
[Costa Rica: Jurisdictional REDD+ used as a condition to access rights](#)

Costa Rica was the first country in Latin America and the Caribbean to receive World Bank payments for a national program called Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, better known as Jurisdictional REDD+. Indeed, the country presents itself to be a leader in this. (1) In its official propaganda, the government claims that a percentage of the funds are distributed among indigenous communities who protect forests. (2) However, the reality is different. In the last decade, the state has reduced investment in health, housing, education, and other basic rights for the population. And in indigenous territories, it has made these resources conditional based on communities' acceptance of REDD+. In other words, if they do not accept REDD+, there would be no funds to guarantee their most basic rights – including the right to their territory.

There are eight Indigenous Peoples in the country – Gnobes, Huetar, Chorotegas, Borucas, Broran, Maleku, Cabécar y Bribri – spread across 24 territories. Most of their territories are forested. The Cabécar and Bribri peoples have the largest territories in terms of both forest area and proportion of the country. The Bribri Indigenous Territory, spanning 43,690 hectares, is located in the southeastern part of the country, between the Atlantic coast and the La Amistad International Park.

In this article, we hear from Emmanuel Buitrago Páez of the Kólkuák Indigenous clan of the Bribri of Talamanca. He is a coordinating member of the National Front for Indigenous Peoples (FRENAPI, by its Spanish acronym), a collective that represents eight Indigenous Peoples from at least 15 territories. He talks about their struggle to resist pressure from the state, which seeks to subjugate forests and their communities to the interests of the polluting companies that are behind REDD+ and carbon markets.

Communities in resistance

I am Emmanuel Buitrago Páez, from the Kólkuák Indigenous clan, in the Bribri Indigenous Territory of Talamanca. In this area we have 32 communities, distributed into clans that are family units, and more than 80 percent of them are farmers. We produce organic bananas, plantains and cacao to sell, and we also produce many other products for exchange and consumption. Being on the border with Panama, the five most important rivers in the border region flow through our territory: Coén, Lary, Tlírí, Urén, and Yorki, which together form the Sixaola river that marks the border between the two countries. Due to our close relationship with spirituality Sibö/God and Iiria/Earth, more than 70 percent of our territory has forests or is used for organic production.

We have taken a strong stance against REDD+ in this territory. We denounce the Costa Rican government for imposing conservation and financing models that threaten Indigenous Peoples, and for moving forward with its plans to commodify and privatize 'common goods'. It does this through coercion and structural violence against those of us who are fighting to defend the earth, rivers, coasts and forests, and to reaffirm our rights to health, education, and housing.

Indigenous Peoples do not need REDD+ to protect forests. We have extraordinary experience taking care of forests, because forests are linked to our very lives and spirituality. Nonetheless, some

indigenous leaders who have been pressured by the state's budget cuts, ended up accepting the funds offered through REDD+. Meanwhile, the communities still do not know the truth about the program; they have not been told where it comes from, who finances it, or how the financing arrives and under what conditions.

This initiative, therefore, caused divisions in several indigenous communities in the country due to disagreements over criteria and the position to take in negotiations. This has destabilized community governance and weakened its credibility.

Jurisdictional REDD+: state blackmail

In 2008, Costa Rica was selected by the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) to begin preparations to implement the Jurisdictional REDD+ program. (3) Since then, many indigenous communities have questioned the state's actions, given that our participation and representation were not guaranteed, nor were we informed. There was also no strategy implemented to ensure transparency in the use of funds.

As part of this process, state representatives – through state institutions and associations – began visiting indigenous communities throughout the country, supposedly to inform them and consult with them about the REDD+ program. However, these meetings, which lasted no more than three hours on average, were not intended to let communities decide, but to merely provide superficial information about the REDD+ project. In our Bribri Territory in Talamanca, there are about 10,000 of us. However, there were no more than 100 people at that meeting, which is very low representation. Additionally, instead of informing and consulting with us, the state representatives asked people to present a list of needs in the territory. And in response to the demands that were listed (a bridge, an aqueduct, a school, etc.), the state representatives said that they would be covered by the REDD+ fund. This is how they take advantage of communities' needs.

In response, indigenous communities throughout the country began to hold demonstrations and, in 2014, we managed to halt the implementation of REDD+. (4) The main reason was the government's unwillingness to consult with communities through a free, prior, informed, and good-faith process (as required by Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization – ILO – to which Costa Rica is a signatory). (5)

In this process, we, the Bribri of the indigenous territory of Talamanca, sent the "Declaration of the Bribri Territory Free of REDD+", to several authorities, including the government of the Republic of Costa Rica and the Board of Directors of the Association of Integral Development of the Bribri Indigenous Territory (ADITIBRI, by its Spanish acronym). In the document, which was drafted in 2016 and signed by more than 300 people, we were emphatic: "Exercising our right to hold our own consultation, we decide to reject the REDD+ project, its consultation protocol, and any modification of the project's name, and we declare the Bribri Territory of Talamanca to be free of REDD+, from this day forward". (6)

However, some time later, the REDD+ implementation process began to move forward again throughout the country. The state's strategy of using people's needs to justify the program and pressure them to accept it in their territories was instrumental in this.

As part of that strategy, in 2019 the government approved and implemented laws such as the law to 'Strengthen Public Finances', which allowed it to freeze budgets and contracts every year, including those allocated to indigenous territories. This was used as a way to pressure communities to accept

alternative sources of income, such as REDD+.

In this context, the state began to suspend contracts for Payments for Environmental Services (PSA, by its Spanish acronym), one of the few funds that communities receive collectively. These are resources that the country collects through taxes, which it then uses to pay communities for forest conservation. The Indigenous Bribri Territory of Talamanca went from having seven contracts in 2019 to three in 2023, which restricted support for the most vulnerable and dispossessed communities in the territory.

At the same time, the government has significantly cut investment in educational plans and programs, infrastructure, school meal services, administrative services, transport scholarships, and regular study scholarships. This leads to greater inequality, and it constitutes a failure to guarantee the right to education. In light of this reality, some indigenous representatives think that the limited REDD+ funds could provide a solution for this lack of resources, when in fact this has been a programmatic action by the state. This situation has become the justification to advance REDD+ in indigenous territories; REDD+ is presented as a palliative measure to provide resources to address the educational needs of communities. And with that, the state moves forward with REDD+, while limiting investment in education to the purchase of school furniture – such as chairs, tables, desks, etc.

The same thing happened with health care. The public health system is implemented by the Costa Rican Social Security Fund – where there have been cases of corruption, underinvestment, and failure to respond to health care needs. For example, in Talamanca – including in indigenous Bribri territory – part of the REDD+ funds are now going to support the Health Boards, something that is the state's responsibility to finance. (7)

Similarly, low investment in public water services, such as those provided by Acueductos y Alcantarillados (AyA), has been another argument to justify REDD+: according to its proponents, REDD+ would supposedly provide solutions for the lack of water infrastructure.

The state and its institutions believe that REDD+ funds and other carbon trading businesses will solve problems that should really be addressed by the state. The truth is, nothing that REDD+ supposedly provides will solve the underlying problems; rather, it just offers palliative, temporary or superficial measures. It is the state's responsibility to provide funding for the public policies that its institutions develop to respond to the needs – and guarantee the rights – of indigenous communities.

As for land rights, the state also lacks a plan developed with and by communities to restore territories, that is, to return to Indigenous Peoples all the lands that legally belong to them. On the contrary, the state imposes carbon businesses and defunds public policies that would address the needs and guarantee the rights of peoples.

The main beneficiaries: the people who deforest

According to the document, 'Costa Rica National REDD+ Strategy,' the state's total investment to reduce emissions between 2018 and 2024 is around 1.177 billion dollars. Of that total, 92 percent (US 1.082 million dollars) corresponds to what the country is already investing in REDD-related policies, such as the National Forestry Development Plan and the Protected Wilderness Areas Policy; these items are included in regular institutional budgets. (8)

As for the remaining eight percent (US 95 million dollars), the Government intends to cover it, in part,

with the income it expects to obtain from selling emissions reductions to the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF), which is managed by the World Bank. (9) This income is calculated to be US 63 million dollars, of which the country has already received US34 million dollars. (10) The government says it will invest this amount in actions to reach its target emissions reductions and to preserve 640,000 hectares of forest. However, the program will allocate most of this money, 69 percent, to landowners and rural producers in the private sector – in other words, to one of the sectors that bears the most responsibility for deforestation and land conflicts with indigenous communities. Meanwhile, 16 percent of the revenue is earmarked for us, the Indigenous Peoples.

Using a forest preservation and conservation policy to benefit the sector that most deforests is a pretty clear indicator of who the government and REDD+ benefit: those who are the biggest threat to Indigenous Peoples' rights to the territory, and therefore, the biggest threat to forests.

Preserving forests: the path is to guarantee territorial rights

Costa Rican law guarantees the right to indigenous reserves exclusively to the communities who inhabit these lands. However, there are landowners who occupy these lands with the complicity of the state.

Landholders with ties to politicians, judges, prosecutors, and municipal governments have set fires in indigenous territories – occupying land, threatening, intimidating, and displacing indigenous communities from their lands, in violation of the law. (11) Indigenous territories are being affected by large producers of pineapple and banana monocultures, which generate pollution due to the use of agrochemicals on the plantations – specifically in the South Pacific and the northern regions of the country.

Many Indigenous Peoples risk their lives fighting against this reality and defending their territories. Since 2019, for example, there have been two murders that have gone unpunished. The victims were the indigenous comrades, Sergio Rojas, from the territory of Salitre, and Jerhy Rivera, from the territory of Térraba. Both were killed by invading landowners. (12)

The impunity of state power structures allows for the consolidation of aggression, discrimination, racism, and the imposition of new forms of colonization of minds, property, spiritualities, structures, and cultural diversity.

Our collective, the National Front for Indigenous People (FRENAPI), holds the state responsible for the attacks and violations of Indigenous Peoples' rights, since it has failed to guarantee or implement the rights enshrined in the Constitution and in international law for Indigenous Peoples.

Image

Frente Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas (Foto: FRENAPI)

Therefore, the Costa Rican state has been irresponsible; it has not upheld its obligation to guarantee life, conservation and the people's right to land.

This vacuum is used as an argument to advance REDD+. This program is presented as an alternative way to finance territorial regularization that would guarantee the full recovery of indigenous lands currently held by landowners or businesspeople; that is, it would guarantee the return of the lands to their rightful owners: the Indigenous Peoples. But beyond whether REDD+ is approved or not, it is the state's responsibility to settle the age-old debt of returning lands to indigenous communities.

Conclusion

There are two proposals and agendas underway. One comes from the state, which is promoting REDD+; intellectual property over biodiversity; expansion of plantations; mining; privatization of public services and assets; oil exploration; hydroelectric exploitation; drug trafficking; corruption; cuts to public funds and investments; and the privatization of forests, coasts and public areas.

And another, very different agenda comes from the Indigenous Peoples of Costa Rica. It is based on spirituality; forests; nature; food; medicine; our own education; language; identity; culture; and our own structures. But above all, it is based on territorial reaffirmation, which implies the total regularization of indigenous territories.

REDD+, through deceitful methods, pawns off forests to supposedly guarantee other rights – such as education, health and land. In this way it restricts the freedom and the good faith of Indigenous Peoples.

The state must guarantee rights unconditionally. An inherent function of state institutions is to respond to public needs, plans and policies. In the case of the Indigenous Peoples in Costa Rica, the state must provide economic resources to communities that respond to the peoples' own agendas – without conditions or the use of blackmail to get them to accept REDD+.

From our villages, we have experienced the dispossession of 'common goods' through cronyism and the imposition of the state's agendas and structure. This reveals the continuation of a murderous colonial model of conquest, usurpation and extractivism of our 'common goods' and of LIFE itself.

We condemn the bad practices of governments – the fiscal, classist, and violent practices that strip peoples of their identity, lands, spirituality, forests, coasts, rivers, and 'common goods', based on the peoples' particular circumstances due to customs, language, their economic situation and other social barriers.

We demand recognition of and respect for the critical role that indigenous communities – from their territories – play in maintaining and defending the customs, spirituality and lands of their peoples. We reaffirm indigenous communities' rights to have a voice and influence, and to be afforded respect for the cultural wealth they represent. This must be allowed in all political, social, economic and cultural spaces.

Inspired by our people's LIFE Project, we propose and call for common and collective causes. For the 'common good', for LIFE, we will continue reaffirming and staking our dreams, which we have the right to weave with ancestral wisdom.

We call on all Peoples to defend and reaffirm the right to 'common goods', to coasts, forests, rivers, food and water; to our own education and health; to conservation of natural and cultural ecosystems; to traditional structures; and to Indigenous Peoples' governance and autonomy.

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- (2) The World Bank in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2025. Forest conservation payments in Costa Rica are supporting indigenous communities ([video](#))
- (3) [REDD+ Costa Rica 2025. Forest Carbon Partnership Facility. Documents and legal contracts about FCPF between the government of Costa Rica and the World Bank](#)
- (4) Telar Comunicación Popular, 2014. Talamanca dice No REDD+ Estas selvas no tienen precio (video).
- (5) WRM, 2016. [Bribri: a people never conquered who are standing up to REDD](#) and [Protest from the indigenous Bribri territory, 2015](#)
- (6) Voces Nuestras, 2016. Comunidades Bribri de Talamanca piden ser territorio libre de REDD+ <https://vocesnuestras.org/comunidades-bribri-de-talamanca-piden-ser-territorio-libre-de-redd/> and [Declaration of the Bribri Territory Free of REDD+, 2016](#)
- (7) Health Boards are auxiliary bodies of hospitals, clinics and health areas that are part of the Costa Rican Social Security Fund, whose purpose is to improve healthcare, administrative and financial performance, as well as to promote citizen participation.
- (8) [National REDD+ Strategy Costa Rica.](#)
- (9) The lion's share of those US\$95.3 million will be raised through the sale of carbon emission reductions to the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF). In total, the FCPF is expected to contribute US\$63 million, of which the Costa Rican government has already received more than half at the time of publication of this article. For more information, click [here](#).
- (10) The World Bank in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2025. [Sustaining Forests and Strengthening Communities in Costa Rica](#)
- (11) TV Sur Pérez Zeledón, 2020. [Solution sought to the land conflict in the indigenous territory of China Kichá](#) and Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica, 2020. [Plenary session mourns death of indigenous leader and calls for investigation.](#)
- (12) Cultural Survival, 2024. [Dismissal of Land Defender Sergio Rojas' Murder Case in Costa Rica Causes Distress and Indignation](#) and Cultural Survival, 2020. [Segundo asesinato de defensor Indígena en Costa Rica evidencia la inacción del Estado](#)

