



Climate crisis in Latin America: the high cost of government inaction

Sara Benitez-Mongelos*

Abstract: Latin America faces escalating negative impacts from climate change, exacerbated by poverty and corruption, yet governments continue to put economic gain above citizens' needs. It is worth examining the human rights implications of environmental inaction across the region.

Latin America currently stands on the brink of a climate crisis. Rising temperatures, more intense hurricanes, prolonged droughts and rises in the levels of seas and rivers are no longer distant threats—they are daily realities. While climate change affects the entire planet, its consequences are particularly acute in a region already marked by inequality, extractive economies, corrupt governments, weak institutions and fragile democracies. Government responses have been insufficient, often prioritising short-term economic gains over long-term resilience and rights protections. The result - deepening vulnerabilities for those already most at risk.

Across the region, climate change is already forcing people from their homes. In Panama, approximately 300 Guna families have been relocated from the Guna Yala

* Sara Benitez-Mongelós is a Paraguayan lawyer, public translator, researcher and university lecturer. She holds a Master's in Human Rights and Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean ([LATMA](#)) from the Global Campus Latin America. She currently works as a Law Clerk to Judge Diego Moreno Rodriguez at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

archipelago due to rising seas — marking one of Latin America's first cases of [climate-induced displacement](#). While the relocation was framed as proactive adaptation, the reality has been more complicated. Communities have faced cultural disruption, limited access to public services and inadequate infrastructure in their new settlements. For Indigenous peoples whose identity is intimately tied to territory, being uprooted means far more than the loss of property—it means the erosion of memory, autonomy and rights.

Moreover, Latin America remains the world's [most lethal region](#) for environmental defenders. In 2023, Colombia [recorded 79 killings](#) of land and environmental activists—the highest number globally. Those most at risk are often Indigenous and Afro-descendant leaders who oppose large-scale development projects, deforestation or mining on ancestral lands. These attacks are far from isolated: they reflect systemic failures by states to guarantee protection and justice. Far from being recognised as guardians of the planet, these defenders are often criminalised, stigmatised and left to face violence alone. [Mexico and Honduras](#) followed comparable trajectories in 2023, each reporting 18 killings of environmental defenders. While Mexico experienced a decline compared to the previous year's toll of 31, Honduras saw a rise from the 14 recorded in 2022.

Policy gaps and political contradictions as inequality deepens crisis

Despite growing recognition of the climate emergency, Latin American governments continue to fall short. According to [Amnesty International](#), many countries in the region have not only failed to reduce emissions but are actively expanding fossil fuel extraction—particularly in Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela. Policies often lack coherence, balancing climate rhetoric with extractivist practices that endanger ecosystems and livelihoods. This disconnect is especially harmful for vulnerable populations who are least responsible for emissions but bear the brunt of their consequences.

The impacts of climate change are magnified by existing social and economic inequalities. According to [ECLAC research](#), the poorest and most excluded groups in Latin America— particularly rural, Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities— face disproportionate risks due to limited access to resources, services, and adaptive infrastructure. Climate vulnerability is thus not only environmental but also deeply structural, embedded in historic patterns of discrimination and marginalisation.

The Escazú Agreement: a tool yet to be used

One of the region's most promising frameworks is the regional treaty to ensure [environmental justice](#), which aims to guarantee access to information, public participation in decision-making and protection for environmental defenders. Yet implementation of the Escazú Agreement has been slow and uneven. While some

countries have ratified it, others—including [large emitters and biodiversity hotspots](#), like Bahamas, Barbados, Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras, Surinam, Trinidad y Tobago y Venezuela—have yet to commit. Without stronger political will, its transformative potential remains largely untapped.

Climate justice in Latin America must begin by placing human rights at the core—especially the rights of historically marginalised and disproportionately affected communities. This means guaranteeing the right to remain in one's territory, ensuring free, prior and informed consent for development projects, and upholding the right to a healthy environment as both a legal and existential imperative. It also requires a decisive shift away from extractivist economic models and towards policies rooted in conservation, sustainability, and equity.

While international solidarity and climate finance are important, lasting change must come from within: through stronger democratic institutions, real political accountability, and the active, meaningful participation of citizens—particularly Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, and rural populations.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has consistently supported this vision. Through a growing body of [jurisprudence](#), the Court has recognised the deep interconnection between environmental protection and human dignity and has upheld the rights of communities to protect their territories, defend nature, and demand justice. The Court's recent [Advisory Opinion OC-32/25](#) reaffirms this framework, establishing clear state obligations to address the climate crisis through a human rights-based approach.

Way forward

May 2025 witnessed two significant statements by key bodies in the region. The Special Rapporteurship on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights (REDESCA) of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) published its [Annual Report](#), analysing major human rights developments across the Americas in 2024. Meanwhile, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights issued [Advisory Opinion OC-32/25](#)—a landmark interpretation on the climate emergency and human rights. Requested by Chile and Colombia, this opinion marks the most comprehensive articulation to date of state obligations under the American Convention in the context of the climate crisis.

The REDESCA report [warns](#) that the climate emergency has devastating impact on both the environment and human rights, particularly access to a healthy environment, clean water and adequate food. These issues disproportionately affect structurally marginalised groups such as Indigenous peoples, women, small-scale farmers and migrants, especially in regions facing water stress and food insecurity. The report stresses that without a comprehensive, rights-based approach to climate and environmental policy, poverty and inequality will remain entrenched.

The energy transition presents new challenges. While shifting away from fossil fuels is crucial, the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects, wind farms and critical mineral extraction must not repeat past mistakes. REDESCA [emphasises](#) that this transition must be just and sustainable, ensuring free, prior and informed consent, territorial rights, and effective participation of affected communities. Environmental safeguards must be strict to avoid ecosystem degradation and water contamination. The cited Advisory Opinion also calls for responsible business conduct (eg, see paras 246, 347, and 506) aligned with international and inter-American human rights standards, including the [UN Guiding Principles](#) on Business and Human Rights. Companies must not only avoid harm but actively contribute to rights protection. Business practices should promote democratic values, social participation, and respect for cultural diversity.

The Court [affirms](#) that the climate emergency threatens the effective enjoyment of numerous rights, including the rights to life, personal integrity, health, water, food, housing, property and cultural identity. It stresses that these rights are especially endangered for groups historically excluded or disproportionately impacted, such as indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, women, children and environmental defenders.

Critically, the Court [establishes](#) that states are bound by heightened duties of prevention and due diligence (eg, see paras 231-237) and must adopt both mitigation and adaptation measures in line with human rights standards. The opinion also highlights the compelling nature of the obligation not to cause irreversible climate and environmental harm, elevating this duty beyond mere policy discretion.

In procedural terms, the Advisory Opinion OC-32/25 [emphasises](#) the right to access climate information, public participation and access to justice (eg, see paras 488-560), reinforcing the urgent need for implementation of the Escazú Agreement. Furthermore, it recognises the right to defend the environment as a standalone human right and mandates effective state protection for environmental defenders (eg, see paras 561-587).

By articulating a binding interpretative framework, this opinion offers a powerful legal tool for civil society, indigenous groups and affected communities to demand rights-based climate action. It underscores that climate justice in Latin America cannot be achieved without accountability, equity, and a profound transformation of state responsibilities—both in domestic policies and international cooperation.

Ultimately, both statements confirm what science and activism have long declared: the climate crisis is a human rights emergency, and the time for rights-based solutions is now.