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Amazon summit lights way for Indigenous say in forest protection

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Indigenous leaders are holding out hope that a summit of Amazon country leaders held this week in the Brazilian city of Belém will give them more power over how the rainforest is managed, drawing on knowledge of protecting their lands for centuries.

A political declaration from the gathering said that the eight Amazon nations should act urgently to prevent the forest from reaching a tipping point, driven by land clearance, that would dry and degrade it further, intensifying global warming.

Brazil's Indigenous peoples, supported by international studies, argue they are the best guardians of the forest, which is regarded by scientists as an essential tool to curb climate change, as its trees absorb and store planet-heating carbon.

The summit re-launched the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), whose member states met for the first time in 14 years, establishing an Indigenous mechanism within the body intended to promote dialogue and coordination between governments and Indigenous peoples.

This step was welcomed by Indigenous leaders, together with the inclusion of Indigenous peoples throughout the "Declaration of Belém".

The document - which mentions them 128 times - defines Indigenous peoples as "central for the conservation of biodiversity and natural resources" of the Amazon.

It says they should have the right to protection and active participation in policy-making, along with other local communities.

Colombian Fany Kuiru Castro, president of the Confederation of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), noted however that the document "is a mere declaration of political will" - and needs to reinforce rights in practice.

During the summit, Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva called for a "just ecological transition" and said Amazon resources should be valued and used more fairly rather than exploited for the benefit of a few.

He also emphasised the importance of considering forest-dwellers in the quest to raise more finance for Amazon conservation at the COP28 UN climate talks in late 2023.

"We are going to COP28 with the objective of telling the rich world that... it is necessary to allocate money not only to take care of the forest canopy, but of the people who live under it," Lula told the closing of the Belém summit.

While acknowledging signs of progress there, Indigenous activists criticised weak ambition in fixing clear time-bound environmental goals, after the Aug. 8-9 summit failed to agree on ending deforestation by 2030, a commitment sought by Brazil.

They also pointed to a lack of clarity over the decision-making power Indigenous peoples will have in the revamped ACTO.

At the summit - which gathered 24,000 people, more than double the number expected, on the heels of the world's hottest month on record - COICA had requested that each leader meet with a key Indigenous representative of their country.

That did not happen, demonstrating how Indigenous power and rights, as well as forest protection under ACTO, still depend on the will of political authorities and pressure from civil society, said COICA's Castro.

Governments still in charge

Apib, Brazil's largest Indigenous umbrella organisation, said in a statement that the [Belém declaration](#) was "frustrating" because it did not establish concrete goals for demarcating Indigenous territories, which have long been dogged by an absence of clear ownership, laying them open to exploitation.

Apib coordinator Dinamam Tuxá added that while Indigenous peoples had space to participate in the "Amazon Dialogues" - the civil society discussions that preceded the summit - they did not have a seat at the table in the presidential negotiations.

"Our recommendations did not make it into the declaration - rather (they were attached) as an appendix," he said.

Governments can still "take the actions they want, with the deadline they want", he added.

Besides ducking a firm deadline for zero deforestation, [fellow Amazon countries also rebuffed an ongoing campaign](#) by Colombia's leftist President Gustavo Petro to end new oil development in the Amazon.

In his summit speech, Petro likened the desire among some left-wing governments to keep drilling for oil within their borders to right-wing denial of climate science.

Brazil, for example, is weighing whether to develop a potentially huge offshore oil find near the mouth of the Amazon River and the country's northern coast.

Crackdown on environmental crime

One concrete commitment at the summit was to set up an Amazon police co-operation center in the Brazilian city of Manaus, aimed at exchanging information between countries.

It will be tasked with investigating and [cracking down on environmental crime](#) in the region, which is grappling with illegal land-grabbing, logging and mining, increasingly connected to drugs and arms trafficking in the forest's porous borders.

Tuxá said Apib supports law enforcement and protection, but at the same time, stressed that "there must be a dialogue with those who live in the forest".

Another achievement hailed by environmentalists was the creation of the Intergovernmental Technical-Scientific Panel of the Amazon, inspired by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the global authority on climate science.

"This is important because it establishes a formal connection between science and decision-making," said Adriana Ramos, political advisor at the NGO Instituto Socioambiental.

She added that the summit had also demonstrated to the rest of the world Amazon nations' interest in "treating the Amazon as one single thing and valuing it in a unified manner".

Dario Mejía Montalvo, chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, said that despite failing to adopt more ambitious collective goals, the summit had set a positive political direction of travel.

"It is not a finish line, rather a starting point," he said.

"This is the first place in the world in which leading politicians are gathering around an ecosystem - whereas in other places they are discussing how to make wars," he added.

Source: <https://www.eco-business.com/news/amazon-summit-lights-way-for-indigenous-say-in-forest-protection/>