

**Interview with Robinson López, Climate Change and Biodiversity Area Coordinator COICA
July 10, 2020**

This is one of the last interviews Mr. López gave prior to his death due to COVID-19 on August 21.

1. From your perspective, what are the reasons for deforestation and forest degradation in Indigenous territories of the Amazon?

The Indigenous movement in Latin America, and especially in the Amazon, has been persistently pointing out since the 20th century that the greatest depreciation against nature occurs outside of the Indigenous territories. The Indigenous Peoples consider ourselves guardians of Mother Nature. We have a relationship with the environment and the territory and we understand the importance of caring for it, since it is sacred to us.

Today, science has proven us right. There are studies that have shown that more than 80% of deforestation and forest degradation occurs outside the legally recognized and ancestral Indigenous territories.

For this reason, I consider that deforestation and forest degradation, as well as the loss of biodiversity in our territories, are mainly due to external causes, typical for the western extractivist model.

Pollution, logging (legal and illegal), extensive agriculture and livestock, infrastructure projects, poaching, crude oil exploration and exploitation, mining, hydroelectric dams, and racism are conditions that have been accelerating deforestation in the Amazon and, in the case of the Indigenous territories, the adoption of public policies that ignore our rights. In this context, there are governmental and third-party actions that directly affect our territoriality, without giving guarantees for the exercise of the fundamental right of consultation and free, prior and informed consent.



Robinson López

2. In your opinion, how can forest degradation in Indigenous territories be reduced?

The complexity of forest degradation of ecosystems in Indigenous territories makes it necessary for any proposed action to recognize and value the broad knowledge and capacities that Amazonian Indigenous Peoples have been acquiring for millennia.

The Amazonian Indigenous Peoples have provided humanity with immense knowledge. We have adapted hundreds of plants and trees to meet food and health needs. Medicines from our territories have been developed and have saved millions of human beings around the world - medicines that our grandparents and great grandparents knew and generously shared.

For this reason, we propose that any long-term intervention models for protecting our territories must refer to our own Indigenous Amazonian knowledge systems. To reduce the degradation of ecosystems in the Amazon, the territorial rights of the Indigenous Peoples over our ancestral territories must be recognized and guaranteed; likewise, respect for collective rights and the fundamental right of free and

informed consultation and consent is essential to avoid and remedy the impact of multiple projects and laws that affect and encourage degradation and deforestation in the Amazon.

Finally, it is very important to have the decisive support of civil society, international cooperation and friendly governments to advance in the construction of long-term proposals that allow strengthening and maintaining the capacity of Indigenous Peoples to remain in our territories, living a dignified life and maintaining our harmonious relationship and care for our Mother Nature.

3. What is the role of COICA in preventing deforestation and degradation in the Amazon?

The Coordinator of the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin - COICA, is an Indigenous organization of international convergence that works on the protection of Indigenous Peoples and territories through the defense of their ways of life, principles and social, spiritual and cultural values. Our actions are focused on the defense of life and the Amazon to conserve forests for a living planet that ensures the continuity of our present and future generations. As an international Indigenous organization, our main objectives include developing and promoting the necessary mechanisms for the interaction of the Indigenous Peoples and organizations that are members of COICA and defending territorial claims, the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and respect for human rights.

Within our organizational structure, we have a coordinator of Climate Change and Biodiversity, for which I have been responsible for the last two years. In this coordination, we seek to generate mechanisms of sustainable living systems for the Indigenous Peoples and nations of the Amazon basin and the integrity of the Amazon. Thus, it is necessary to create conditions to guarantee the life and integral well-being of Indigenous Peoples from their own conception and the implementation of their knowledge systems in the processes of restoration and conservation of the biodiversity of the Amazon.

So I have been developing an advocacy agenda and proposals to promote environmental governance for Indigenous Peoples in the countries of the Amazon basin. Likewise, despite the economic and technical difficulties, efforts have been made to support Indigenous organizations affiliated with COICA in the process of formulation and monitoring of national safeguards information systems, as well as in the implementation of the Cancun Safeguards, among others.

4. Relating to the current situation, what does the threat of COVID-19 mean for the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon and for their territories?

The current situation of Indigenous Peoples in the face of the COVID-19 threat shows, first of all, the immense neglect that the states of the region maintain towards the Indigenous territories and the Amazon. The impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples shows the immense inequality that exists regarding the guarantees of life, health and safety of Indigenous Peoples compared to other ethnic groups. Our forms of health care and attention are unknown and denied, our traditional doctors have no recognition.

On the contrary, if we analyze the regulations imposed by the different ministries of health in the region, there is a systematic persecution of the practice of Indigenous medicine, which is a cruel attack on our way of life, our worldview and our understanding of what is health.

It seems important to me to point out that we, the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon, do not have an immune system prepared to successfully face the deadly and devastating effects of diseases transmitted

by the majority of society. For this reason, a different approach to health care is required. No state in the Amazon basin has taken these topics seriously.

On the other hand, we see that national and sub-national governments have dedicated themselves to trying to save the financial system and give guarantees to extractive companies. The general population, and the Indigenous population, has been neglected. Today, our societies are at serious risk not only due to the incidence of the virus, but also due to the profound impoverishment and great needs that are beginning to be perceived. This situation ends up affecting us to a greater extent since we have seen an exponential increase of people entering our territories to do illegal logging, mining (both legal and illegal), cutting down and burning large forest areas.

There are no controls by the state or guarantees for the communities and their authorities to carry out their territorial control. This increase in the arrival of strangers to our territories coincides with the increase in infections among the Indigenous population in the Amazon. COICA frequently publishes an updated report on those numbers. Many deceased are our grandmothers and grandfathers, who are the repositories of great knowledge and of the spirituality of our communities. Today we are mourning for them and for many Indigenous Peoples who are taking giant steps towards their extinction. The errors of governments, the silence of the international community and of supranational organizations are condemning us to genocide.

Finally, I emphasize that in addition to the 506 different Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon, there are 76 peoples that we consider Indigenous Peoples in isolation or initial contact. These peoples are at greater risk, since any contact or intervention profoundly affects their lives. Thus, the arrival of the virus in regions where they inhabit poses an immense risk of disappearance of these peoples, since their immune systems do not have the capacity to resist the virus.

5. What are the actions of states, allies, and the Indigenous Peoples themselves that COICA believes are pertinent at this time to protect Indigenous Peoples and their territories in the Amazon basin?

Since the start of the pandemic, Amazonian Indigenous organizations have drawn attention and sought the support of governments and allies in different aspects. I would like to present some of them. It should be noted that there are geographical and national particularities that require a more detailed analysis, but for now I consider important to:

- Establish **effective communication and coordination channels** with the representative institutions of Indigenous Peoples, aimed at promoting joint and coordinated action at all levels.
- Facilitate **COVID-19 tests and the training of Indigenous health promoters** and other public servants, for example teachers, to perform tests and provide adequate information to the communities.
- **Hire medical teams**, nursing assistants, especially Indigenous professionals, and **strengthen traditional health systems** with recognition of the spiritual doctors of each Indigenous people, located in the different health centers in Indigenous communities.
- Drugs such as chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, recently authorized by some ministries of health to treat symptoms of COVID-19, are essential drugs for the treatment of Malaria. For this reason, it must be ensured that the additional demand for these medicines does not limit the **necessary access to them by our communities to attend to the endemic diseases of the region.**

- Ensure support so that our Indigenous governments define and implement their **own measures and strategies for managing the disease**.
- Although some Indigenous communities require humanitarian aid, for example food, our Indigenous governments must count on the support of the state to **strengthen traditional food systems**. This, in addition to contributing to improving health conditions, decreases dependence on bigger towns.
- **Prohibit and restrict the access** by land, river or air of people outside our territories and who come from other departments or other countries. In this sense, the decisions of the Indigenous authorities that prohibit or restrict access to the territories of people outside the Indigenous communities must be **respected and enforced**.
- **Carry out diagnoses**, with the support of
- Indigenous organizations and NGOs, on: (i) the response capacity of health centers and medicalized planes for the care of COVID-19 (ii) the condition of the airstrips enabled in the Indigenous territories. **Taking measures to guarantee hospital care service**.
- **Provide our communities with the minimum conditions** that allow effective actions to deal with the pandemic. This implies the urgent provision of communication equipment (radios, antennas, batteries and solar panels), essential to activate emergency protocols in the prevention of diseases, as well as the care and referral of patients.
- **Provide health centers in Indigenous territories** with the minimum conditions to attend emergencies. This includes health professionals and having ambulances that can attend emergencies from COVID-19.
- Anticipate the need to **install medical camps near prioritized airstrips** in the Amazon, for the care of patients while the planes arrive.