The role of violence in planetary health

Planetary health science aims to address climate change while protecting human health and ecosystems, ensuring the future of our societies.1 However, planetary health science is primarily driven by initiatives and organisations from high-income countries, which largely ignore the role of violence for communities striving to protect the environment and its resources in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs). Every week since 2015, four activists have been murdered for defending environmental causes. Latin America accounts for two thirds of such killings and threats worldwide and eight of the ten countries most violent towards environmental leaders.2 The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation even more dire, exacerbating the use of violence as a social control mechanism, making leaders and communities more vulnerable.3

Indigenous communities, who are strong proponents of sustainable economies and of the rights of nature,3,5 are disproportionately impacted by environmental and social violence, with Indigenous activists 12% more likely to be assassinated than non-Indigenous activists.4 In Colombia, the country with the highest count of leaders killed and the second most violent country per capita after Honduras,2 242 Indigenous leaders have lost their lives since the 2016 Peace Agreements, 91 in 2020 alone. Indigenous people represent 37% of all killings but less than 5% of the population.5

Violence is strongly related to economic activities with high environmental impacts. In Latin America, land dispossession and extractivist economies represent the biggest threats to local communities.2,3 These activities also carry the highest environmental impact in deforestation, carbon emissions,2 air and water pollution, and biodiversity loss, but are supported by states due to strong economic incentives. In countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, and Brazil, violence enforced by private security companies and law enforcement is a common mechanism to exploit natural resources and intimidate communities, while criminalising opposition.2,3 During the COVID-19 lockdowns, these economic activities have continued, while Indigenous, environmental, and human rights leaders continue to be killed.5

Violence in LMICs is a threat to human health, communities’ wellbeing, and actions promoting and protecting ecosystems that support our very existence. As Latin American scholars and activists heeding the call of young generations worldwide,4 we call on global cooperation on four fronts, basing our claims on research and empirical cases that support the important role civil society and grassroots movements play in achieving successful environmental outcomes (panel).4

First, protect the right to protest and assemble freely. Protests have leveraged legal and institutional protections for environmental resources and called attention to disproportionate impacts of violence.2 In the UK, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of communities affected by a large-scale copper mine in Zambia, holding companies accountable for failing commitments to protect populations and ecosystems.7 In Ecuador, the Waorani Indigenous tribe stopped the government from auctioning their territory for oil and gas exploration.8 In Colombia, the Amazon jungle, Atrato river, and Pisba moorlands have been declared subjects of rights, achieving constitutional protection.9 These initiatives decolonise and protect territories and Indigenous communities, supporting planetary health goals.

Second, endorse international humanitarian and national laws that extend protection to the rights of nature and enforce the rights of Indigenous communities. Using the human rights framework to protect nature has been successful in advancing initiatives such as Bolivia’s World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, and the legally binding Escazú Agreement, which includes provisions on human rights defenders in environmental matters. International governance agendas that endorse these treaties and condemn their opposition to economic development could further reduce criminalisation, stigmatisation, and

Panel: Actions to promote change connecting high-income countries and LMICs in planetary health

1 Protect the right to protest and assemble freely
2 Endorse laws that protect the rights of nature and Indigenous communities
3 Promote participatory governance
4 Integrate planetary health into public policies, public health and academic projects

LMICs=low-income and middle-income countries.
violence against Indigenous and environmental leaders for protecting natural resources.

Third, promote participatory governance structures. Prioritising civil society decision making can help to recognise the social-ecological benefits of community-based natural resources management and supports the direct recognition of plural cultural knowledge and decolonisation of government, science, and medicine, including planetary health science, in new initiatives. Participatory environmental governance that includes rural dwellers and Indigenous communities can support and protect their human rights, and their work as efficient managers of natural resources with better conservation outcomes than non-Indigenous groups.10

Fourth, integrate planetary health into academic6 and policy initiatives in LMICs that promote actions towards social justice, peace, democracy, and human and nature’s rights, basing these principles as the pillars needed to survive and thrive. Climate change is our biggest current existential threat globally. However, efforts to address it will fail if we do not address environmental violence in LMICs, particularly in Latin America, southeast Asia, and Africa. Decolonising knowledge and addressing these threats to our health need to be at the heart of a truly global and inclusive planetary health science.

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