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Indigenous peoples, commons and the challenge of sustaining life amid capitalist land grabs

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ABSTRACT

The role of Indigenous peoples in the protection of the nature 'commons' has gained much traction worldwide. It has been suggested that Indigenous 'environmental stewardship' would significantly contribute to addressing the climate crisis and that 'land tenure security' is key to this aim. This paper critically explores these assumptions by highlighting the need for closer attention to the lived reality of Indigenous peoples and the state of the commons they inhabit, some of which have been taken over, fully or partly, by big capital, and exhibit a great difficulty to sustain life – as a result of broader capitalist trajectories.

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1. Introduction

Indigenous peoples, as much as other rural communities, are dependent on land and related resources for their subsistence. Over time, Indigenous people's use of the surrounding natural ecosystems has been associated with collective and reciprocal practices, and are typically assumed to be based on a strong sense of protection of the environment. We can think of this as one main reason why Indigenous peoples are frequently linked to nature conservation.

With the rapid advance of climate change, the role of the Indigenous in the protection of the nature commons has gained much traction among civil society organizations and scholars, policy experts (especially those working within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – UNFCCC processes), think tanks and funding agencies. In policy circles, at least two main rationales underlie seeming connections between Indigenous peoples and nature conservation. In the first place, 'Indigenous systems' are now increasingly deemed 'an important source of guidance for biodiversity conservation, impact assessment, governance, disaster preparedness and resilience' (IPCC 2022b, 526) and, as such, they are perceived as central to climate change adaptation. Second, to strengthen Indigenous peoples' ability to protect and adapt in a changing environment, observers have emphasized the urgency to provide them with 'secure property rights'

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over their lands. The latter have been typically associated with so-called '*de jure* rights', which are understood in property theory as one of various 'sources of the rights of access' to a particular domain. While the former 'are given lawful recognition by formal, legal instrumentalities', '*de facto* property rights', by contrast, 'are not recognized by government authorities' (Schlager and Ostrom 1992, 254). According to Ostrom (2003), although *de jure* rights are generally assumed to denote 'well-defined and secured property rights' in comparison to *de facto* rights, in reality, the possibilities to access certain resources and to acquire full ownership over them are determined by a larger array of factors (including institutional capacity and mechanisms of enforcement by various actors). Nevertheless, in the case at hand, the conventional understanding is that private property rights sanctioned by law, through land titling of Indigenous lands, effectively ensure ownership and facilitate sustainable land use – one that is beneficial to humanity as a whole.¹ Notwithstanding the significance of formally recognizing Indigenous systems and land rights, a closer examination of the *actual* state of the lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples today, and the challenges of subsisting within them, is imperative. The findings of this examination, as shall become clear below, have direct implications for climate change politics.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to critically explore the potential contributions of Indigenous peoples towards a more sustainable future for humanity, particularly as expressed in the two key policy assumptions noted above. It does so by examining what could be *less* optimistic cases of Indigenous commons and livelihoods. I employ evidence from interviews, fieldwork observations and household survey data to examine struggles around land access, and an associated lack of sustainable livelihoods, of two Indigenous communities at the so-called 'last agricultural frontier' in Colombia, the *Atillanura* ('high plains') region – the epicenter of the contemporary land rush in the country. The findings from both case studies seriously problematize assumptions around the role of the Indigenous peoples in addressing the climate crisis. In particular, and in relation to the first rationale, they reveal that conservation of ecosystems through Indigenous so-called 'environmental stewardship' has become practically impossible to realize in a context of increasing commodification of land and land-based resources, of which the recent land rush is a case in point. The findings of this study also suggest that in such contexts, where Indigenous lands and livelihoods are permanently subjected to different external pressures, 'secure property rights' (on their own) do not *necessarily* make a significant difference to Indigenous peoples' daily subsistence in ways that could allow them to enforce an ecosystem's conservation – which corresponds to the general belief informing the second rationale.

The commodification of land (the ongoing process through which land is increasingly treated as yet another commodity for exchange, at the expense of different social values and relations around it) (Harvey 2005; Marx 1976; Polanyi 1944), ecosystem degradation, and a consequent decline in livelihoods are all aspects linked to broader processes of capitalist development, from which Indigenous peoples cannot be disentangled. Certainly, as Fraser has rightly reminded us, environmental crises leading to climate change are always connected to socio-political and historical aspects, all of which are marked by capitalism. Due to this inevitable connection, attempts at tackling climate change must necessarily

¹I focus on the formalization of Indigenous land rights in the form of *de jure* property rights, as discussed by Ostrom (2003), although vary that property cannot be reduced to such, and that there exist different property rights arrangements to manage local commons (Cardenas 2000; Silva Garzon 2011).

pay attention to other related social, political and economic crises, and the ways in which they interact. In her words, attempts must go beyond the 'merely environmental' (2021, 96). Here, I borrow from the author's initial conceptualization around the need to overcome a 'merely environmental' focus of the climate change crisis to suggest, in a similar vein, that a focus on the Indigenous as a seemingly stand-alone category, without consideration of broader processes of capitalist development, becomes a 'merely Indigenous' perspective – which, in turn, does not (and will probably not) capture the full character and drivers of the climate change crisis and the reality of Indigenous communities, in the first place. In this article, the transformations brought about by the contemporary land rush on Indigenous lands and livelihoods are employed as illustrative of these wider capitalist trajectories. This idea is articulated by Tania Li, who stresses that 'contemporary advocates seeking to protect Indigenous people [through collective landholdings] do not attempt to reverse the dispossessory effects of capitalism overall'. Instead, she elaborates: '[...] they seek to erect a wall', one that 'leaves the world beyond its boundaries unchanged' (2010, 399).

Indeed, the ways in which Indigenous lands and livelihoods have been gradually subsumed into capital (Dell'Angelo et al. 2017), and the accompanying challenges, can be partly explained by the 'combined and uneven development of capitalism' (see O'Connor 1989; Smith 1990) – wherein to maximize profits and counter its crises, capitalism is continuously searching for 'non-capitalist', 'underdeveloped' spaces in a process that results in drastic 'ecological and human effects' (O'Connor 1989, 1). Indigenous lands, such as the cases from Colombia described below, are at the heart of capitalism's efforts to pursue expanded accumulation of capital, while at the same time fixing its crises. This renders the current struggles for land (*and* life) central (Shattuck et al. 2023). And while, as argued by Bernstein (2022), surely the character of these struggles differs from the past iconic land struggles of the twentieth century, these are no less relevant. Today's struggles for land, increasingly marked by different forms of power in addition to class (e.g. race, caste, patriarchy and ethnicity), are as important as ever in spite of – or even because of – the fact that their particular meaning is contested and open to various interpretations (Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018, 876; see also van der Ploeg 2022). What is more, these very same struggles are likely to shape (and are reshaped by) Indigenous people's perceptions of themselves, contesting what can be homogenous and essentialized views about them (Castañón Ballivián 2022), such as that considering Indigenous people as supposedly 'having an intimate knowledge of and commitment to environmental conservation' (Valdivia 2005, 285) – a problematic presumption that nevertheless continues to inform climate change debates.

On this basis, and contrary to what is largely assumed in mainstream approaches, the article argues that in order for Indigenous peoples to take a significant role in climate change mitigation and adaptation, actually several challenges – structural, institutional and political – would have to be addressed, many of which cannot be resolved by a single 'recognition' of Indigenous land rights through titling and formalization programs. The precarious living conditions facing Indigenous communities (including lack of access to land as a means for their subsistence and/or environmental degradation) are partly a result of the workings of capitalism in different Indigenous frontiers and have to do with, among other things, land concentration, discrimination and state abuse, *in addition to* insecure land tenure. Thus, building on the '5Rs' framework, as elaborated by Borras and Franco (2018; Franco and Borras 2021a), the article suggests that the state's

recognition of Indigenous land rights is an important element, but just one in a wider agenda for a more sustainable life in the rural world. ‘Recognition’ is inseparable from ‘restoration’, ‘redistribution’, ‘regeneration’ and ‘representation/resistance’ – all of which are key political reference points towards a hopeful Indigenous commons, closer to what is popularly assumed or aspired in scholarly, political and policy circles today. It is important to emphasize this point because there persists a tendency in scholarly literature, policy and political activist work to over-emphasize the significance of the formal ‘recognition’ of Indigenous land rights, at times inadvertently disembedding it from its political economic location system-wide.

Although I acknowledge the fact that important literature has critically examined mainstream ideas around private property rights, environmental stewardship and Indigenous livelihoods (e.g. Castañón Ballivián 2022; Gonda et al. 2023; Vélez-Torres et al. 2019), I believe the present analysis stands. The evidence provided in this article questions important generalizations and assumptions surrounding these categories and that are currently found in various climate change (one of the greatest threats of our age) discourses, the same that are shaping actual implementation and budget agendas about the phenomenon. This demonstrates – to say the least – a continuous disregard of policy interventions for the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, many of which openly contradict conventional notions about them. It also shows the relevance of promoting instead contextualized and holistic agendas like the 5Rs, which have the potential of more effectively tackling climate change. This is surprisingly not the case to date, despite several of the arguments put forward below being already known by many.

The next section critically examines key rationales by policy experts about the alleged relationship between Indigenous peoples and climate change adaptation. This is followed by basic background information on the two case studies and the research methods. Next is presented a brief overview of the contemporary land rush in the *Altillanura*, serving as a context for the following sections, in which I examine current challenges faced by Indigenous communities in accessing land and sustaining life. I use findings from these case studies to analyze the limitations of conventional rationales around Indigenous environmental stewardship, while highlighting the advantages of implementing the 5Rs framework to have a better grasp of Indigenous realities. I end with a discussion of the implications of this analysis for climate change politics.

2. Indigenous peoples and climate change adaptation: a critical overview

There has been a worldwide renewed enthusiasm about Indigenous peoples’ systems and the role they can play in addressing climate change. Policy experts sitting at the UNFCCC and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for instance, have increasingly highlighted the significance of ‘Indigenous knowledge’ to the deployment of more attuned adaptive responses to climate change. Some of the most recent related publications, such as the 2019 IPCC ‘*Climate Change and Land Special Report*’ and the latest comprehensive ‘*Sixth Assessment Report (AR6)*’, emphasize at least two main rationales underlying the alleged connection between Indigenous knowledge and climate change adaptation. Below I provide an overview of the key claims behind each rationale, followed by a critical evaluation of them from academic literature.

2.1. Indigenous peoples as ‘environmental stewards’

The first rationale refers to the idea that Indigenous livelihoods are presumably more sustainable than other ways of living (IPCC 2022a, 109, 2713). As stated by the report, historically Indigenous peoples have lived in close connection with the natural environment and have developed particular modes of living, based on their own set of traditional and cultural values (IPCC 2022a, 47) – especially, the recognition of their interdependence with nature (IPCC 2022b, 183, 2022a, 1942). They are seen as having a ‘a spiritual duty to care for the land and its flora, fauna and aquatic community, or “Circle of beings”’ (IPCC 2022a, 1943); essentially, as the ‘stewards of their environment’. It is often argued that Indigenous lands are ‘less degraded’, and their ecosystems are more preserved, in contrast to non-Indigenous territories, precisely as a result of Indigenous communities’ ‘resource-use practices and ecosystem stewardship’ (IPCC 2022a, 109, 204). Evidence supporting this claim is based on report’s estimates that over half of the remaining biodiversity is located in Indigenous lands across the world (IPCC 2022a, 47). Indigenous communities have also devised strategies to deal with natural hazards (e.g. floods, landslides) and, as such, they are assumed to represent an important guidance for ‘disaster preparedness and resilience’ (IPCC 2022b, 526). In sum, Indigenous peoples have built what the report defines as an ‘accumulated knowledge’ that can serve both governments and organizations to determine the pace of climate change and its impacts, and to share lessons in order to mitigate and adapt (IPCC 2022a, 1313). From such a perspective, then, Indigenous peoples are vital for the conservation of the nature commons.

The above narrative by policy experts is problematic. As discussed below, a number of claims supporting the role of Indigenous peoples in climate change adaptation ‘tend to idealize Indigenous peoples’ production systems’ (Franco and Borras 2021b, 1284). Allusions to Indigenous ‘environmental stewardship’ and to an apparent harmonious relationship with nature do not correspond with the reality of many Indigenous territories today, increasingly ‘marked by social differentiation, commodification and agroecological diminution and degradation’ (Franco and Borras 2021b). Indeed, evidence from research on Indigenous lands suggests that ‘the target areas and purported beneficiaries of these projects (on climate change adaptation and mitigation) are often embroiled in multiple socio-ecological conflicts’ (Gonda et al. 2023, 1,2). Similarly, it shows that policies and programs aimed at strengthening Indigenous and local knowledge ‘are unlikely to reverse the loss of cultural diversity as long as the political and economic structures of the industrial society remain essentially unchanged’ (Gómez-Baggethun 2022, 1151).

The emphasis placed around the Indigenous/non-Indigenous territories binary is not a straightforward one for other political-historical reasons. The very notion of ‘ethnic territories’ is a highly contested category, which is permanently informed by people’s everyday struggles (Anthias and Hoffmann 2021, 219; Valdivia 2005). An overemphasis on the alleged distinctiveness of Indigenous territories bears the risk of essentializing what in reality are highly political and historical processes. Moreover, this distinctiveness can also serve purposes of instrumentalization, wherein the rights of Indigenous peoples are authorized in so far as these can be a conduit for the conservation of the global environment (Dehm 2016, 209), and of exclusion, as those Indigenous people who do not conform with the expectations of environmental stewardship may find their rights to be restricted or ceased (Engle 2010).

Colombian anthropologist Astrid Ulloa (2001, 2004) synthesizes the now predominant idea about Indigenous peoples as environmental stewards through the category of the *nativo ecológico* or 'ecological native'. For her, recent perceptions about Indigenous peoples in Colombia and elsewhere have been shaped by, among other things, global debates and concerns around the climate crisis, in which increasingly Indigenous peoples went from being mere 'savages, warlocks, and minors' to represent a strategic 'political-ecological actor'. While this new position has improved Indigenous participation in relevant debates regarding their livelihoods and territories, Ulloa stresses that several development projects continue to be based on colonialist imaginaries around this population and/or follow western ideas about harmony and pristine standards that do not correspond with Indigenous diverse perceptions about nature and their reality. Besides, Indigenous knowledge on biodiversity is rapidly being channeled into more capitalist logics searching for new places, commodities and genetic resources. And so, as stated by the author, a recognition of Indigenous peoples' relationship with the environment by different political and economic actors has not prevented these from taking over their lands and territories and challenging Indigenous rights to territorial and political autonomy (2001, 2, 5, 22) (also Li 2010) – such as the examples from Colombia presented below.

2.2. Secure land rights and climate change adaptation

The second rationale emphasizes the posited relationship between land tenure security – of Indigenous lands in particular – and climate change adaptation. According to the report, people's ability to respond to climate change is severely diminished in the context of insecure land tenure. This is because, the argument follows, communities might be less prone to advance necessary changes on their lands that can facilitate adaptation and mitigation of climate change (IPCC 2019, 29). In this respect, the formal recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights over their lands is understood as a major contributor for communities to be able to exercise their presumed traditional governance and knowledge (IPCC 2022b, 773). 'Strong' land rights are also assumed to protect Indigenous lands from 'overconsumption'. As suggested by the report, because land rights are thought to serve the purpose of promoting Indigenous peoples' own knowledge, these should ultimately help to avoid the introduction of external, non-Indigenous practices that can contradict their systems and the sustainable development practices they are known to apply in their territories (IPCC 2022a, 1313). An emphasis on land tenure security is likewise considered as an important condition for the successful implementation of afforestation and/or reforestation (A/R) projects (IPCC 2022a, 809) – many of which are part of the climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies promoted by the IPCC and related agencies. The logic follows that if Indigenous peoples have clear land rights, in the form of formal titles, their ability to participate in the benefits brought by these projects would be higher than if they had to permanently assert their land rights against external actors.

Critical scholars have taken the above claims on property rights and turned them upside down by emphasizing on the broader processes underlying land formalization efforts and its implications for how we frame the debate around it. For instance, they have shown how the emphasis on land-titling schemes should be conceptualized as belonging to the wider neoliberal project promoting market-oriented agrarian reform

and land-use management (Borras 2003). Research on different contexts has also examined the contradicting effects of pro-market land formalization for Indigenous communities, as in the terrain of state-citizen relations (Mamdani 2001; Yashar 1998, 1999). Others have underscored actual reasons behind land property formalization, some of which have little to do with securing land for the subsistence of the rural poor. More closely linked to the focus of this article, Li demonstrates how ‘advocates concerned about forest conservation also seek to fix Indigenous people in place, not to support their farming ventures but to limit them in favor of “community-based forest management”’ (2010, 388). Still others have argued that legally recognized land property rights are not a guarantee against land dispossession (see, e.g. Anthias 2021; Ojeda 2022; Tusing 2023), and conversely, that a lack of legal titles does not mean that communities feel less attached to their lands (see Lund 2022).

Franco and Borras, for instance, demonstrate why the report’s reasoning is problematic for at least four reasons. First, in contexts of deep, prior inequalities, the formal recognition of land rights alone, in the absence of redistribution or restitution, may result in ‘the formalization of inequalities’ (2021b, 1283). This is, recognition of the current access to land by different users can disregard (and even legalize) past instances of expulsion, making those who were previously dispossessed not susceptible to land tenure security – as they no longer have any land to secure, in the first place. Second, for practices and systems characterized by their mobility, like shifting cultivation, formalization almost always translates into sedentarization, a shift that significantly changes the ways in which different people relate to natural ecosystems to sustain life. In addition, the lands that the formalization process makes available are most likely transformed into more industrial, capital-intensive uses (2021b), which in turn triggers climate change. The authors’ third point of contention has to do with the variable character of land claims. Similar to policies and laws, they say, land claims are permanently subjected to interpretation by different social and state forces and take form in an arena of political struggles, in which the balance has been generally tilted in favor of more powerful actors. Recognition of land tenure is not exempted from it. Finally, as evidence from different land titling programs suggests, formal property rights do not represent a guarantee against expulsion or land commoditization, as capital is permanently finding ways to adapt to different institutional schemes, including formalized lands (2021b, 1284; also Li 2010).

For Anthias (2021), perhaps the largest deficiency of global discourses promoting Indigenous land titling is the treatment of ‘territory and property as coherent and mutually supportive logics within Indigenous land claims processes’ (2021, 268). There is a need, she argues, to differentiate between territory (the image of it by Indigenous peoples) and the ‘legal-material outcomes of property’. While the idea of territory that has come to dominate in the contemporary era – as a particular, bounded area – contrasts with an open, borderless space (closer to Indigenous peoples’ original notions of territory), it nevertheless has led to expectations and aspirations of Indigenous peoples to obtain control over these areas. However, as her research in native communal lands in Bolivia suggests, these ‘expectations have not been met by the process of propertisation’. In this case, Indigenous peoples were allocated lands distant from one another, and next to areas claimed by private actors, making it impossible for them to realize their territorial aspirations in practice (2021, 269, 270, 275). A similar outcome took place in Paraguay where, as Tusing describes, a major Indigenous collective land titling program in fact

allowed for new ways of dispossession and lead to an increase in social tensions within and between Indigenous and other social groups, suggesting the need to analyze land titling 'as a complex process and not just an outcome or result' (2023, 407).

Moreover, as Ojeda (2022) sustains, although modern notions of property are continuously being paired with access to and security over land, in reality 'property and theft are not antagonistic practices' (2022, 5). The processes through which people are given land, and for what uses, are very much political in character – and almost always these have resulted in the dispossession and exclusion of racialized and gendered populations, hence the need to look 'beyond property'. Arguably, based on this critical evaluation of the promises of formal land property schemes, Indigenous peoples may continue to face land loss even when they are granted property titles over their lands, a situation that would logically prevent them from acting as stewards of ecosystems.

In sum, policy experts at the IPCC refer to at least two main rationales supporting Indigenous peoples' potential contribution in addressing climate change, but these are hardly generalizable to different contexts and more empirical evidence is needed. In the paragraphs that follow, I present two case studies of Indigenous peoples' territories, focusing particularly on their current livelihoods and their relationship with their surrounding ecosystem. As we shall see, both cases demonstrate 'commons' that have been taken over by big capital and that are unable to sustain life, challenging policy claims of the kind scrutinized here. Before this examination, let us briefly develop the 5Rs framework and highlight the possibilities it offers to the present discussion.

2.3. Alternative rationales to addressing the climate crisis

Addressing the climate crisis necessitates, indeed, pathways that better reflect the actual and *broader* challenges of sustaining life by different peoples, including the Indigenous. As hinted in the introduction, the strength of the '5Rs' framework lies in the emphasis given to the interdependence of the five concepts and hence the urgency to apply them all together (Borras and Franco 2018, 11). In this sense, 'recognition' is just one element (although a significant one) in a wider agenda, one that simultaneously engages with redistribution, restitution, regeneration and representation/resistance.

The '5Rs' are, essentially, constitutive pillars of a broader program on 'agrarian climate justice'. To date, despite growing awareness of the interplay between agrarian and climate issues (as evidenced by the nurtured response to a recent *JPS* Forum), efforts at tackling both remain largely disconnected. A majority of the international organizations leading the response to the climate crisis are inclined to 'corporate-driven, technological narratives' aiming at economic efficiency via technological and market-led interventions, without scrutinizing the role of these same practices in the climate crisis (Borras and Franco 2018; Borras et al. 2022).

What is more, the implications of climate change adaptation and mitigation politics on land and related resources have not been sufficiently explored. This is especially so when climate change mitigation projects overlap with land deals at the same sites with the potential of generating 'spillover effects and chain reactions, which in turn can ignite new or aggravate old resource conflicts outside the original area' (Hunsberger et al. 2017, 314). Overall, one reason for the lack of sufficient exploration on the intersection between climate change and land grabs has to do with the 'subtle, indirect (...) and

often invisible interconnections’ in which this relation presents (Franco and Borrás 2019, 192). According to the authors, there are at least three main manifestations of this interaction that merit attention: (i) climate change programs may propel land grabs or serve as a context for the ushering of land deals, (ii) land grabs may be an obstacle to the realization of ‘potentially genuine’ initiatives for mitigation and adaptation to climate change, (iii) in other instances, climate change adaptation and mitigation discourses could be employed as a façade for land grabs (Borrás, Franco, and Nam 2020, 3–5; Franco and Borrás 2019, 195–196). In the context of this third type of manifestation, big initiatives from conservation companies and agencies may result in the dispossession of local users, either by restricting access to forests and other ecosystems or through outright dispossession – an aspect that we will briefly take up below.

Summing up, a combination of agrarian justice and climate justice principles points towards a more promising pathway to address what, in essence, are ‘inherently interconnected social processes’ (Borrás and Franco 2018, 12). The means through which this combined agenda can be put into practice are no other than by ‘deep social reforms’ like the ‘5Rs’ described. In an era of climate crisis and increasing commodification of land and related resources, the challenges to realize such deep social reforms have undoubtedly intensified. Often times, well-intentioned reforms end up exacerbating pre-existing conflicts or creating new disputes by privileging just one of the 5Rs. Let us take as examples the cases of Indigenous communities in Colombia.

3. Case studies of indigenous communities in Colombia

An average of circa two million people self-recognize as Indigenous in Colombia. The majority are grouped into state-recognized Indigenous lands (or *resguardos*) spread across the country. In the Colombian context, *resguardos* are a legal category first established in the late sixteenth century under the Spanish rule. According to historical accounts, early colonial land grabs dispossessed entire communities of Indigenous people – most of whom were nomadic or semi-nomadic – and destroyed their sources of living, leading to a situation of great social discontent (Bohórquez 2002; Mayorga 2002; Quiroga Zuluaga 2015). A program of collective land titling led by the Spanish Crown later created several Indigenous *resguardos* allegedly as a means to protect them from continuous usurpation and to contend with massive unrest. Yet in practice, as argued by different commentators, they also became strategic places of Indigenous labor supply used by the Crown and settlers for their economic exploitations (Bohórquez 2002) – and thus served purposes of concentration and segregation (Machado 2009). The first *resguardos* remained in place until around the mid-1700s when they were no longer functional to the production demands of the country or served as an important source of labor (Zamosc 1986).

Collective land titles under the figure of *resguardo* gained new salience in the late 1990s when a new constitution, and related polices, more firmly recognized ethnic peoples and their land rights. According to latest official statistics, ethnic populations in Colombia (comprised of Indigenous people and afro-descendants) are in possession of some 38 million hectares of land in the country, or approximately 33% of the total continental area. Indigenous lands under *resguardo*, alone, amount to some 28% of the country’s geographical extension (La República 2020). This is, for some, an important figure

within the Latin American region, one that makes Colombia's policies and legislation comparatively stronger in the efforts to safeguard ethnic populations (see Herrera 2017, 2). Other observers, however, are more skeptical of these apparent accomplishments, suggesting that the real material outcomes of legislation and collective land titling are not readily compatible with such statistics (see Bille Larsen 2016; Calle Alzate 2017b; Rodríguez 2015) (Table 1).

3.1 Contextual background

The Llanos Orientales region or eastern plains in Colombia is home to a number of these newer Indigenous *resguardos* in the country's history, accounting for a significant proportion of the Indigenous population. Several remaining Indigenous groups in the area belong to the 'Sikuaní', a group of 'real hunter-gatherers' (Gómez 1998, 352). Throughout Colombian history, the Sikuaní have resisted different forms of exploitation and violence. Initial waves of colonization through outright violence and Catholic missions sought their sedentarization and a forced conversion (Gómez, Molina, and Suárez 2012, 82–84). A directed policy of colonization of the frontier after independence animated the further takeover of lands considered public domain or *baldíos*, particularly in tropical lowlands such as the Llanos and the Amazon (LeGrand 1984) – leading to a further encroachment of Indigenous territories.

Colonization of frontier areas intensified as a result of generalized violence in 1950s–60s, in a period often referred to as '*La Violencia*' in recounts of Colombia's history. Fierce confrontations between peasant settlers (*colonos*) and the landed elite evolved into deep agrarian struggles, forcing many to leave the more populous Andean region and find better livelihood opportunities in the eastern plains (Bejarano 1983; Fajardo 2015). Increased disputes over land in the area, between peasant *colonos*, large landowners and Indigenous peoples turned into severe interethnic conflicts (Gómez, Molina, and Suárez 2012, 94). Violent persecution and the infamous practice of 'Indigenous hunts' – considered as 'savaged' and 'primitive' – were documented until well into the late twentieth century, as noted by Gómez (1998). In parallel, industries such as oil and mining extraction were gaining economic traction in the region, a situation that further added to land control at the expense of the Indigenous. Most often, these different industries collaborated with paramilitaries to assert their claims over areas of the plains against so-called 'rebels' (CNMH 2018). To an extent, the creation of new *resguardos* during the 1990s sought to alleviate different threats imposed against the Indigenous, but overall these have proven a weak mechanism (Calle Alzate 2014, 2017b).

At present, rampant dispossession of Indigenous lands – even of those formally constituted into *resguardos* – prevails. Contemporary state projects to 'reconquest the territory' (Serje 2006), and about the 'renaissance' of the Llanos Orientales, in particular (in

Table 1. Collective land tenure in Colombia.

Figures of collective land tenure	Area (hectares)	Percentage of the total country area
Indigenous <i>resguardos</i>	32,032,238	28,1
Afro-descendants community councils	5,396,376	4,7
Total	37,428,614	32,8

Source: data retrieved from Herrera (2017, 2).

the form of capital intensive projects), as part of the recent land rush (more on this below) have unleashed further colonization and accompanying pressures over Indigenous territories (Calle Alzate 2017a). In the eastern plains of Colombia today, land is at the same time disputed by a myriad of actors, including peasant settlers, big capital owners and Indigenous peoples.

I focus on two cases of Indigenous communities with different trajectories around land access and livelihoods – allowing for comparison and contrast between the two – (i) a community on formally constituted Indigenous land, and (ii) a community fighting for the legal recognition of their ancestral land rights. Both of these communities are located at the heart of the eastern plains, in the so-called ‘last agricultural frontier’ in Colombia, the *Altiplanura* (‘high plains’) (Minagricultura 2004) (see section 4), a vast region to the east of Colombia on the border with Venezuela (see Figure 1).

The first case study concerns a *resguardo* by the name of *La Llanura*, situated in the province of Vichada (municipality of La Primavera). Vichada is one of two provinces integrating the *Altiplanura*. It is the second largest province in the country after the Amazon; its large geographical extension contrasts, nevertheless, with its low population density. A significant percent of the population in Vichada belongs to one of the different Indigenous communities present in the area. The province is characterized by an ecosystem of savannah that has since long served cattle ranching, a key economic activity in the region. For most of Colombia’s history after independence, Vichada had been a frontier land far from the country’s capital, Bogotá, and relegated from relevant policy plans. Aside from cattle ranching, the isolation of this territory has made it difficult for its inhabitants to have a stable source of income, with majority of them living from informal

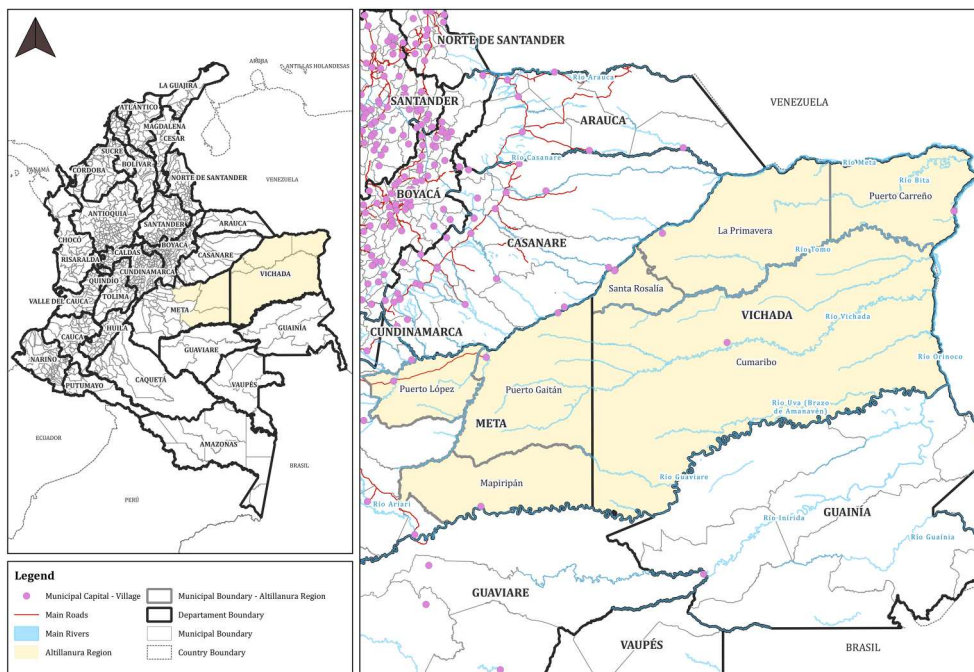


Figure 1. Map of the *Altiplanura* region. Note: Map elaborated by Nicolás Rosero Peralta on behalf of the author.

seasonal labor at cattle farms and/or occasionally employed at food and clothing stores in the urban area (CNMH 2016; Gómez, Molina, and Suárez 2012). Only in 1991, following the enactment of a new constitution, Vichada was elevated to the category of 'province'. Some years before this designation, Vichada had first grabbed the attention of country leaders who had planned to transform the area into a key agro-industrial power, but those plans did not materialize back then. It was in the early 2000s, in the context of the global contemporary land rush, that this territory started to appear more prominently in political circles at the national level (Semana 2007), as explained below.

The second case study refers to an Indigenous community in the municipality of Puerto Gaitán (province of Meta). The community, by the name of *Iwitsulibo*, is established at an informal settlement in the peri-urban area of the municipality. Both Meta and Vichada integrate the *Altilanura* region. Unlike the second, Meta province, and Puerto Gaitán in particular, have received considerably more attention from national level government authorities. Puerto Gaitán has been the main hub of oil extraction in Colombia for decades; over the years, it has attracted several waves of migration in search for better income opportunities, contributing to the expansion of the municipality and its dynamism (Arias 2020; Rivera Huertas 2023). More recently, Puerto Gaitán can be said to be the epicenter of the contemporary land rush in the country. The next section discusses key aspects of this recent land rush in order to provide context for the later sections.

3.2 Research methods

During 2022 and the first quarter of 2023 I conducted field research in the *Altilanura* region, in which I interviewed Indigenous peoples belonging to different communities across the area, all of which have suffered the effects of the recent land rush in the region in one way or another (as well as peasants, local and national level government functionaries, and researchers and investigative journalists with knowledge about the phenomenon). Together with a human rights organization – *Corporación Claretiana* Norman Pérez Bello (CCNPB) – we identified a first set of potential interviewees through purposive sampling. We then resorted to snowball techniques to reach a larger group of participants. My formal collaboration with the organization started in early 2022. The CCNPB is a non-profit organization that works to promote social justice and peace, and accompanies peasant and Indigenous communities who assert their rights through non-violent mechanisms. The organization offers legal advice and assistance, as well as psychological, pedagogical and communications support. From 2003, the CCNPB has continually supported efforts by different groups of people to improve their living conditions in Colombia's eastern plains and other regions of the country. The Indigenous communities of *Iwitsulibo* and *La Llanura* are just two of them.

In addition to individual interviews (66), I conducted focus group discussions (10), participant observation and engaged in countless informal conversations while in the field. With the assistance of the human rights organization, I also conducted a household survey of 200 Indigenous respondents. Out of the different Indigenous communities participating in the research, I purposively selected two cases that could better exemplify the propositions put forward in this article. Personal data remains confidential following standard ethics guidelines. Ethnographic material was complemented by archival research and newspaper articles from a press review.

4. The contemporary land rush in the *Altillanura*

A sudden interest for land in the *Altillanura* region of Colombia might well be understood as part of the contemporary 'global land rush'. While new waves of land grabs took place across the country during the 2000s and 2010s (Grajales 2011; Ojeda 2012; Ojeda et al. 2015), I have argued elsewhere (Arango 2021) that a combination of powerful state narratives about last agricultural frontiers, as well as productivist ideologies (see Arias 2022; Díaz 2016a, 2016b), turned the *Altillanura* into the epicenter of the recent land rush in the country.

As it is now established in the land grabbing literature, a 'convergence of multiple global crises' (food and oil prices, financial) around 2007–08 precipitated an extraordinary interest in land (Borras and Franco 2012). Myriad actors ranging from national governments to different types of financial investors engaged in competition to obtain the best possible lands the world over (Fairbairn 2014; Wolford et al. 2013, 2024; Zoomers 2010). This land rush (Borras and Franco 2024) was largely triggered by a particular set of assumptions. One, the apparent existence of large tracts of 'empty' and 'underutilized' land worldwide – which could be turned into productive use through modern technology and large-scale capital. Two, the belief that there existed a great gap between the potential of land in terms of economic production and the actual level of production at the current use, referred to as the 'yield gap', and that this gap had to be closed (Deininger and Byerlee 2012). But contrary to other types of investments, certainly 'land is a strange object' (Li 2014). That is, due to its material features, land cannot be easily removed or transported as happens with other types of investments. Moreover, land has other types of attributes that are non-material or symbolic that often exceed a purely economic value, which also turns it into a rather peculiar object to invest in (Fairbairn 2020). Therefore, another essential component of the land rush was a 'spectacle' (see Tsing 2000) in which land was portrayed as a highly promissory investment.

In Colombia, former president Álvaro Uribe was a key figure behind the spectacle that animated the recent land rush. In 2004, Uribe inaugurated a 'reconversion program' of approximately six million hectares of land in the provinces of Meta and Vichada, encompassing the *Altillanura* region (Minagricultura 2004). This was an area, he recalled, until then unused and easy to reach 'without the axe', with an incredible economic potential (Díaz 2016a, 2016b, 180). As it became evident later, Uribe's ultimate goal was to replicate the so-called 'miracle of the *cerrado*' (The Economist 2010) – a vast region in neighboring Brazil characterized by seemingly related agro-ecological conditions to the *Altillanura* in Colombia. Around that time – through an overall impulse toward mechanized agriculture – the *cerrado* had reached an astonishing farm production at the level of the 'big five grain exporters' (The Economist 2010). *Altillanura* was thought to be the next 'Colombian *cerrado*' (Semana 2010).

Uribe followed the inauguration of his plans for the *Altillanura* with a series of press conferences and trips globally – attracting the attention of a flurry of investors. Newspapers reported the interest to invest in the region by the Japanese government, the US magnate Bill Gates, the multinational investment bank J.P. Morgan Chase and the Norwegian Siem, to name just a few (Semana 2007). Interest in the Colombian *cerrado* also came from within the region. Nicknamed the 'king of soy', the Brazilian businessperson Blairo Maggi sent a team of his collaborators to search for land in the province of Meta –

aiming to expand his already large production of soy in Brazil (El Tiempo 2008). Argentina's 'king of soy' Gustavo Grobocopatel remained a guest of honor of later president Juan Manuel Santos (Portafolio 2011), who followed the breeding ground left by his predecessor (see Grajales 2020). Domestic bankers and financial investors also joined the frenzy, together with former politicians, business people, land brokers and illegal armed groups alike.

At the peak of the recent land rush, Vichada appeared to be the 'promised land' (Semana 2007). Several of the intentions of land deals focused on the province – presumably characterized by large extensions of empty and plain land, with low population density and thus ready for the taking (see Díaz 2016a for a critical review of this narrative). Similarly, as of 2008, Puerto Gaitán in Meta became the epicenter of an annual forum about the *Altillanura* and its features and possibilities. Puerto Gaitán in itself attracted the attention of foreign and domestic investors, too, many of whom landed their deals there (Verdad Abierta 2013). Today, although the pace of the land rush has waned, its effects continue. For the Indigenous communities of *Iwitsulibo* and *La Llanura*, the focus of this article, the recent land rush in the area has added significantly more pressure to their lands in ways that affect their livelihoods – suggesting, at the very least, the problem with generalized assumptions about Indigenous systems that are common in policy discourses about climate change.

5. The intensification of land and life struggles

This section examines key challenges to sustain life by two Indigenous communities in the Colombian *Altillanura*, particularly in the context of a renewed interest for land in the area. Overall, Indigenous communities inhabiting the *Altillanura* live in conditions of extreme precarity, at remote and isolated *resguardos* with poor or non-existent basic infrastructure and services – an aggregate result of centuries of land grabbing, genocide and discrimination (Calle Alzate 2023; Gómez, Molina, and Suárez 2012; Millán 2021), as hinted at above (section 3). They lack electricity and drinkable water, are poorly connected by road, and do not have access to nearby public health clinics, schools or local markets. In addition to these challenges, Indigenous lands are now surrounded by private *fincas* (land plots), and by agro-industrial, mining and oil complexes that have seriously transformed the natural and human landscape in the area – partly as a result of the recent land rush. Several Indigenous people have been forcibly dispossessed from their lands outright. In other cases, as shown below, despite communities remaining in the targeted areas for land investment, their access to different types of lands has been increasingly restricted – which provides for both their productive and reproductive work. As a result, over time Indigenous people have had to resort to wage work. Some are employed on oil palm and rubber plantations in the rural area. They also work in the oil sector performing different roles such as security guards, machinery operators, cleaning staff and training instructors. Some serve as kitchen assistants, housemaids or construction workers in the urban area of towns. Others, especially women and the elderly, sell handicrafts (hats, purses and house ornaments) or traditional Indigenous food. Hence, contrary to the more conventional claims presented in section 2, the discussion below suggests that wider processes of capitalist development have implications for Indigenous peoples' lands and livelihoods, many of which contest overly optimistic, taken for

granted assertions about this population. The order of the discussion mirrors section 2: the first case study discusses rationale one, and the second case study explores rationale two, which is common in climate change mainstream discourses. Elements from the 5Rs framework are considered in order to highlight the insufficiency of land rights recognition alone, and why the application of all Rs is imperative for rural livelihoods.

5.1. Case study 1. Immiseration and ecosystem's degradation

The Indigenous peoples of *Iwitsulibo* are one important case that exemplifies the exhaustion of the commons in the context of the recent land rush in the *Altillanura*, challenging the first rationale discussed in section 2 – whereby Indigenous systems are equated with nurtured and sustainable ecosystems. Indigenous peoples of *Iwitsulibo* have only recently returned to their ancestral lands in Puerto Gaitán, Meta. According to their testimonies, they were forced to leave in the 1970s during one of the highest peaks of the armed conflict in the region – and the threat of Indigenous hunts – and had remained ‘from here to there’ without a fixed location. *Iwitsulibo*'s lands have never received any formal recognition by the state, not even in the past, before they had to flee the region. At the time of their displacement, they belonged to different semi-nomadic communities that practiced shifting cultivation throughout the eastern plains of Colombia, even stretching to today's territory of Venezuela, according to their testimonies. Different portions of land served for other activities such as fishing and hunting, complementing their diets. They used natural benchmarks such as spring waters and rivers to demarcate their territory (Arango 2022). Throughout the 2000s, they pursued several attempts to regain control of their ancestral territory via judicial means but these were all left unattended. It was only in early 2021 that they finally managed to ‘re-settle’ in *de facto* (Arango 2022).

They [armed groups] kicked us out of the territory in 1971. We stayed in Guainía for seven years [...]. When we returned in 1979 there were already people with their own animals [in our land] and we couldn't enter. We went to Vichada, to San José de Ocné. We stayed there working and I got this woman. I returned to the region in 2009 with all of my kids [...]. (Indigenous leader from *Iwitsulibo* - Puerto Gaitán, Meta, personal interview, 2022)

However, finding the appropriate ways to sustain life upon re-settlement has proven to be an even harder undertaking. Most of the lands that people of *Iwitsulibo* claim as their own are now under the control of different agro-industrial complexes – some of the key figures of the recent land rush in the area: (i) a large plantation of soy and maize of over 40,000 hectares, owned by a group of foreigners popularly called in the region ‘The Mennonites’ (see Daniels 2021; Fitzgerald 2023); and (ii) the biggest industrial meat-processing compound in the country (La Fazenda), held by a set of renowned domestic entrepreneurs (see Verdad Abierta 2013).

When I returned, I began to see enormous tractors and white people, not from around here [...]. People call them ‘The Mennonites’. [When we arrived] they were already here but still far from where we are now [...]. Nowadays the ploughing almost reaches our houses. (Indigenous leader from *Iwitsulibo* – Puerto Gaitán, Meta, personal interview, 2022)

The two complexes have severely transformed the human and natural landscape in the area. For example, there are a number of legal claims against the so-called ‘The

Mennonites' (in the absence of a company name) about the contamination of nearby rivers and natural ponds as a result of their agro-industrial practices (Mejía 2022; Vélez 2022). Similarly, the adjacent meat-processing company, La Fazenda, has been requested on several occasions to lessen the emissions of pollutants into the air and water, through improvement of the mechanisms for disposal of animal manure (Godoy 2013; Rutas del Conflicto 2020). Unsurprisingly, given their proximity, the Indigenous peoples of *Iwitsulibo* are directly suffering the effects of water and air contamination.

Private security, fences and checkpoints also add to the transformation of the landscape. To reach their settlement, the people of *Iwitsulibo* must first pass through a number of checkpoints established along the way, by both 'The Mennonites' and La Fazenda. According to the human rights organization that facilitated my fieldwork, and the people of *Iwitsulibo* themselves, this is one of the different strategies deployed by the companies to force Indigenous people to leave the area once and for all, under the appearance of voluntary displacement. Since their resettlement in 2021, Indigenous people have been subjected to persecution, intimidation and threats of evictions by armed groups who are said to be hired by these same companies, but until this date they have resisted (Arango 2022).

Both the environmental effects resulting from capitalist operations, and the overall threatening atmosphere imposed upon Indigenous communities, contributes to the poor living conditions they face today. Indigenous peoples are generally forbidden to use the open savannah for traditional life-affording activities like hunting, fishing and foraging, as they were used to. To make matters worse, soils immediately close to their settlement are generally acidic and lack necessary water to grow enough food to feed their families. According to their testimonies, communities used to cultivate in particular areas of the plains they refer to as *monte*, places with trees and available water, which are now impossible to use given the restrictions to transit freely across the plains and the degradation of these areas as a result of mechanized operations. This is one of the main reasons Indigenous people have become highly dependent on informal wage labor elsewhere. Consider that 10 out of the 10 Indigenous people from *Iwitsulibo* that participated in the broader household survey applied within this research indicated that while family members still practice agriculture in the land close to their housing plots, their primary source of income is informal wage labor outside their settlement.

At *Iwitsulibo*, Indigenous people spend the night in improvised shelters covered by plastic sheets, which barely protects them from strong rain or high temperatures. There is no drinkable water or electricity. Most road infrastructure is deficient or lacking. Where roads and electricity poles do exist, these are only servicing the nearby businesses. In addition, there are no public schools in the surrounding area, and the community lacks sufficient funds to send children outside the settlement to study (Arango 2022). Food purchase was reported to be the main expense of Indigenous families according to the same survey results. All 10 of the 10 respondents from *Iwitsulibo* reported food expenses as being 'the highest', and little or nothing is left for other purposes like schooling, in this case. Life at *Iwitsulibo's* ancestral lands has grown more and more difficult, revealing that these ecosystems do not comply with conventional images of Indigenous territories.

5.2. Recognition without redistribution or regeneration

In discussing Indigenous challenges to sustain life with the lenses of the 5Rs' framework, it is possible to observe the limitations of an approach that hinges exclusively on the formal recognition of Indigenous land rights. As I write, a significant part of the efforts by the Indigenous population of *Iwitsulibo* – and the human rights organization providing them with legal advice – are focused on the recognition of the territory they are settled in as belonging to their ancestral lands. Around the mid-2010s, the government of Colombia issued a decree (Decree 2333 of 2014) that mandated the protection of so-called 'ancestral territories' from any threat of eviction or dispossession by a third party. This protection was meant to serve as a provisional measure over the lands, while Indigenous peoples undergo the many required steps to create or expand a *resguardo* before relevant government offices. The decree was one important motivation for the Indigenous people of *Iwitsulibo* to return to the region and to start a new life. However, the effectiveness of this decree is far weaker than originally enthusiastically anticipated (Arango 2022). As of August 2023, they continue to push for such a recognition of their lands in the midst of life threats and the increasing deterioration of the surrounding ecosystem.

I started passing requests in 2016 when I found out that the government had issued a decree that said that people who have their ancestral territories have the right to claim [...]. Nothing has happened, no one has notified us [...]. We continue fighting for our lands. (Indigenous leader from *Iwitsulibo* - Puerto Gaitán, Meta, personal interview, 2022)

Let us suppose, however, for the sake of argumentation, that the *Iwitsulibo* peoples obtain formal recognition of the rights over their ancestral lands and that they are legally entitled to a *resguardo*. While this step would mean an immense realization for the Indigenous peoples, prevailing structural aspects most probably would continue to prevent them from experiencing a more joyful and sustainable life. Together with recognition of ancestral land rights, a strategy must be devised to redistribute a significant portion of the lands that are currently in control of the agro-industrial complexes ('The Mennonites' and La Fazenda), and to convert them to more sustainable uses under principles of regeneration. Otherwise, the ability of recognition (on its own) to make significant contributions to improve Indigenous livelihoods is frankly too little. Meanwhile, this situation does not contribute to the conservation of the natural ecosystems that Indigenous communities inhabit.

5.3. Case study 2. Dispossession in spite of property rights

Indeed, the challenges that the people of *Iwitsulibo* (and elsewhere) are experiencing have been attributed to a lack of formal property rights over their lands, as presented in the second rationale introduced above. But while formal land rights may act as an important mechanism to strengthen land tenure security, the same has proven weak in different contexts. We explore this idea through the case of the Indigenous *resguardo* of *La Llanura*.

In comparison to other cases within the region and nationwide, the Indigenous people at *La Llanura* (Vichada) might appear as a case of success. They have formal land titles dating from at least the early 1980s covering approximately 74,000 hectares of land – a

relatively large area allocated to a single community. The *resguardo* is home to some 1,300 Indigenous Sikuani that are grouped, in turn, into at least 16 sub-communities spread across the land titled area – distanced from one another. Some of these smaller communities are comprised of only one or two households each. At the *resguardo*, it seemed, land was abundant for communities to sustain life.

Indigenous people from *La Llanura*, nonetheless, have continuously suffered from dispossession – even if they do not openly express it in such terms. Below I discuss one contemporary instance. In 2016, people at *La Llanura* signed a contract agreement with Biofix – a foreign company dedicated to ‘climate financing’, according to their official website (see Biofix 2022b) – as part of a series of projects on carbon sequestration carried out across Vichada, amidst the recent land rush. The contract concerned the implementation of a REDD + project certified by Cercarbono – a Colombian company created that same year which, according to a description of its mission, ‘facilitates and guarantees the registration of Climate Change Mitigation Programmes or Projects (CCMPs), the certification of emissions, and the registration of the carbon credits generated by these initiatives’ (Cercarbono 2024; El Tiempo 2022). By 2022, a project evaluation indicated that it had managed to protect over 60,000 hectares of forest within the Indigenous *resguardo*, achieving a reduction of CO₂ emissions of 50,000 tons (Biofix 2022a).

As the counterparts in the contract, the Indigenous communities were entitled to receive (what they assumed at the time to be) significant sums of money during the duration of the agreement, on one condition: that they ‘preserve the forest’. Many welcomed the initiative believing it could raise their incomes and consequently improve their living conditions at the *resguardo*. They also saw it as having no potential harm to their lands, in comparison to previous projects they had been asked to partake in the past – some of which involved the establishment of industrial tree plantations (ITP) of acacia or eucalyptus. Due to the isolation of the *resguardo* and scarce infrastructure, rumors had circulated that companies involved in the ITP sector would need to carry trees in helicopters, and that they would destroy the native vegetation at the *resguardo*. This was not the case with Biofix’s REDD + project, and so people were said to have largely agreed with it, as some of the Indigenous people I talked to described to me. Their initial enthusiasm, however, quickly vanished when they began to realize what it really meant to ‘preserve’ in the context of the contract.

I was there from the beginning when the company came to make an agreement [...]. They said they were not going to carry trees by plane, or in bags or anything. We were convinced and accepted that [...]. They talked about retroactivity, about going back five years ago and that they were going to reward us. They gave us an amount, but at the end of the day I see that things were not as we discussed [...]. The company works with our native trees, they have not planted anything new. At first, they told us that it would not affect us [...]. (Indigenous leader from *La Llanura*, La Primavera – Vichada, FGD, 2023)

During the first year after the signature of the agreement, the Indigenous communities continued their lives as they used to – engaging in slash and burn practices, tearing down trees to turn them into wood for cooking and to protect themselves from low temperatures. They occasionally heard helicopters flying over the area, and they also received a number of visits from company members that were commissioned to run calculations – but they never really understood the point of it, they declared. The first disbursement

arrived a year after, as established in the agreement, only significantly lower than expected. At the time, Biofix adduced that the compensation corresponded to the levels of forest conservation met by the Indigenous communities, which was calculated based on the amount of greenhouse emissions produced within a time period, and that there was no apparent inconsistency. Ambivalent about these results, the Indigenous communities sought the help of the human rights organization we introduced before, who provided with legal advice; they pointed at specific fragments of the contract that could explain the lower monetary compensation received. But while there seemed to be a legal justification to it, as appearing in the contract, still the Indigenous communities found it odd. For this reason, the organization also facilitated a meeting between representatives of Biofix and the Indigenous *resguardo* to help clarify any misunderstanding. At the meeting, as community members explained to me in our conversations, the company reiterated that there had not been any error on their part, and that if they received lower payments than expected it was due to 'poor forest management'. If, from the Indigenous communities' perspective, all that they did was to relate to the forests in the same way, what is the kind of forest conservation that Biofix was expecting? As the work by McElwee (2023, 187) suggests, contrasting views about forest management, environment and conservation seem to be more prevalent in the context of climate change mitigation, whereby 'existing discourses and plans for NETs [negative emissions technologies] continue to follow mostly technocratic and capitalist models', while reference to social justice perspectives – of the type reclaimed by the Indigenous *resguardo* in this case, remains scant.

Most of the money from Biofix's first disbursement vanished quickly, and exacerbated internal conflicts within people at *La Llanura* – many of whom demanded the termination of the contract. As flaws in the implementation of the REDD + project became noticeable to more members of the Indigenous community, confrontations erupted between these and the 'leaders' who had negotiated the contract. The former blame the latter for risking access to their *resguardo* lands 'just for the sake of profit' and for having 'misused' the payment received. Indigenous 'leaders', in turn, have responded to the 'attacks' by alluding to the need to look for alternative livelihood sources. These expressions of discontent and antagonism *within* Indigenous groups are much more frequent than conventional understandings about indigeneity assume, and have been documented in different locations. As argued by Castañón-Ballivián, based on his exploration of the Bolivian case, most often 'clashes are not between homogenous ethnic groups, but between different classes with opposing interests' and thus the need to pay attention to the increasing 'class differentiation within ethnic groups' (2022, 901). In *La Llanura*, the clash emerging from the REDD + project may not be resolved easily. As explained by lawyers from the human rights organization during my fieldwork, a breach in the contract on the part of the Indigenous community could be extremely costly. And so, notwithstanding the large land area they are formally entitled to, the Indigenous people feel permanently trapped within their own *resguardos*. A strict observation of the contract regulations might entail no longer using the forest for their subsistence, which in turn would make them necessarily more dependent on the market. As of early 2022, nearly half of the participants in the household survey of *La Llanura* (24 out of 46) reported that they had to migrate in the search for wage work. Most of these Indigenous migrant workers go to nearby intermediary cities. To the question of why they decided

to conduct migrant work, participants cited ‘poor land quality at home’ and ‘insufficient resources at home to cover family expenses’. These numbers will most probably increase in the future. At the *resguardo*, there is a strong sentiment of regret and despair.

In many respects, Biofix’s project for carbon credits in *La Llanura* can be one example of what He and Wang (2023) referred to as ‘certificated exclusion’, in which particular groups are prevented from the potential benefits of climate mitigation strategies. ‘Certificated exclusion’ is different from ‘licensed exclusion’ (see Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011) insofar as the latter refers to practices of exclusion with respect to land titles. In the former, by contrast, communities possess legal titles over the lands. The exclusion derives, instead, from ‘the imposition of a technocentric procedure to certify carbon credits for trade’ (He and Wang 2023, 5,6). An example is provided from inside China, in which farmers subscribing to a carbon sequestration agreement encountered all sorts of barriers (e.g. of technical knowledge, language) to properly negotiating its terms and conditions. Even the alleged financial benefits did not represent a significant compensation for them. These all are similar challenges facing Indigenous communities at *La Llanura*. The question then arises: If land titles cannot guarantee access to land for the production and social reproduction of Indigenous populations, in what ways are Indigenous people thought to be able to care for the ecological conservation of their natural surroundings? This is a matter that needs to be demonstrated with grounded empirical research, instead of taken for granted based on de-contextualized policy perspectives that fail to recognize the wider capitalist trajectories shaping Indigenous lands. The points discussed here are an approximation to a much needed and broader analysis about Indigenous peoples, their lived reality and how these influences climate change politics.

5.4. Recognition without representation

Indeed, from the description above, the case of *La Llanura* serves as an actual example of how existing recognition of Indigenous rights to land, in the absence of other ‘Rs’, is significantly weak. In this case, one can even suggest that formal land rights actually played against the Indigenous communities. Initially, the contract with Biofix appeared as a rapid solution to the lack of monetary income by community members to supply pressing needs. Overall, as noted earlier, the isolation of the *resguardo* and the obstacles to make use of the savannas for their subsistence has turned the Indigenous *resguardo* into a place that is unable to sustain life. But one thing Indigenous do have are titles over those lands. And this is precisely what Biofix needed too: a considerably large area of legal, titled lands to advance its project. According to testimonies from Indigenous community members, negotiations with Biofix went relatively fast, without this meaning that it was a fair platform representing the interests of the communities. Apparently, much of the conversations between members of Biofix and the Indigenous leaders had an informative character, in which the company simply presented the project rather than submitting it for debate, as some recalled.

We have a problem because the last time we had a meeting [with Biofix] it was not very clear. We made an agreement; they spoke very beautifully. You know that professionals speak very nicely – and even if we do not understand, we said yes. But when they finished the meeting, we started to review the documents about four months later and we hired some people who were experts in that and they [the company] had already set the contract for 25–30 years [...].

I was one of those who said that this could not be the case because we had set this up [the contract] for 10 years. We called a lawyer from the Claretians [human rights organization] and asked her what we could do. It was after signing the contract that we realized the conditions [...]. We managed to have another meeting and there it was agreed that the contract would run until 2025.

The company carries out the project across our territory. And the bad thing is that since we do not have a professional, they make the documents however they want and here we cannot do anything [...]. The company always alters the information that we tell them; they put something else in the minutes when they arrive in Bogotá. (Indigenous community member from *La Llanura*, La Primavera – Vichada, FGD, 2023)

Therefore, recognition of Indigenous peoples' land rights must be paired with representation of Indigenous organizations at different levels, in which communities are directly involved in the decision-making processes that might have an impact upon their territories. In the case of Indigenous peoples in particular, representation must (at least) entail that communities understand the contents and extent of what is at stake at all times to be able to engage meaningfully in debate. Only then, perhaps, recognition of Indigenous land titles might prove more effective than it has, including for tackling climate change at its root causes.

6. Addressing land *and* life struggles: implications for climate change politics

The cases of *Iwitsulibo* and *La Llanura* in Colombia serve as a reminder of the struggles for land and around life subsistence that too often are experienced by Indigenous peoples. The so-called 'Indigenous knowledge', about which the IPCC report is particularly keen, is increasingly challenged with the advance of land's commodification under capitalism. As noted in the preceding section, the surrounding natural ecosystems at *Iwitsulibo* and *La Llanura* do not fit well with the reports' estimates, which posit that Indigenous lands overlap with some of the most preserved remaining ecosystems in the world – an assumption that equates Indigenous communities with environmental stewardship. Formal property rights do not make a remarkable difference to the purpose of life affordability, which could impact positively on the ecosystem's conservation, as the case of the Indigenous *resguardo* of *La Llanura* evidences. And yet, the recognition of Indigenous peoples' diverse systems is crucial to any meaningful agenda towards a better future for humanity. Meanwhile, land tenure security remains one of the most recurring demands of rural populations today, including the Indigenous.

What this paper is particularly concerned about is to emphasize the lived reality of Indigenous peoples and the implications for climate change politics. Some of the main arguments underlying the alleged nexus between Indigenous knowledge and climate change adaptation seem to be based more on an ideal representation rather than on the real experiences taking place at the ground level. This is synthesized by Camargo (2022, 728–729), who notes that the real challenges experienced by rural communities in Colombia are often misrepresented by standard adaptations to climate change. Interpretations of more 'prosperous futures' by government officers and aid agencies, he says, may not take into account what communities actually aspired for in contexts of economic and climate disasters.

Research on the practices of rural women in Honduras by Fash et al. arrived at similar conclusions. For the authors, popularized alternative pathways to addressing the climate crisis such as *buen vivir* actually ‘understates how precarious life is and will continue to be for those practicing its principles’. They added: ‘(...) by proposing a paradigm somehow outside of precarious circumstances, the *buen vivir* literature does not do justice to how people live, adapt and innovate’ (2022, 2).

In the end, what the latter examples and the case studies from Colombia evidence is that environmental crises are *never* only environmental. These are, at the same time, social, political, economic, and ecological, in essence. In this respect, Ribot, for instance, has rightly put forward that climate related damages are always ‘stratified by historical, social and political-economic arrangements that render some people secure and others vulnerable’ (2022b, 684–685) and not just ‘natural’ events (2022b, 696, see also 2022a). In other words, people’s position in the face of climate change differs significantly as a result of various socio-economic and political circumstances (see e.g. Clay 2023). And whereas political, economic and social crises have certainly been aggravated due to climate change, an over-emphasis on the ‘environmental’ diverts attention away from the broader, ‘non-environmental’ aspects of ‘our general crisis’ (Fraser 2021, 96), at the center of which is capitalism.

Not only are policy experts, scholars and movements too environmentally focused, as the discussion presented here suggests, the IPCC and others are similarly falling into a ‘merely Indigenous’ perspective, by disembedding Indigenous lands and livelihoods from broader processes of capitalist development. It is not a coincidence that the Indigenous peoples of *Iwitsulibo* are now cornered by big agro-industrial complexes, nor it is accidental that official *resguardo* lands in *La Llanura* are located extremely far from basic infrastructure (and yet surrounded by private *fincas*) making it extremely difficult to sustain life. Even when both of these places are not yet highly commodified internally, other key issues such as the location of and the type of the lands they are in matter. And those are marked, fundamentally, by particular capitalist trajectories.

To reiterate, recognition of Indigenous peoples’ knowledge and land rights is key to any meaningful project for a more sustainable future, a project that is compatible with the second policy rationale explored here. But to assert the actual validity of such rationales, an assessment of Indigenous peoples’ *actual* living conditions and the state of their territories today is imperative in Colombia (Calle Alzate 2017a; Gómez, Molina, and Suárez 2012; Rodríguez 2015) and beyond. To this purpose, I have argued in this paper that such an assessment must necessarily overcome the ‘merely Indigenous’-type of narratives such as those popularized by the IPCC (2019, 2022a), which often portray Indigenous peoples in a vacuum, and instead promote more comprehensive agendas to study their everyday reality – such as the ‘5Rs’. Ultimately, understanding Indigenous peoples’ current struggles for land and to sustain life by considering the ways in which these intersect with broader processes of capitalist development can also tell us more about the extent of the climate crisis and how to better act upon it – aspects that nevertheless continue to be largely overlooked.

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