

# Resourcing Earth Defenders

## Philanthropic Response to Heightened Repression in Latin America



**CLIMA Fund**  
RESOURCING GRASSROOTS CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

**P**rioritization of corporate interests over human rights and social services, coupled with the increase in authoritarian regimes, with an increase in violence towards rural and Indigenous communities, an escalation of conflicts over land rights, and persecution of Natural Resource Defenders (NRDs). NRDs are people taking peaceful action to protect land or environmental rights, and they are being murdered and assaulted globally.<sup>1</sup> Latin America has emerged as the deadliest region for NRDs, accounting for more than half of such deaths each year, with those resisting mining and agribusiness enduring the worst violations. This is exacerbated by frequent impunity and governments' and judicial systems' failure to support and protect defenders. As the climate crisis escalates globally, it is imperative that those defending our last remaining forests, clean waterways, and biodiverse ecosystems are protected from continued repression.

According to Global Witness, roughly 122 NRDs were killed around the world in 2019<sup>2</sup> and 164 in 2018,<sup>3</sup> 83 of whom were from Latin America.<sup>4</sup> However, these numbers are dramatically underestimated, given the Global Witness's narrow definition of 'land defender'. For example, in just a small corridor of Colombia's state of Cauca, 15 leaders from a single Indigenous group, the Nasa, were killed last year for their belonging to a non-violent land defense force called the Guardia Indígena. None of these deaths were counted because of the armed conflict in the region.<sup>5</sup> According to the UN's records, 107 activists were killed in 2019 in Colombia alone, a majority of whom were NRDs.<sup>6</sup>

Mining and agribusiness continue to be responsible for the most violence.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, levels of impunity persist in the vast majority of cases, with only 12% of perpetrators punished.<sup>8</sup> Criminalization of protest is frequently used as a tactic to silence NRDs, tying

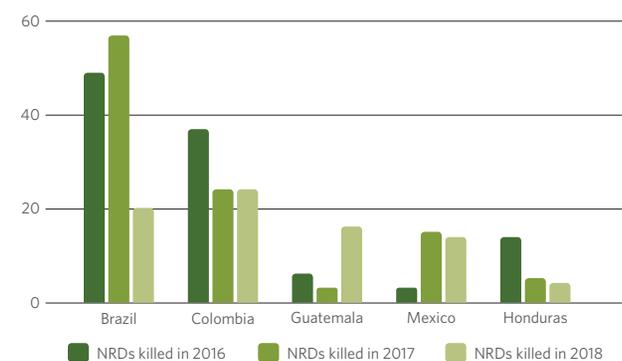


*Women members of Peasant Committee of the Altiplano (CCDA) in Guatemala demanding justice for the thousands of victims of the genocide of the Ixil area*

defenders up in costly lawsuits or unjustly incarcerating them.<sup>9</sup>

Women, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant NRDs are the most vulnerable in the face of government impunity and corporate greed. While these populations experience higher instances of discrimination, threats, and violence, they also have the least access to philanthropic resources to support movement-building to challenge increasing incursion into their lands.<sup>10</sup> Multinational extractive businesses, headquartered in the Global North, are allowed into these countries without the informed consent of the affected communities in the name of economic development. Frontline communities are left with protest as their only option for resisting the destruction of their land and waterways.

*Recorded killings of natural resource defenders in Latin America in 2016, 2017, and 2018.*



NRDs experience the highest levels of violence among human rights defenders, as protecting land and water often has the highest cost to extractive industries, yet are under-represented in philanthropic support. While effective rapid response funding programs are in place for when violence has occurred,<sup>11</sup> there is little focus on preventive funding to tackle the context-specific root causes of violence and persecution.

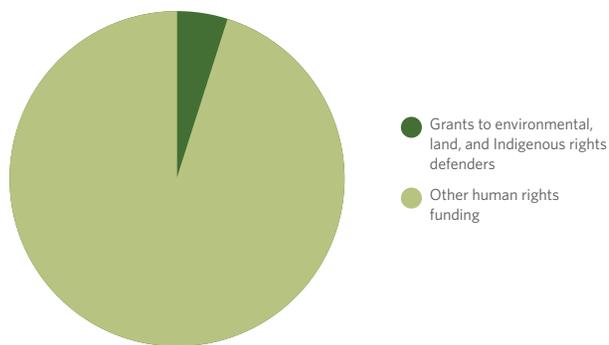
This report is a summation of 25 interviews with international experts, literature reviews, news and media analysis, and database research conducted over three months in 2017, and updated in 2020. This research found that an effective philanthropic response to violence against NRDs in the region requires a combination of rapid response, long-term support, and seed funding to

support movements in which NRDs work. The CLIMA Fund provides flexible funding via those three channels in 168 countries globally, offering an efficient, high-impact way for funders to invest in NRD support ([www.climasolutions.org](http://www.climasolutions.org)).

## Global Philanthropic Landscape

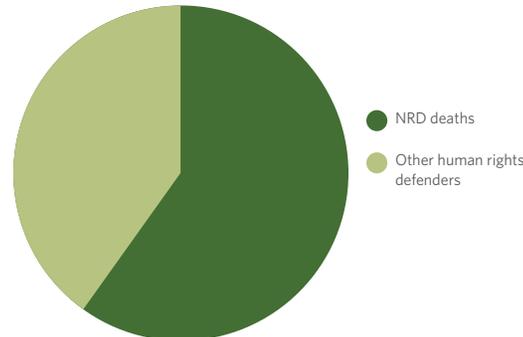
*Grants to environmental, land, and Indigenous rights defenders amounted to about 5% of all human rights funding via these three channels, while the same population represented 50% of all human rights defenders killed in 2016 and 67% in 2017.*

*Human Rights Defender Deaths Globally*



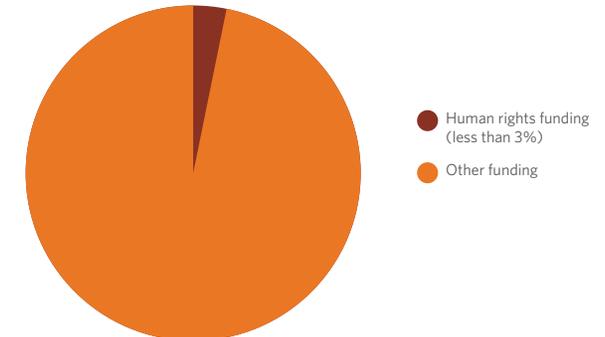
The percentage of grants and grant dollars does not match the way in which NRDs disproportionately suffer higher levels of human rights violations. Human rights funding remains a marginal proportion of foundation's budgets, constituting between 0.01% (U.K) and 0.25% (E.U) of public funds' budgets (such as government-sponsored programs) and less than 3% of most private donors' budgets (foundations and intermediaries).

*Human Rights Funding Globally*



Philanthropic support trends towards short-term, project-based funding, emphasizing protection after the violence or threat has occurred.<sup>12</sup> Due to stricter regulations for international funding and a lack of support to civil society, there remains a need for more flexible, long-term funding for NRDs to build capacity in their work and organizations.<sup>13</sup>

*Proportion of Private Funding for Human Rights Globally*



As human rights violations persist, there is a need for a greater focus on prevention to build long-term resilience and provide support to movements. All experts consulted emphasized the overall lack of funding to natural resource defenders and an urgent need to increase all types of funding.



# Gaps and opportunities

While funding strategies exist to support natural resource defenders, the rise in violence creates an urgent need to increase both the quantity of funds provided and their efficacy. The following are current gaps and opportunities in funding NRDs in Latin America. For more on each of these, see Appendix B.

- a. Lack of grassroots funding:** There is significant funding going towards large, professionalized organizations in Latin America, which can divert funds away from local community groups.<sup>14</sup> Many grassroots movements achieve remarkable results with minimal financial support.<sup>15</sup>
- b. Lack of context-specific funding strategies and attention to the closing of civil society spaces:** When philanthropic organizations neglect to take into account context-specific details of the community they are providing funding to, it hinders the efficacy of the funding and the agency of the NRD movement.
- c. Lack of mid/long-term financing:** Emphasis on short-term, emergency funding in comparison to long-term, flexible funding leaves a prominent gap in supporting prevention and protection strategies.
- d. Limited flexible funding:** Much of the existing funding to NRDs holds various restrictions, which does not support responsive and community-driven movement building.
- e. Limited NRD networks:** NRD networks allow defenders to share knowledge and information, thus contributing to more resilient movements and



*The Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil has faced repression because of their work advancing agroecology. Members of the Landless Workers Movement in Pernambuco, Northeast Brazil, hold their ground in the aftermath of violence at the hand of landowners' hired guns and in the face of the threat of state sponsored repression.*

- more unified strategies.<sup>16</sup> Yet, little funding goes to supporting these NRD networks.
- f. Limited philanthropic networks and cohesion:** Lack of coordination has led to duplication of efforts; competition for resources; and lack of reflection, analysis, and dialogue about regional support strategies.<sup>17</sup>
- g. Narrow scope of protection:** Individualized methods of protection can isolate individuals, leave their communities and families at continued risk, limit collective approaches to protection, and provide only a short-term solution to a systemic issue. Further,

there is a risk of greater vulnerability as NRDs are individually recognized for their work and their visibility increases.

- h. Lack of attention to vulnerable populations:** The higher level of risk faced by marginalized populations is currently not reflected in funding, as Indigenous Peoples receive under 1% of international funding and women's environmental initiatives receive less than 0.02% of funding.
- i. Limited data about available funds:** Due to the relatively recent attention of funders to NRD violence and threats, funding data is limited.



# Recommendations

*How can funders ensure safety of NRDs in Latin America and contribute to movement-building for ecological justice?*

**1 Shift support from crisis-centered approach to a movement-building approach:** Create funding opportunities that provide long-term, flexible grants to movement-building organizations to address the drivers of criminalization of and violence against NRDs.

**2 Support local connections:** When appropriate, help defenders create relationships with local organizations who can support their work and ensure safety, thereby aiding in the creation of a more resilient movement.

**3 Create connections between funders to pool resources and strategies:** Engage in existing funder networks, such as WINGS or Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía, to share information and develop and strengthen strategies to best support NRDs.

**4 Give fast and reliable emergency response funds:** Support emergency response funds that provide flexible support to NRDs. For example, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Rights model gives security grants within 10 business days of receiving requests.<sup>18</sup>

**5 Increase support to marginalized and/or underfunded populations:** Seek out and connect with movements and organizations consisting of and/or led by women, LGBTQ communities, Afro-descendent populations, and Indigenous Peoples.

**6 Improve access to legal support and counsel:** Connect partners with available legal aid and fund emblematic cases to catalyze movements.<sup>19</sup> For example, Urgent Action Fund resources legal training and assistance where NRDs are criminalized for their activism. UAF has also funded Indigenous women NRDs' advocacy at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and to testify and present documentary evidence to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

*For more on each of these, see Appendix C.*

## Ecosystem approach to supporting NRDs in Brazil

The CLIMA Fund is structured to provide support to the movement ecosystems in which NRDs work, as recommended in this report. In 2019, CLIMA re-granted \$80,000 to movement groups in Brazil. In June and July 2019, Brazil saw a surge in deforestation, increasing threats to Indigenous and other frontline defenders of the forest, and devastating wildfires.<sup>20</sup> In response, the CLIMA Fund provided security grants directly to defenders threatened by government violence and corporate expansion. Additionally, the CLIMA Fund supported community groups providing digital security trainings for movement leaders and journalists criminalized for resisting and exposing repression from extractive industries in the Amazon. Funding also went to local groups training youth in agroecology methods, regional organizations protecting Amazonian Indigenous cultural diversity and developing distributed community solar grids, and national movements protecting fishing rights and resisting large hydro-power dams. Supporting this diversity of strategies and movements is critical for stopping violence against NRDs and enabling them to advance climate justice in Latin America and globally.

# APPENDIX

## A. Example philanthropic institutions taking action

### Fondo Acción Urgente - America Latina

**Type:** International NGO; emergency-response funding; capacity-building funding

**Background:** Fondo Accion Urgente - America Latina is the Latin American branch of the US-based Urgent Action fund. It is a non-profit feminist organization that promotes and defends human rights and women's rights. Since its establishment in 1997, the US-based fund has provided over 1000 grants in 97 countries, now operating under an annual budget of \$1.6 million USD. The Latin American branch was established in the region in 2009 in order to address regional conflicts related to safety, justice, and sustainability. The fund works to strengthen and promote women's rights in the region by mobilizing resources to fund women-led initiatives.

**Primary grant-making strategy:** Fondo Accion Urgente - America Latina provides rapid-response emergency funding to women HRDs at risk, and funding support for sustainable movement-building and activism. Grants are used to increase security measures and protection, and support includes institutional strengthening, community relationship-building, strategy development, and security improvements.

#### Types of grants:

- **Security Grants provide support for the safety and security of women or trans human rights defenders, activists, and organizations who face threats due to their human rights work.**
- **Opportunity Grants support advocacy or mobilization geared towards the advancement of women's and LBTQI rights, such as legal decisions or laws and policies.**

**Population focus:** Women or trans-led HRD organizations

**Grant size:** Maximum of \$5000 ranging from 3 to 6 months

### Biodiversity Funders Group, Environmental Defenders Collaborative

**Type:** Pooled Fund, project-support grants, urgent-response funding

**Background:** Recognizing the growing concern amongst funders for the safety of natural resource defenders, the Biodiversity Funders Group created the Environmental Defenders Collaborative in January 2017, connecting and pooling funds from 14 foundations and donors, with the Global Greengrants Fund as the fiscal sponsor of the EDC. Through this, funders connect directly and specifically on issues of environmental defense, and since its inception, the fund has provided \$610,000 in grants, with over 30% of their funding going to Latin American countries.

**Primary grant-making strategy:** Environmental Defenders Collaborative's strategies target root causes of violence towards NRDs by supporting organizations that are mobilizing against industries that are frequent perpetrators of violence. While funding concentrates on preventing future violence by strengthening security capacities, it is also provided to fight NRD criminalization cases, focusing on funding emblematic cases to catalyze NRD movements.

**Types of grants:** Flexible, project-based funding

Rapid-response through partnerships with Frontline Defenders and the Urgent Action Fund

**Population focus:** NRDs globally

**Grant size:** Ranging from \$5,000 to \$85,000 and averaging \$25,000.

### Defend the Defenders Coalition

**Type:** Funder Network; Research

**Background:** The Defend the Defenders Coalition is a group of international organizations coordinated by the World Resources Institute. The group was formed by three members in January 2017 and has expanded to include over thirty members, with the goal of improving strategies of protecting environmental defenders globally. The coalition has been in the process of mapping the landscape of current

protection and support strategies and is evaluating the efficacy of both emergency and capacity-building funding.

**Current work:** The Coalition has conducted and continues to update a mapping of groups and initiatives working to support environmental defenders. They are currently conducting an in-depth analysis of funding methods in Colombia, with the goal of providing resources and strategies to other funders. Their research evaluates the successes of current strategies, while also determining existing gaps in support. This mapping provides resources to both NRDs and to organizations supporting NRDs, as it identifies and connects spaces for joint support and advocacy and facilitates collaborations between partner organizations.

## B. Gaps and opportunities

While excellent funding strategies exist for natural resource defenders, the increase in violence demonstrates an urgent need to increase both the quantity of funds provided and their efficacy. The following list identifies existing gaps and opportunities in the landscape of funding to NRDs in Latin America.

- Lack of grassroots funding:** In a conversation with Alison Wright, the program director for the Environmental Defenders Fund, Wright identified that there is significant funding going towards large, professionalized organizations in Latin America, but not enough to grassroots organizations. While funding larger NGOs in the region can be beneficial in many ways, specifically if that NGO works with grassroots communities and can distribute funds thoughtfully and efficiently, it can also move funds away from communities that really need funding.<sup>21</sup> Wright identified a need for more funding at the \$5,000-15,000 level to small communities and organizations directly experiencing threats to their land and resources.
- Lack of context-specific funding strategies and attention to the closing of civil society spaces:** The closing of civil society spaces in Latin America coupled with an increase of stigmatization toward NRDs, was identified as a significant barrier to funding by Laura Carvajal Echeverry, the coordinator for the Responsible for Women and Territories Initiative with Fondo de

Acción Urgente- América Latina. The context in which NRDs operate varies depending on the region and corresponding factors, thus, changing the types of threats, violence, and barriers that NRDs face. The closing of civil society space, in particular, often manifests in financial restrictions, such as challenges receiving international funding or difficulties receiving or retaining official NGO certification.<sup>22</sup> In the philanthropic community, there is a lack of realization of this barrier and a subsequent lack of action to overcome related challenges.<sup>23</sup> When philanthropic organizations neglect to take into account context-specific details of the community they are providing funding to, this hinders the efficacy of the funding and the agency of the NRD movement.

- c. **Lack of mid-/long-term financing:** The abundance of short-term, emergency funding in comparison to long-term capacity-building leaves a prominent gap in terms of support for the development of prevention and protection strategies. Long-term financing allows communities and organizations to build their organizational capacity and create individualized solutions and plans for threats and violence.<sup>24</sup> In a study conducted by Global Greengrants, activists identified a lack of unrestricted, multi-year support.<sup>25</sup>
- d. **Limited funding flexibility:** Much of the existing funding to NRDs holds various restrictions. This can hinder NRDs' work as it reduces the ability to prioritize actions and thus limits effective movement-building. Individuals consulted in Thousand Currents' research emphasized the importance of trusting communities' ability evaluate and prioritize actions in order to build sustainable and effective movements.
- e. **Limited NRD networks:** An important way of creating momentum for natural resource defense is through connection and cohesion amongst individuals, communities, and organizations involved. NRD networks allow defenders to share knowledge and information, thus contributing to more resilient movements and more unified strategies.<sup>26</sup> However, often these networks are non-existent, unavailable, or face funding or coordinational challenges.
- f. **Limited philanthropic networks and cohesion:** While philanthropic networks exist, there remains a need for

better connection and coordination between funders. Lack of coordination can lead to duplication of efforts, competition for resources, and lack of reflection, analysis, and dialogue about community contexts and individualized support strategies.<sup>27</sup>

- g. **Narrow scope of protection:** Lourdes Inga, the executive director of the International Funders of Indigenous Peoples, highlighted that global funding towards NRDs tends to be focused around individuals; however, frequently, the individual represents the community, organization, or collective movement.<sup>28</sup> Individualized methods of protection can isolate individuals and leave their communities and families at continued risk. Additionally, it limits collective approaches of protection and provides only a short-term solution to a systemic issue.
- h. **Limited informational resources available to NRDs:** Laura Carvajal Echeverry from Fondo de Acción Urgente- America Latina stressed the importance of NRD education related to their rights, developing strategies, and health risks. She highlighted that these could be provided through learning exchanges with other groups or local advisors, NRD networks, and supplying resources for the space and time to learn and strategize. Echeverry highlighted the fact that NRDs often don't have the time or resources to document information that would help them build their movement, such as strategy and methods. While risks and instances of violence are frequently documented, NRDs need time and resources to document and reflect on operational aspects of their work.
- i. **Lack of attention to vulnerable populations:** The higher levels of risk faced by marginalized populations is currently not reflected in the majority of funding strategies. Indigenous communities in particular often face additional barriers in accessing funds, and may be unable to access funds directly, however few funders address this.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, many individuals and organizations have identified a lack of an intersectional gendered perspective in NRD movements and funding. While garnering more attention, there are few protection efforts to address gender-based violence among NRDs, though female NRDs often face more frequent, more severe, and more personalized threats than their male counterparts.<sup>30</sup> Thus, there is a prominent need to create

funding strategies that address and support vulnerable populations.

- j. **Gap in systematic capacity-building:** Strong, cohesive organizations and movements are more resilient to risk, and in turn create safer environments for natural resource defense work. Organizations that have the capacity to spend time evaluating and assessing risk and developing individualized security plans, can greatly mitigate risk.<sup>31</sup> Alison Wright from the Biodiversity Funders Group, mentioned the importance of helping organizations conduct organizational security assessments, through which NRDs can develop collective methods of protection and prevention, thus increasing their ability to prevent violence.
- k. **Lack of attention to root causes:** Root causes of violence against NRDs include corruption and impunity, securing and respecting land titles, guaranteeing the rights of communities, and upholding free, prior, and informed consent.<sup>32</sup> These components are complex and challenging, and are difficult to tackle from a philanthropic perspective. Due to their complexity, there has been very little work addressing these components; however, these pieces are vital in decreasing violence and persecution.<sup>33</sup> While support for legal action has been increasing and can help tackle some of the root causes of the issue, there is a significant gap in deep, reflective work as to how to prevent this violence. This is reflected in the relative lack of preventative and capacity-building support as opposed to reactionary and emergency funding. Through shifting this focus from reactionary to preventive, funders can work on tackling some of the context-specific root causes of the issue and work on diminishing the violence towards and persecution of NRDs.
- l. **Limited data about available funds:** Due to the relatively recent attention of funders to NRD violence and threats, funding data is limited. Many individuals spoken to for this research indicated challenges finding representative data about funding available to NRDs. The Human Rights Funders Network (HRFN) has put together a database of global funding to human rights issues around the world and, once utilized by more funders, will provide an excellent resource for funding data related to natural resource defenders.

## C. Recommendations

### Provide long-term, flexible funding

Mid- to long-term funding is essential to enable NRDs to work without violence in the present and the future. While urgent funding helps in cases of immediate threat or violence, long-term funding allows defenders to plan for the future, develop strategy, carry-out capacity-building, organizational planning and development, and tackle the root causes of the violence.

Providing long-term funding is essential, but so is providing long-term access to resources and support. Since many defenders are dealing with this violence for the first time, it is important that context-specific resources are provided in order to build the organization's capacity. Funders can provide this support by compiling resources such as security information and trainings, access to affordable legal counsel, and information exchanges with other individuals and organizations doing similar work.

### Support local connections and resources

Due to the breadth of this problem, challenges NRDs face vary drastically depending on the local context. This means that protection and prevention strategies will also vary depending on location. Funders can address this by supporting resources within the community or region. By creating strong local networks, funders can aid in the creation of a more resilient movement. This helps increase the self-sufficiency of NRDs and can also aid in the prevention of violence. To do this, funders can spend time working with partners to evaluate local resources and develop connections. Defenders will then be able to take steps towards their own safety, manage risks and security, and create solidarity within their region.

### Help create regional safety networks

While many international funders offer support in terms of financial resources or education, few organizations provide access to or promote connections with local resources. This can mean that support can be slower, or that defenders face greater barriers to accessing immediate support. By helping promote local and regional safety networks, funders

can increase the efficiency of NRD protection. In Grassroots International's funding strategy, the organization highlights collective approaches to community protection and security as a way to create resiliency and to strengthen safety measures. Having regional rapid response networks can also aid in the prevention of violence and can increase resiliency.

### Create connections between funders to pool resources and strategies

As the awareness of the violence towards NRDs increases, more funders are focusing on the issue and finding ways to support defenders. While support and funding is increasing, it is also important to consolidate strategies and methods of support. This is helpful both to funders and to defenders, as information can be more easily shared and strategies can be strengthened. Funders can promote this by reaching out to other organizations and funders to share information and knowledge, and also by participating in funder networks, such as WINGS or Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía. Funders can then, not only improve their own NRD strategies and those of the international funding community, but can also aid in connecting NRDs with further resources.

### Give fast and reliable emergency response funds

While long-term funding and support is important, urgent-response funding is vital in the case of an emergency. Funders should create space in their budgets for emergency-response funding, which is easily accessible and able to be accessed rapidly. Alternatively, funders should connect their partners with existing emergency response funds such as Frontline Defenders or Fondo Accion Urgente, both of which provide efficient rapid-response grants.

Create plan for action by funders in case of a threat: work with partners to develop a plan in the case of a threat or violence. Determine what resources can be made available and how defenders will access them. Develop secure methods of contact and ways that funds can be made accessible quickly and easily. Help defenders determine who to contact and how to get to their safe space.

Connect defenders with local security resources: create a list of people and organizations that defenders can contact in

case of an emergency. Having connects to people who are geographically close to defenders and their organizations can make a huge difference in terms of how quickly support and protection can get to the defenders. Defenders should have a list of who to contact and what type of support different contacts can give.

### Increase support to marginalized and/or vulnerable populations

The current funding landscape rarely focuses on high-risk populations when providing resources. However, in terms of NRDs, women, LGBTQ+, Afro-descendent, and Indigenous communities are often at much higher risks for violence than other populations. In addition to facing higher risks, Peter Kostishack from Global Greengrants identified the lack of space and agency given to women in this movement and identified this as a critical area to fund in. As funders develop their strategy, attention should be given to addressing these gaps and providing agency to populations who have had it taken away.

### Improve access to legal support and counsel

Create legal support fund for NRDs, including funds for NRDs who are criminalized and persecuted. Make sure defenders have access to high-quality, affordable legal support. Funders should concentrate on funding emblematic cases that will strengthen at catalyze NRD movements.

### Shift support from a crisis-centered approach to a movement-building approach

Support policy advocacy by providing support to defenders who wish to advocate for policy changes. Due to the frequent criminalization of NRDs and the lack of action on the part of governments, one way to address some of the root causes of this violence is to help create policy changes. Defenders working on advocating for these changes will need access to funds and appropriate resources. Additionally, funders should concentrate on supporting the recognition and enforcement of land and resource rights in order to prevent the land and resource grabbing, and the consequential infringement on human rights.

## List of organizations and individuals consulted for research

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Alison Wright, Biodiversity Funders  
Amber Moulton, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee  
Ana Paula Hernandez, The Fund for Global Human Rights  
Andrea Martalo, Freedom House  
Artemisa Castro, Fondo Acción Solidaria  
Billy Kyte, Global Witness  
Cristina Ruiz, Centro Mexicano para la Filantropía  
Carole Excell, World Resources Institute  
Desarrollo Económico y Social de Los Mexicanos Indígenas, A.C.  
Ed O'Donovan, Frontline Defenders  
Eva Rehse, Global Greengrants Fund

FENMUCARINAP - La Federación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas, Artesanas, Indígenas, Nativas y Asalariadas del Perú  
Florence Miller, Environmental Funders Network  
Instituto para la Superación de la Miseria Urbana de Guatemala, Institute for Overcoming Urban Poverty in Guatemala  
James Savage, The Fund for Global Human Rights  
Jerusha Burnham, Freedom House  
John Knox, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment  
Jovanna Garcia Soto, Grassroots International  
Kizito Byenka, Open Society Foundation  
Laura Carvajal Echeverry, Urgent Action Fund-Latin America

Laurent Aldenhoff, Frontline Defenders  
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Ryan Mack, Goldman Prize  
Rachel Thomas, Human Rights Funders Network  
Salote Sogo, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee  
Sarah Brown-Campello, The Worldwide Initiatives for Grantmaker Support  
Shauna O'Donnell, Biodiversity Funders  
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## ENDNOTES

This report was researched by Sophie D'Anieri of Thousand Currents in August 2018 and edited by the CLIMA Fund in early 2020.

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