

# What Does It Take to Protect Livelihoods and Forests? Insights from workers and communities in the Brazilian Amazon opposing deforestation and slave labour

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## Abstract

In this short article, we explore what needs to be in place for the workers and communities in the Brazilian state of Amazonas to resist slave labour in areas that have recently opened up routes to deforestation, cattle ranching, and mining. Drawing from community-based work in several remote locations in Amazonas state, including individual interviews and discussions with community groups, we argue that long-term work by trusted local organisations, aiming to curb structural violence at community level, is vital, enabling local residents to visibilise the problem of forced labour and slavery-like practices and prompt actions by statutory bodies to protect workers and the environment.

Suggested citation: J N Chagas, D Ferreira, and G Baumann, ‘What Does It Take to Protect Livelihoods and Forests? Insights from workers and communities in the Brazilian Amazon opposing deforestation and slave labour’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 25, 2025, pp. 158-164, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.2012252510>

## From Protecting the Forests to Holding the Chainsaws

In July 2021, Dr Jolemia Chagas, a coordinator of RETA (Rede Transdisciplinar da Amazônia or Amazon Transdisciplinary Network—a regional network protecting people’s rights and livelihoods alongside forest conservation in southern Amazonas state) was visiting a traditional community on the Manicoré River to provide agroecological support. She interviewed a resident who described not just threats to his livelihood due to climate change but violent incursions and theft of natural assets on which he depends for his self-sufficiency: ‘Without pity or mercy, firstly, the loggers use legal threats against people. ... He [the logger] wanted to take my land. He said that if I didn’t negotiate, then if he went to court, he would win. I don’t know him, but the logging company works on the river.’

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The lives of these local residents depend on fishing from the river and gathering non-timber resources from the surrounding environment. When speaking about climate change, they do not use the jargon of international conferences, instead speaking in more literal terms about the rapid changes they see all around them. For example, during a meeting of riverine community women with RETA staff in July 2024, they described the scorching heat that forces them to go to their fields earlier and earlier; the mass deaths of fish in the torrid and dried up rivers; wildfires in the forest; and the worsening scarcity of drinking water. They explained how poor water quality causes vomiting and diarrhoea, with health risks increased when it is difficult to reach clinics due to the rivers being too low to travel on. Yields of forest products are reduced and small-scale crops are failing due to the unpredictability of the growing seasons and the soil being too hot and dry.

Their sustainable, ancestral ways of life also face a more violent threat,<sup>1</sup> driven by global demand for commodities such as cattle, soya, and gold. In southern Amazonas, the BR-319 highway is opening out new swathes of forest, allowing illegal loggers and miners to access the region's resources and rapidly advance towards these river communities. Trees have already been cut to make room for 1,500 kilometres of side roads. After hundreds of years, and despite this being one of the Amazon's areas that is most strictly protected by existing laws, these riverine and indigenous communities find their forests cut down and cattle pastures encircling them. In this region, large areas of forestry with Brazil nut, palm, and açai trees have been destroyed, seriously reducing both biodiversity and the livelihoods that depend on a healthy forest.

The Brazilian government's substantial social protection programmes could help in this crisis,<sup>2</sup> but they provide little benefit in these remote locations: health and social assistance are often precarious or non-existent. At the same time, the communities' income generation is undermined by the state's lack of understanding of Amazonian family farming, so there is insufficient government investment in services and infrastructure for their real needs. In an age-old pattern called *aviamento*, communities trade their forest products for a pittance so they can buy extortionately priced necessities from urban areas. Communications technology and solar energy that would transform these rural conditions are barely available.

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<sup>1</sup> L Modelli, 'Amazonian River Communities Seek to Boost Hard-Won Land Rights to Fight Loggers', *Mongabay*, 11 October 2022, <https://news.mongabay.com/2022/10/amazonian-river-communities-seek-to-boost-hard-won-land-rights-to-fight-loggers>.

<sup>2</sup> See further information on Brazil's social protection programmes in: M Morgandi *et al.*, *Social Protection for Brazil of the Future: Preparing for Change with Inclusion and Resilience*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank and UNDP, Washington, DC, 2022, p. 10. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099041823131543914/pdf/P1748360cee7150e30857b06a0e80ada814.pdf>.

The final tragic twist is that workers from these same communities then often have no choice but to accept jobs to carry out deforestation or mining, further destroying the livelihoods of neighbouring settlements. These workers can be recruited precisely because the conditions required for meeting their basic needs have been removed by the invaders and exhausted by climate change.

## Climate Change Driving Exploitation—Driving further destruction

It is a cyclical pattern that is far from unique to the Amazon. While poverty, social exclusion, and lack of labour rights already create risks of slave labour around the world,<sup>3</sup> climate change is now super-charging vulnerability that, in turn, provides the desperate hands to carry out further destruction. The cycle is very well-evidenced, with examples ranging from bonded labourers across the South Asia brick kiln belt; children trafficked for illegal fishing enterprises in Bangladesh in the protected Sundarbans, a mangrove forest area; and young exploited miners in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>4</sup> Workers pushed to the margins of survival are drawn into slave labour that accelerates climate change.

How is it then that global efforts to prevent further climate change rarely engage closely with worker organisations or affected communities in order to understand how to help them avoid and resist ecologically damaging slave labour?<sup>5</sup> Why is this

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<sup>3</sup> We use this term as defined in Article 149 of the Brazil Penal Code—*trabalho escravo* (slave labour)—because it is aligned with the contextual realities of forced labour: exhausting work hours, restriction of movement due to debt to the employer, and degrading working conditions.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, D Brown *et al.*, ‘Modern Slavery, Environmental Degradation and Climate Change: Fisheries, Field, Forests and Factories’, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 4, issue 2, 2019, pp. 191–207, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848619887156>; J L Decker Sparks *et al.*, ‘Growing Evidence of the Interconnections between Modern Slavery, Environmental Degradation, and Climate Change’, *One Earth*, vol. 4, issue 2, 2021, pp. 181–191, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.01.015>. For more examples, see *Climate Change and Modern Slavery Hub*, <https://www.climate-modern-slavery-hub.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Only 17% of adaptation finance across 2017–2021 aimed to build local resilience. See UN Environment Program, *Underfinanced. Underprepared. Inadequate Investment and Planning on Climate Adaptation Leaves World Exposed. Adaptation Gap Report 2023*, Nairobi, 2023, <https://www.unep.org/resources/adaptation-gap-report-2023>. Likewise, between 2003 and 2016, less than 10% of climate finance was explicitly targeted at the local level. See M Soanes *et al.*, *Delivering Real Change, Getting International Climate Finance to the Local Level*, International Institute for Environment and Development, London, 2017, p. 4, <https://www.iiied.org/10178iiied>. Within these locally-led programmes, only a proportion are likely to be focusing on enabling workers to resist exploitation.

focus on the workers themselves—the people forced to operate the chainsaws or fishing nets or bricks—so absent?

## Learning from Un-siloed Initiatives

Fortunately, there are a range of initiatives in the Amazon that are helping workers and communities try to leave situations of exploitation and avoid harmful work—and even to blow the whistle on crimes that only they are witnessing.<sup>6</sup>

In order to expand this worker and community-led approach to addressing climate change, it is important to spell out and learn from these emerging initiatives. For example, in April 2024, in an isolated part of the river communities of southeastern Amazonas, community members raised the alert when they saw ferry loads of workers passing through with tractors, excavators, and materials for logging. They informed RETA and a local association.<sup>7</sup> Through these trusted connections, further monitoring was carried out by Greenpeace and the BR-319 Observatory, leading to a joint inspection operation by the Ministry of Labour, IBAMA (Brazil's federal agency for the environment and renewable natural resources), and the Federal Police.

The labour inspector for the government mobile squad found 50 workers, including children, in conditions of slave labour. They had been sheltering in tarpaulin shacks for more than a month, with no access to safe drinking water. Unable to walk away, they cooked, bathed, and drank water from the nearby stream. They had no safety equipment, and one had fractured his collarbone after a tree branch fell on him. The mobile squads took the workers to the municipality headquarters where they received immediate care. They were issued with worker documentation so that they will be compensated. It was the largest deforestation operation detected by the authorities in Amazonas since the start of the year.

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<sup>6</sup> In the states of Pará and Amazonas, one such programme brings together four local organisations working closely with communities severely affected by slave labour and loss of forestry and biodiversity, linking them with national-level labour rights and environmental NGOs with support from the Freedom Fund. (Names of the local organisations are withheld due to security risks). The local work focuses on strengthening the capacity of the communities to guard against slave labour and illegal deforestation, with a community fund investing in livelihoods that value and respect healthy forests. Alongside this, national NGOs strengthen the responsive capacity of labour and environment inspectors and ensure that cases of slave labour lead to businesses being put on the country's 'dirty list' (see footnote 9). Partner organisations are tracing supply chains in order to use national and international mechanisms for corporate accountability with regard to the affected companies.

<sup>7</sup> Not named for security reasons.

Unfortunately, the manager of the illegal operation escaped, leading to heightened risks to community members and to organisations denouncing the criminals. Not all of the chainsaws could be found and confiscated.

Importantly, this official inspection process creates reliable, publicly available data on the existence of slave labour, encouraging urgently needed investment in government programmes to tackle the problem and protect frontline communities. The labour inspector, Magno Pimenta Riga, emphasised to us that in the absence of the state in large swathes of the Amazon, the role of local organisations in investigating cases of enslavement is fundamental. Community action allows for cases to be reported as they are actually happening, so that effective enforcement can take place against the criminals and a range of public policies can be activated.<sup>8</sup>

The information and alerts from communities and workers are especially vital to address the presence of slavery and climate crimes within global business supply chains. For example, because of the official registration of slave labour in this recent rescue operation, the case will be added to Brazil's public 'Dirty List',<sup>9</sup> making it harder for the criminals to sell their products or get bank loans. Recent editions of this list have highlighted slavery in the mining, beef, leather, and timber industries within national and global supply chains.<sup>10</sup>

## What It Takes to Confront Slave Labour

Raising the alert about forest incursions is not new for these communities. What is new is that this time they were also denouncing slave labour, which brings added legal enforcement power and business sanctions. There were various important factors that made this possible:

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<sup>8</sup> Email correspondence between Freedom Fund staff and Magno Pimenta Riga (labour inspector, Brazilian Ministry of Labour and Employment), 21 October 2024.

<sup>9</sup> The Government publishes a Register of Employers (the 'Dirty List') who have been found by government inspectors to be subjecting workers to slave labour. Listed companies are banned from acquiring credit from state-owned banks and may be refused credit by private banks. Violators are kept on the list for two years and are removed only if they have discontinued use of forced labour and paid all back wages.

<sup>10</sup> H Freitas, H Potter, and I Harari, 'Nova "Lista Suja" do trabalho escravo traz 5 fornecedores da JBS e 13 garimpos', *Repórter Brasil*, 6 October 2023, <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/2023/10/nova-lista-suja-do-trabalho-escravo-traz-5-fornecedores-da-jbs-e-13-garimpos>; I Harari *et al.* 'Trabalho doméstico infla crescimento da nova "lista suja" da escravidão', *Repórter Brasil*, 5 April 2024, <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/2024/04/escravidao-domesticas-lista-suja>.

- **Trust with communities:** RETA is well-known by the community members. They trust RETA staff and volunteers because they have helped them deal with other kinds of emergencies before. No outside organisation could instil this level of confidence, allowing residents to denounce criminal activity despite the connivance of some of the local politicians and officials. RETA can then use its connections to reach beyond this local corruption to activate the federal enforcement agencies.
- **Understanding and rejecting slave labour:** RETA is supporting community members to learn about and form their own understanding of slave labour. They are now better equipped to identify cases of slavery and resist being lured into exploitation. RETA helps them access additional support for processing their sustainable products and accessing fairer markets, which can bolster this resistance. They know how to bring cases to the attention of the authorities in order for action to be taken against slave labour. RETA has been assisting the communities with environmental conservation for over two decades, but only more recently has it focused on the fight against slave labour as a crucial part of the strategy for preserving ways of life in the region. It is working together with expert Brazilian worker rights and anti-slavery organisations to strengthen and deepen collective actions across the most affected areas of the Amazon.
- **Managing risks:** People who alert the authorities to slave labour are risking their lives because the criminals have coopted powerful allies. This is one reason why slavery often remains invisible, with workers and bystanders terrorised and afraid to disclose what is happening. Brazil tops the list of the most dangerous countries for human rights and labour rights activists.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, it is vital that community members who witness such crimes have safe channels for reporting. In the case of the large rescue in April 2024, one of the leaders had to be included in the government's protection programme, following threats.

## Conclusion

Initiatives, connections, and resourcing along these lines are essential within so many other global contexts where climate chaos is being unleashed through the use of severely exploited workers or by workers already pushed to the brink of survival by poverty and environmental degradation. In contexts like these, it is only through resident communities' confidence and relationships with frontline

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<sup>11</sup> E Hale, 'India, Brazil among Most Dangerous Places for Activists: Report', *Al Jazeera*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/5/3/india-brazil-among-most-dangerous-places-for-activists-report>.

NGOs and movements that they can protect the forests and the climate—and themselves—from exploitation and slave labour.

As one local man explained, ‘We’re concerned about organising everything so that one day when we go, [our children and grandchildren] will be in a proper environment, an environment where they’re respected, where people can live with dignity.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, Manicoré River, 1 July 2021.