

Illicit Economies vs Natural Resources

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The Amazon and the Congo Basin should no longer be treated primarily as environmental-policy questions. They are emerging as strategic arenas where natural resources, organized crime, territorial control, climate security, food security, critical minerals, political power and international competition increasingly converge.

These forests contain extraordinary reserves of biodiversity, carbon and freshwater, but they also surround some of the world's most valuable commodities, including gold, copper, cobalt, lithium, timber, soy, cattle and, in Colombia, coca. Their protection is therefore becoming inseparable from questions of economic development, national security and international stability.

The central political problem is an asymmetry of incentives. The profits from extracting gold, timber, cattle, minerals, narcotics and other commodities are immediate, concentrated and often captured by relatively small groups mostly illegal actors.

The benefits of keeping forests intact—climate regulation, water security, biodiversity, carbon storage and ecosystem stability—are diffuse, long-term and global. The economic system therefore frequently rewards destruction more quickly than preservation. The strategic challenge is to reverse that calculation and create conditions under which protecting forests becomes economically and politically more valuable than destroying them.

The Congo Basin is particularly important because it contains the world's second-largest tropical forest system after the Amazon, with the Democratic Republic of Congo containing the majority of the basin's rainforest. Recent research indicates that forest loss remains substantial. One 2026 assessment estimated that approximately 780,000 hectares of primary forest were lost across the Congo Basin in 2024, representing an increase in the rate of loss compared with 2023.

The Democratic Republic of Congo accounted for more than three-quarters of regional primary-forest loss. The pressures are not limited to industrial extraction; small-scale agriculture, charcoal production, logging, population growth and infrastructure are also major drivers of forest degradation.

Mining creates a particularly important strategic problem because its environmental footprint can extend far beyond the physical boundaries of the mine. Research in eastern Congo has found that artisanal mining can trigger deforestation several kilometers from mining sites because settlements, agriculture and infrastructure develop around extraction areas.

More recent research across sub-Saharan Africa suggests that the indirect footprint of mining can extend considerably farther, with mining-associated roads, settlements and agricultural expansion producing substantially greater forest loss than the area directly cleared by the mine itself. A mine is therefore not simply a mine. It can become the nucleus of a much wider economic system involving roads, migration, settlements, agriculture, energy infrastructure and informal commerce.

This problem is particularly significant because the Democratic Republic of Congo possesses many of the minerals required for the global energy transition, including

cobalt and copper as well as other strategically important resources. The world needs these minerals for batteries, electricity networks, electric vehicles, renewable technologies, digital infrastructure and modern manufacturing. Congo is therefore not peripheral to the energy transition; it can be an important supplier of the resources required to implement it. Yet mineral extraction can damage forests, contaminate water and expose local communities to serious environmental and social risks.

The fundamental question is therefore becoming increasingly difficult: how can the world accelerate the energy transition without simply transferring environmental destruction from one part of the planet to another? The Congo illustrates one of the central geopolitical contradictions of the green transition. If wealthy economies reduce their dependence on fossil fuels while the environmental and social costs of obtaining the minerals required for that transition are concentrated in poorer resource-producing countries, the transition risks becoming politically and morally unsustainable.

Decarbonization cannot therefore be separated from the governance of the supply chains that make decarbonization possible. The objective should not be to prevent resource-rich countries from developing their mineral economies, but to ensure that legitimate resource development generates economic benefits without creating a parallel system of environmental destruction, corruption and criminal exploitation.

This debate is increasingly entering the sphere of international law. A 2026 Financial Times article, "Ecocide is a crime against humanity," presented the argument of the Congolese environment minister that severe environmental destruction associated with mining, fossil-fuel extraction, agriculture and armed conflict should be treated as a question of international justice.

She advocates recognition of ecocide as an international crime, arguing that severe, widespread or long-term environmental destruction should have consequences comparable to other serious international crimes.

The significance of this proposal extends beyond the precise legal definition of ecocide because it reflects an effort to redefine environmental destruction as a matter of international justice and security rather than simply domestic environmental regulation.

Such an approach could become increasingly relevant where environmental destruction is connected to armed conflict, illegal mining, corruption, forced displacement, exploitation of Indigenous communities, transnational corporations and international commodity markets.

At the same time, the development of international legal mechanisms would require careful definitions and credible standards of evidence. If environmental crimes are to be internationalized, the framework must be sufficiently precise to prevent selective political application while remaining strong enough to deter deliberate or reckless destruction on a massive scale.

The Amazon faces a similar but distinct combination of pressures. Brazil has demonstrated that deforestation is not an uncontrollable force. Government enforcement, satellite monitoring, protected areas, financial restrictions and political commitment have produced substantial reductions in deforestation in recent years.

This is strategically important because it demonstrates that state policy can alter the economic incentives surrounding forest destruction. However, progress remains fragile. Illegal mining, fires, agricultural expansion, land grabbing, infrastructure development and climate change continue to place enormous pressure on the Amazon. Illegal gold mining is particularly revealing because it demonstrates how environmental crime can become integrated into sophisticated financial and commercial networks.

A May 2026 Reuters investigation based on Greenpeace research found that 26.8 tons of gold, valued at approximately \$3.88 billion, had been associated with mining permits that showed no evidence of actual mining activity.

Such “ghost permits” can potentially give illegally extracted gold the appearance of legality. The strategic significance is greater than the value of the gold itself. Illegal mining increasingly depends on financing, equipment, transport, documentation, corruption, intermediaries, commodity traders, refineries and international markets.

Extraction in the forest is only the first stage of a much broader criminal economy. Environmental crime should therefore increasingly be understood as organized financial crime. Destroying machinery in the forest or arresting individual miners may disrupt extraction temporarily, but it does not necessarily dismantle the networks that finance, transport, legalize and sell the commodities.

Effective enforcement must increasingly follow the money, identify beneficial owners, investigate corrupt officials and intermediaries, trace commodity flows and target the international market structures that make illegal extraction profitable.

The Colombian Amazon provides an even clearer illustration of the convergence between environmental destruction and territorial insecurity. Coca cultivation, illegal gold mining, illegal logging, cattle ranching and land grabbing can interact with the activities of illegal armed groups and organized crime. Roads constructed to facilitate access to remote areas can open forests to further settlement, mining and agriculture.

The result can become a self-reinforcing cycle in which control of territory creates access to natural resources, natural resources generate revenue, and that revenue finances territorial control. Where the state is weak, armed groups can exercise authority over mines, roads, coca-growing areas and forest territories.

They can impose taxes, regulate economic activity and profit directly or indirectly from gold, timber, cattle and narcotics. Environmental destruction then becomes more than a consequence of criminal activity; it can become part of the financing mechanism of territorial power.

This is why environmental policy, and security policy can no longer be treated as separate subjects. The political debate surrounding Gustavo Petro's government and its Paz Total strategy is a clear example. Petro came to power promising a different approach to Colombia's armed conflict and the war on drugs. His government argued that decades of predominantly militarized counter-narcotics policy had failed to eliminate the underlying economic and social causes of coca production and sought instead to negotiate with armed groups while addressing the socioeconomic conditions sustaining illicit economies.

Petro also made environmental protection and climate policy central elements of his political message. The experience of Paz Total, however, demonstrated the difficulty of combining negotiations with the restoration of territorial state authority. During the Petro period, negotiations and ceasefires were established with several armed and criminal organizations allowing them to dramatically expand in Colombia following the Picota Jail Pact during the 2022 Presidential campaign in which Petro promised to illegal armed groups and organized crime: business as usual, immunity and territorial control. During his presidency such groups co governed with Petro, received military and police intelligence from Petro's administration and became extremely rich.

As a result, such criminal groups brought to Petro and Iván Cepeda and their movement the Historic Pact 4 million votes-pistole in the 2026 presidential and legislative elections in Colombia. Petro empowered for 4 years criminal groups in Colombia and the whole region including the El tren de Aragua, El cartel de los Soles, The Gulf Clan and so on.

The Colombian political situation has now entered a new phase. Gustavo Petro left office in August 2026, and Abelardo de la Espriella assumed the presidency with a substantially more confrontational approach toward armed groups, drug trafficking and illicit coca cultivation.

His government has signaled a stronger emphasis on security enforcement and a significant departure from Petro's approach to negotiations with armed organizations. The new administration therefore faces a fundamental test: whether stronger security policies can restore state authority without simply displacing criminal economies from one territory to another.

A return to a predominantly security-based strategy could strengthen state authority in areas previously dominated by armed groups, but military pressure alone cannot eliminate the economic structures that make illegal mining, coca cultivation, logging and land grabbing profitable.

The central question for Colombia's new government is therefore not simply whether it can increase military pressure. It is whether it can establish lasting state control while simultaneously creating legitimate rural economies, strengthening environmental enforcement, expanding justice and infrastructure, and disrupting the financial networks that sustain criminal organizations.

Claims involving Gustavo Petro, Iván Cepeda, the Historic Pact or other political figures have circulated publicly, including allegations connected to the 2022 presidential campaign. At the same time, governments, political movements and advocacy organizations can themselves make accusations about disinformation that are politically motivated.

The appropriate response is therefore evidence-based transparency: follow the money, identify ownership structures, disclose funding, verify digital networks and distinguish documented relationships from political claims. This phenomenon is not unique to Colombia. Similar dynamics exist in other parts of the world where criminal organizations combine territorial control, illicit economies, corruption, political influence and international networks to protect and expand their interests.

The particular commodities differ from one region to another, but the underlying political economy is similar. Control of territory creates access to resources, resources create

revenue, revenue creates political and coercive power, and political or territorial power protects the underlying economic system.

The Congo presents a related dynamic. Armed conflict, illegal mining and natural-resource exploitation can reinforce one another. In areas where state institutions are weak, control over valuable resources can become an important source of financing for armed actors and local power structures. Environmental degradation can therefore become intertwined with questions of human security, governance and conflict resolution.

This is why environmental protection in fragile states cannot be treated simply as a technical conservation program. Climate change makes these dynamics substantially more urgent. Scientists increasingly warn that the resilience of the Amazon is being tested by the combination of deforestation, rising temperatures, drought and changing rainfall patterns.

Recent 2026 research has identified evidence of potential vegetation-state transitions under warming scenarios, including risks associated with declining precipitation and soil moisture. The concern is not simply that fewer trees will exist. The deeper concern is that sufficiently degraded portions of the forest may become progressively less capable of maintaining the humid conditions on which rainforest ecosystems depend. This creates a dangerous feedback mechanism.

Forest destruction can reduce the capacity of ecosystems to recycle moisture and store carbon. Climate change increases heat and drought stress. Drought increases vulnerability to fires and additional degradation. Further forest loss can then reinforce the original climatic pressures.

The risk is not necessarily that the entire Amazon will suddenly cross a single global tipping point, but that regional thresholds and irreversible ecosystem changes may emerge unevenly, making prevention significantly more valuable than attempting restoration after ecological systems have been severely degraded.

The Congo Basin faces a related danger. It remains one of the world's great carbon-storing and climate-regulating ecosystems, yet it receives considerably less international scientific and financial attention than the Amazon. The international community increasingly recognizes the Amazon as a global climate asset while the Congo is often approached primarily through the lenses of conflict, poverty, development and minerals. That approach is incomplete.

The Congo Basin should simultaneously be understood as a climate-regulation system, biodiversity reserve, source of critical minerals, agricultural and freshwater system, source of livelihoods, security environment and potential arena for transnational criminal economies.

The broader strategic question is therefore much larger than "How do we stop deforestation?" The real question is how to create an economic and political system in which keeping the forest alive is more valuable than destroying it. That requires a policy architecture that connects environmental protection with security, economic development, financial regulation, international trade and climate policy.

Governments need stronger institutions and effective territorial control. Indigenous and local communities need secure land rights, political participation and legitimate economic alternatives. Illegal mining and logging need to be

attacked not only at the point of extraction but also through the financial networks that make them profitable.

International companies need credible and traceable supply chains. Countries that benefit from the climate and ecological services provided by the Amazon and Congo forests need to contribute financially to their protection. This is particularly important for the global energy transition. The world needs cobalt, copper, lithium and other minerals to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and expand renewable energy and electrification. But the transition cannot simply become another form of resource extraction in which environmental and social costs are concentrated in poorer regions while the economic and technological benefits are enjoyed elsewhere.

A green economy that destroys tropical forests would contain a fundamental contradiction. Critical-mineral policy should therefore increasingly focus on traceability, environmental standards and financial transparency. The objective should not be to prevent resource-rich developing countries from exploiting their natural resources, but to ensure that legitimate producers receive the benefits while illegal operators lose access to international markets.

The same principle should apply to gold, timber and other commodities associated with deforestation and illicit economies. Environmental assessments should also account for the indirect footprint of extraction. A mine should not be evaluated solely according to the number of hectares cleared inside its formal boundaries. Roads, settlements, agriculture, migration and informal economic activity can produce much larger secondary impacts.

This is particularly important in the Congo Basin, where research has demonstrated that mining-associated indirect deforestation can substantially exceed direct mine-site clearance. Indigenous and local communities should be treated as central political actors rather than simply as beneficiaries of environmental programs. Secure territorial rights, access to justice, political participation and legitimate economic opportunities can strengthen both environmental protection and state legitimacy.

In many remote areas, communities are among the first actors to observe illegal mining, logging and land appropriation. Their protection and participation should therefore be considered part of territorial governance. International financing is equally important. If tropical forests provide global climate benefits, the international community should contribute to the cost of maintaining them.

However, forest-finance mechanisms should be tied to measurable outcomes, transparent monitoring and strong safeguards for Indigenous and local communities. Payments should reward genuine preservation rather than merely compensate for projected losses that may not have occurred.

Environmental crime should also increasingly be approached through the same financial architecture used against other forms of transnational organized crime. Governments should target financiers, equipment suppliers, corrupt officials, transport networks, shell companies, money-laundering channels, commodity intermediaries, exporters, importers and beneficial owners.

The objective should be to dismantle the economic system that makes environmental destruction profitable rather than simply arresting individuals at the point of extraction. Security policy and environmental policy must also be integrated. In regions controlled by armed groups, environmental policy

cannot be implemented independently of security policy. At the same time, security strategies that destroy criminal infrastructure without providing legitimate economic alternatives can simply displace illicit activity geographically.

The objective should therefore be lasting territorial governance rather than temporary military control. The Amazon and Congo Basin represent a broader test of the international system because natural resources are increasingly becoming simultaneously economic assets, strategic commodities, sources of political influence and potential instruments of conflict.

Gold can finance criminal organizations. Cobalt and copper can become strategic assets in geopolitical competition. Timber and cattle can drive frontier expansion. Coca can finance armed groups. Forests can provide climate and water services whose enormous economic value is not reflected adequately in conventional commodity markets.

The central failure occurs when markets reward destruction more effectively than preservation. If an illegal miner can earn substantial profits from destroying a forest while the state and local population receive little economic benefit from keeping that forest intact, environmental regulation will remain structurally vulnerable. Conservation cannot depend indefinitely on moral appeals against economic incentives. The incentives themselves must change.

The Amazon and Congo should therefore be understood as strategic natural infrastructure for the planet. They regulate water, store carbon, sustain biodiversity, support millions of people and influence agricultural and economic systems far beyond their borders.

Their destruction is not simply the loss of trees. It can weaken state authority, strengthen criminal organizations, destabilize communities, increase commodity-market risks, undermine climate resilience and intensify competition over strategic resources.

The encouraging reduction in Brazilian Amazon deforestation demonstrates that effective government policy can change the trajectory. But the persistence of illegal mining, criminal finance, territorial insecurity and climate stress demonstrates that environmental gains remain vulnerable. Brazil shows that state capacity can produce measurable environmental progress, while Colombia and the Congo demonstrate that environmental policy becomes much harder when criminal organizations retain territorial and economic power.

The warning emerging from Congo, the Amazon and Colombia are therefore clear: natural resources are increasingly becoming sources of both wealth and conflict. The strategic challenge is to prevent control over those resources from becoming a mechanism for criminal power and environmental destruction.

The international community should consequently move beyond a narrow conservation agenda and build a broader framework combining forest protection, territorial security, Indigenous rights, responsible mineral development, financial transparency, anti-corruption measures, credible supply chains and international climate finance.

The objective should not be to freeze economic development or prevent resource-rich countries from benefiting from their natural wealth. It should be to change the direction of development. A successful strategy would make the forest standing more valuable than the forest destroyed, legitimate

resource extraction more profitable than illegal extraction, and state authority stronger than criminal territorial control.

That is ultimately the test facing the Amazon and the Congo Basin—and, increasingly, the international system itself.

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Key references

Congo Basin

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Amazon

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[The Guardian — Colombian Amazon, cocaine, gold, armed groups and cattle](#)

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The danger is not simply the disappearance of forests. It is the convergence of natural-resource extraction, illegal economies, violence, weak governance and climate change, compounded in Colombia by the Petro government’s controversial policy of negotiating with, and in the eyes of analysts effectively co-governing with, illegal armed groups and organized crime. The result is a dangerous erosion of both environmental protection and state authority over strategic territories and natural resources.