” Such words were echoed across the other cases, and often strengthened by the witness of those who have defended nature and human rights at the cost of their lives. Talking of Dorothy Stang murdered in 2005 in Brazil, an informant from Altamira explains: “Dorothy was this example of Jesus on Earth, of the church on the way out. Even when threatened, she did not back down against the tyrants, and today her image takes the Pilgrimage of the Forest forward, mobilizing and filling many people, especially young people, with hope.”

INTERSECTING SCALES

All cases involved intersecting scales at the local, national, and global level. The infrastructure or extractive projects selected are all local and territorial expressions of national policy discourse around development narratives that promise job creation and better social services and that are rooted in global commodity markets. Similarly, across the four cases, faith communities deploy strategies at these intersecting levels. We note in particular the importance of cross-regional organizing and exchange of experiences, national and international visibility, and international technical and financial support.

In the case of Brazil, the presence of (Catholic) overseas missionaries opened doors to financial and technical support and increased the international visibility of local actions. Our informants in Altamira and Apodi often mentioned how such overseas funding facilitated the work of associations and enabled community organizing. As a representative of the Rural Workers Union in Apodi explains, “When we organized, the priests here began to bring organizations from Europe, from Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain to come and support the communities and associations. [...] Small tractors began to arrive for the association, and pumps for pulling water from the wells that were electric. As a result, other communities began to call on us to help set up associations.” Churches were not only places to pray, but also places of formation, of seed distribution, and other social incidence activities.

With the decline of the number of missionaries, the possibility of international financing through their mediation has decreased. A Catholic priest in Apodi comments that “today this support is much more difficult; before it was all foreign priests, missionaries, who went to Europe and brought money here and organized all these things. Nowadays it has changed; we no longer have that facility.” However, the foreign missionary presence has been somewhat replaced by the internationalization of the struggles via the organizational structures of the church itself, especially the institution of the papacy, rather than individuals. Although this does not seem to bring in the same amount of technical and financial support, there is more symbolic and political support. Under the papacy of Pope Francis, local communities affected by infrastructure and extractive projects have acquired greater international visibility, as in, for example, the convening of a

Synod on the Amazon in Rome in October 2019 to discuss the specific issues affecting the people in the region and how the Catholic church can respond. A representative of the Movement of People Affected by Dams in Altamira explains, “Recently, the church promoting the Synod for the Amazon helped to further internationalize this local struggle. We had some companions here in the region who went to the Synod in Rome to denounce Belo Monte. In Caquetá, it was not as much the past presence of overseas missionaries that was influential in setting up the organizational basis of the mobilization—the Vicaría del Sur was founded by a Colombian priest and nun—but the technical support of European organizations, such as Caritas Germany, which funded the technical evaluation of the company’s environmental impact assessment. In San Cristóbal, it was the local Mexican church, influenced by the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops Conferences of Medellín and Puebla, that was pivotal in the organization of Indigenous communities in the region. Modevite has not yet mobilized internationally, partly because the highway project has been stalled, but also because there is a strong international association with the Jesuit religious order that leads the Misión Bachajón. Its international links are, for example, essential in the success of its network of cooperative social enterprises, which they named “Yomol A’tel,” meaning “Together We Work” (Díaz and Roxana 2018, Yomol A’tel n.d.).

These international links are not as present among Protestant churches. The exception is that of the organization Diaconia in Apodi, which also stood out among our four case studies for working to raise awareness of environmental concerns among pastors in Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. Diaconia is part of a wider Evangelical international network, the Micah Network, which seeks to promote what it calls “integral mission” (Micah Network n.d.); that is, social transformation integrated with biblical preaching (Alvarez 2016; Padilla 2021). According to a representative from Diaconia, this international link is foundational to the work it does in Apodi: “Rede Miqueias [Micah Network] is working with us to raise awareness on the topic of ecology. They do a lot of training that brings the environmental theme into the evangelization. [...] They awaken that the spiritual must be together with the social, economic dimension....”

Another source of international support, which was not mentioned in our interviews and focus groups but is becoming more prominent in recent years, is a growing awareness at the level of global civil society of the threats to environmen-

tal defenders and the importance of their work, including the importance of local communities in preserving biodiversity and conserving environments. Notably, the “Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean”, known as the Escazú Agreement, adopted in March 2018, has placed a heightened focus on the rights and involvement of environmental defenders, including Indigenous peoples and local communities. It is the first international legal instrument for the protection of environmental defenders (CEPAL 2018). The Escazú Agreement also focuses on ensuring access to environmental information and involving the public in environmental decision-making. Mexico ratified the agreement in January 2021 and Colombia in October 2022, Brazil has signed it but has yet to ratify it at the time of writing (Mesa-Neira and Jiménez 2022; Movimiento Escazú Brasil n.d.; Robles Garza and García López 2022; Stevenson 2023).

Even if none mentioned the Escazú Agreement, all informants underlined the importance of bringing the concerns of local communities to the national (and international) level, which points to the role of faith communities in collecting and disseminating information through radio, letters, statements, and other means. In Brazil, it was about reaching the provincial government and the national government in Brasília. A representative of the MXVS in Altamira talks of “spreading cells”: “We began to spread cells of our movement to echo the struggle. There were people in Belém, in Manaus, in Brasília, in Europe, groups who worked by putting the complaint in the media, groups that wrote letters to send to the banks not to finance. Two thousand letters were written by hand here.” In Apodi, a representative of the Rural Workers Union talks of the work of the Pastoral Land Commission in connecting local communities: “The CPT began to connect isolated communities here in this national network that they support. We began to see that our struggle here was not just ours; there were many people in many places with the same struggle.” A Catholic priest similarly describes such a role in raising local concerns at the national level: “[T]he CPT with the support of our local church here called a large seminar and a document came out of it, a letter against the Irrigated Perimeter. Very, very big. I would say it gave visibility. [...] Suddenly, society itself noticed. [...] as you have a presence of bishops, several priests with the CPT that

joined [...], it makes society as a whole begin to realize that there are voices that differ from those who opt for development at all costs.”

The case of the Irrigated Perimeter in Apodi brings out another common feature across the four cases, namely the importance of learning from similar experiences elsewhere. The Irrigated Perimeter, nicknamed the Project of Death, was instrumental in bringing awareness of the consequences of the diversion of the São Francisco River. This learning from similar cases elsewhere is particularly valuable when the effects of the project are not immediately visible until it is too late to remedy. What happened with a river diversion for irrigation in a neighboring municipality (Ceará) helped mobilize the struggles in Apodi. Similarly in Altamira, learning about what is happening elsewhere helped local communities understand the issues they are facing so that they can address them. A representative of the MXVS talks of learning from the experience of the Tucuruí dam on the Tocantins River in the state of Pará: “One good thing was that they went to the Tucuruí dam and recorded some videos there of the people telling them what had happened there. This helped the people here to understand what was going to happen”; and so says a representative from the Women’s Movement in Altamira: “We even managed to get into the media; they made some videos about Tucuruí and put them on big televisions inside trucks so people could see what had happened there.” In Caquetá too, farmers from some communities earmarked for oil extraction were taken to visit other communities already affected so that they could be more informed about what they were going to experience. In San Cristóbal in Chiapas, the fear of what happened to other communities affected by a transportation project and its facilitating of extractive activities was also to some extent influencing the mobilization.

VALUATION OF NATURE AND ALTERNATIVES TO DEVELOPMENT

Another common feature across the four cases is that local and faith communities predominantly viewed nature as a living being, sometimes like a family member, worthy of rights, with views at times diverging within local communities, and often influenced by external interventions. Such views were seen by our informants as incompatible with



Apodi on the border between native forest and agribusiness. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

national development narratives based on the extraction of natural resources for international commodity markets. In Altamira, there was a predominant view among local and faith communities of the river being a person, which is how the Xingu Forever Alive movement started, according to a representative of the movement: “We wrote a letter, as if it were the Xingu River speaking. From there, Xingu Vivo was born. [...] What would Xingu say about all this, the letter is called SOS Xingu. We pass through schools, neighborhoods, and many other places.” Many of our informants expressed a view of nature as a synonym for life and God. A Pentecostal pastor in Altamira even affirmed that killing nature is killing God (see earlier quote). The CVA in Colombia “conceives of seeing and feeling God in nature” (Vicaría del Sur 2023, 68), or in the words of one of its representatives, “Nature is for us everything; it is like saying that without God we cannot exist because it is He who created everything.” In our Mexican case, the personalization of nature was stronger, given the majority Indigenous component of faith communities in the region. All informants in San Cristóbal viewed nature as a mother, as a living being who sustains life.



Informants linked to the Catholic church often referred to Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*, for which one of the origins of the current environmental crisis is a utilitarian view of nature that commodifies it and reduces it to a tradable commodity (Francis 2015, 30, 146). As some local religious leaders we interviewed have expressed, "The Church has always defended life. Nature is life. She is defending nature, the life that comes from God. The Pope draws attention to this modern way of life of mercantilism and utilitarianism. We must fight against this." (Altamira); "*Laudato Si'* gave support and visibility to the struggle that was already taking place. This is now moving toward the rights of nature. So [the encyclical] opened this horizon." (Altamira); "*Laudato Si'*, [...] with this revolutionary statement or this perspective of socio-environmental justice, said by the Pontiff of the Church, the highest representation, is a reason for hope for the communities." (San Cristóbal). The discourse of nature as a "common home," borrowed from *Laudato Si'* the full title of which is "On Care for Our Common Home," was a recurring theme across the cases. It should also be noted that the document *Laudato Si'* was not a starting point of their actions, but rather an important tool to strengthen them. It was a global recognition of the work in socio-environmental justice based on spirituality that they were already engaged in.

The valuation of nature as a resource to exploit versus a life to be cared for was mentioned by many of our informants across the case studies as the core of their struggles and a reason why they do not understand their actions as dealing with "governing natural resources" but as dealing with "defending life." As a representative of the Women's Movement in Altamira expresses it, "Here there were women from the movement who went to Rome to participate in the Synod. But it's a huge struggle because the region here has always been coveted for resources, so there are people who came from all over Brazil trying to make money. That's always been the case since the opening of the trans-Amazonian highway. These people are all in favor of mining, deforestation, using all natural resources. Not us; we defend life and the Earth." Her words also highlight that local communities do not see this money-making from nature as benefiting them, as their governments promised. Those who benefit are those coming from elsewhere to exploit their territories with some communities naming explicitly government discourse as lies. As a priest in Altamira laments, "They constructed a false discourse of development, that the people would escape poverty, that they would earn a lot of money, and that

Altamira would be a great commercial hub. Lie!” His words were similarly echoed by a riverine resident in Altamira: “They came promising many things and ended up taking us out of the territory, killing everything we knew, ruining our way of life; they lied!”

One has to note that it is not so much the incompatibility of money-making from nature and defending life that our informants raised but the incompatibility of a certain way of money-making from nature. In all the four cases, the disputes were not so much about how natural resources should be governed nor about how the benefits that may emerge from the projects more fairly redistributed, but about models of socioeconomic development, about the means to increase social and economic opportunities in the region. A main area of action of the movements analyzed in the four cases was about shifting development narratives and ways of valuing nature from valuing nature as a set of resources to be exploited to valuing nature as kin to be taken care of in a reciprocal relationship. All movements in the four cases were involved in creating alternative ways of deriving economic benefits from nature without damaging its life, and many communities started agro-ecology projects to be able to secure livelihoods and defend life at the same time. In Caquetá, Altamira, Apodi, and San Cristóbal, the Vicaría, MXVS, CPT, Rural Workers Union, and Modevite, respectively, were involved in creating enterprises that had socio-environmental objectives. In Apodi, it was organic family farming and the creation of fair and solidarity markets in both Catholic and Protestant circles. Agro-ecology was a strong component of Diaconia’s work, as one of its representatives described: “In this region here at Apodi, the strong work is with water reuse, water security, cisterns, etc. Now, more recently, we are also working on consolidating the organic production chain.” In Caquetá, the Vicaría is committed to promoting an alternative model of development for the Amazon and promotes initiatives such as the Amazonian farms, a network of seed conservationists, and a farmers’ markets where food produced on Amazonian farms is sold without commercial intermediaries. The Vicaría also leads a network of women’s fairs where women sell agricultural products and food and handicrafts that they have produced. In Altamira, communities affected by the dam, especially riverine communities, were experimenting with family farming based on agroforestry systems, and solidarity economy initiatives were initiated in the region, such as the social movement Federation of Organizations for Social

and Educational Assistance, which coordinates a network of cooperatives and has promoted an agro-ecological caravan for farmers to train and exchange knowledge (Batista 2021). In San Cristóbal, the Misión Bachajón runs a large social solidarity economy initiative under the Yomol Atel, as mentioned earlier.

In some cases, there was more divergence than others within actors themselves about the valuation of nature and the open criticism of a development model that commodifies nature and therefore commodifies life. In our Colombian case, there were some differences between the national government and local governments, the latter being more critical of national policy directions. In Brazil, within some Protestant faith communities, there are pastors and members who tacitly acquiesced to government development discourse and its promises of bringing jobs and social and economic development to the region, or rather, they did not see questioning these policies as a matter of the practice of their faith and expression of their following of Christ. A farmer in Apodi expresses this divide: “But within the Church of Christ, people have the idea that these companies aren’t good, that they don’t bring development. It used to be less so, but they’ve realized it. Now, they generate a lot of employment for young people, so things are a bit divided.” In Apodi, a representative of the CPT talks of divides within families themselves: “There is an issue behind this, because it starts to generate conflict in the community and in the family, because the woman goes to training and comes back aware, but her husband works in the company.”

HETEROGENEOUS FAITH COMMUNITIES

Our case studies brought out that the basis of the strategies of faith communities and their motivations to act in socio-environmental disputes are based on the awareness of communities belonging to a life system in which each human life is embedded and depends on the environment to survive. That belonging is often expressed with reference to God. But all cases have highlighted, with some more than others, that faith communities are far from discrete and homogeneous. In Apodi, two prominent organizations, the CPT linked to the Catholic church and Diaconia linked to a network of Protestant churches, were not perceived as being connected to a faith community. They mobilized local communities

under the discourse of rights with little explicit references to a faith dimension, except when mobilizing religious leaders themselves, as in the case of Diaconia's work with pastors. In Colombia, the Commissions for the Life of Water, connected to the Catholic diocese of Caquetá, cooperated with a large array of organizations not linked to faith communities and also included members from other denominations. Similarly in Mexico, Modevite is an initiative of the Catholic diocese of San Cristóbal but also includes members of other denominations in its activities and mobilizing actions.

All faith communities active in the four case studies belonged to the Christian tradition, but despite all taking inspiration from the Bible, there was a large variety of interpretation across denominations. In the Mexican case, biblical interpretations were strongly intertwined with Indigenous cosmovisions. As an Indigenous Catholic priest expresses it: "There is also a wisdom in the native peoples. At least my father doesn't know the Bible, but he always insisted a lot, our Mother Earth, don't hurt her [...] don't mistreat the water [...] take care. And that comes from a wisdom as native peoples. I think that for me those are the foundations, why we fight for life. We defend the Earth, we organize the people for peace, we organize for life." The integration of Indigenous cosmovisions with Catholic theology and biblical interpretation is a distinctive feature of Modevite and is unique in our four cases. In Colombia, we found no evidence of involvement of Indigenous peoples in the mobilization against the oil project. In Brazil, the Indigenous Missionary

All faith communities active in the four case studies belonged to the Christian tradition, but despite all taking inspiration from the Bible, there was a large variety of interpretation across denominations.

Council was defending indigenous rights but not seeking to mix Catholic theology with Indigenous cosmovisions. In Apodi, the Indigenous community was in the incipient process of reclaiming its identity. In Altamira, Indigenous peoples often mixed their cosmovisions with Christianity, and some joined existing movements, such as the MXVS.

In Brazil, we observed a marked difference of interpretations between historical Protestant churches, and newer churches, such as Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal, which did not have a coordinated leadership. Overall, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches tended to have a stronger separation between faith and socio-ecological commitment. As a farmer in Apodi expressed it: "If you are a true evangelical, you respect your family and work well; your character is honest and God-fearing." However, there were some notable exceptions, such as the organization Diaconia, which provided technical assistance to farmers and human rights training. We also observed in the Brazilian and Colombian cases some degree of involvement of Pentecostal church members in various social mobilizations, despite being discouraged by their leadership to do so. In Caquetá and Altamira, there were common rallying points beyond denominational differences. "The life of water," to which all human life is connected was the unifying element in Colombia, and the category of "affected by mega-corporations" was the common denomination that united people across denominations in Altamira. The Riverside Council in Altamira was formed by both Catholic and Protestant riverine people in the search for guaranteeing their rights as riverine communities. Despite these common rallying points, the Vicaría del Sur in Caquetá noted that interdenominational cooperation remains a challenge because of stereotypes and lack of ecumenical formation. In a critical examination of its work over the last decade, the Vicaría reflects that "the radical and fundamentalist positions of both Catholics and non-Catholics and the lack of further ecumenical formation cause people to move from stereotypes and unfounded generalizations about members of other religions. Some religious leaders encourage a sectarian culture and judgment of other people's lives because they do not belong to the same church" (Vicaría del Sur 2023, 120). The CVA's use of Marian symbols in its defense of the life of water has also been perceived by some of our informants as an obstacle to ecumenical collaboration. In Mexico, there was evidence of ecumenical collaboration in Modevite, especially with historical Protestant churches, but more at the local interpersonal than institutional level. One

informant however mentioned the “Interreligious Council of Chiapas,” which is chaired by a pastor and meets to discuss the issues and the multiple forms of violence that local populations are facing.

In our two Brazilian cases, we also encountered some Protestant church leaders who interpreted the Bible as an injunction for humans to be “guardians of creation.” As one pastor in Altamira describes it, “There is no explicit positioning of the church on these topics. What exists is the preaching of the word of God. Preaching by Genesis, by the evangelical, nature is God’s creation, we are the guardians of the garden. Loving God and loving others are the greatest laws.” A pastor from a historical Protestant church (Baptist) in Apodi criticizes biblical interpretations from a mercantilist perspective:

We are fiercely critical of this idea of a guy picking up a microphone and a Bible and seeing it more as a means of business, bargaining with God. [...] So, this kind of theology doesn’t represent us, so much so that even the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Statistics) will do a survey and put everyone in the same bag. This new neo-Pentecostal phenomenon is mischaracterizing the Protestant church. We are not what they show on TV. In a church, we had 2,000 years of prayer, of reading the word, a biblical reading, centered on Christ, on love of neighbor. Helping your neighbor, fearing the Lord is totally contrary to this mercantilist vision that the church has today.

Within the Catholic community, heterogeneity is less marked. What has transpired from the case studies is some difference between the local communities shaped historically by the work of missionaries and the Base Ecclesial Communities from the 1970s onward and the new ecclesial leadership which has not been formed in that tradition. A CPT representative talks of priests and missionaries being in the past “in the trenches with the people.”⁶⁹ Indeed, the work of all movements analyzed in the four case studies is a consequence of faith leaders “being in the trenches with the people,” or as Pope Francis would write in *Evangelii Gaudium*, about bishops “having the smell of their sheep, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others” (Francis 2013, 24). In Caquetá, the CVAs are a product of the historical presence of Catholic leadership among rural populations and accompanying them in improving their lives, and they



Movement of Women in Altamira. (Credit: Luiz Felipe Lacerda.)

were also founded by two local religious leaders, a priest and a nun. In Altamira, the MXVS is the product of a historical presence of Catholic leadership among Indigenous peoples and accompanying them in securing their rights, with the then bishop of Xingu, Erwin Kräutler, and CIMI being instrumental in its founding. In Apodi, the creation of the CPT was facilitated by then Bishop Tomás Balduino, and the Rural Workers Union was founded against a background of the involvement of the leadership of the Catholic church in walking alongside rural populations to advance their rights. In Chiapas, Modevite was established on the strong basis laid out by earlier pastoral orientations of the diocese of San Cristóbal under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz. Even if many of our informants mentioned a change in the profile of Catholic leadership in recent years and a less political position adopted by their leaders, the work laid out by previous generations continues and is mostly led by women.

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP

The leadership of women at the local level stood out across all cases. In Altamira, our informants summarized that “the face of resistance in Xingu is female.” They noted that women brought a specific dimension to the grass-roots mobilization, namely a cross-cutting perspective by linking issues of land with other issues, such as women’s rights, health, or education. The work in popular education led by women was particularly pivotal in that respect. In our Brazilian cases especially, it was noted that women went house to house, to schools, to parishes, to inform local residents about the health, social, and environmental impacts of infrastructure projects and make local communities aware of their

rights. One informant in Altamira talked of “women as being the seed.” In Caquetá, the Vicaría is itself led by women and promotes women’s leadership. In Chiapas, Modevite started with women’s mobilization against alcoholism among youth, and the movement also promotes women’s leadership. Women’s participation in Modevite is extensive, though not always at the decision-making level, and the diocese of San Cristóbal, the Bachajón Mission, and various civil society organizations have built programs to strengthen the rights of Indigenous women. However, promotion of female leadership in social movements, often spearheaded by Catholic nuns, was only observed in our fieldwork with those linked to the Catholic church or with no faith foundation. None of our informants mentioned instances of female leadership in Protestant churches. They were perceived as playing a supporting role, such as a pastor’s wife or caring for children and the elderly.

Yet, across all cases, while women organized groups and carried out training and capacity-building work and exercised local leadership within movements and organizations linked to the Catholic church, they always did so under the authority of a male religious leader, that is, a priest or bishop. In Brazil, the only space where women could break the Catholic male hierarchy is in women’s movements that establish collaboration with the churches but maintain their autonomy, as in the case of the MXVS in Altamira or the 8th March Women Center in Apodi. In Caquetá, the Vicaría recognized the predominance of a patriarchal culture within the Catholic church, and, since 2010, it has adopted a transversal gender perspective in all its work. This has enabled greater participation of women in leadership positions in community organizations and in advocacy. However, tensions were mentioned with the male leadership of the Catholic church.

The diocese of Xingu stands out in that regard, with Dom Erwin Kräutler, as did other bishops in the Amazon, asking the Pope to officially recognize the local leadership of women and demand their insertion in formal ecclesial leadership by ordaining them as deacons. This was discussed during the Amazon Synod, which took place in Rome in 2019. The final Synod document spoke about the urgency of recognizing women’s leadership in official ecclesial circles: “It is urgent for the Church in the Amazon to promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner. The fabric of the local Church, in the Amazon as elsewhere, is guaranteed by small missionary Church communities that cultivate faith, listen to the Word, and celebrate together

close to the people’s life. It is the Church of baptized men and women that we must consolidate by promoting ministries and, above all, an awareness of baptismal dignity.” (Amazon Synod 2020, 95).

Our research findings point out that such official recognition of women’s leadership within Catholic communities would significantly strengthen civil society and strategies in defense of life and the protection of the rights of low-income, rural, and Indigenous communities. There are currently steps in that direction, although very slow. The ordination of women to the diaconate has been examined by two specially appointed papal commissions, but no decision has been made yet. In the meantime, our case studies highlight the paramount importance of supporting women in leadership and enabling them to have access to adequate formation and support channels.

CONCLUSIONS

The previously mentioned set of common insights signals some differences between the cases, such as Indigenous peoples’ involvement, ecumenical involvement, and mobilizing discourse, all of which testify to stakeholders’ varied responses to varied contexts. As one would expect, some determining factors behind the different types of response were the social makeup of local communities affected, the common unifying element of their responses to the project, and the visibility of its impacts. Having a common element on which to mobilize was also central, such as water, life, being affected by mega-corporations, or sharing life in a semi-arid region. Such common elements are what bridged the ecumenical divide and joined Catholics and Protestants together, such as in the Movement of People Affected by Dams and the Riverine Council in Altamira, the Commissions of the Life of Water in Caquetá, the Articulation for the Semi-Arid Region in Apodi, and Movement for the Defense of Life and Territories in San Cristóbal. In Brazil, this common unifying element was also important in bridging the political polarization of the country.

The faith communities that developed strategies of defense of life in the four cases did so by combining a spiritual, community, discursive, and socio-political dimension but, as one would expect, combined them in different ways according to context and had a different engagement with other civil society actors in the region. In Caquetá, faith com-



munities leveraged first a spiritual and symbolic dimension through the life of water, which formed the basis of their construction of normative discourse, and which then went on to nurture a community basis—as all life in the territory depends on the life of water—from which actions sprang in the socio-political domain. In Altamira, the community organizing work of faith communities over several decades prior to the dam project led them to nurture a spiritual and symbolic dimension, particularly through the life of martyrs who have given their lives to defend ecosystems and human rights. This served as a platform for mobilizing discourse around the defense of life and a basis for constructing strategies of defense. In Apodi, it was similarly the prior community organizing work that formed the basis of strategies of defense. However, there was a greater detachment between community organizing and nurturing a spirituality dimension, which supported more community relations than community mobilizing. The spiritual dimension was implicitly grounding the construction of narrative discourse and the actions of representative organizations connected to faith communities. In San Cristóbal, there was a direct relation between mobilizing the spiritual and symbolic dimensions, particularly around the view of nature as Mother Earth, which strengthened a community dimension and built alternative discourse. Unlike the other cases, the Mexican case had the most explicit orientation to peace with strategies of defense of life and territories seen as forms of peace-building in the region.

In their edited volume on peace-building in mining conflicts, Montevecchio and Powers (2021) have argued that peace is not the opposite of conflict and the disappearance of differences. Peace is inextricably linked to socio-environmental justice, which they define as “integral peace” or “ecological just peace.” For volume contributors Scheid and Scheid (2021, 124-5), an ecological just peace has two foundational principles: respect (of human dignity, well-being of the planet, and ecosystems) and restoration (acknowledgment and reparation of harms to people and ecosystems). The responses of faith communities who mobilized in socio-environmental disputes and who were analyzed in this report could be summed up as an orientation to an ecological just peace. As a Vicaría del Sur representative in Colombia summarizes it, “In the measure that people have a good life in the territory [and] have a dignified life and opportunities, one can have peace. Because peace is not only not having armed actors around; peace is when one can meet one’s basic needs, when one has opportunities for income generation, and when one can live quietly where one is.” In our “Conclusion,” we examine further how such an ecological just peace can be fostered and how to support the role of faith communities in that effort.





Conclusion

This research highlights the distinctive role of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes in Latin America, focusing on their unique contributions to peaceful resolution and defense of local communities' rights. By examining Christian communities, it reveals how spirituality and community-building efforts underpin effective collective action and alternative development models, emphasizing the need for capacity building and recognition of women's leadership.

This research was motivated by the dearth of studies on the role of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes, their near total absence in the political ecology literature, and a lack of focus on local communities in the literature on religion and development. By examining the dynamics of faith communities' involvement at the territorial level, namely Christian communities in three Latin American countries, the study aimed to shed more light on the distinctive contributions that faith communities make toward peaceful resolution of socio-environmental disputes and sought to identify factors that lead faith communities to develop strategies to defend the rights of rural, low-income, and Indigenous communities in four specific cases of socio-environmental disputes.

Selecting territories where there were instances of socio-environmental disputes but where faith communities did not get involved in these disputes, or selecting case studies where they played a negative role in fueling conflict in local communities would have brought further additional insights. However, we did not choose to go that route for security reasons, on the one hand, and for our research objectives, on the other. As we mentioned in the introduction and the section on methodology, our research and case selection were guided by the desire to provide the greatest insights for understanding better the processes through which faith communities become involved and seek peaceful resolution of socio-environmental disputes. In our four cases,

this meant that they sought to create alternative models of development as a long-term peace resolution mechanism to socio-environmental disputes that they saw as arising from an extractive-based model of development that failed to recognize nature as kin to be cared for, as a life that had to be defended and protected. At the end of this journey, which we hope is only the beginning of another, we summarize what we have learned from the case studies about the processes through which faith communities develop strategies for the defense of rights of local communities and ecosystems. We also propose some areas for intervention.

MAIN LESSONS

First, each case detailed how the community-building efforts of faith communities historically were the foundational ground for social mobilization and collective action today. Each case, although some more than others, emphasized the role of spirituality, conceived broadly as connection with nature, with its rivers and forests, and which faith communities saw as intimately linked to a connection with God, as motivating ground for undertaking action and for perseverance when their actions fail in their goal of defending life.

Faith communities drew their actions from their specific normative underpinnings, especially biblical interpretations, which gave them an ability to diagnose the causes of social and environmental harms and seek responses to address them. Faith communities serve as watchful observers of the local communities in which they are embedded, recognizing when their fundamental rights are violated, or rather, as they would put it, when life, whether human or nonhuman, on their territories was threatened. For Protestant communities, their diagnosis of environmental destruction and violation of rights was based on biblical understandings of the sacredness of God's creation, although not all Protestants endorsed such interpretations. For Catholic communities, their diagnosis of injustice was likewise based on biblical interpretations but also on ecclesial documents that set orientations for the work of faith communities in accompanying marginalized communities. The most noteworthy were the documents of the Latin American Bishops Conferences and those of Pope Francis. The importance of such documents in Protestant churches was not highlighted by our informants; yet the work of Diaconia in Apodi was inspired by the Lausanne Covenant within the World Evangelical Alliance.



At the end of this journey, which we hope is only the beginning of another, we summarize what we have learned from the case studies about the processes through which faith communities develop strategies for the defense of rights of local communities and ecosystems.

Furthermore, in addition to playing a key role in highlighting human rights violations, we observed during our research that faith communities nurtured a sense of commonality among their members, such as being affected by mega-corporations, being Amazonian, or a collective identity around the memory of those who have struggled to defend land, sometimes at the cost of their lives. This can become a powerful driving force for collective action, uniting individuals and organizations of diverse faiths and backgrounds in their pursuit of the defense of human rights and environmental protection. We also observed that faith communities actively involved in socio-environmental disputes often emphasized that these rights extend beyond humans to the natural world, including rivers and waterways, trees and forests, and the plant and animal life that they contain. This collective perspective that all living things inhabit a common home, encourages a more extensive and impactful response to what undermines the possibility of life in that common home, such as the building of a dam that changes river flows and oil extraction that destroys forests and contaminates water.

To create meaningful change, it is therefore essential to strengthen the local capacity among faith communities, their leaders, and all members alike for conducting critical analysis of the social reality, whether that be through increased awareness and skills, human or financial capacity, or coordination across different stakeholders. As our research has shown, faith communities play a pivotal role in equipping local communities with the tools to assess their circumstances comprehensively, based on shared visions about what constitutes good living and the protection of their common home. The works of the Indigenous Missionary Council and the Pastoral Land Commission in Brazil, the Vicaría del Sur in Colombia, and the Pueblo Creyente in Mexico particularly stand out in that regard. This empowerment is the foundation for effective advocacy and action far beyond the boundaries of faith communities.

A second factor of faith communities' involvement in socio-environmental disputes is that they operate at the intersection of various scales, from local to global. Recognizing the lived experiences of their members and making these experiences visible at different scales is essential for meaningful change. Their unique organizational feature of being a global institution operating at the local level allows them to bridge gaps between the local and global, bringing attention to local issues on the global stage. This was especially the case for Catholic faith communities where the institution of the papacy and the Synod of Bishops on the Amazon in Rome in 2019 brought concerns of local communities to the global stage and informed the religious teachings of the church globally.⁷⁰ Our informants mentioned that the recognition of their actions at the global level was a source of moral strength and support and also brought financial, human, and organizational resources, focusing needed attention and capacity to movements on the ground. These support mechanisms were especially facilitated in the past by overseas missionaries and today by regional network organizations like REPAM. A similar pattern was observed among Protestant churches in Apodi where the global Micah Network provided technical support in connecting the defense of the rights of local communities with the evangelical faith, as well other forms of technical support in agro-ecological production.

Such global-local connecting dynamic of faith communities is of particular importance as the socio-environmental disputes that take place in local territories are often influenced by global dynamics of international commodity markets. Most faith communities analyzed in this report play a crucial role in acknowledging and addressing this interplay and in seeking alternative pathways for improving people's lives. In none of our case studies did faith communities undertake actions to demand a fairer redistribution of resource rents

and better social and environmental practices of businesses involved in the extractive or infrastructure projects. Instead, they sought to promote alternatives to development models that they perceive as undermining ecosystems and people's health and ways of life, such as social and solidarity economy models that focus on good living and harmony between humans and the flourishing of ecosystems. These models allow for social and economic opportunities for local populations, based on the reproduction of life within a territory, which is essential for long-term environmental protection and human well-being. The models are also based on a subsidiarity principle so that initiatives aimed at enhancing productive activities best respond to local social and ecological contexts while being guided by global frameworks (Montevecchio 2023). The Amazonian farm initiative of the Vicaría in Caquetá does not, for example, follow the same premise as the family agriculture initiative of the CPT in the semi-arid region of Apodi, but all have in common an understanding of nature as imbued with life, as informed by Indigenous cosmologies and religious teachings. This valuation of nature is integral to strategies to protect the rights of local communities. It is also a central motivating factor of faith communities' actions. They act to defend life itself.

Third, our research has pointed out that it is essential to acknowledge the diversity across and within faith communities. Different denominations and groups within faith communities exhibit varying priorities and approaches. It is therefore crucial to work on the basis of a common ground in the face of shared challenges. The common values, such as those of the life of water, a river alive forever, protection of a common home, and human rights, unite faith communities and beyond and form the basis of their struggle for socio-environmental justice. These values serve as a unifying force for collective action. Recognizing the importance of these shared values can help guide and strengthen the work of faith communities in socio-environmental disputes. In cases where we observed little or no involvement of some faith communities in these disputes, our findings suggest that training pastors and strengthening a sense of common experiences of injustice can help members of these faith communities join actions in defense of human rights and environmental protection.

We also noted differences between faith communities at the local level and their leadership at the regional and national level, mostly in the case of the Catholic church. In all our case studies, there was a mention at some point or another of

tensions between the social movements on the ground and the hierarchy. In Brazil, the more recent leadership of the church at the diocesan level was taking a more diplomatic position, and so was the case in Colombia where the church sought to accommodate all; that is, rural communities as well as oil company workers. In Chiapas, there were some exceptions to local religious leadership supporting the movement. Informally, some informants mentioned the difficult position of faith communities receiving significant donations from wealthy individuals, such as agribusinesses offering food to locals for their patronal feasts and making it uncomfortable for the religious leadership to question their socially and ecologically harmful practices. We could not explore these tensions further in our fieldwork due to methodological limitations (data collection through interviews and focus groups) and research ethics protocol, but examining how these less socially and ecologically involved faith communities respond to socio-environmental disputes would be an interesting further research avenue. What we did come across is how faith communities sought to overcome this absence or this lukewarm engagement of religious leaders in disputes, namely through mobilizing around a common element and through formation (such as Diaconia training Pentecostal leaders on the biblical roots of involvement in socio-environmental justice matters).

Fourth, when analyzing what leads faith communities to develop strategies of defense of life, one could not ignore women's leadership. Even if all the appointed religious leaders of the faith communities researched in this study were males (priests and pastors), women's leadership played a critical role within Catholic communities. It is a woman who co-founded the Vicaría del Sur; it is women who are predominantly leading the Commissions for the Life of Water in Colombia; it is women who are leading the movement around the Belo Monte dam; it is women who are going from house to house, school to school, to talk about the effects of the diversion of the São Francisco river, and it is women in Chiapas who first mobilized to implement the dry laws to curb alcoholism and started the Movement in Defense of Life and Territories. It is therefore vital to support the training of women and enhance their capacity for social analysis. Creating spaces for women's participation amplifies the impact of faith communities in environmental protection. Empowering women is not only a matter of gender equity but also a strategic move toward more com-

prehensive and effective action for the protection of the rights of local communities affected by infrastructure and extractive projects.

Our research findings argue for the pressing need for broader recognition of the role of faith communities in peaceful resolution of socio-environmental disputes. International initiatives aimed at protecting environmental defenders, such as the Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED n.d.), do not single out the contribution of faith communities in environmental defense. Yet, often environmental defenders are connected to faith communities and are inspired and nurtured by them. Moreover, faith communities bring a specific communal dimension to environmental defense and the protection of environmental defenders. As we have seen in our case studies, all movements adopted a collective leadership approach to protect individuals from intimidation and threats to their lives. We argue that recognizing the work of faith communities in international initiatives at protecting environmental defenders would strengthen environmental protection and the protection of environmental defenders. In our fieldwork in Brazil, it was noted that environmental defenders were often protected by international organizations by taking them away from their territories, but leaving the rest of their families and communities in danger. In Mexico, the remoteness of communities where environmental defenders carry out their work makes emergency evacuation difficult. On the basis of our research findings, we recommend a communal and locally led approach to the protection of environmental defenders and a greater recognition of the role of faith communities in environmental defense within international environmental initiatives. We could add here the Climate Loss and Damage Fund as another arena for the recognition of faith communities in socio-environmental justice matters and their potential role in operationalizing such a fund.

AREAS OF INTERVENTION

A priority intervention for strengthening the protection of people and territories is that of formation of faith communities at both the leadership and membership level. Given their distinctive contribution to peaceful resolution of socio-environmental disputes, effective environmental advocacy and governance requires a commitment to capacity building that spans the breadth of faith communities with a particular focus on their effective methods of organizing, such as

shared leadership as a strategy for protecting individuals. This investment in capacity building targets both leadership figures and grass-roots members. By equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and socio-political insights required for effective agency, faith communities can be better prepared to address pressing environmental and social justice issues. Comprehensive training—that is, training that not only includes knowledge sharing and greater understanding and awareness of government policies and their implications for the sustainability of life in their territories, but also a critical assessment of social realities based on faith communities' own normative assumptions—is essential.⁷¹ This approach ensures that faith communities' participation is rooted in genuine conviction on the basis of their faith. Their faith supports them for the long term and makes them resilient in the face of setbacks and disappointments. Such capacity-building initiatives and the framing of strategies are also more effective when built around a sense of what is common.

A second area of intervention that we derive from our research findings is that of investment in community information, exchange, and monitoring. The dynamic and evolving nature of socio-environmental disputes within the changing policy and legal landscape requires continuous assessment and a responsive approach. To that end, it is imperative that faith communities establish a structured system for planning, follow-up, evaluation, and the continuous assessment of evolving community contexts. This system acts as a comprehensive lens through which communities can observe the progress of conflicts, make informed decisions, and refine approaches as needed. Moreover, faith communities can participate in local data collection and validation, such as with the work of ALLIED and Global Witness, to track the number of environmental defenders killed or threatened on an annual basis, as they already do in Brazil, with the CPT being the main source of data in the Global Witness reports. Activation of mechanisms for citizen participation and engagement is another critical component. This ensures that decisions are inclusive and participatory, thereby fostering a democratic and collaborative approach to addressing environmental issues. Our findings also highlight the importance of learning from, and exchanging with, other communities which are experiencing similar challenges. Making the struggles of local communities to defend life visible at the national and global scale and enabling alliances with other aligned actors at the national and international level are other important areas of intervention to support faith communities

in defending human rights and environmental protection in territories affected by infrastructure and extractive projects that threaten the lives of local communities.

In this context of international networking and alliance-building, promoting religious inclusion and interfaith collaboration is paramount. The defense of our common home or Mother Earth provides a unique opportunity for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, including dialogue between Indigenous cosmovisions and institutionalized religious traditions and with those who do not belong to a faith tradition. Effective communication strategies, tailored to diverse faith backgrounds while focusing on shared values among faith communities and beyond, are integral to this recommendation. International development and financial institutions could play an important part in bolstering such interfaith networks, defender networks, Indigenous networks, and other relevant groups as these organizations foster collaboration and knowledge exchange, transcending borders and belief systems.

Although we did not collect data about the age configuration of those involved in the movements and organizations analyzed in this report, we noted in each of the cases their efforts to reach out to youth, for it is the younger generation who will be the torch bearers of environmental protection in the future. Their active participation is a cornerstone of the continuity and sustainability of the struggle in the defense of life. For example, the Vicaría del Sur in Colombia had a special network of youth organizations that they created in 2003 (Red de Organizaciones Juveniles de la Vicaría del Sur) and that has been working with children and youth groups in parishes. Vicaría del Sur has been organizing from a faith perspective youth-focused training on human rights and issues affecting the Amazon region, as well as schools of democracy and peace. In Mexico, Modevite has also created a special youth group called Youth Recreating Autonomy, and the topic of youth participation was constantly mentioned during its tenth anniversary gathering in November 2023. The Bachajón Mission implements workshops with children and young people on peace and nonviolence, and Serapaz conducts workshops about the reality of migration to the United States to young people who intend to migrate. In Brazil, our informants mentioned that youth involvement in the movements for the defense of life has been weakened with the coronavirus pandemic, but some initiatives are slowly resuming in Xingu, such as a youth-focused and led Pilgrimage of the Forest in memory of Dorothy Stang, con-

vened by religious sisters. In the city of Altamira, however, youth in the urban resettlements are increasingly involved in organized crime. In Apodi, youth are increasingly working on the plantations of monoculture companies in precarious labor conditions,⁷² and there is little evidence of a systematic effort on the part of church organizations, unions, or rural communities to involve young people. It is therefore urgent for interventions to focus on strengthening youth participation. Even if some movements do attempt to reach out to the younger generation, the membership composition of organizations and movements in defense of life are middle-aged and older. One major challenge for youth, especially in Chiapas and Altamira, is alcoholism and recruitment in organized crime and the lack of employment opportunities. Any intervention oriented at increasing youth participation in strategies of defense of life and territories needs to take a multidimensional approach, addressing employment and human rights training and education at the same time.

Given that there can be no support for the work of faith communities in the defense of life and territories without the support for women, who are the preeminent leaders in their communities, interventions must prioritize their empowerment to enhance their autonomy, not just in leading environmental efforts but also in response to structural issues in local communities, such as male violence, alcoholism, or access to decision-making processes. This empowerment includes economic independence and an increased awareness of women's rights throughout these communities. It contributes not only to gender equality but also to the resilience and vitality of faith communities.

Another area of intervention to recognize the invaluable experiences of faith communities in environmental protection is to create spaces where these experiences can be shared with the global community. The creation of audiovisual materials would facilitate this knowledge sharing. These materials can serve as a bridge for knowledge transfer, enabling insights, practices, and success stories of faith communities to reach a broader audience and inspire others to take similar action. Think tanks, NGOs, and other institutions working in the environmental and development sectors should broaden their environmental communication efforts to include networks of faith communities. By translating their work into formats and languages that resonate with faith communities, these organizations can effectively bridge the communication gap between faith communities and other

actors. This inclusivity can lead to a more robust exchange of ideas and practices and may help catalyze uptake of the work of civil society groups.

To foster an environment of collaboration and mutual learning, providing financial and technical support is essential. This support can facilitate the exchange of experiences and lessons learned among faith communities and other stakeholders. Investment in community infrastructure for learning and communication is crucial as it enhances knowledge sharing and the dissemination of best practices. This financial and technical support also includes supporting nonformal education initiatives. Examples like water-monitoring schools in Caquetá provide alternative avenues for learning, particularly among underserved communities. The integration of nonformal education complements formal education systems and contributes to a deeper understanding of complex socio-environmental challenges.

Our findings also call out for a deeper understanding of the role of faith communities in promoting alternative models for socioeconomic development rooted in the reproduction of life within the territory, or in the words of the final document of the Synod on the Amazon (2020, 73), “a model of development in which commercial criteria are not above environmental and human rights criteria.” The faith communities examined in this research, including some segments of Protestant churches, played a pivotal role in offering alternative socioeconomic development pathways. The promotion and support of alternative development pathways is also a central task for national and local governments. Our research opens the question of whether international finance could be more focused on supporting such development models, rather than financing projects that are premised on bringing economic and social benefits to local communities but are in opposition to the worldviews and priorities of many local communities. As we have seen in the case of Colombia, this

national-local community interface on alternative development is already taking place to some extent with the peace agreements and government-supported territorial development programs. In Brazil, work has been undertaken to promote a new economy for the Brazilian Amazon based on agroecology and ecosystem restoration (WRI 2023). These alternative development models are anchored in the principles of environmental responsibility and social well-being and align with the worldviews of many faith communities and Indigenous peoples. These models foster economic opportunities and job creation rooted in the sustainable reproduction of life. Governments can play a pivotal role in nurturing these practices. Forging alliances with faith communities can amplify the impact of these government-led agro-ecology and solidarity economy initiatives.

Another responsibility for governments is that of embracing rights-of-nature legislation. Many of our informants highlighted how this legal framework serves as a cornerstone for environmental protection. Colombia’s historic declaration by its Supreme Court in 2018 of the Colombian Amazon as a subject of rights (Angarita and Mojica 2022) serves as an inspiring model. Despite implementation challenges, such declarations recognizing the intrinsic value of natural ecosystems serve as important guiding principles under which different strategies for the protection of life in local territories are formulated and implemented.

Given the growth of organized crime observed in recent years in the context of our four case studies and throughout the Latin American region, research on how to better protect environmental defenders from a community perspective and the work of faith communities in that regard could be an important avenue to buffer crime’s advance on the continent and offer further insights on the cultivation of hope and promotion of an ecological just peace in the region.



Appendices

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Questions for local communities, religious communities, civil society organizations, and grass-roots associations and movements

Socio-environmental situation

- What do you think the main economic, social, and environmental impacts of project x will be or have been?
- In your opinion, how did these arise, and what were the causes that led to the current situation?

Valuation and meaning of nature

- What does nature mean to you?
- What motivates you to protect the territory and nature?
- Do you think there is a relationship between spirituality and care for nature? Which one?

Strategies and actions

- How have you organized yourselves to undertake actions of resistance and defense of the territory?
- Have you taken legal actions? Which ones?
- What objectives did you pursue with these actions?
- Have you received assistance? If so, what kind, and from whom? (This may be financial, organizational, technical, capacity building, or other assistance.)
- Have solidarity and support networks been formed? If so, which ones, and between whom? (moral, spiritual, social, etc.)?

- What elements have helped you or your organization strengthen this struggle (images, myths, music, banners, stories, symbols, etc.)?
- What motivates a faith community to participate in the struggles for the defense of the territory?
- What spiritual elements have helped you or your organization strengthen the struggle for the defense of the territory and nature?
- What role have faith communities played in the struggle for the defense of the territory and nature?
- Have the faith communities been involved in other struggles in defense of the territory or social processes? Which ones? When?
- How do you think the local community perceives the participation of faith communities in territorial defense processes?
- How do you think other actors, such as companies and the government, perceive the participation of faith communities in the processes of territorial defense?
- What role have women, elders, and youth played in these actions?
- How have the government and companies dealt with or responded to the resistance actions?
- What have been the effects of the communities' actions of resistance and defense of the territory?
- If you had to start over, what would you do differently and why?



Additional questions for Catholic religious leadership

- How do you perceive the participation of the faith community in the struggles for the defense of territory and nature?
- How does the Catholic church implement *Laudato Si'* in the country?
- What influence do you think *Laudato Si'* has on this type of situation in the country?
- Do you consider that *Laudato Si'* is a tool for Catholic communities facing environmental problems?
- Has the church generated alliances on environmental issues with other religions or organizations based on *Laudato Si'*?
- When there are differences of position between communities and government and/or companies in the way in which nature is used, has the church played a role in the treatment of these differences?

APPENDIX B. FOCUS GROUPS

Objective: To facilitate the collective construction of knowledge on the relationship of faith communities and natural-resource governance.

1. Presentation (10 min.)

2. Timeline of the process of defense of territory (40 min.)

- Presentation of a timeline of the socio-environmental dispute and invitation to correct or add.
- Discussion on the most significant moments in the history of the dispute and the process of territorial defense. Participants are given notes of different color with the following words: "Here we learned that..."; "Here we realized that..."; "Here we valued that..."; "Here women/young people/children/men/elderly people were important because..."; "Here we were concerned/frustrated/upset/angry/indignant because..."; Here our faith was important because..."; "Here we felt very happy/satisfied because..."; "Here we will never forget this because..."
- Participants are invited to make collective reflections: Why has this journey been important for us? And what would we like our children or new generations to learn from this journey?

3. Map of actors (40 min.)

Participants are given a set of cards with the main actors involved and may add more if needed. They are asked to arrange actors according to their position in the situation. The following exercise called PIN (positions, interests, and needs) was then conducted:

- Positions that each party takes on the conflict, including judgments, values, and perceptions. What do they want?

- Interests: other sources of satisfaction for the parties and may include the means to resolve their needs. Why do they need what they want (interests), and why is it important to this person, group, or organization (worldview)?
- Needs: minimum satisfiers that the parties require and are considered to be goods or situations that cannot be renounced.

Priority is given to working on the PIN of the faith community and, very briefly, what they consider to be the positions, interests, and needs of other actors that they consider relevant in the process.

4. Lessons to share with other faith communities

- The facilitator reads a fictive letter sent to them by a faith community that is currently experiencing a threat to its territory. The community never had the need to organize themselves to face a mega-project before, and they do not know how to react. They are therefore asking for help, advice, and recommendations from this community. The group is invited to reflect collectively on the question: What advice could you give to this community in order to deal with the problem they are facing?

5. Reflection on the human-nature relationship from a faith perspective (10 min.)

6. Final reflection (50 min.)

- Collective reflection on the process and keywords or key points. Reflection on the relationship between human beings and nature from a faith-based approach.

APPENDIX C. FIELDWORK COLOMBIA

Preliminary virtual interviews for case-study selection

- Alex Maldonado, organization Justapaz, March 23, 2023
- Lorena Peña, organization Justapaz, March 23, 2023
- Germán Mahecha, eco-theologian, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, March 28, 2023
- Blanca Lucía Echeverry, Interfaith Rainforest Initiative Colombia, March 31, 2023
- Tatiana Rodríguez, director CENSAT Agua Viva, March 31, 2023

Interviews conducted in Caquetá (F: Female interviewee. M: Male interviewee)

- Representative Red de Organizaciones Juveniles de la Vicaría del Sur, July 4, 2023 (F)
- Representative CVA Morelia, July 5, 2023 (F)
- Representative CVA Morelia, July 5, 2023 (F)
- Representative CVA Morelia, July 5, 2023 (F)
- Representative CVA Morelia, July 5, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA Morelia, July 5, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA Morelia, July 5, 2023 (M)
- Representative Vicaría del Sur, July 5, 2023 (F)
- Representative Vicaría del Sur, July 6, 2023 (F)
- Representative CVA Belén, July 6, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA San José, July 6, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA Valparaíso, July 6, 2023 (M)
- Director Corporación Terrae, July 6, 2023 (F)
- Representative MEDDAT, July 7, 2023 (F)
- Representative Vicaría del Sur, July 7, 2023 (F)
- Representative CVA Albania, July 7, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA Solita, July 7, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA Valparaíso, July 7, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA Valparaíso, July 8, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA Valparaíso, July 8, 2023 (M)
- Representative CVA Valparaíso, July 8, 2023 (M)

Focus groups

- Focus group 1 (July 4, 2023): Eight people from Vicaría del Sur de Caquetá. The meeting took place at the *Casa Pastoral* of the municipality of Morelia, the head office of Vicaría del Sur.
- Focus group 2 (July 8, 2023): Eleven people from CVA Valparaíso. The meeting took place at the home of one of the CVA leaders in the municipality of Valparaíso.

APPENDIX D. FIELDWORK BRAZIL

Preliminary virtual interviews for case-study selection

- Dr. Johny Giffonis, Public Defense of Pará, April 13, 2023
- Kawari Tenetehara, Indigenous leader of the Multi-ethnic association of Belém, Pará, April 11, 2023
- Fr Silvio Marques S.J., Ph.D., on socio-environmental conflicts in Brazil, April 13, 2023
- Camila Alves Montavani, Evangelical Coalition for the Climate, April 12, 2023

Interviews conducted in Altamira (F: Female interviewee. M: Male interviewee)

- Representative Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre, June 16, 2023 (F)
- Representative Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), June 17, 2023 (M)
- Catholic bishop of Xingu, June 12, 2023 (M)
- Representative Women's Movement Altamira, June 15, 2023 (F)
- Representative Riverine Council (Evangelical), June 15, 2023 (M)
- Catholic sister of Notre Dame de Namur, June 14, 2023 (F)
- Representative Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), June 15, 2023 (M)
- Representative Black Movement of Altamira, June 16, 2023 (F)
- Pastor, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, June 15, 2023 (M)
- Catholic priest, June 13, 2023 (M)
- Catholic priest, June 13, 2023 (M)
- Catholic priest, June 13, 2023 (M)
- Pastor, Assembly of God, 1 June 13, 2023 (F)
- Two Indigenous leaders, June 16, 2023 (F)
- Leader of Riverside Council,* June 16, 2023 (F)
- Catholic leader of Pueblos Ribeirinhos Extractivistas, June 14, 2023 (F)
- Representative of a riverine community, June 13, 2023 (F)

**The Riverside Council is a collective of riverine peasants that is supported by the MXVS because the government did not recognize the peasants as affected. The council's demand is for the demarcation of a specific territory to be settled.*

Focus groups in Altamira

- Focus Group 1: Five people from the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters, who serve resettled communities in the urban community resettlements. The meeting took place at the sisters' residence in Altamira.

- Focus Group 2: Twelve women linked to the Altamira Women's Movement and the Xingu Vivo para Sempre Movement. The meeting took place at the headquarters of the Federal University of Pará.
- Focus group 3: Seven people representing the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), Childhood and Senior Pastoral ministry, and a diocesan priest. The meeting was held in the pastoral office at the headquarters of the Catholic Diocese of Xingu-Altamira.

Interviews conducted in Apodi (F: Female interviewee. M: Male interviewee)

- Representative Rural Workers Union Apodi, June 26, 2023 (M)
- Farmer in Incra (Catholic), June 27, 2023 (M)
- Farmer in Incra (Evangelical), June 27, 2023 (F)
- Representative Rural Workers Union Apodi, June 27, 2023 (M)
- Indigenous Paiacu leader, June 28, 2023 (F)
- Representative Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), June 26, 2023 (M)
- Catholic priest, June 26, 2023 (M)
- Catholic priest, June 27, 2023 (M)
- Pastor, Baptist church, June 28, 2023 (M)
- Academic, Federal University of Cuenca, June 29, 2023 (M)
- Two representatives of the Municipal Agricultural Department, June 29, 2023 (F)
- Representative, 8th March Women's Center, June 29, 2023 (F)
- Representative ECAP, Women's Movement, June 30, 2023 (F)
- Representative Diaconia, June 30, 2023 (F)

Focus groups in Apodi

- Focus group 1: Nine women linked to rural communities allied to the Apodi Workers Union. The meeting took place at the Rural Workers Union headquarters.
- Focus Group 2: Six men linked to the general coordination of the Union, the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), and local social movements, such as the Xique Xique Network. The meeting took place at the Rural Workers Union headquarters.

APPENDIX E. FIELDWORK MEXICO

Preliminary virtual interviews for case-study selection

- Gabriel Espinoza Iñiguez, Comité Salvemos Temacapulín, Acasico y Palmarejo, December 1, 2022
- Marcela Talamantes Casillas and Dulce Ramos, Universidad Iberoamericana, January 13, 2023
- Pablo Romo Cedano, Serapaz, January 23, 2023
- Claudia Isabel Camacho, Comunidades Eclesiales de Base, March 15, 2023
- Rodrigo Pinto SJ, Misión de Bachajón, Chiapas, March 31, 2023
- Sister Dania Martínez, Misión de Bachajón, Chiapas, March 31, 2023
- Rommel González, Consejo Regional Indígena y Popular de Xpujil CRIPX, April 6, 2023

Interviews conducted in Chiapas (F: Female interviewee.

M: Male interviewee)

- Catholic priest, San Cristóbal de las Casas, June 28, 2023 (M)
- Catholic priest, Cancuc, June 30, 2023 (M)
- Catholic priest, Oxchuc, July 1, 2023 (M)
- Representative Modevite (Ocosingo), July 2, 2023 (F)
- Representative Modevite (Ocosingo), July 2, 2023 (F)
- Catholic nun, Chilón, July 3, 2023 (F)
- Catholic priest, Chilón, July 3, 2023 (M)
- Representative Modevite (Chilón), July 4, 2023 (F)
- Catholic priest, Chilón, July 4, 2023 (M)
- Representative Modevite (Salto del Agua), July 5, 2023 (F)
- Catholic priest, Yajalón, July 6, 2023 (M)
- Representative Modevite (Yajalón), July 6, 2023 (M)
- Representative of Serapaz (F) and Bishop Samuel Ruiz Museum, July 8, 2023

Focus groups

- Focus group 1: Five (male) representatives of Modevite from the Ejido Candelaria. The group included a pastor of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, a pastor of the Church of the New Covenant, and three members of the Catholic church. The meeting took place in the parish building of Ejido Candelaria.
- Focus group 2: Two women and nine men from Modevite Cancuc. The meeting took place in the Cancuc parish building.
- Focus group 3: Six women, one child, and nine men from Modevite Oxchuc. The meeting took place in the Oxchuc parish building.
- Focus group 4: Eight men and 16 women from Modevite Ocosingo. The meeting took place in the Ocosingo parish building.
- Focus group 5: Four men and two women from Modevite Chilón. The meeting took place in the Mission of Bachajón.
- Focus group 6: Eight men and two women from Modevite Sitalá. The meeting took place in the Mission of Bachajón.
- Focus group 7: Seven men from Modevite Yajalón. The meeting took place in the chapel of Yajalón.
- Focus group 8: Seven men and six women from Modevite Altamirano. The meeting took place in the Altamirano parish building.

APPENDIX F. ONLINE EXCHANGE SEMINAR

As part of our follow-up and reciprocal relationship with the local communities from the four cases, we organized an online exchange seminar where representatives of the four movements studied in this research could share their experience, learn about the reality of the other countries, and together engage in a reflective dialogue on the role that faith communities have been playing in the processes of governance and defense of the territories. To this end, we hosted a two-hour virtual dialogue on April 3, 2024, from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm Mexican time. The session was recorded, and notes were taken on the contributions of participants. Some of those insights have been included in the final report.

Objective: To create a space for dialogue for the faith communities of Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico where they can exchange their experiences and lessons learned.

Participants: Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre; Comissão Pastoral de la Tierra y el Sindicato de Trabajadores Rurales de Apodi; Comisión por la Vida del Agua, Modevite Chiapas; and consultants from Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, WRI, LSRI, and others. We suggested the participation of three to five people per movement; however, other people from the movement participated as assistants.

TABLE F-1 | Seminar agenda

TEMA	DESCRIPCIÓN	TIEMPO
Bienvenida Carlos	Bienvenida y presentación breve de generalidades del estudio.	5'
"Presentación individual Araceli"	"Presentación de asistentes: Nombre y organización/movimiento de procedencia."	10'
"Presentación movimientos Araceli/Pamela"	Presentación por parte de representantes de cada movimiento donde compartirán su experiencia a partir de las siguientes preguntas: ¿Quiénes son? ¿Cuál es su lucha? ¿Cuáles son sus principios? ¿Cuál es el mayor desafío que enfrentan actualmente?	
	1. Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre (Brasil)	10'
	"2. Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais de Apodi y Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Brasil)"	10'
	3. Comisión por la Vida del Agua (Colombia)	10'
	"4. Movimiento en Defensa de la Vida y el Territorio. Modevite (México)"	10'
"Diálogo reflexivo María y Luiz"	"Diálogo reflexivo a partir de las siguientes preguntas: 1. ¿Cuáles consideran que son estrategias útiles o para enfrentar los desafíos de los movimientos y las comunidades de fe en la defensa de los territorios? 2. ¿Cómo la espiritualidad ha sido importante en el proceso de defensa?"	50'
"Lanzamiento de la Plataforma. Carlos y Pamela"	Presentación de la plataforma que muestra los resultados de la investigación	5'
"Cierre Carrick"	Agradecimientos	5'
"Cierre espiritual Modevite"	Un representante de Modevite liderará un cierre espiritual	5'

Source: Authors.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALLIED	Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders	MAB	Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (Movement of People Affected by Dams)
ANLA	Autoridad Nacional de Licencias Ambientales (National Authority of Environmental Licenses)	MEDDAT	Mesa Departamental para la Defensa del Agua y el Territorio (Departmental Roundtable for the Defense of Water and Territories)
ASA	Articulação no Semi-Árido Brasileiro (Articulation for the Semi-Arid Region)	Modevite	Movimiento en Defensa de la Vida y el Territorio (Movement in Defense of Life and Territory)
CEAMA	Conferencia Eclesial Amazonica (Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon)	MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers Movement)
CODIMUJ	Coordinadora Diocesana de Mujeres, Chiapas (Diocesan Coordinator of Women)	MXVS	Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre (Movement Xingu Alive Forever)
CPT	Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission)	PDET	Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial, Colombia (Development Programs with Territorial Focus)
CUT	Central Única dos Trabalhadores (Central Trade Union)	REPAM	Red Eclesial Pan-Amazónica (The Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network)
CVA	Comissão para a Vida da Água (Commission for the Life of Water)	Zodevite	Zoques en Defensa de la Vida y el Territorio (Zoques in Defense of Life and Territory)
EZLN	Exército Zapatista de Libertação Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation)		
FBO	Faith-Based Organization		
IBAMA	Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources)		

ENDNOTES

1. This work came to the fore with the establishment of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation in 1986, which closed in 2019.
2. In his *Critical Introduction to Political Ecology*, Robbins (2020) does not mention the role of religious actors in climate-change justice and socio-environmental justice matters.
3. "Liberation theology" is a conception of the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council (1962–65) in the Latin American context and links the Christian faith with the promotion of social justice. Subsequent sections of this report will expand on the relationship between the Second Vatican Council and faith communities' participation in socio-environmental disputes.
4. The Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas 2023) numbers at the time of writing 3,871 cases globally. For a description of the atlas, see Temper et al. (2018) and Martínez Alier (2023). For an overview of the literature on socio-environmental conflicts in the context of the green transition, see Dunlap and Riquito (2023).
5. For the relationships among the Latin American Bishops' Conference documents, liberation theology, and the Second Vatican Council, see Deneulin and Bano (2009, 136–48); for the relationship between *Laudato Si'* and liberation theology and how the former has superseded it, see Deneulin (2021a, 78–85).
6. For religious rituals legitimizing mining in Mongolia, see Shimamura (2014).
7. We follow in part Thiede and Carnes (2018) who highlighted three ways in which the Catholic church contributed to expanding the civic space in Chile and El Salvador during the dictatorship period: information sharing, civic education, and discourse that challenges oppressive structures.
8. Bebbington and Bury (2013, 15) noted that, between 1990 and 1997, global investment in mining exploration increased by 400 percent in Latin America, compared to 90 percent globally, and that the region's share of overall global mining investment increased from 12 to 33 percent between 1990 and 2000.
9. Water use varies across minerals and locations, but all mineral extraction is water-intensive. To take the case of gold, a study of a gold mine in Colombia estimates that one kilo of gold extracted required between 300 and 400 cubic meters of water (Alvarez-Pugliese et al. 2021).
10. According to FAO-OECD (2021), Latin America is estimated to account for 63 percent of global soybean exports, 56 percent of global sugar exports, and 42 percent of global beef exports by 2030.
11. According to Global Witness (2023), 34 percent of all attacks registered in 2022 were experienced by Indigenous people while they make up only 5 percent of the world's population. See also Scheidel et al. (2020), whose review of 2,743 cases of conflicts globally shows that environmental defenders were facing criminalization in 20 percent of cases, physical violence in 18 percent, and assassinations in 13 percent, and that these numbers significantly increased when Indigenous people were involved.
12. The term "structural violence" was introduced by John Galtung in the late 1960s (Crettiez 2009; Giménez and Jiménez 2017) and has often been used in Latin America to describe situations of poverty, power inequality, human rights abuses, land and livelihoods dispossession, political and military violence, and destruction of cultures.
13. For a summary of the relationship between gender inequality and environmental threats and ways of addressing gender-based violence in environmental contexts, see Castañeda Carney et al. (2021)
14. The Indigenous groups who remain today are the Coreguajes, Uitotos, Paeces, and Ingas.
15. For an account of how colonization processes led by state policies have been shaping rural territories in Colombia, resulting in land concentration, marginalization, and displacement of peasant populations; weakening of peasant economies; and increases in deforestation and biodiversity loss, see, among others, Cueto (2011), Molano et al. (1989), González (2001), and Molano (1987).
16. During the government of Pastrana (1998–2002), there was an initiative at dialogue with the FARC that determined a detente zone from which the armed forces had to withdraw. One municipality of Caquetá was within that zone, but this attempt at negotiation was aborted in January 2002. The first failed attempt at dialogue and peace negotiations was in the 1980s in La Uribe (Meta) during the Betancur government (1982–1986).
17. According to Datos para la Paz (2023), as of September 30, 2023, in Caquetá there were 8,332 disappeared, 339,214 displaced people, and 34,914 homicides.

18. The Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (PDET) are an initiative of the peace agreements, especially the first section on "Integral Rural Reform," which focuses on creating better living conditions for rural populations. The implementation of the peace agreements was stalled with the government of Iván Duque, but the government of Gustavo Petro is making progress in implementing them. The Vicaría sees in the PDET a window of opportunity to strengthen its work.
19. This was a bilateral agreement between Colombia and the United States to define strategies toward peace. Initially, the plan was focused on building the social conditions for development, but it soon focused on addressing narco-trafficking and illegal cultivation.
20. It ran Radio Sutatenza in the 1950s and 1960s, which broadcast education programs for rural populations. The Catholic church has also facilitated the creation of the Workers Union and the National Agrarian Federation in Colombia (Arias 2002, CNMH 2016).
21. Emerald Energy (then British owned) entered the municipality of San Vicente in 2006, and Pacific Rubiales that of San José de Fragua in 2012.
22. According to the 2019 National Survey on Religious Diversity, 57.2 percent of the population of Colombia self-identifies as Catholic, and 19.5 percent as Evangelical (Beltrán and Silva 2020). In Caquetá, in 2022, there were 253,849 baptized Catholics out of a population of 292,280; that is, more than 86 percent of the population in Caquetá is Catholic (Arquidiócesis de Bogotá 2023).
23. The other cases selected were The InterFaith Rainforest Initiative, the dam El Quimbo in Huila, the mine Quebradona in Jericó, the Río Atrato as subject of rights, the Mennonite occupation in Meta.
24. This is a Protestant church specific to Caquetá. It was founded by Gregorio Perdomo Guzmán in the 1960s. He was a doctor who started to cure people and created a faith community.
25. The Eucharistic service and its homily were published on the CVA Facebook page.
26. Arnulfo Trujillo was a priest of the Diocese of Florencia and arrived in Caquetá in 1987 as a parish priest in the municipality of Belén de Los Andaquíes where the first office of the Vicaría was located. Father Arnulfo, together with Sister Clara Lucía Loaiza, accompanied local communities throughout the civil conflict. Father Arnulfo died during heart surgery, and Sister Clara Lucia died in a car accident.
27. Radio Andaquí is a community radio from Belén de los Andaquíes, and its leader is also one of the CVA leaders. The Vicaría and the CVAs therefore sometimes use this community radio to communicate.
28. In 2018, the Colombian Supreme Court declared the Colombian Amazon as a subject of rights, following a court case brought forward by a group of 25 young Colombians, including two from Caquetá, and which was facilitated by the Colombian socio-legal studies research center Dejusticia (Angarita and Mojica 2022).
29. This expression was central to the Amazon Synod. In his post-Synodal Exhortation, Pope Francis (2020a, 61) writes: "The Church is called to journey alongside the people of the Amazon region. In Latin America, this journey found privileged expression at the Bishops' Conference in Medellín (1968) and its application to the Amazon region at Santarem (1972), followed by Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992), and Aparecida (2007). The journey continues, and missionary efforts, if they are to develop a Church with an Amazonian face, need to grow in a culture of encounter toward 'a multifaceted harmony'."
30. Corporación Terrae, or Corporación Geoambiental TERRAE in its full name, is a Colombian nonprofit organization whose mission is to generate and disseminate knowledge to improve the technical base of decision-making in environmental and territorial matters and help communities protect their natural environment through the integration of scientific information and ancestral knowledge.
31. Different types of organizations have collaborated in the process of territorial defense, such as the Colombian environmental organizations CENSAT Agua Viva and Corporación Terrae, the Colombian associations Minga, Colectivo Sugamuxi, the collective ANSUR, ecumenical organizations such as the Centro Ecueménico para América Latina de Comunicación (CEPALC), local government-based associations such as Asociación de Juntas de Acción Comuna (Asojuntas), the Departmental roundtable (MEDDAT), the Foundation Chasquis, the Universidad de la Amazonía, and international Catholic cooperation agencies, such as Caritas and other Catholic organizations, such as REPAM and the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon (CEAMA), among others.
32. The Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios-ESMAD) exercised physical violence against the peaceful demonstrators, leaving some injured and detained. Who ordered the intervention of the Squadron remains unknown.

33. For example, in a recent interview, the president of the Colombian Oil and Gas Association said that investments of \$3 billion were planned for the coming years in Caquetá, but due to the opposition, these will not be made. This discourse generates division and uncertainty among local residents (Cajarmaca 2023).
34. It has been reported that the initial impact assessment of Emerald Energy was based on a survey with farms in areas that had already been deforested and had few aquifers, thus minimizing the environmental and social impact of the project (Díaz 2018).
35. The current government (of Gustavo Petro, 2022-) is seeking a better implementation of the peace agreements than the previous one. It is introducing stricter regulation of environmental licenses and implementing other policies to combat deforestation in the Amazon. How this change in government at the national level will affect the outcome of the socio-environmental conflict at the local level remains to be seen.
36. This is a form of civil participatory right where a group of citizens can present a normative project to the national congress to be approved or denied.
37. These include Katholische Zentralstelle Für Entwicklungshilfe, Fastenaktion, DKA, Adveniat, SNPS, Caritas Germany and Caritas Spain, Forum SYD, MIVA e ITA-CHO.
38. The council states, "The joys and the hopes, the griefs, and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs, and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (Paul VI 1965, 1).
39. These are part of the government's Zero Deforestation strategy. However, the Vicaría fears that these policies could undermine the region's native forests and may result in land concentration, expulsion, and multinational patents on native species (Vicaría Sur 2018b).
40. Among the various groups are the Kayapó, Arara, Xucuru, Guaraní, Guajajara, Xavante, Xicrin, and Canela.
41. In Brazil, the people who live on riverbanks (*ribeirinhos*) are a generic category subject of rights. They are part of the peasantry who adapt their productive activities to seasonal river variations.
42. See for example the detailed ethnographic study of the local struggles by Taylor Klein (2022) and Bratman's (2014) analysis of the Belo Monte struggles in a historical context. Other studies in English include Atkins (2018, 2020), Chaves and Weißer-mel (2023), Fearnside (2017), Jaichand and Sampaio (2022), Peters (2018), Ribeiro and Morato (2020); and in Portuguese: Alves (2013), Fleury and Almeida (2013), Magalhães and Hernandez (2009), Magalhães and Cunha (2017), Marques (2021), Pereira and Penido (2010), Santana and Brzezinski (2018).
43. EJAAtlas (2023) has identified 222 socio-environmental conflicts in Brazil. In 2021, the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI 2021) identified 305 cases of conflicts, of which 226 involved Indigenous territories.
44. Pentecostalism arrived in Brazil in the early 20th century. It is characterized by an emphasis on a direct and personal experience of the Holy Spirit and an individual moral discourse. The Christian Congregation and the Assembly of God are the oldest Pentecostal churches in Brazil. Neo-Pentecostalism emerged in the second half of the 20th century, and links faith to financial and personal success. The largest neo-Pentecostal church in Brazil is the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God; see Chesnut and Kingsbury (2022) for a history of Pentecostalism in Brazil. In the context studied here, Pentecostals have assumed a political stance of negotiation and bargaining, while neo-Pentecostals have remained neutral, working mainly on relieving their members from negative consequences of mega-infrastructure projects.
45. They are part of a large network of therapeutic communities where people with alcohol and other drug problems are sent for detoxification and treatment. It is not uncommon to demand tithes and loyalty to the church in exchange for the provision of material, social, and emotional support.
46. This is also echoed in the final document of the Amazon Synod (2020, 16): "One of the most glorious pages of the Amazon has been written by the martyrs. The participation of the followers of Jesus in his passion, death, and glorious resurrection has accompanied the life of the Church to this day, especially in the moments and places in which, for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus, Christians live in the midst of acute contradictions, such as those who struggle courageously in favour of integral ecology in the Amazon. This Synod admires and recognizes those who struggle, at great risk to their own lives, to defend the existence of this territory." See Gandolfo-O'Donnell (2023) for an account of the lives of "eco-martyrs" in the Amazon and Latin America.

47. See Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness [...] Blessed are the peacemakers" (verses 3-10). In the eyes of the people, Sister Dorothy Stang represented a personification of the Beatitudes. Both her words and steadfast practice of justice were read by local communities as a personification of the attributes of Jesus.
48. The CPT was founded in 1975 during the military dictatorship, in response to the situation experienced by rural workers, especially in the Amazon, who were expelled from the land they occupied and were subjected to conditions similar to slave labor. The Pastoral Land Commission is linked to the Brazilian Catholic Bishops Conference. See Pinto (2015) for an analysis of the CPT and its influence on social movements in Brazil.
49. Diaconia is linked to the Micah Network (Micah Network n.d.; Freeman et al. 2020). It is inspired by the Lausanne Covenant, which was adopted at the first World Evangelical Congress in 1974 and links evangelism and social action (Aasmundsen 2018; Dahle et al. 2014; Padilla 1976).
50. According to one informant, there could be two or three Evangelical pastors per community, but one Catholic priest for five or six communities.
51. The MST officially came into being in 1984 at the first National Meeting of Landless Rural Workers in the state of Paraná. MST is a social movement that calls itself mass-based and autonomous and seeks to organize rural workers in order to achieve an agrarian reform. For accounts about the MST in the English academic literature, see, among others, Hernandez (2020), Robles (2002), and Sauer (2020).
52. Judicialization means the resolution of socio-environmental disputes through court rulings and legal processes.
53. This is a solidarity marketing network comprising a range of civil society organizations. They work toward improving the quality of life of rural and urban workers.
54. The Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) is Brazil's largest union and the largest workers' union in Latin America.
55. Tomás Balduino O.P. was a Brazilian Catholic bishop. He played a prominent role on issues related to agrarian reform and Indigenous peoples' rights. He participated in the creation of the Indigenous Missionary Council in 1972. He founded the CPT in 1975 and was its first president. He died in 2014.
56. Modevite was formed to press municipalities to implement the Dry Law (*Ley Seca*). The law prohibited alcohol and closed canteens, mainly to address violence against women, prevent alcoholism in children and adolescents, and reduce fights. Modevite collected more than 20,000 signatures, held meetings with local government, and organized statements and pilgrimages to mobilize local populations.
57. These are Altamirano, Cancuc, Chicomuselo, Chilón, Huixtán, Ocosingo, Oxchuc, Palenque, San Cristóbal, Sitalá, Tenejapa, and Yajalón. Fieldwork has been conducted in eight of them (Appendix E).
58. These groups have often exercised lethal violence, as in the Acteal Massacre of December 22, 1997 in which paramilitaries shot at a population in prayer, resulting in the murder of 45 Tzotzil people, of whom 18 were women (4 of them pregnant), 16 girls, 4 boys, 17 men, and 26 people seriously injured (CNDH, n.d).
59. The Mexican Constitution recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and their own forms of government. Modevite is developing such community governments in two of its municipalities, Chilón and Sitalá. This new way of governing integrates social, political, religious, and legal perspectives, supported by traditional forms of decision-making. A formal request has been submitted to the Institute of Elections and Citizen Participation to eliminate political parties and establish a traditional Indigenous government. Given the delay of the institute's response, Chilón and Sitalá are organizing their elections according to their customs and have launched alternative campaigns to propose alternative service offices that better respond to local issues. Political parties are violently boycotting the process, but the community governments, initiative goes forward.
60. There is a vast literature on the Zapatistas. For an account of the movement, see, among others, Dinerstein (2015), Gahman and Mohamed (2022), Harvey (1998), and Khasnabish (2010).
61. For more information on Chicomuselo, see Estrada (2023), Kneen (2013), Mandujano (2023a), RedTDT (2023).
62. For more information on the connection between the highway and the Mayan train, see Frabes (2019), and Mariscal (2019a, b).
63. For a description of the Jesuit Mission and its activities in the area, see Iberoamericana University Foundation (n.d.) and Rioridan and Travieso (2018).

64. According to a priest from the Misión Bachajón, there are currently 126 permanent deacons and their wives serving 640 communities in the area covered by the Misión and 90 deacons in formation.
65. When our research team participated in the 10th anniversary celebrations of Modevite in November 2023 to discuss research findings, people from Chicomuselo were not able to join the celebrations as two drug cartels and the Mexican army were in a violent confrontation on the village's main square. Local residents were not able to leave, and no food was entering the village. Some residents took refuge in the hills. Modevite went to the hills to pray and give thanks to the hills for providing refuge to Chicomuselo residents.
66. Serapaz (Services and Advice for Peace) was created by Bishop Samuel Ruiz during the mediation process between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the Mexican government. Since then, it has worked in the region with a positive conflict transformation approach, strengthening peace dynamics in Chiapas and other parts of the country that experience high levels of violence.
67. The Internal Security Law was promulgated on 21 December 2017. It was questioned by international human rights organizations, civil society organizations, and social movements due to its militarization of territories and leaving public security in the hands of the army. In Chiapas, the law was widely opposed because Chiapas is a region where armed military and paramilitary groups have seriously violated the human rights of the civilian population.
68. Paolo Freire is a Brazilian educationalist who developed in the 1960s a pedagogy of the oppressed, which transformed education from being about information and knowledge sharing (which he called "banking education" to being about a critical analysis of social realities and their transformation (which he called "problem-solving education"). See Freire (1990, 2021).
69. This "past" refers to the work of the missionaries after the Second Vatican Council from the 1960s onward, and to some extent the work of the Catholic church during the 1930s, especially in Colombia and Brazil. During colonial times, there are references of missionaries having facilitated deforestation and extractive activities as in our Colombian case.
70. Francis (2020, 1-4) urges "the entire Church" and "every person of good will" to read the Final Document of the Amazon Synod so that "the entire Church may be enriched and challenged by the work of the synodal assembly" and that "it may inspire in some way every person of good will."
71. This is also a conclusion of the Amazon Synod. It urged a formation of faith communities that integrate faith and socio-environmental commitment: "Continuing with the Latin American Church tradition: figures such as San José de Anchieta, Bartolomé de las Casas, [...] among others, taught us that the defence of the first peoples of this continent is intrinsically linked to faith in Jesus Christ and his Good News. Today we must form pastoral agents and ordained ministers who show socio-environmental care" (Synod of the Amazon, 2020, 75).
72. According to a report by Oxfam (Williams 2019), agricultural workers often do not have access to adequate toilets, lunch facilities, and adequate safety equipment to handle pesticides and are mainly contracted for temporary and seasonal employment.

REFERENCES

- Aasmundsen, H.G. 2018. "The Lausanne Movement, Holistic Mission and the Introduction of Creation Care in Latin America." In *Church, Cosmivision and the Environment: Religion and Social Conflict in Contemporary Latin America*, edited by E. Berry and R. Albro. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 55–74.
- ALLIED (Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders). n.d. "About Us." <https://allied-global.org/about/>. Accessed October 1, 2023.
- Alvarado, M. 2023. "Tramo San Cristóbal-Palenque, Necesario." *Diario de Chiapas*, October 31, 2023. <https://diariodechiapas.com/portada/tramo-san-cristobal-palenque-necesario/>.
- Alvarez, M. 2016. *Integral Mission: A New Paradigm for Latin American Pentecostals*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Regnum Books International.
- Alvarez-Pugliese, C.E., F. Machuca-Martínez, and M. Pérez-Rincón. 2021. "Water Footprint in Gold Extraction: A Case-Study in Suárez, Cauca, Colombia." *Helyon* 7 (9): 49–79. e07949.
- Alves, J.M. 2013. "Luta e Resistência dos Movimentos Sociais à Hidrelétrica Belo Monte na Transamazônica – PA." *Revista Ideas* 7 (3): 9–35. <https://revistaideas.ufrj.br/ojs/index.php/ideas/article/view/1>.
- Amazon Synod. 2020. *Final Document: The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*. <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.pdf>.
- Angarita, M., and A. Mojica. 2022. "Colombian Supreme Court Rules to Protect Future Generations and Amazon Rainforest in Climate Change Case." <https://www.escr-net.org/case-law/2019/stc-4360-2018>.
- Aquínoticias. 2019. "SOP Reitera Construcción de Carretera SCLC-Palenque." *Aquínoticias*, July 10, 2019.
- Arellano-Yanguas, J. 2014. "Religion and Resistance to Extraction in Rural Peru: Is the Catholic Church Following the People?" *Latin American Research Review* 49 (Special Issue): 61–80.
- Arellano-Yanguas, J. 2016. "From Preaching to Listening: Extractive Industries, Communities, and the Church in Rural Peru." In *Religious Responses to Violence: Human Rights in Latin America Past and Present*, edited by A. Wilde. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. 311–38.
- Arellano-Yanguas, J., and J.L. Dammert. 2020. *Gobernanza de las Industrias Extractivas en América Latina: Material de Capacitación Introductorio*. Lima, Peru: Natural-resource governance Institute.
- Arias, R. 2002. "Revista del Libro: De la Izquierda a la Derecha. La Iglesia Católica en la Colombia Contemporánea, por Michael Larosa." *Historia Crítica* 1 (23): 163–8.
- Arquidiócesis de Bogotá. 2023. *Arquidiócesis de Florencia: Un Camino de Fe entre Sombras y Luces de Esperanza*. <https://elcatolicismo.com.co/iglesia-hoy/colombia/arquidiocesis-de-florencia-un-camino-de-fe-entre-sombras-luces-y-esperanzas>. Accessed August 30, 2023.
- Arsel, M., B. Hogenboom, and L. Pellegrini. 2016. "The Extractive Imperative in Latin America." *The Extractive Industries and Society* 3 (4): 880–887.
- Asad, T. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Atkins, E. 2018. "Belo Monte: There Is Nothing Green or Sustainable about These Mega-Dams." *The Conversation*, August 9, 2018. <https://theconversation.com/belo-monte-there-is-nothing-green-or-sustainable-about-these-mega-dams-98025>.
- Atkins, E. 2020. "Contesting the 'Greening' of Hydropower in the Brazilian Amazon." *Political Geography* 80: 10–21. 102179.
- Batista, A. 2021. "Comunidades do Pará Sofrem com Entressafra do Acai e Caravana Agroecologica Apresenta Alternativas." <https://fase.org.br/pt/noticias/comunidades-do-para-sofrem-com-entressafra-do-acai-e-caravana-agroecologica-apresenta-alternativas/>. Accessed July 1, 2024.
- Bebbington, A., and J. Bury. 2013. *Subterranean Struggles: New Dynamics of Mining, Oil and Gas in Latin America*. Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Bebbington, Anthony J., Denise Humphreys Bebbington, and Laura Aileen Sauls. 2018. *Assessment and Scoping of Extractive Industry and Infrastructure in Relation to Deforestation: Global and Synthesis Report*. San Francisco, CA: Climate and Land Use Alliance. <http://www.climateandlandusealliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Global-Synthesis-Impacts-of-EII-on-Forests-1.pdf>.
- Bebbington, A., B. Fash, J. Rogan, L. Farthing, and N. Fabricant. 2019. "Socio-Environmental Conflict, Political Settlements, and Mining Governance: A Cross-Border Comparison, El Salvador and Honduras." *Latin American Perspectives* 46 (2): 84–106.
- Beltrán, W.M., and L. Silva. 2020. *Diversidad Religiosa, Valores y Participación Política en Colombia*. https://www.justiciaypazcolombia.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Beltran-Larotta_Diversidad-Religiosa-valores-y-participación-política-en-Colombia_V2.pdf.

- Berry, E., and R. Albro, eds. 2020. *Church, Cosmovision and the Environment: Religion and Social Conflict in Contemporary Latin America*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Biles. 2010. "Geo-Mexico: The Geography and Dynamics of Modern Mexico." *Journal of Latin American Geography* 9(2): 171-172. <https://geo-mexico.com/?p=3856>.
- Bratman, E. 2014. "Contradictions of Green Development: Human Rights and Environmental Norms in Light of Belo Monte Dam Activism." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46 (2): 261-89.
- Cabrero, F. 2014. "Teología India y Opción por los Pobres: Un Encuentro poco Explorado." *Revista Realidad* 142: 521-34.
- Calderisi, R. 2013. *Earthly Mission: The Catholic Church and World Development*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Caritas. n.d. *REPAM: The Church in the Heart of the Amazon*. <https://www.caritas.org/what-we-do/development/repam/>. Accessed June 13, 2023.
- Caritas Colombiana. 2020. *Vicaría del Sur: Material Pedagógico en pro del Amor a la Creación de Dios*. <https://caritascolombiana.org/vicaria-del-sur-material-pedagogico-en-pro-del-amor-a-la-creacion-de-dios/>. Accessed May 10, 2023.
- Castañeda Carney, I., L. Sabater, C. Owren, A.D. Boyer, and J. Wen. 2021. *Gender-Based Violence and Environment Linkages*. Gland: Switzerland: International Union for Conservation of Nature. <https://www.iucn.org/es/node/31993>. Accessed May 15, 2023.
- Cavalcante, L., A. Dewulf, and P. van Oel. 2022. "Fighting Against, and Coping with, Drought in Brazil: Two Policy Paradigms Intertwined." *Regional Environmental Change* 22 (11): 110-123. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-022-01966-4>.
- CDHAL (Comité pour les Droits Humains en Amérique Latine). n.d. *Blackfire Exploration, México*. <https://www.cdhal.org/es/recursos/mexico/blackfire-exploration-mexico/>. Accessed April 13, 2023.
- CELAM (Conferencia Episcopal de América Latina). 1968. *Segunda Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano: Documento Final*. https://www.celam.org/conferencias_medellin.php. Accessed June 14, 2023.
- CELAM. 1979. *Documento de Puebla. Tercera Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano*. https://www.celam.org/documentos/Documento_Conclusivo_Puebla.pdf.
- CELAM (Conferencia del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe). 2007. *Documento Conclusivo de Aparecida*. <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Espanol.pdf>.
- CENAMI (Centro Nacional de Ayuda a las Misiones Indígenas). 1990. *Teología India: Primer Encuentro Taller Latinoamericano México*. September 16-23, 1990. https://usuarios.tinet.cat/fqi_sp02/mexic90.htm. Accessed May 13, 2023.
- CEPAL (Comisión Económica para América Latina). 2018. *Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean*. <https://www.cepal.org/en/escazuagreement>. Accessed March 13, 2023.
- Chaves, K.A., and S. Weißermel. 2023. "The Cosmopolitics of Resistance: The Belo Monte Dam and the Struggle of Riverine Communities." *Society and Natural Resources*, May 2023, 809-825. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2023.2199689>.
- Chesnut, A., and K. Kingsbury. 2022. "Pentecostalism in Brazil." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Brazilian History and Culture* (online), edited by Guillermo Palacios. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Missionário). 2021. *Relatório: Violência contra os Povos Indígenas no Brasil*. <https://Cimi.Org.Br/Wp-Content/Uploads/2022/08/Relatorio-Violencia-Povos-Indigenas-2021-Cimi.Pdf>.
- Clarke, G. 2006. "Faith Matters: Faith-Based Organizations, Civil Society and International Development." *Journal of International Development* 18 (6): 835-48.
- Clarke, G., and J. Jennings, eds. 2008. *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Clarke, M., and V. Ware. 2015. "Understanding Faith-Based Organizations." *Progress in Development Studies* 15 (1): 37-49. DOI:10.1177/1464993414546979.
- CMLK (Centro Martin Luther King). 2010. "El 'Ejército de Dios,' Ataca a las Comunidades Zapatistas." March 13. <https://cmlk.org/el-ejercito-de-dios-ataca-a-las-comunidades-zapati>.
- CNDH (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos). n.d. *Matanza de Acteal, Chiapas*. <https://www.cndh.org.mx/noticia/matanza-de-acteal-chiapas-grave-violacion-los-derechos-humanos-por-parte-del-estado>. Accessed June 13, 2023.
- CNMH (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica). 2016. *Tierras y Conflictos Rurales: Historia, Políticas Agrarias y Protagonistas*. Bogotá, Colombia: CNMH.

- Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia. 2022. "La Economía a la Luz de las Propuestas de la Iglesia Católica y Su Diálogo con Otros Sectores." November 22–24, 2022. <https://www.cec.org.co/sistema-informativo/actualidad/la-economia-la-luz-de-las-propuestas-de-la-iglesia-catolica-y-su>. Accessed August 3, 2023.
- Córdova, M.L., and P. Gómez López. 2018. "Women's Experiences on the Pastoral Area of Dioceses of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34 (2): 105–9.
- Crettiez, X. 2009. *Las Formas de la Violencia*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Waldhuter.
- Cueto, I. 2011. "Colonización y Frontera Agropecuaria en Colombia." *Revista Punto de Vista* 2 (3): 91–108.
- Dahle, L., M. Serigstad, and K. Jørgensen, eds. 2014. *The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Regnum Books International.
- Datos para la Paz. 2023. "Registro Único de Víctimas." <https://datos.paz.unidadvictimas.gov.co/registro-unico-de-victimas/>. Accessed May 10, 2023.
- Davies, J. 2010. "Mitzitón: Una Comunidad en Chiapas Resistiendo la Construcción de una Carretera del Gobierno." *The Narco News Bulletin*. March 8. <https://narconews.com/Issue64/articulo4077.html>. Accessed May 3, 2023.
- Deneulin, S. 2021a. *Human Development and the Catholic Social Tradition*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Deneulin, S. 2021b. "Religion and Development: Integral Ecology and the Catholic Church Amazon Synod." *Third World Quarterly* 42 (10): 2282–99.
- Deneulin, S., and M. Bano. 2009. *Religion in Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Deneulin, S., and C. Rakodi. 2011. "Revisiting Religion: Development Studies Thirty Years on." *World Development* 39 (1), 45–54.
- Díaz, K. 2018. "Desapareció el Agua: Preocupación en Caquetá por Falencias en los Estudios Técnicos de la Empresa Petrolera Emerald Energy." *Semana Sostenible*. March 20. <https://www.ambienteysociedad.org.co/desaparecio-el-agua-preocupacion-en-caqueta-por-falencias-en-los-estudios-tecnicos-de-la-empresa-petrolera-emerald-energy/>. Accessed July 10, 2023.
- Díaz, K. 2019. "Información sobre el Caso del Bloque Petrolero El Nogal." *Universal Periodic Review*. https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-04/js3_upr31_chn_s_annexe5.pdf.
- Díaz, V., and M. Roxana. 2018. "El Sentido de lo Alternativo en la Economía Solidaria: La Experiencia de Yomol A'tel." In *Cuadernos Deusto de Derechos Humanos* 92. Bilbao, Spain: Universidad de Deusto. <http://www.deusto-publicaciones.es/deusto/pdfs/cuadernosdcho/cuadernosdcho92.pdf>.
- Dinerstein, A. 2015. *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organising Hope*. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Drexler-Dreis, J. 2017. "The Option for the Poor as a Decolonial Option: Latin American Liberation Theology in Conversation with Teología India and Womanist Theology." *Political Theology* 18 (3): 269–86.
- Dunlap, A., and M. Riquito. 2023. "Social Warfare for Lithium Extraction? Open-Pit Lithium Mining, Counterinsurgency Tactics and Enforcing Green Extractivism in Northern Portugal." *Energy Research and Social Science*. 95: 102912.
- Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. 2018. *Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean*. <https://repositorio.cepal.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/7e888972-80c1-48ba-9d92-7712d6e6f1ab/content>. Accessed March 3, 2023.
- EJAtlas. 2023. *Global Atlas of Environmental Justice*. <https://ejatlas.org>. Accessed February 3, 2023.
- Estrada, H. 2023. "¿Minera Canadiense detrás de Nuevo Grupo Armado en Chicomuselo?" *El Sol de Chiapas*. January 18, 2023. <https://elsoldechiapas.com/minera-canadiense-detras-de-nuevo-grupo-armado-en-chicomuselo/>.
- FAO-OECD (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations-Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2021. *Regional Brief: Latin America and the Caribbean*. <https://www.agri-outlook.org/documents/oecd-fao-outlook-regional-latin-america-and-the-caribbean.pdf>.
- Fearnside, P. 2017. "Brazil's Belo Monte Dam: Lessons of an Amazonian Resource Struggle." *Erde*. 148 (2–3): 167–84.
- Fleury, L., and J. Almeida. 2013. "A Construção da Usina Hidrelétrica de Belo Monte: Conflito Ambiental e o Dilema do Desenvolvimento." *Ambiente y Sociedade*. 16 (4): 141–56.
- Follmann, J.I., ed. 2020. *Ecologia Integral: Abordagens (Im)pertinentes*. São Leopoldo, Brasil: Casa Leiria. https://olma.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ecologiaintegral_vol2-1.pdf.

- Fountain, P. 2013. "The Myth of Religious NGOs: Development Studies and the Return of Religion." *Revue Internationale de Politique de Développement* 4 (4): 9-30. <https://doi.org/10.4000/poldev.1361>.
- Frabes, S. 2019. "Chiapas: Gobierno Condiciona Presupuesto Municipal a Cambio de Aprobación de la Carretera San Cristóbal-Palenque." *Avispa Midia*. April 2, 2019. <https://avispa.org/chiapas-gobierno-condiciona-presupuesto-municipal-a-cambio-de-aprobacion-de-la-carretera-san-cristobal-palenque/>.
- Francis. 2013. *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. Accessed March 3, 2023.
- Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si': On Care of Our Common Home*. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.htm. Accessed March 3, 2023.
- Francis. 2020. *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: Querida Amazonia*. <http://www.sinodoamazonico.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/post-synodal-apostolic-exhortation--querida-amazonia.html>. Accessed April 4, 2023.
- FRAYBA (Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas). 2023a. *Chiapas, un Desastre. Entre la Violencia Criminal y la Complicidad del Estado*. https://frayba.org.mx/sites/default/files/Informes/Informe-Frayba-2023/Informe-Frayba-2023_Chiapas-un-desastre.pdf.
- FRAYBA. 2023b. "El Poder Judicial del Estado de Chiapas Condena a 25 Años a los Cinco Indígenas Tseltales de San Juan Cancuc por Defender Su Territorio," *Boletín* No. 10, May 17. <https://frayba.org.mx/el-poder-judicial-del-estado-de-chiapas-condena-25-anos-los-cinco-indigenas-tseltales-de-san-juan>.
- Freeman, D., A. Heuser, and J. Koehrsen. 2020. "Mobilising Evangelicals for Development Advocacy: Politics and Theology in the Micah Challenge Campaign for the Millennium Development Goals." In *Faith-Based Organizations in Development Discourses and Practice*, edited by J. Koehrsen and A. Heuser. London: Routledge. 57-85.
- Freire, P. 1990. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. 2021. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Gahman, L., and N. Mohamed. 2022. *A Beginner's Guide to Building Better Worlds: Ideas and Inspiration from the Zapatistas*. Bristol, United Kingdom: Policy Press.
- Gandolfo-O'Donnell, E. 2023. *Ecomartyrdom in the Americas: Living and Dying for our Common Home*. New York: Orbis Books. See also <https://ecomartyrdom.net/about-the-book>.
- Giménez, G., and Jiménez, R, eds. 2017. *La Violencia en México a la Luz de las Ciencias Sociales*. Ciudad de Mexico, Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales.
- Global Forest Watch. 2023. *Global Deforestation Report*. <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/COL>. Accessed May 3, 2023.
- Global Witness. 2023. *Standing Firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis*. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/standing-firm/>. Accessed February 23, 2023.
- González, Juan Manuel. 2001. "Una Aproximación al Estudio de la Transformación Ecológica del Paisaje Rural Colombiano: 1850-1990." In *Naturaleza en Disputa: Ensayos de Historia Ambiental en Colombia, 1850-1995*, edited by G. Palacio. Bogotá, Colombia: Universidad Nacional, 77-115.
- Gualinga, P. 2023. "Defending Water in the Amazon: Interview by Lisa Sullivan." *Maryknoll Magazine*. June 6, 2023. <https://www.maryknollmagazine.org/2023/06/patricia-gualinga-defending-water-in-the-amazon/>.
- Gudynas, E. 2021. *Extractivisms: Politics, Economy and Ecology*. Rugby, Canada: Practical Action Publishing.
- Guimarães, J.P. 2023. "Fishers Confirm Scientists," Warning: Brazil's Belo Monte Dam Killed off the River." *Mongabay*, June 8, 2023. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/06/fishers-confirm-scientists-warning-brazils-belo-monte-dam-killed-off-the-river/>.
- Harvey, N. 1998. *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hernandez, A. 2020. "The Emergence of Agroecology as a Political Tool in the Brazilian Landless Movement." *Local Environment* 25 (3): 205-27.
- Heuser, A., and J. Koehrsen, eds. 2020. *Faith-Based Organizations in Development Discourses and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Human Rights Watch. 2022. *World Report 2022*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/13/latin-america-alarming-reversal-basic-freedom>. Accessed May 21, 2023.
- Iberoamericana University Foundation. n.d. *Misión Bachajón*. <https://uia-foundation.org/mission-bachajon/>. Accessed February 20, 2023.

- IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia y Estadística). 2010. "Census: Religião." <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/pa/altamira/pesquisa/23/22107>. Accessed June 12, 2023.
- IBGE. 2022. "Población Rural y Urbana." <https://educa.ibge.gov.br>. Accessed June 12, 2023.
- International Rivers. 2010. "Speech by President Lula at a Rally for the Belo Monte Dam." <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/resources/speech-by-pres-lula-at-a-rally-for-the-belo-monte-dam-4293>. Accessed June 3, 2023.
- IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services). 2022. *Summary for Policymakers of the Methodological Assessment Report on the Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. <https://zenodo.org/record/7075892#.Y3cyUcfP02w>. Accessed June 4, 2023.
- Jaichand, V., and A. Sampaio. 2022. "Dam and Be Damned: The Adverse Impacts of Belo Monte on Indigenous Peoples in Brazil." *Human Rights Quarterly* 35 (2): 408–47.
- Jaskoski, M. 2022. *The Politics of Extraction: Territorial Rights, Participatory Institutions, and Conflict in Latin America*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Kayapó, B.K., R. Kayapó, and Y. Juruna. 2010. "Indigenous Declaration after the Belo Monte Dam Auction." *International Rivers*. April. <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/resources/indigenous-declaration-after-the-belo-monte-dam-auction-4297>. Accessed May 6, 2023.
- Khasnabish, A. 2010. *Zapatistas: Rebellion from the Grassroots to the Global*. London: Zed Books.
- Kneen, Jamie. 2013. "Executive Summary of Report re Blackfire May 2013 SPA." *MiningWatch Canada*. <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/2143576/executive-summary-of-report-re-blackfire-may-2013-spa/2898874/>. Accessed May 23, 2023.
- Köhrsen, J., B. Julia, and F. Huber, eds. 2022. *Religious Environmental Activism: Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship*. London: Routledge.
- Kopenawa, D., A. Bruce, and A. Dundy. 2013. *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Koster, H., and C. Deane-Drummond, eds. 2023. *In Solidarity with the Earth: A Multi-disciplinary Theological Engagement with Gender, Mining and Toxic Contamination*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Lacerda, L.F., A. Carcamo, C. Cetina, C. Teixeira, F. Pontes, J. Giffoni, L. Barros, et al. 2020. *Direitos da Natureza*, São Leopoldo, Brasil: Casa Leiria. <http://www.casaleiria.com.br/acervo/olma/direitosda-natureza/4/index.html>. Accessed June 14, 2023.
- Lacerda, L.F., A. Pinheiro, A. Alechandre, B. Bolzani, D. Ribeiro, D. Vasconcelos, H. Contreras, et al. 2022. *Direitos da Natureza: Perspectivas Teóricas e Aplicabilidades Empíricas*. São Leopoldo, Brasil: Casa Leiria. <http://www.guaritadigital.com.br/casaleiria/olma/dnperspectivas/4/index.html>. Accessed June 14, 2023.
- Lacerda, L.F., A. Jesus, E. Santana, E. Rangel, E. Rabbani, F. Potiguara, G. Albuquerque, et al. 2023. *As Religiões e a Natureza*. <http://www.guaritadigital.com.br/casaleiria/olma/asreligioeseana-natureza/6/index.html>. Accessed June 14, 2023.
- Levey, E.C. 2021. "From Liberation Theology to Teología India: The Progressive Catholic Church in Southern Mexico, 1954–1994." PhD. diss. University of Maryland, College Park, Department of History.
- Leyte, A.L. 2019. "Ampliación SCLC-Palenque Seguirá Siendo un Sueño." *Aquínoticias*. December 4, 2019. <https://aquinoticias.mx/ampliacion-sclc-palenque-seguira-siendo-un-sueno/>.
- Magalhães, S., and F. Hernandez, eds. 2009. *Painel de Especialistas: Análise Crítica do Estudo de Impacto Ambiental do Aproveitamento Hidrelétrico de Belo Monte, Belém, Pará*. http://philip.inpa.gov.br/publ_livres/Dossie/BM/Outros/Belo%20Monte%20painel%20especialistas.pdf.
- Magalhães, S., and M. Cunha. 2017. *La Expulsión de los Ribereños en Belo Monte*. São Paulo, Brasil: Informe Sociedade Brasileira para o Progresso da Ciência. <http://portal.sbpcnet.org.br/es/publicacoes/la-expulsion-de-ribeirinhos-en-belo-monte-informe-de-la-sbpc/>. Accessed May 4, 2023.
- Maher, M. 2019. "A Rebellion of Spirituality: On the Power of Indigenous Civil Resistance in Honduras." In *Civil Resistance and Violent Conflict in Latin America*, edited by C. Mouly and E. Hernández Delgado. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. 41–63.
- Mandujano, I. 2009. "Las Botas de Dios." *Proceso*. August 18, 2009. <https://www.proceso.com.mx/reportajes/2009/8/18/las-botas-de-dios-18003.html>.
- Mandujano, I. 2023a. "Marchan en Chicomuselo contra Grupos Armados Que Imponen la Minería en Chiapas." *Proceso*. January 6, 2023. <https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/estados/2023/1/6/marchan-en-chicomuselo-contra-grupos-armados-que-imponen-la-mineria-en-chiapas-299891.html>.

- Mandujano, I. 2023b. "Muchos Jóvenes Están Migrando por la Violencia en Chiapas, Lamenta el Obispo de San Cristóbal." *Revista Proceso*. August 28, 2023. <https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/estados/2023/8/28/muchos-jovenes-estan-migrando-por-la-violencia-en-chiapas-lamenta-el-obispo-de-san-cristobal-313718.html>.
- Mariscal, Á. 2019a. "Indígenas de 12 Municipios Rechazan: 'Carretera de las Culturas,' Obra Asociada al Tren Maya." *Aristegui Noticias*. December 3, 2019. https://aristeguinoticias.com/0312/mexico/indigenas-de-12-municipios-rechazan-carretera-de-las-culturas-obra-asociada-al-tren-maya/?fb_comment_id=2690585564354817_2690798281000212.
- Mariscal, Á. 2019b. "Iniciativa Privada Construirá Carretera Estratégica para Proyectos Extractivos en Chiapas." *Aristegui Noticias*. December 26, 2019. <https://aristeguinoticias.com/2612/mexico/iniciativa-privada-construira-carretera-estrategica-para-proyectos-extractivos-en-chiapas/>.
- Marques, A., P. Rossa, R. Horota, D. Brum, E. Souza, A. Aires, L. Kupssinsku, et al. 2019. "Improving Spatial Resolution of LANDSAT Spectral Bands from a Single RGB Image Using Artificial Neural Network," *2019 13th International Conference on Sensing Technology (ICST)*, Sydney, NSW, Australia, pp. 1-6. doi: 10.1109/ICST46873.2019.9047670.
- Marques, S. 2021. "A Igreja Católica nos Conflitos Socioambientais na Amazônia: O Caso de Belo Monte, Pará." Doctoral diss. Universidade Federal de Amazonas, Centro de Ciências Ambientais. <https://tede.ufam.edu.br/handle/tede/8938>.
- Marshall, K. 2013. *Global Institutions of Religion: Ancient Movers, Modern Shakers*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Martínez-Alier, J. 2023. *Land, Water, Air and Freedom: The Making of World Movements for Environmental Justice*. Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Méndez, M.J. 2018. "'The River Told Me': Rethinking Intersectionality from the World of Berta Cáceres." *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 29 (1): 7-24.
- Méndez-Gómez, D., and E. Pérez. 2023. "Voces desde los Territorios: 'Carretera de las Culturas' San Cristóbal de las Casas-Palenque y el Sentipensar de los Pueblos Originarios en Chiapas." *Antrópica. Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades* 9 (18): 67-91. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/9171335.pdf>.
- Menton, M., and P. Le Billon, eds. 2021. *Environmental Defenders: Deadly Struggles for Life and Territory*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Mesa-Neira, A., and C. Jiménez. 2022. "Acuerdo de Escazú: Retos ante Su Ratificación en Colombia." *THEMIS: Revista de Derecho* (82): 159-68.
- Metz, J.B. 2013. *Por una Mística de Ojos Abiertos: Cuando Irrumpe la Espiritualidad*. Transl. Bernardo Moreno Carrillo. Madrid, Spain: Herder.
- Micah Network. n.d. "Our History." <https://micahglobal.org/>. Accessed May 20, 2023.
- Miller, V.J. 2021. "Mining and the Call for Solidarity." In *Catholic Peace-Building and Mining: Integral Peace, Development and Ecology*, edited by C. Montevecchio and G.F. Powers. London: Routledge. 203-20.
- Modevite. 2016. "Comunicado Final de la Megaperegrinación (San Cristóbal)." <https://modevite.wordpress.com/2016/11/25/comunicado-final-de-la-megaperegrinacion-san-cristobal/>. Accessed April 12, 2023.
- Modevite. n.d. *X Aniversario Modevite*. <https://modevite.wordpress.com/x-aniversario-modevite/>. Accessed May 30, 2023.
- Molano, A. 1987. *Selva Adentro: Una Historia Oral de la Colonización del Guaviare*. Bogotá, Colombia: El Áncora Editores.
- Molano, A., D. Fajardo, and J. Carrizosa, eds. 1989. *La Colonización de la Reserva la Macarena. Yo Le Digo una de las Cosas*. Bogotá, Colombia: Corporación Araracuara.
- Montevecchio, C. 2023. "Subsidiarity: A Central Principle for Justice, Peace, and Sustainability in Mining." *The Journal of Social Encounters* 7 (1): 133-49. https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol7/iss1/8.
- Montevecchio, C., and G. Powers, eds. 2021. *Catholic Peace-Building and Mining: Integral Peace, Development and Ecology*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Mouly, C., and E. Hernández Delgado, eds. 2019. *Civil Resistance and Violent Conflict in Latin America: Mobilizing for Rights*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Movimento Escazú Brasil. n.d. "Movimento Escazú Brasil." <https://escazubrasil.org.br>. Accessed April 5, 2023.
- Murphy, R. 2007. *Martyr of the Amazon: The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Niño, O.A., G.G. León, F.G. Rey, A.R. Salazar, and C.A. Salazar. 2002. *Caquetá, Construcción de un Territorio Amazónico en el Siglo XX*. Instituto Sinchi: Instituto Amazónico de Investigaciones Científicas. <https://sinchi.org.co/caqueta-construccion-de-un-territorio-amazonico-en-el-siglo-xx>. Accessed April 20, 2023.

- OCMAL (Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros en América Latina). 2023. Mapa de Conflictos Mineros en América Latina. <https://www.ocmal.org/>. Accessed February 12, 2023.
- Öhlmann, P., and I. Swart. 2022. "Religions and the Environment." In *The State of the Evidence in Religions and Development*, edited by the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLIFC). Washington, DC: JLIFC. <https://jlifc.com/2022-state-of-the-evidence/>. Accessed January 15, 2023.
- Otano, Jimenez G. 2018. "Social Justice as Environmental Justice. An interpretation of the Social Teaching of the Church from the Practices." *Revista de Fomento Social* 73 (2): 305–23. <https://revistas.uoyola.es/rfs>.
- Padilla, R. 1976. *The New Face of Evangelicalism: An International Symposium on the Lausanne Covenant*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Padilla, R. 2021. *What Is Integral Mission?* Transl. Rebecca Breckveldt. Oxford, United Kingdom: Regnum Books International.
- Paul VI. 1965. *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Accessed March 12, 2023.
- Peet, R., and M. Watts, eds. 2004. *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development and Social Movements*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Pereira, D., and M. Penido. 2010. "Conflitos em Empreendimentos Hidrelétricos: Possibilidades e Impossibilidades do (Des)envolvimento Social." In *Desenvolvimento e Conflitos Ambientais*, edited by A. Zhoury and K. Laschefski. SciELO - Editora UFMG. 250–75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7476/9788542303063>.
- Pérez, Mario Alejandro. 2014. "Conflictos Ambientales en Colombia: Inventario, Caracterización y Análisis." In *Minería en Colombia: Memoria y Justicia Socioecológica, Movimientos Sociales y Posconflicto*, edited by L.J. Garay-Salamanca. Bogotá, Colombia: Contraloría General de la República, 253–325.
- Peters, I. 2018. *Cohesion and Fragmentation in Social Movements: How Frames and Identities Shape the Belo Monte Conflict*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer.
- Pew Forum. 2014. *Religion in Latin America*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>.
- Pew Forum. 2022. *Key Findings from the Global Religious Futures Project*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/>. Accessed March 12, 2023.
- Pinto, A.A., and J.M. Florez. 2022. "¿La Militarización de la Función Ambiental de la Operación Artemisa o la Construcción de Paz en Colombia?" In *Conflicto Armado, Medio Ambiente y Territorio*, edited by Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz. 176–221. <https://www.jep.gov.co/Infografias/docs/libro-comision-territorial-2022.pdf>.
- Pinto, L.H. 2015. "The Influence of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) in the Constitution of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST)." *Revista de Estudios Sociales*. 51: 76–88.
- Polanía-Reyes, S., and F. Henao. 2021. "The Church in Colombia and Extractives: Pastoral Accompaniment Using an Ecotheology of Peace." In *Catholic Peacebuilding and Mining*, edited by C. Montevecchio and G. Powers. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 33–44.
- Pope, S. 2019. "Integral Human Development: From Paternalism to Accompaniment." *Theological Studies*. 80 (1): 123–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563918819798>.
- Purdy, C., and R. Castillo. 2022. *The Future of Mining in Latin America*. Leveraging Transparency to Reduce Corruption Project. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/GS_07072022_LTRC-Future-Mining-Latin-America.pdf.
- Raftopoulos, M, eds. 2018. *Social-Environmental Conflicts, Extractivism and Human Rights in Latin America*. London: Routledge.
- Rapozo, Pedro. 2021. "Necropolitics, State of Exception, and Violence against Indigenous People in the Amazon Region during the Bolsonaro Administration." *Brazilian Political Science Review* 15 (2): e0002.
- Red TDT (Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos). 2023. "Todos los Derechos para Todas y Todos." Mesa de Coordinación Transfronteriza Migraciones y Género Guatemala, México (MTMG). Colectivo de Monitoreo-Frontera Sur. <https://redtdt.org.mx/archivos/18384>. Accessed March 3, 2023.
- Ribeiro, H., and J.R. Morato. 2020. "Social Environmental Injustices against Indigenous Peoples: The Belo Monte Dam." *Disaster Prevention and Management* 29 (6): 865–76.
- Riofrancos, T. 2020. *Resource Radicals: From Petro-nationalism to Post-extractivism in Ecuador*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Riordan, P., and E. Travieso. 2018. "Integral Ecology and Common Goods in Chiapas: The Misión de Bachajón in Light of Laudato Si." *Heythrop Journal* 59 (6): 959–68.
- Robbins, P. 2020. *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*. 3rd edition. Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell.
- Robles, W. 2002. "The Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 28 (2): 146–61.

- Robles Garza, M., and D. García López. 2022. "La Justicia Ambiental en México: Protección a Comunidades Indígenas bajo la Lupa de Escazú." *IUS: Revista del Instituto de Ciencias Jurídicas de Puebla*, 49: 253–83.
- Rueda, R. 2024. "Chiapas Irá a las Urnas en Plena Crisis de Violencia." *El Sol de México*. March 31, 2024. <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/elecciones-2024/chiapas-ira-a-las-urnas-en-plena-crisis-de-violencia-11682078.html>.
- Santana, A., and M.L. Brzezinski. 2018. "UHE Belo Monte: O Estudo do Impacto Ambiental e Suas Contradições." *Revista Brasileira de Iniciação Científica* 5 (2): 235–56. <http://dspace.unila.edu.br/123456789/5799>.
- Santiago, J. 2016. "El Congreso Indígena de 1974: Buscando Nuestras Raíces." *Ojarasca: La Jornada*. May 13, 2016. <https://ojarasca.jornada.com.mx/2016/05/13/rogelio-cuellar-imagenes-de-un-congreso-historico-5011.html>.
- Sauer, S. 2020. "Interview with João Pedro Stédile, National Leader of the MST-Brazil." *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 47 (5): 927–43.
- Scheidel, A., D. Bene, J. Liu, G. Navas, S. Mingorria, S. Demaria, S. Avila, et al. 2020. "Environmental Conflicts and Defenders: A Global Overview." *Global Environmental Change*. 63: 102104–12.
- Scheid, A.F., and D.P. Scheid. 2021. "Integral Ecology, Just Peace and Mining." In *Catholic Peacebuilding and Mining*, edited by Cesar Montevecchio and Gerard Powers. London: Routledge. 117–32.
- Schickendantz, C. 2023. "Reception of Vatican II in Latin America and the Caribbean." In *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, edited by C. Clifford and M. Faggioli. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. 676–94.
- Shimamura, I. 2014. "Ancestral Spirits Love Mining Sites: Shamanic Activities around a Copper-Gold Mining Site in Mongolia." *Inner Asia*. 16 (2): 393–408.
- Stevenson, H. 2023. "Promoting Environmental Rights in Turbulent Times: Latin America and the Escazú Agreement." In *Global Environmental Politics in a Turbulent Era*, edited by P. Dauvergne and L. Sipton. Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing. 49–61.
- Sumaúma. n.d. "Sumaúma: Journalism from the Centre of the World." <https://sumauma.com/en/quem-somos/>.
- Survival International. n.d. "What Brazil's President, Jair Bolsonaro, Has Said about Brazil's Indigenous Peoples," <https://www.survivalinternational.org/articles/3540-Bolsonaro>.
- Svampa, M. 2015. *Neo-extractivism in Latin America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Synod on the Amazon. 2020. *Final Document: The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-02/final-document-synod-amazon.html>. Accessed March 4, 2023.
- Tadros, M., and R. Sabates-Wheeler. 2020. "Inclusive Development: Beyond Need, Not Creed." Working Paper 1, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton, United Kingdom: Institute of Development Studies.
- Tallman, P., A. Riley-Powell, L. Schwarz, G. Salmón-Mulanovich, T. Southgate, C. Pace, A. Valdés-Velásquez, et al. 2022. "Ecosyndemics: The Potential Synergistic Health Impacts of Highways and Dams in the Amazon," *Social Science and Medicine*. 295: 56–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113037>.
- Taylor, C. 2007. *A Secular Age*. London: Belknap.
- Taylor Klein, P. 2022. *Flooded: Development, Democracy, and Brazil's Belo Monte Dam*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Teijlingen, K.M. 2022. "'The Church of the Poor and the Earth' in Latin American Mining Conflicts." *Religions*. 13 (5). 443. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050443>.
- Téllez, A. 2023. "El Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial del Tren Maya: Principios de la Consulta a Comunidades Indígenas." Tesis. Mexico City, Mexico: Universidad Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM). <https://ru.dgb.unam.mx/bitstream/20.500.14330/TES01000843440/3/0843440.pdf>.
- Temper, L., D. Federico, S. Arnim, D.B. Daniela, and J. Martinez-Alier. 2018. "The Global Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas): Ecological Distribution Conflicts as Forces for Sustainability." *Sustainability Science*. 13 (3): 573–84.
- Thiede, J., and M. Carnes. 2018. "Filling the Gaps in Civil Society: The Role of the Catholic Church in Latin American Democratization." *Journal of Religion and Society* 20: 1–18.
- Tomalin, E. 2018. "Religions, Poverty Reduction and Global Development Institutions." *Palgrave Communications* 4, article 132. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-018-0167-8.pdf>.
- Tomalin, E. 2021. "Religions and Development: A Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual?" *Religion*. 51 (1): 105–124, DOI: 10.1080/0048721X.2020.1792055.
- Tomalin, E., J. Haustein, and S. Kidy. 2019. "Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals." *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*. 17 (2): 102–118. DOI:10.1080/15570274.2019.1608664.
- UN (United Nations). n.d. *Harmony with Nature*. <http://www.harmonywithnatureun.org>. Accessed July 23, 2023.

UN (United Nations). 2020. "Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space." https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf.

Urzola, N. 2022. "Derechos de la Naturaleza: Un Camino hacia la Construcción de la Paz Ambiental en Colombia." In *Conflicto Armado, Medio Ambiente y Territorio*, edited by Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz. Bogotá, Colombia: Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, 49–85. <https://www.jep.gov.co/Infografas/docs/libro-comision-territorial-2022.pdf>.

Vanhulst, J., and A. Beling. 2014. "Buen Vivir: Emergent Discourse within or beyond Sustainable Development?" *Ecological Economics*. 101: 54–63.

Vicaría del Sur. 2018a. *Agrobiodiversidad en el Sur del Caquetá, Comunidades Campesinas del Sur de Caquetá*. <https://www.semillas.org.co/es/agrobiodiversidad-en-el-sur-del-caquet-caracterizacion-de-especies-y-variedades-criollas-de-semillas-campesinas>. Accessed March 14, 2023.

Vicaría del Sur. 2018b. *Más Agua, Más Vida, Caquetá Es Amazonía*. Morelia, Colombia: Comisión por la Vida del Agua del Sur de Caquetá.

Vicaría del Sur. 2023. *Un Proceso de Fe y Vida. Sistematización Colectiva de la Experiencia de Trabajo del Equipo Pastoral en la Vicaría del Sur, Caquetá (2009–2022)*. Morelia, Colombia: Comisión por la Vida del Agua del Sur de Caquetá. https://issuu.com/revistacreer23/docs/vicariasurlibro_versiondigital_31enero. Accessed May 30, 2023.

Villalba-Eguiluz, U., and I. Etxano. 2017. "Buen Vivir vs. Development (II): The Limits of (Neo-Extractivism)." *Ecological Economics*. 138: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.03.010>.

Wilkins, D. 2021. "Where Is Religion in Political Ecology?" *Progress in Human Geography* 45: 276–97.

Williams, Peter. 2019. "Sweet and Sour: An Investigation of Conditions on Tropical Fruit Farms in North-East Brazil." OXFAM Briefing Paper. October 2019. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/sweet-and-sour-an-investigation-of-conditions-on-tropical-fruit-farms-in-north-620875/>. Accessed June 20, 2023.

WRI (World Resources Institute). 2020. *Undermining Rights: Indigenous Lands and Mining in the Amazon*. <https://www.wri.org/research/undermining-rights-indigenous-lands-and-mining-amazon>. Accessed February 12, 2023.

WRI. 2023. *New Economy for the Brazilian Amazon: A Path to Building Economic Wealth through Forest Health*. <https://www.wri.org/research/new-economy-brazil-amazon>. Accessed March 14, 2023.

Yomol A'Tel. n.d. "Yomol A'tel: Nosotros y Nuestra Historia." <http://www.yomolatel.org/historia.php>. Accessed June 12, 2023.

ABOUT WRI

World Resources Institute is a global research organization that turns big ideas into action at the nexus of environment, economic opportunity, and human well-being.

OUR CHALLENGE

Natural resources are at the foundation of economic opportunity and human well-being. But today, we are depleting Earth's resources at rates that are not sustainable, endangering economies and people's lives. People depend on clean water, fertile land, healthy forests, and a stable climate. Livable cities and clean energy are essential for a sustainable planet. We must address these urgent, global challenges this decade.

OUR VISION

We envision an equitable and prosperous planet driven by the wise management of natural resources. We aspire to create a world where the actions of government, business, and communities combine to eliminate poverty and sustain the natural environment for all people.

ABOUT LSRI

The Laudato Si' Research Institute is based at Champion Hall at the University of Oxford and is a work of the Jesuits in Britain. Since opening in 2019, its work has been inspired by Pope Francis' vision in the encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, which calls all people to respond to the "cry of the earth" and the "cry of the poor." Inspired by Ignatian traditions and drawing insights from the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, the Institute's mission is to develop an integral ecology paradigm to create a hope-filled future for socio-ecological transformation.



Photo Credits

Cover, Araceli Téllez Haro; Pg. ii, Dan Gold; Pg. 2, Girl with red hat; Pg. 4, Caroline Jacobi:WRI Brasil; Pg. 6, FERNANDO TRIVIÑO; Pg. 9, Crisoforo Gaspar Hernandez; Pg. 11, Lukas Souza; Pg. 13, Alex Mercier; Pg. 14, Marcelo Matsumoto: WRI Brasil; Pg. 17, Alex Quezada; Pg. 19, Matheus Oliveira; Pg. 20, Renan Pissolatti:WRI Brasil; Pg. 23, David Restrepo; Pg. 25, Araceli Téllez Haro; Pg. 26, Debby Hudson; Pg. 30, Sebastian Laverde; Pg. 33, Riccardo de Luca; Pg. 36, Gabriel Porras; Pg. 51, Richard Brunsveld; Pg. 52, Marizilda Cruppe: WRI Brasil; Pg. 57, Matheus Oliveira; Pg. 70, Ivan Cheremisin; Pg. 79, Luiz Felipe S.C.; Pg. 83, Leo; Pg. 86, PROJETO CAFÉ GATO-MOURISCO; Pg. 88, Araceli Téllez Haro; Pg. 101, Max Böhme; Pg. 106, Juan Pablo Jou-Valencia; Pg. 114, Caleb Bennetts; Pg. 119, Ramon Buçard; Pg. 120, LIVESTART STIVEN; Pg. 122, Araceli Téllez Haro; Pg. 128, Josh Withers

Each World Resources Institute report represents a timely, scholarly treatment of a subject of public concern. WRI takes responsibility for choosing the study topics and guaranteeing its authors and researchers freedom of inquiry. It also solicits and responds to the guidance of advisory panels and expert reviewers. Unless otherwise stated, however, all the interpretation and findings set forth in WRI publications are those of the authors.

Maps are for illustrative purposes and do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of WRI, concerning the legal status of any country or territory or concerning the delimitation of frontiers or boundaries.



**WORLD
RESOURCES
INSTITUTE**

10 G Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002
WRI.org



Copyright 2024 World Resources Institute. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
To view a copy of the license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>