



PROTECCIÓN DE PERSONAS DEFENSORAS DE DERECHOS

"Tejiendo redes por la libertad y dignidad"

The struggle and challenges for dreams of freedom and a dignified life

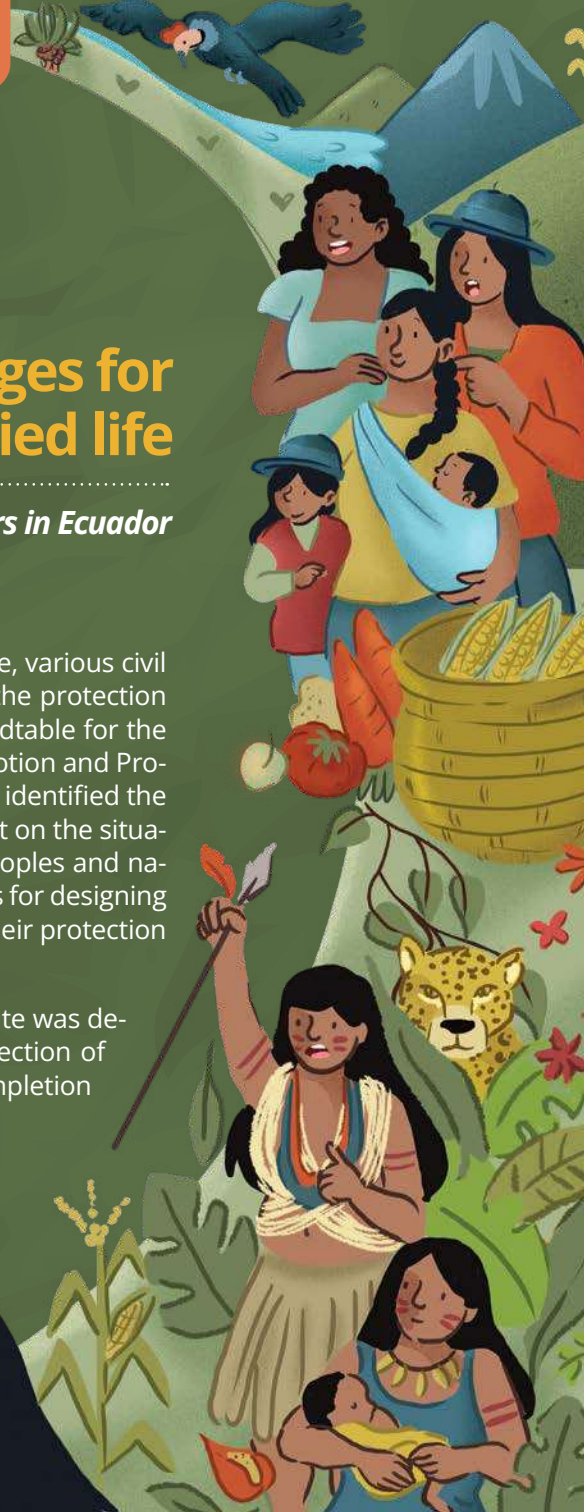
Diagnosis of the situation of human rights defenders in Ecuador

Background

Given the State's constitutional duty to protect the rights of all people, various civil society organizations demanded the creation of a public policy for the protection of human rights defenders. In response, the "Interinstitutional Roundtable for the Design and Implementation of a Comprehensive Policy for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Nature Defenders" was formed,¹ which identified the need for this process to have an updated assessment that sheds light on the situation and needs of human rights defenders, peasants, indigenous peoples and nature rights defenders in Ecuador. This assessment will serve as a basis for designing and proposing a protection policy that will guide actions to ensure their protection and recognition.

To achieve this goal, a collaboration between civil society and the state was developed, with funding from the European Union, through the "Protection of Human Rights Defenders" Project. One of its outcomes was the completion of a diagnosis, the main findings of which are shown below.

¹ Formed by the Council for Development and Promotion of Information and Communication; Council of the Judiciary; National Council for Equality of Disabilities, Gender, Human Mobility, Peoples and Nationalities, and Intergenerational; Ombudsman's Office; Public Defender's Office; Attorney General's Office; Ministry of Women and Human Rights; Ministry of Environment, Water and Ecological Transition; and Ministry of the Interior.



Main findings

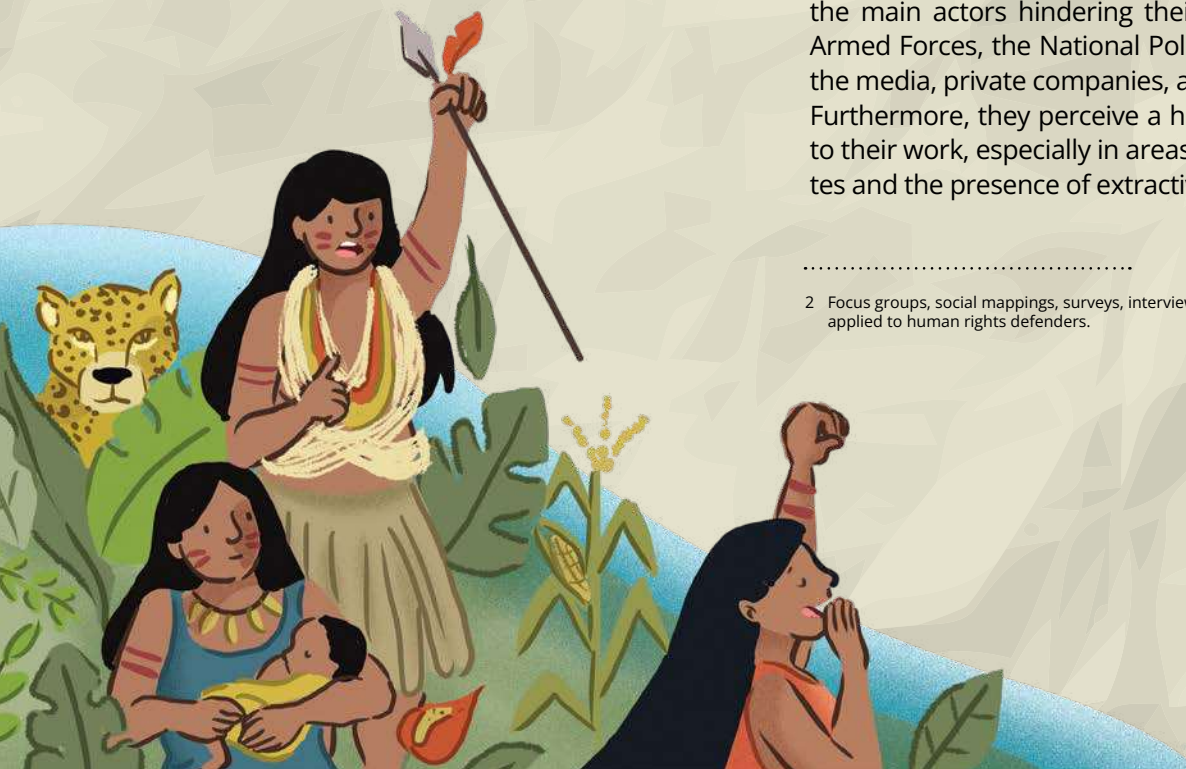
1 Topic: Current situation of human rights defenders

According to the instruments applied in the diagnosis,² various forms of obstruction to the work of human rights defenders are identified, such as restrictions on freedom of association, censorship, threats, physical attacks, judicial harassment, harassment on social media, murder, and exile. The findings suggest a worrying situation regarding the risks facing human rights defenders, who in addition to facing criminalization and prosecution are also faced with an increase in attacks that seek to silence their voices through murder, hidden under the rhetoric of widespread violence and conflicts

between criminal gangs. This violence is not isolated; the forms of obstruction to their work are often related to conflicts over economic interests, particularly in extractive sectors. In some cases, these dynamics involve direct pressure from companies, while in others, they are linked to the actions of certain political actors or criminal groups, creating an environment of vulnerability for those who defend rights.

In this context, human rights defenders stated that violence against them occurs primarily during protests, marches, community activities, and meetings with authorities. According to surveys conducted, the main actors hindering their work include the Armed Forces, the National Police, public servants, the media, private companies, and criminal groups. Furthermore, they perceive a high level of risk due to their work, especially in areas with high crime rates and the presence of extractive activities.

2 Focus groups, social mappings, surveys, interviews, and life stories applied to human rights defenders.



This situation is evident in all three regions of the country:

Coast

The main problems include impoverishment, mining, land trafficking, and the presence of criminal groups. Esmeraldas, Guayas, Manabí, Los Ríos, Santa Elena, and El Oro are the most violent provinces.

Sierra

Conflicts with mining are reported, there is increased recognition of the criminalization of human rights defenders, and the presence of criminal groups linked to mining. The most affected province is Azuay, specifically the Camilo Ponce Enríquez canton.

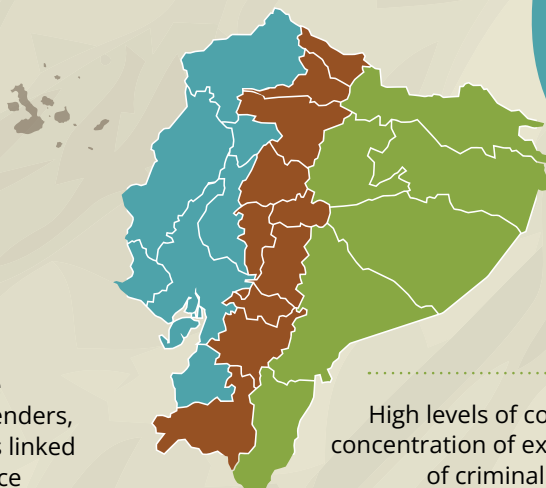
Between 2023 and 2024, at least nine human rights defenders linked to those who participated in the assessment were murdered, while others have suffered assassination attempts or received death threats.³ These attacks reflect the use of new and increasingly extreme forms of violence, which endanger the lives of rights defenders and force them to temporarily relocate to another city or go into exile. During the information gathering, five cases of temporary relocation of human rights defenders were recorded, as well as of acquaintances or relatives of those who participated in the assessment.⁴ Twenty percent of the surveyed population reported serious psychological consequences and noted a lack of institutional support to address these impacts.

.....

3 Human rights defenders murdered: 5 in Sucumbios, 2 in Azuay, 1 in Esmeraldas, and 1 in Orellana; they were defending the right to life, to nature, and to a dignified life of Indigenous peoples and nationalities (Information taken from the survey, interviews, and focus groups of the "Protection of Human Rights Defenders" project).

4 Relocated human rights defenders: 2 from Los Ríos abroad; 5 from Sucumbios nationwide; 1 from Esmeraldas nationwide; 4 from Manabí abroad; 3 from Pichincha nationwide; they defend peasant rights, land rights, nature rights, indigenous peoples' rights, self-determination rights, and water rights (Information taken from the survey, interviews, and focus groups of the "Protection of Human Rights Defenders" project).

A 20% of the surveyed population reported serious psychological consequences and noted the absence of institutional support to deal with these impacts.



..... Amazon

High levels of conflict are identified in areas with a concentration of extractive projects and the presence of criminal groups fighting for control of land and mining operations. The most affected province is Orellana.

For this reason, human rights defenders identify that the capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal development model conflicts with their struggle, placing them in conditions of high vulnerability and risk. Particularly in indigenous territories, oil and mining exploitation and land concessions are carried out without respecting the right to free, prior, and informed consultation, and even when consultation has taken place, in many cases, popular decisions are not respected.



2 Topic: State action

The human rights defenders who participated in the assessment stated that they are aware that state institutions, including the judicial system, sometimes act in collusion with private companies and criminal groups. This exacerbates the threats and risks they face in a context of rising crime and violence in the country, as well as constant violations of human rights, indigenous rights, peasant rights, and the rights of nature, despite the Declaration of a Non-International Internal Armed Conflict and the states of emergency declared by the current governments. In this context, surveys reflect a high level of distrust toward state institutions.

Thus, human rights defenders denounce the State's lack of effective policies, mechanisms, and measures for prevention and protection against all forms of violence, including prosecution, criminalization, and murder. As a result, they have developed their own self-protection measures, both individual and collective, which are self-funded, allowing them to continue their struggle, but at the expense of their lives and those of their families.

On the other hand, interviews with public institutions, such as the Ombudsman's Office, the Ministry of Women and Human Rights, and the Attorney General's Office, reveal that these entities do not have specialized units for the protection of human rights defenders, which limits their capacity to respond to the rights violations faced by this population, highlighting the urgent need to work together to strengthen protection mechanisms.



3 Topic: Needs of human rights defenders

Many human rights defenders do not self-identify with the universal concept of “human rights defender” due to the stigma attached to this category and the risks it poses to their integrity and lives. This creates a need for training on community protection mechanisms, self-protection, security protocols, and human rights education.

According to surveys, human rights defenders express an urgent need for support in three key areas:



As neither they nor their organizations have sufficient resources to address the stress and conflicts resulting from violence, judicial and criminal persecution. They also highlight the visibility of their work, the creation of networks, and the strengthening of the social and organizational fabric as key strategies for their collective protection.

Conclusion

Currently, human rights defenders perceive a high risk to their safety, that of their families, their communities, and their assets due to their advocacy work. Despite this, they lack effective protection mechanisms or support to defend human rights and the rights of nature, in contrast to external interests that prioritize neither human beings nor nature over capital. Therefore, it is essential to publicize the conditions under which they carry out their struggle, with the aim of strengthening the social fabric, obtaining the support of civil society, and ensuring a genuine commitment from the State. This must be translated into the design of a protection and support policy that materializes in concrete mechanisms and actions with adequate funding and based on the findings of the assessment.

Consulte the diagnostic summary in English and Spanish and the full report in:



Main recommendations

TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

- The construction and implementation of a system for the protection and prevention of human rights violations against human rights defenders, tailored to their needs and circumstances, and with a budget allocation.
- Avoid all forms of violations of the rights of human rights defenders when they are exercising their legitimate right to resistance in contexts of social protest, marches, sit-ins, or other demonstrations, as well as when they decide to go to government agencies to demand the protection of their rights.

TO THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

- Create and support all necessary political mechanisms and dialogue to achieve the passage of a law and public policy, with a budget allocation, for the protection of human rights defenders, in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Escazú Agreement for the Protection of Nature Defenders, in conjunction with grassroots organizations, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations.

TO THE STATE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE

- Design a national and local protection program for human rights defenders, with timely implementation and mandatory implementation by provincial prosecutors' offices.

TO THE OMBUDSMAN OF ECUADOR

- Share the diagnosis of the current situation of human rights defenders with the Interinstitutional Roundtable.
- Implement a specific program to defend against violations of human rights defenders in their daily work.
- Energize existing units and mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders within the framework of the resolutions issued by the institution.

TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, DIPLOMATIC DELEGATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

- Provide support, monitoring, technical assistance, and funding to state agencies and civil society to strengthen their role in protecting human rights defenders, in accordance with the UN Declaration and European Union guidelines.

TO NETWORKS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS, COMMUNITIES AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

- To raise awareness about the situation of human rights defenders and to work together and in a coordinated manner on the proposed law and a comprehensive public policy for the prevention of human rights violations and the protection and defense of human rights defenders.
- Participate actively and decisively in the development of a comprehensive law and public policy for the prevention of rights violations and the protection and defense of human rights defenders, as well as advocate for its approval and subsequent enforcement.