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

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Indigenous peoples, commons and the challenge of sustaining life amid capitalist land grabs¹

Lorenza Arango Vásquez
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Abstract

The issue about the role of the Indigenous peoples in the protection of the nature ‘commons’ has gained much traction among policy experts, civil society organizations and scholars, particularly in the face of climate change. 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 the potential contributions from the indigenous peoples towards a better future for humanity by examining *less* optimistic cases of indigenous commons and livelihoods. My study focuses on the struggles of two indigenous communities in Colombia at the so-called “last agricultural frontier”, the Altillanura (‘High Plains’) — also the epicenter of the recent land rush in the country. Both communities exhibit a ‘commons’ that have been taken over, fully or partly, by big capital, and that are experiencing a great difficulty to sustain life as a result of broader processes of capitalist development taking place in the area. This latter aspect is often overlooked by conventional accounts that tend to treat indigenous peoples as a stand-alone category isolated from capitalist dynamics, at times resulting in a ‘merely indigenous’ perspective. Building on more comprehensive frameworks, I conclude that the notion of ‘recognition’ (e.g., of indigenous land rights) is inseparable from ‘restitution’, ‘redistribution’, ‘regeneration’ and ‘representation/resistance’ – that are altogether key political reference points for a more hopeful indigenous’ commons, closer to what is popularly assumed or aspired in scholarly, political and policy circles today.

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1. Introduction

Indigenous peoples are highly dependent on land and related resources for their subsistence. Over centuries, they have made use of the surrounding natural ecosystems in accordance with their own ‘cosmo-vision’ or worldview, generally favoring collective and reciprocal practices and a strong sense of preservation of the environment. This is one main reason why indigenous have long been associated with nature conservation.

With the rapid advance of climate change, the role of indigenous peoples in the protection of the nature commons has gained much traction among civil society organizations and scholars, policy experts (especially those working within the UNFCCC processes), think tanks and funding agencies. Indigenous’ systems are now increasingly termed as “an important source of guidance for biodiversity conservation, impact assessment, governance, disaster preparedness and resilience” (IPCC, 2022b, p. 526) and, thus, they are perceived as central actors in climate change adaptation. To strengthen indigenous ability to protect and adapt in a changing environment, observers have also emphasized on the urgency to provide indigenous peoples with “secure property rights” over their lands. Ultimately, from this perspective, protecting indigenous commons is beneficial to humanity as a whole. Notwithstanding the significance of recognizing indigenous’ systems and land rights, a deeper understanding of the *actual* challenges indigenous peoples are facing today, and what the implications are for climate change politics, is imperative.

This paper critically explores the potential contributions from the indigenous peoples towards a better future for humanity by examining *less* optimistic cases of indigenous commons and livelihoods. I employ evidence from interviews, fieldwork observations and household survey data to explore land *and* life struggles of two indigenous communities at the so-called “last agricultural frontier” in Colombia, the Altillanura (‘High Plains’) region – also the epicenter of the contemporary land rush in the country.

The findings from both case studies problematize some of the main assumptions around the role of indigenous peoples in addressing the climate crisis. In particular, they reveal that conservation of natural ecosystems through indigenous’ so-called “environmental stewardship” has become nearly impossible 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 type of contexts – where indigenous lands and lives are permanently subjected to several external pressures –, ‘secure property rights’ (on its own) do not *necessarily* make a significant difference to the purpose of ecosystem’s preservation, let alone to indigenous’ subsistence.

Commodification of land, ecosystem’s degradation and a decline in decent livelihoods are all aspects linked to broader processes of capitalist development, from which indigenous peoples cannot be disentangled. Certainly, as Nancy Fraser (2021) has rightly reminded us, environmental crises leading to climate change are always connected to socio-political and historical aspects, both of which are expressions of capitalism. Due to this inevitable connection, attempts at tackling climate change must necessarily pay attention to other and related social, political and economic crises, and the ways in which they interact. In her words, attempts must go beyond the “merely environmental” (2021, p. 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 seeming stand-alone category, without consideration of broader processes of capitalist development, becomes a 'merely indigenous' perspective – that does not (and will probably not) capture the full character and drivers of the climate change crisis.

In effect, the ways in which indigenous lands and livelihoods have been gradually subsumed to capital, and its 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, p. 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. And while, as argued by Bernstein's (2022), surely the character of these struggles differs from the past iconic land struggles of the 20th 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), 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 et al., 2018, p. 876; see also van der Ploeg, 2022).

I argue, more generally, that in order for indigenous to take a significant role in climate change mitigation and adaptation, several challenges – structural, institutional and political – would have to be addressed, many of which cannot be resolved by a stand-alone 'recognition' of indigenous property rights. Building on the '5Rs' framework as an analytical lens, I conclude that recognition of indigenous land rights is one element in a wider agenda for a more humane and sustainable life in the rural world. 'Recognition' is inseparable from 'restitution', 'redistribution', 'regeneration' and 'representation/resistance' – all of which are key political reference points for a more hopeful indigenous peoples' 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 is a tendency in scholarly literature, policy and political activist work to over-emphasize the significance of 'recognition' of indigenous land rights at times inadvertently disembedding it from its political economic location system-wide.

The next section examines key assumptions by policy experts and scholars about the alleged relationship between indigenous knowledge and climate change adaptation. I later present basic contextual information about the two case studies and the research methods. Section four provides a brief overview of the contemporary land rush in the *Altiplanura*, serving as a context for the following section, in which I examine challenges to sustain life by indigenous communities in the contemporary era (section 5). The final discussion (section 6) explores why 'recognition' (on its own) is not likely to contribute to indigenous peoples' commons (at least not in the way that climate change literature assumes), arguing for the '5Rs' as a more comprehensive framework to addressing current land *and* life struggles.

2. Indigenous peoples and climate change adaptation: an 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 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (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.

2.1. Indigenous peoples and "environmental stewardship"

The first rationale refers to the idea that indigenous' livelihoods are presumably more sustainable than other ways of living due to the ancestral ties indigenous hold to their lands and the surrounding natural ecosystem (IPCC, 2022a, pp. 109, 2713). As stated by the report, historically indigenous 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, p. 47) – especially, the recognition of their interdependence with nature (IPCC, 2022b, p. 183, 2022a, p. 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, p. 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' "resource-use practices and ecosystem stewardship" (IPCC, 2022a, pp. 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, p. 47). From this perspective, then, indigenous peoples are vital for the preservation of the nature 'commons'.

The practices of indigenous peoples across North America are generally considered to be exemplary of the ways in which indigenous exercise their stewardship. The Menominee people in the state of Wisconsin, USA are one of these cases. According to the report, they apply sustainable forestry practices (including forest inventories) at their reserve building on a "land ethic" subscribed by all members. Nowadays, as a result of these practices, the forest is said to be at a better off quality state than some two centuries ago when the timber harvesting first initiated. The Menominee people appear to call themselves "The Forest Keepers" and to recognize that their ability to subsist is directly dependent on the type of management they give to the forest, of which they are a part of (IPCC, 2022b, p. 1689).

Indigenous have also devised strategies to deal with natural hazards (e.g. floods, landslides) and, as such, represent an important guidance for "disaster preparedness and resilience", suggests the report (IPCC, 2022b, p. 526). Throughout generations, indigenous have learned to read the patterns of various types of ecosystems including, ice, waters, lands and forests – and the ways it connect with climate; they understand 'climate' and 'weather' as two key dimensions of their relationship with the environment (IPCC, 2022a, p. 1942). In sum, indigenous have built what the report refers to 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, p. 1313).

Together with policy experts, scholars have also joined the enthusiasm around indigenous peoples' systems and their potential contribution to climate change adaptation. They have referred to sustainable ways in which indigenous relate to their ecosystems by, for instance, making use of the available resources without depleting – in a sort of “harmony with nature”. This is the type of interaction that has helped them to preserve their environment, they claim, and that can be turned into a key aspect of their “participation in global governance of the environment” (Etchart, 2017, p. 2). Along the same lines, some have even advanced calculations on the seeming “overlap” between different types of protected areas and indigenous' territories, examining the degree of indigenous' participation in the management of “areas of high conservation value” – with positive results, they suggest (Garnett et al., 2018). Others call for the relevance of indigenous' contribution to the maintenance of the commons as an important strategy to break with the “state/market ‘duopoly’” – that has come to dominate key aspects of human-nature interaction (Ceddia et al., 2015, p. 317). And as a way to further democratize the efforts to contend climate change by policy experts and panels worldwide, precisely like the IPCC (Maldonado et al., 2016).

Scholars have also alluded to indigenous' recent protagonism in addressing climate change as an important step towards “decolonizing climate adaptation” (Johnson et al., 2022, p. 1544). They suggest that valuing indigenous own viewpoints strengthens the climate adaptation agenda, by encouraging reflexivity on issues of power relations – asking who is producing knowledge about climate change and how and for what purposes, and which type of actors are leading adaptation (Johnson et al., 2022, p. 1545) – as well as of scale – is it climate change a real concern for indigenous peoples and part of their priorities? (Brugnach et al., 2017). Similarly, observers stress on the long-term reign of modern scientific knowledge and argue for “indigenous knowledge” to be considered as a “complement” rather than as a “competitor” with other systems of knowledge (Nyong et al., 2007, p. 788), in the face of climate change.

Yet other set of academic literature understands indigenous participation as an indispensable factor for the success of “nature-based solutions” to climate change (Ramos-Castillo et al., 2017, p. 2; Ricketts et al., 2010; Townsend et al., 2020, p. 551). While these same authors refer to negative effects arising from NbS and related projects (e.g., displacement, dietary restrictions, cultural shocks), they claim that impacts might be lessen through the rightful inclusion of indigenous in the design and later implementation of so-called climate change mitigation projects.

However, both the above narratives by policy experts and scholars are problematic. As noted below, a number of claims supporting the role of indigenous knowledge in climate change adaptation “tends to idealize indigenous peoples' production systems” (Franco & Borrás, 2021b, p. 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 & Borrás, 2021b, p. 1284). Indeed, evidence from research at indigenous lands suggests that “the target areas and purported

beneficiaries of these projects (on climate change adaptation and mitigation) are often embroiled in multiple socioecological conflicts” (Gonda et al., 2023, p. 1,2), and 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, p. 1151), in stark contrast with the more ideal type representations described early.

The emphasis placed around the indigenous/non-indigenous territories binary is neither a straightforward one for other political-historical reasons. The very notion of “ethnic territories” is a highly contested category, which is permanently shaped and reshaped by people’s everyday struggles (Anthias & Hoffmann, 2021, p. 219). An overemphasis on the alleged distinctiveness of indigenous territories bears the risk of essentializing what in reality are highly political and historical processes – aspects that mainstream discourses on climate change seem to disregard. Moreover, this distinctiveness can also serve purposes of instrumentalization, wherein the rights of indigenous are authorized in so far as these can be a strategy for the preservation of the global environment (Dehm, 2016, p. 209), and of exclusion, as those indigenous who do not conform with the expectations of environmental stewardship may find their rights to be restricted or ceased (Engle, 2010 cited in Dehm, 2016).

2.2. Secure land and property rights and climate change adaptation

The second rationale emphasizes on 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, p. 29). In this respect, the recognition of indigenous’ rights over their lands is understood as a major contributor for communities to be able to exercise their traditional governance and knowledge (IPCC, 2022b, p. 773), in a way that reduces their vulnerability (IPCC, 2022a, p. 107).

‘Strong’ property rights are also assumed to protect indigenous lands from “overconsumption”. Because land tenure rights are thought to serve the purpose of promoting indigenous’ own knowledge, these should ultimately help to avoid the introduction of external, non-indigenous practices that can contradict their unique systems and the sustainable development practices they apply to their territories (IPCC, 2022a, p. 1313), as suggested by the report.

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, p. 809) – many of which are part of the climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies promoted by the IPCC and related agencies in general. Majority of the lands targeted for A/R projects are home to indigenous peoples that have traditionally exercised control over it, under customary systems, with no clear property rights. Different observers, including those working within the IPCC, have noted the negative impacts that these project have entailed, especially during its early phase of implementation around the 2000’s. But A/R schemes have

improved over time, they claim, and are now more sensitive to both environmental and social objectives, making it possible for indigenous to “enjoy a range of co-benefits” (IPCC, 2022a, p. 809). The logic thus follows that if indigenous have clear property rights, their ability to participate in these benefits would be higher than if they had to permanently assert their land rights against external actors.

Overall, the importance given to land tenure security seems to be based on the assumption that property rights over land necessary translates into land tenure security and this, in turn, could incentivize communities in general, and indigenous peoples in particular, to nurture and protect their territory. By contrast, communities lacking these rights might fear dispossession and hence tend to avoid large investments in what the report calls “resilient infrastructure and sustainable land management practices” (IPCC, 2022a, pp. 109, 818). But as different observers have argued, land property rights alone are not a guarantee against land dispossession (see, e.g., Anthias, 2021; Ojeda, 2022; Tusing, 2023), and conversely, a lack of legal titles does not mean that communities feel less attached to their lands (see Lund, 2022).

Franco and Borras (2021b), 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, p. 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 its mobility, like shifting cultivation, formalization almost always translate into sedentarization, a shift that significantly changes the ways in which different peoples relate to the 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, p. 1283), 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, 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 of it. Finally, as evidence from different land titling programs suggest, 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 (Franco & Borras, 2021b, p. 1284).

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, p. 268). There is a need, she argues, to differentiate between territory (the image of it by indigenous) 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’ original notions of territory), it nevertheless has led to expectations and aspirations of indigenous to obtain control over these areas. However, as her research in

native community lands in Bolivia suggests, these “expectations have not been met by the process of propertisation”. In this case, indigenous were allocated lands distant from one another, and next to areas claimed by private actors, making it impossible for indigenous to realize their territorial aspirations (2021, pp. 269, 270, 275) in the practice. A similar outcome took place in Paraguay, where as Tusing (2023) describes, a major indigenous collective land titling program in fact allowed for new ways of dispossession and led 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” (Tusing, 2023, p. 407).

Moreover, as Ojeda (2022) recently argued, 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, p. 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. She takes as an evidence the struggles for land by rural women at one key site of massive land grabbing in northern Colombia. Historically, rural communities in the area have been victims of violent dispossession by different armed actors, such as the paramilitaries, who on many occasions paved the way for the subsequent takeover of lands by individuals and corporations. While in recent years a number of the dispossessed communities managed to regain access to land through formal restitution programs, including the women, the latter continue to be relegated from key practical decisions (e.g., what to cultivate and how), and hence the need to look “beyond property”.

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 territories, focusing particularly on their current livelihoods and their relationship with their surrounding ecosystem. As we shall see, the findings are nothing close to any of the optimistic and celebratory claims about the indigenous and commons. Both cases demonstrate a ‘commons’ that have been taken over by big capital and that are unable to sustain life.

3. Case studies of indigenous peoples in Colombia

An average of circa two million people self-recognize as indigenous in Colombia. Majority are grouped into formal indigenous land reserves (or *resguardos*) spread across the country. *Resguardos* are in the Colombian context a legal category first established in the late XVI century under the Spanish rule. According to historical accounts, early colonial land grabs dispossessed entire communities of indigenous – 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 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, instead (Machado, 2009). The first *resguardos* remained in place until around mid-1700s when they were no longer functional to the production demands of the country and neither served as an important source of labour (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 by indigenous and afro-descendants) are in possession of some 38 million hectares of land in the country or circa 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 number within the Latin American region, one that makes of Colombia’s policies and legislation comparatively stronger in the efforts to safeguard ethnic populations (see Herrera, 2017, p. 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, 2017b; Rodríguez, 2015).

Table 1. Collective land tenure in Colombia

<i>Figures of collective land tenure</i>	<i>Area (hectares)</i>	<i>Percentage of the total country area</i>
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, p. 2).

The Llanos Orientales region or eastern lowlands in Colombia is home to several of these more recent indigenous *resguardos* in the country’s history, accounting for a significant proportion of indigenous population. Several remaining indigenous in the area belong to the ‘Sikuani’, a group of “real hunter-gatherers” (Gómez, 1998, p. 352). Throughout Colombian history, the Sikuani have resisted to different forms of exploitation and violence. Initial waves of colonization through outright violence and Catholic missions sought their sedentarization and a forced conversion (Gómez et al., 2012, pp. 82–84). A directed policy of colonization of the frontier after independence animated the further takeover of lands considered of 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 in the Colombian history as “La Violencia”. 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 lowlands (Bejarano, 1983; Fajardo, 2015). Increased disputes over land in the area, between peasant *colonos*, large landowners and indigenous turned into severe interethnic conflicts (Gómez et al., 2012, p. 94). Violent persecution and the infamous practice of “indigenous hunts” – considered as “savaged” and “primitive” – were documented until well into the late XX century, as noted by Gómez (1998). 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, 2014, 2017c).

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 the form of capital intensive projects) have unleashed further colonization and accompanying pressures over indigenous territories (Calle, 2017a). In the Llanos of Colombia today, land is at the same time disputed by a myriad of actors, including peasant settlers, big capital owners and indigenous peoples.

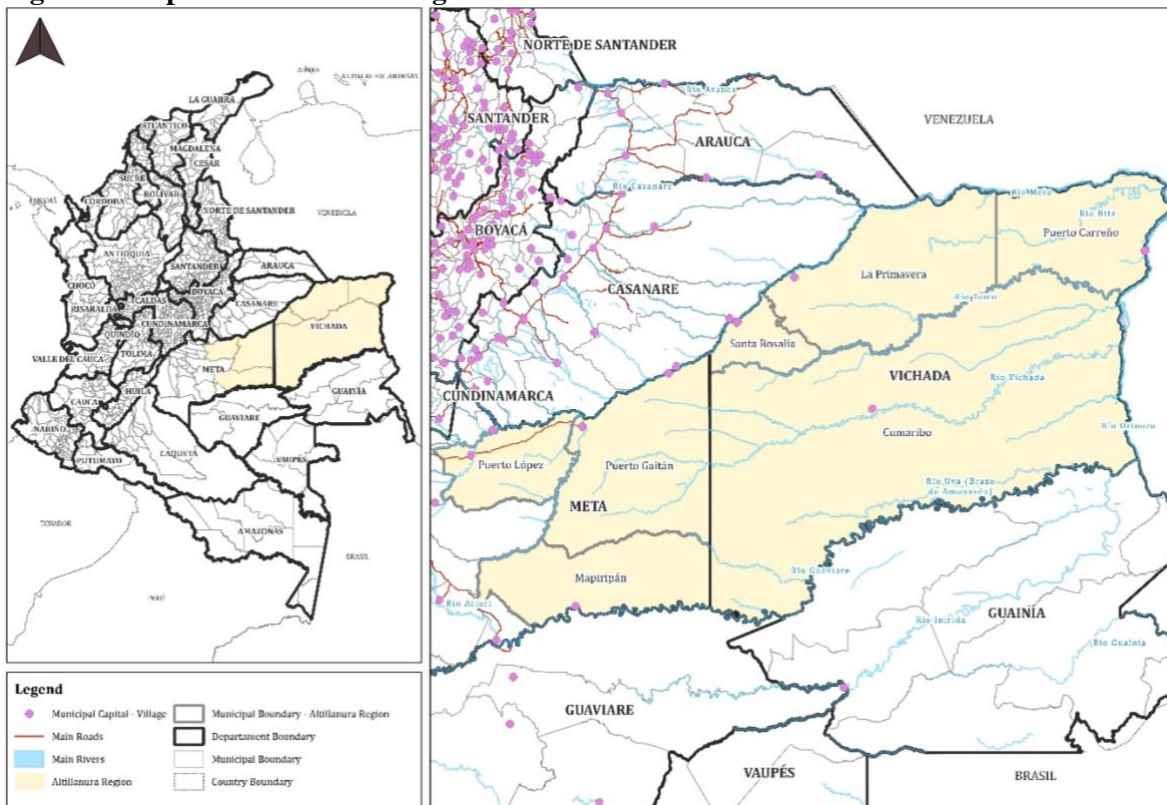
I focus on two cases of indigenous communities with different life and land trajectories – allowing for comparison and contrast between the two – (i) a community in a formally constituted indigenous land, and (ii) a community fighting for the legal recognition of their ancestral land rights. Both these communities are located at the heart of the Llanos Orientales, in the so-called “last agricultural frontier” in Colombia, the Altillanura (‘High Plains’) (Minagricultura, 2004) (see section 4).

The first community is situated in the province of Vichada (municipality of La Primavera). Vichada is one of two provinces integrating the Altillanura – a vast region to the east of Colombia in the border with Venezuela (see Fig. 1). It is the second largest province in the country after the Amazon; its large geographical extension contrast, 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 the most part 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 seasonal labor at cattle farms and/or occasionally employed at food and clothing stores in the urban area (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2016; Gómez et al., 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 materialized 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 Altillanura region. Unlike the second, Meta province, and Puerto Gaitán in particular, have received considerable 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). 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.

Figure 1. Map of the Atillanura region



Note: Map elaborated by Nicolás Rosero Peralta (2022) on behalf of the author.

Research methods

During 2022 and the first quarter of 2023 I conducted field research in the region, paying six visits of approximately three weeks each to both Meta and Vichada provinces. I interviewed indigenous belonging to different communities across the area, all of which have suffered the effects of the recent land rush in the Atillanura 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 local NGO, we identified a first set of potential interviewees through purposive sampling. We then resorted to snowball techniques to reach a larger group of participants. In addition to individual interviews (64), I conducted focus group discussions (5), participant observation and engaged in countless of informal conversations while in the field. As part of the author’s participation in a broader research project, a household survey of over 200 participants was also applied. 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 the project’s own ethics guidelines.

4. The contemporary land rush in the *Atillanura*

A sudden interest for land in the Atillanura 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; and 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 rush for land 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 for land (S. M. Borrás Jr. & Franco, 2012). Myriad of 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; Zoomers, 2010). This competition for land was largely triggered by a particular set of assumptions. One, the apparent existence of large tracts of ‘empty’ and ‘underutilized’ land worldwide – that 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 & Byerlee, 2012). But contrary to other types of investments, certainly “land is a strange object” (Li, 2014). Therefore, another essential component of the 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 circa 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 ax”, with an incredible economic potential (Díaz, 2016a, 2016b, p. 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 than the Altillanura in Colombia. Around that time – through an overall impulse to 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). Former ambassador to Colombia at the time made some of the soundest announcements, with his intention of acquiring over 400,000 hectares in the area (Portafolio, 2010). Interest in the Colombian cerrado also came from within the region. The nicknamed as 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 as 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 as 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 (Díaz, 2016a). Similarly, as of 2008, Puerto Gaitán in Meta became the epicentre of an annual forum about the Altillanura and its features and possibilities. Several if not all of the investors enumerated above attended at least one of the editions of the forum at the municipality. Puerto Gaitán in itself attracted the attention of foreign and domestic investors, too, many of whom landed their deals in 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 rush for land in the area has significantly added more pressures to their lands *and* lives.

5. The intensification of land *and* life struggles

This section examines key challenges to sustain life by two indigenous communities in Colombia, particularly in the context of a renewed interest for land in the area. As oppose 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 claims about this population.

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. Indigenous of *Iwitsulibo* have only recently returned to their ancestral lands in Puerto Gaitán, Meta. According to their testimonies, they were forced to leave around 1971 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 setting. Throughout the 2000s, they pursued several attempts of regaining 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).

However, finding the appropriate ways to sustain life upon re-settlement has proven to be an even harder undertaking. A majority of the lands that people of *Iwitsulibo* claim as their own are now in control of different agro-industrial complexes, running relatively prosperous businesses. *Iwitsulibo* is right at the heart of two main industrial centers, 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 as “The Mennonites” (see Daniels, 2021; Fitzgerald, 2023); and (ii) the largest industrial meat-processing compound in the country (La Fazenda), held by a set of renowned domestic entrepreneurs (see Verdad Abierta, 2013).

Both 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) on 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 air and water, through improvement of the mechanisms for the disposal of animal manure (Godoy, 2013; Rutas del Conflicto, 2020). Unsurprisingly, indigenous of *Iwitsulibo* are directly suffering the effects of water and air contamination – which in turn makes them more susceptible to climate change.

Private security, fences and checkpoints also add to the transformation of the landscape. In order to reach their settlement, people of *Iwitsulibo* must first pass through a number of checkpoints established along the way, by both “The Mennonites” and La Fazenda. According to one local NGO, and people of *Iwitsulibo* themselves, this is one of different strategies deployed by the companies to force indigenous to leave the area once and for all, under the appearance of voluntary displacement. In the past, indigenous 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 indigenous have resisted (Arango, 2022).

Indigenous are also forbidden the use of the open savannah for traditional life-affording activities such as hunting, fishing and foraging. 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. This is one main reason indigenous have become highly dependent on informal wage labour elsewhere. In addition, there are no public schools in the surroundings, and the community lacks sufficient funds to send children outside the settlement (Arango, 2022). Nor are there any health clinics. Life at *Iwitsulibo*'s ancestral lands has grown more and more difficult.

As *Iwitsulibo*'s, the experiences of many other rural inhabitants exhibit the uneven ways in which people position in the face of climate change (see e.g., Clay, 2023). While the most affluent enterprises in Puerto Gaitán remain in a comfortable position, indigenous are left with the highest costs of a problem to which they have barely contributed. And so, as more critical perspectives have highlighted, environmental change and degradation cannot be assessed simply as an ‘environmental’ issue (see Arsel, 2023; Fraser, 2021; Ribot, 2022b). Ribot (2022b), for instance, has rightly put forward that climate related damages are “stratified by historical, social and political-economic arrangements that render some people secure and others vulnerable” (2022b, pp. 684–685) and not just “natural” events (2022b, p. 696, see also 2022a) – as the case of *Iwitsulibo* evidences. Importantly, as Arsel (2023) highlights, bringing front the ‘class’ dimension in climate change analysis can better explain how the causes and effects of the climate crisis are unequally experienced and with what implications for how to act upon it. A reformulation of ‘class’ within climate justice movements, or what Tasdemir (2022) refers to “the agrarianization of the climate justice movement” is crucial a step for more engaged, politically sensitive action against climate change (as explored in more detail in the last section).

Conventionally, the challenges that people of *Iwitsulibo* (and elsewhere) are experiencing have been attributed to a lack of formal property rights over their lands. A great part of the efforts by human right activists and community leaders have focused on fighting for the formal recognition of what indigenous of *Iwitsulibo* refer to as their ancestral territories. But while formal property rights are an important mechanism to strengthen land tenure security,

the same has proven weak in different contexts. The following sub-section explores this idea through the case of the indigenous resguardo of *La Llanura*.

Dispossession in spite of property rights

In comparison to other cases within the region and nationwide, the indigenous peoples at *La Llanura* (Vichada) might appear as a case of success. They have formal property titles dating from at least the early 1980s covering circa 75,000 hectares of land – a relatively large area allocated to a single community. The *resguardo* is home to nearly 1,000 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 sometimes comprised by only one or two households each. At the resguardo, it seemed, land is abundant for communities to sustain a decent life.

Indigenous from *La Llanura*, nonetheless, have continuously suffered from dispossession – even if they do not openly express it in such terms. Below I discuss just two instances in a longer list. The first of these instances has been going on for decades now. As claimed by the indigenous, a number of ‘mestizo’ families established in the vicinity of their lands (apparently followers of Taoism) around the late 1980s, in one of the several waves of colonization following “La Violencia” (see section 3). Throughout the years, these families have stretched their land control over several thousands of hectares of the territory formally recognized as indigenous’ property. People from *La Llanura* refer to them as “the vegetarians”, due to the different dietary traditions between the two. Attempts to dialogue on the part of the indigenous have met with rejection, and very often, these neighboring families have exercised physical violence against the former.

Hunting and foraging is restricted to indigenous in the portion of land claimed by the so-called “the vegetarians”. Several members of the community also declared that they even have to ask for permission to transit in the area – when crossing from one smaller community to another – and that they must alert when they expect visitors from town (who necessarily have to cross the segment of land in control of “the vegetarians”). These restrictions have significantly affected indigenous traditional livelihoods, especially their food diets. While indigenous have attempted to bypass them, they have generally been forced to accept it. “The vegetarians” are the nearest community in the area that has access to solar power, internet connection and provides occasional jobs – all of which are fundamental aspects to counter the isolation of this area, as noted in section 3.

The second instance of dispossession is perhaps less visible to the eye, though indigenous fear that outright dispossession is just a matter of time. In 2017 indigenous of *La Llanura* signed an agreement with Biofix – a foreign company dedicated to “climate financing”, according to their official website (see Biofix, 2022) – as part of a series of projects on carbon sequestration carried out across Vichada, in the peak of the rush for land. As the counterparts in the contract, indigenous 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”. Their initial enthusiasm, however, quickly vanished when they began to realize what it really meant to “preserve” in the context of the contract.

During the first year after the signature of the agreement, indigenous continued their lives as they used to – engaging in slash and burnt practices, tearing down trees to turn it 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 nd 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. Biofix adduced that the compensation corresponded to the levels of forest preservation met by the indigenous and that there was no apparent inconsistency.

These different perceptions about forest have become more evident in the context of climate change mitigation – in which increasingly “the representation of the forests as ‘nature’ in authorized knowledge contrasts with local peoples’ claims of the forest as territory” (Paredes & Kaulard, 2022). Claiming forests as territory recognizes both the ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ elements that makes up for life in the rural settings and the historical-political character of land claims. By contrast, pairing forest with nature risks forgetting that “all nature is socially, culturally and historically constructed” (2022, p. 5); carbon offset and conservation programs, like the one carried out by Biofix, seem to be doing exactly so. Indeed, as the work by McElwee (2023, p. 187) confirms it, “existing discourses and plans for NETs continue to follow mostly technocratic and capitalist models”, while reference to social and justice perspectives remains scant.

Most of the money from Biofix’s first disbursement vanished quickly, and created internal conflicts within people at La Llanura – who demanded the termination of the contract. But as explained by lawyers from a local NGO during my fieldwork, a breach in the contract on the part of the indigenous could result extremely costly. Notwithstanding the large land area they are formally entitled to, indigenous feel permanently trapped; 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 from the market. 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 et al., 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 & Wang, 2023, p. 5,6). An example is provided from inside China, in which farmers subscribing a carbon sequestration agreement met with all sorts of barriers (e.g. of technical knowledge, language) to properly negotiate its terms and conditions. Nor even the alleged financial benefits represented a significant compensation for them. These all are similar challenges facing indigenous at La Llanura.

6. Towards an alternative lens to 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 life that too often are experienced by indigenous peoples. The so-called “indigenous knowledge”, of which the IPCC report is particularly keen about, is increasingly dwindling with the advance of commodification and the logics it imposes. As noted in the preceding section, the surrounding natural ecosystems at Iwitsulibo and La Llanura do not fit well with the reports’ estimates, which posits that indigenous lands overlap with some of the most preserved remaining ecosystems in the world – and, thus, indigenous can be rightly termed as the “stewards of their environment”. Formal property rights do not make a remarkable difference to the purpose of ecosystem’s preservation and life affordance either, as the case of the indigenous *resguardo* of La Llanura evidences. And yet, the recognition of indigenous’ particular values and ways of living is crucial to any meaningful agenda towards a better future for humanity. Meanwhile, land tenure security remains as one of the most recurring demands of rural populations today, including the indigenous.

What this paper is particularly concerned about, then, is to emphasize on the *actual* conditions in which indigenous peoples live in and what the implications are 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 of indigenous livelihoods and territories – and the rural world more generally – rather than on the real experiences taking place at the ground level. Consider that, in analyzing climate hazards and adaptation initiatives in northern Colombia, for instance, Camargo (2022, pp. 728–729) found that real challenges experienced by rural communities are often misrepresented by standard adaptations to climate change. Interpretations of more “prosperous futures” by government officers and aid agencies may not take into account what communities actually aspired for in contexts of economic and climate disasters.

The case of Colombia is certainly not an isolated one. Research on the practices of rural women in Honduras by Fash et al (2022) arrived to similar conclusions. For the authors, popularized alternative pathways to address 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”. Building on the lived experiences of a women-led environmentalist movement and their daily struggles (including poverty, discrimination, patriarchy), the authors argue instead for the introduction of “*buen sobrevivir*” or surviving well (2022, p. 2) as a more accurate term to reflect the real, and often precarious, circumstances in which these women and many other rural inhabitants live.

In the end, what the latter example 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. And while all these have certainly aggravated due to climate change, an over-emphasis on the ‘environmental’ diverts attention away from the broader, ‘non-environmental’ aspects of “our general crisis”, in Fraser’s words. For the author, “only by addressing all major facets of this crisis, ‘environmental’ and ‘non-

environmental’, and by disclosing the connections among them, can we begin to build a counter-hegemonic bloc that backs a common project and possesses the political heft to pursue it effectively” (2021, p. 96). In principle, such a project has to overcome the “merely environmental” to enquire around several other challenges of today, at the center of which is capitalism.

Not only are policy experts, scholars and movements too environmentally focused. As the discussion presented here suggests, IPCC and others are similarly falling into a ‘merely indigenous’ perspective, in a way that disembeds indigenous lands and livelihoods from broader processes of capitalist development. It is not a coincidence that indigenous 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 these places are not highly commodified yet in their inside, 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.

The ‘5Rs’

Addressing the climate crisis necessitates, indeed, of pathways that are more sensitive to the actual and *broader* challenges of sustaining life by different peoples, including the indigenous. I suggest that the ‘5Rs’ framework, as elaborated by Borrás and Franco (2018; 2021a), represent a more appropriate agenda to this aim. The ‘5Rs’ correspond to a set of five key concepts and political reference points (‘recognition’, ‘restitution’, ‘redistribution’, ‘regeneration’ and ‘representation/resistance’) which together demonstrate the importance of land to sustain life in the contemporary era. For the authors, while these all are well-known concepts used in policy and advocacy circles, they are most often employed separately. This is the case with ‘recognition’ (e.g. of indigenous knowledge and ancestral land rights) and the usage of the term by policy analysts and scholars linking climate change adaptation and indigenous peoples’ role in it, as described in section 2. The strength of the ‘5Rs’ framework lies, instead, on the emphasis given to the interdependence of the five concepts and hence the urgency to apply them all together (2018, pp. 11–12). 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. Each of these concepts, and their interconnections, can be briefly described as follows.

Many rural communities, including the indigenous peoples, live in rural areas under customary systems, in accordance with their own worldviews. *Recognition* of the rights of different social groups to live in and from the land is fundamental to their continuity. Recognition, however, is inseparable from *restitution*. It is only by restituting lands to those who have been violently dispossessed in the past – or who were force to relocate for different reasons – that recognition of the rights to various groups to access land can be just. Both recognition and restitution should also work in a context that favors *redistribution*, in which people that do not have any access to land at all or whose access is little, could benefit from redistribution of state lands and large private landholdings (Franco & Borrás, 2021a, pp. 22–25).

Not only access to land is central to the ‘5Rs’. The ways in which different social groups relate to it is also fundamental. Lands can be restituted and redistributed, and the rights of access by peoples recognized, but these efforts will ultimately be in vain if the agro-industrial system continues to dominate our relationship with nature. Margulis et al. (2023) recent examination of the “dangers of market fundamentalism” shows the urgency of containing market rationality in the global agriculture and food system in a climate change context. The continuation of practices emphasizing efficiency, productivity and specialization most probably would “leave the world population acutely vulnerable to large-scale food supply disruptions” (Margulis et al., 2023, p. 216) and to ecosystems’ degradation. A more humane and sustainable future, in the face of climate change, would therefore necessarily require the recognition of our interdependence with the natural environment in a way that favors *regeneration* (Borras & Franco, 2018, p. 12). Agro-ecological and agroforestry practices are examples of regeneration, in which both peoples and ecologies are taken care of.

Finally, the four ‘Rs’ noted above also necessitate of *representation* of different social and civic organizations and of customary authorities, who in turn represent different views, values and knowledge systems in relation to land and land-based resources. And, most crucially, the realization of all ‘Rs’ is ultimately possible through *resistance* against the rapid advance of land accumulation affecting human and natural environments, and through opposing to the different forms of repression and violence exerted to rural communities, including the indigenous (Franco & Borras, 2021a, pp. 26–27).

The ‘5Rs’ are, essentially, constitutive pillars of a broader program on “agrarian climate justice” (S. M. Borras Jr. & Franco, 2018). 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 et al., 2022).

What is more, the implications of climate change adaptation and mitigation politics on land and related resources, and how these “have altered land politics” (p7), have not been sufficiently explored (Borras & Franco, 2018, p. 7). 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, p. 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 & Borras, 2019, p. 192). According to Borras and Franco, 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, the climate change adaptation and mitigation discourses could be employed as a façade for what are actual land grabs (Borras et al., 2020, pp. 3–5; Franco & Borras, 2019, pp. 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. As noted above, this is true for indigenous at La Llanura.

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” (Borras & Franco, 2018, p. 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. Repeatedly, as the later paragraphs of this paper highlight, (potentially) well-intentioned reforms end up exacerbating pre-existing conflicts or creating new disputes by privileging just one of the 5Rs.

Recognition without redistribution nor regeneration

As implied in section 5, a significant part of the efforts by indigenous of Iwitsulibo – and the local NGO providing them with legal advice – are focused on the recognition of the territory they are settled in, as belonging to their ancestral lands. Iwitsulibo has 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. Different portions of land served to 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).

Around mid-2010s, the government of Colombia issued a decree 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 undergo the many required steps to constitute or expand a *resguardo* before relevant government offices. The decree was one important motivation for indigenous 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 natural ecosystem.

Let us suppose, however, for the sake of argumentation, that indigenous of Iwitsulibo obtain the recognition of their 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, prevailing structural aspects most probably would continue to detract 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 turn them into more sustainable uses under principles of regeneration. Indeed, the ability of recognition (on its own) to make significant contributions to improve indigenous livelihoods is little.

Recognition without representation

The case of La Llanura, for its part, is an actual example of how existing recognition (of indigenous rights to land), in the absence of other ‘Rs’, is significantly weak. Indigenous lands, as described in section 5, have been continuously grabbed by external actors – who have resorted to violence on many occasions – despite of the fact that indigenous have official records that demonstrate legal rights over the territory.

Lands at La Llanura have also been used as the setting of investment projects that contradict indigenous’ core values, like the case of Biofix. In this case, one can even suggest that official property rights actually played against the indigenous. 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 suggested in section 3, the isolation of the *resguardo* and the obstacles to make use of the savannahs for their subsistence has turned the indigenous reserve 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 necessitated too: a considerable large area of legal, titled lands to advance its project. According to indigenous testimonies, negotiations with Biofix went relatively fast, without this meaning that it was a fair platform representing the interests of the communities. 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 they recalled.

Therefore, recognition of indigenous’ 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 on their territories. In the case of indigenous in particular, representation must (at least) entail that communities understand the language at all times to be able to meaningfully engage in debate.

To reiterate, recognition of indigenous peoples’ knowledge and land rights is key to any meaningful project for a more sustainable future. But an assessment of the actual conditions of indigenous’ ways of living and territories today is imperative in Colombia (Calle, 2017a; Gómez et al., 2012; Rodríguez, 2015) and beyond. These conditions fall beyond an environmental focus alone (Fraser, 2021). These conditions are neither particular to indigenous peoples’ in and of itself. 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) and more conventional scholarly literature. As described above, several challenges imposed upon indigenous’ lands and lives would have to be resolved before they can rightly take a leading role in addressing the climate crisis. And although the current struggles for land and life in the rural areas of the country (see Arias, 2022; Camargo, 2022; Ojeda et al., 2015), like the ones indigenous peoples are experiencing, are different from past land struggles (see Bernstein, 2022), the former are all the more relevant in the contemporary era (Levien et al., 2018). Understanding indigenous’ current struggles for land by considering the ways in which these intersect with broader processes of capitalist development can tell us more about the extent of the climate crisis and how to better act upon it.

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