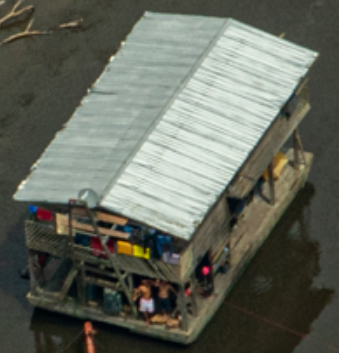
AARIMO
ALIANZA AMAZÓNICA PARA LA REDUCCIÓN DE LOS IMPACTOS DE MINERÍA DE ORO

Amazon Gold Alliance

THE MERCURY CRISIS IN THE AMAZON BIOME:

Immediate actions are required to address the devastating effects on human health, ecosystems, and the alarming increase in environmental crimes

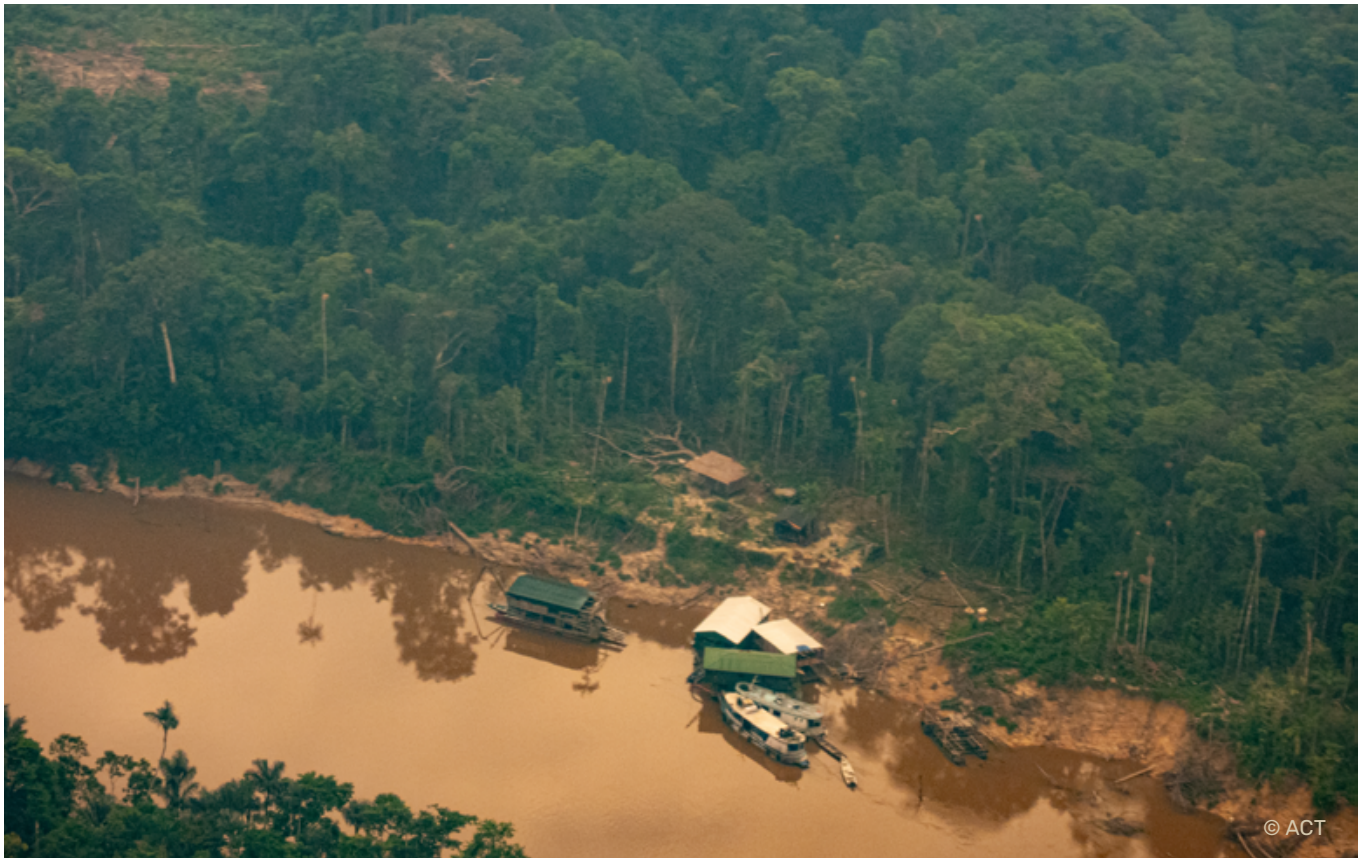


October 2025

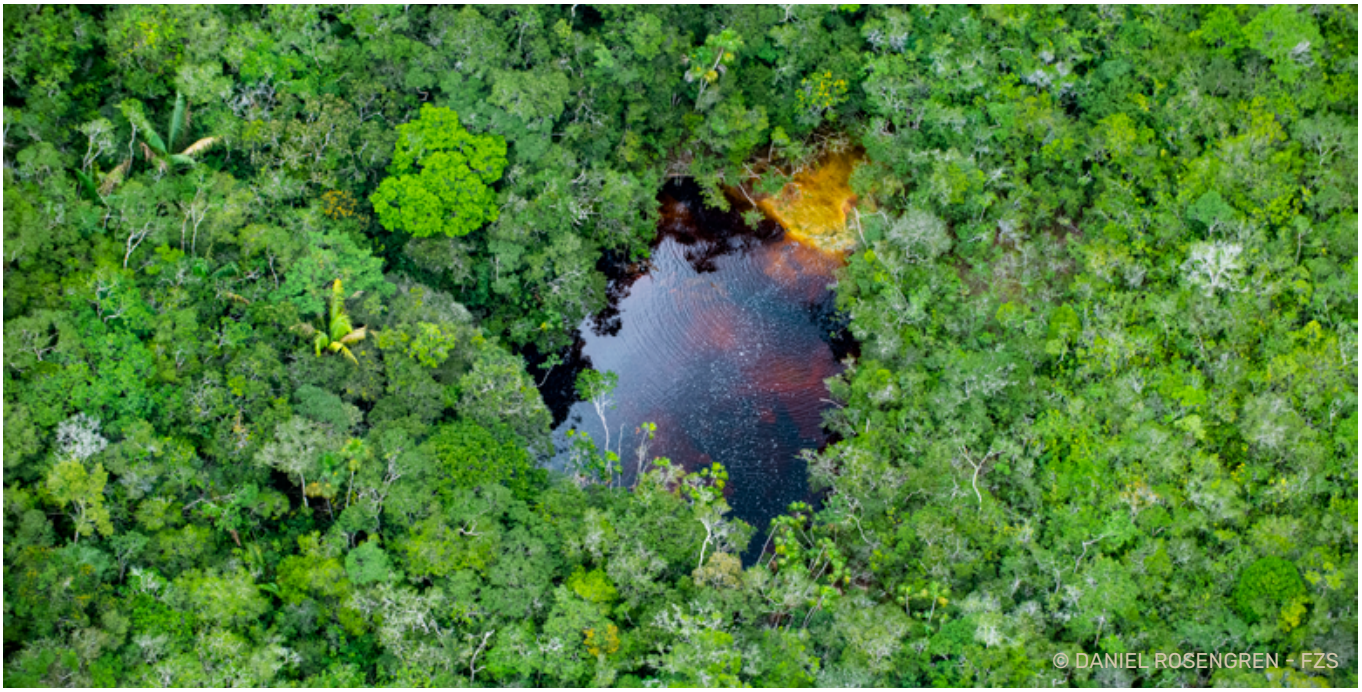
Recommendations from civil society and Indigenous leaders in Amazon countries to strengthen decisions and considerations expected at COP6.[1]

Presentation

During the sixth Conference of the Parties (COP6) of the United Nations Minamata Convention on Mercury, held in Geneva, a coalition of civil society organisations from Colombia and Peru, along with indigenous leaders from the Amazon biome, is presenting four actionable recommendations that align with the Convention's goals. These recommendations emphasise the urgent need to address the devastating impacts of mercury in the Amazon region and propose alternatives grounded in decisions and discussions from the Sixth meeting. Additionally, the recommendations aim to strengthen collaboration among various stakeholders, including governments, civil society, indigenous peoples, academia, experts, and the Convention's secretariat, to accelerate the effective implementation of the Convention's targets.



[1] This document is a collaborative effort from various organizations and voices aiming to protect the Amazon biome from the devastating impacts of illegal gold mining and mercury use including the Alianza Amazónica para la Reducción de los Impactos de la Minería de Oro (AARIMO) and the Amazon Gold Alliance (AGA). The AARIMO is a coalition comprised of WWF Colombia, Frankfurt Zoological Society Colombia, Gaia Amazonas Foundation, Amazon Conservation Team Colombia, Fundación para la Conservación y el Desarrollo Sostenible - FCDS Colombia, and National Natural Parks of Colombia.



Introduction

Illegal gold mining creates a disturbing chain of consequences that compromise the health of indigenous peoples and forest communities and ecosystems across the Amazon biome, primarily due to the indiscriminate use of mercury. According to the Environmental Investigation Agency (2025), at least 200 tons of mercury were smuggled from mercury mines in the state of Querétaro, Mexico, to gold mines in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru between 2019 and 2025. Profits from the illegal mercury and gold trade are funding armed groups in Colombia and Mexico. This is contributing to one of the most destructive gold rushes in the Amazon, while also increasing violence, corruption, and environmental degradation across the region.

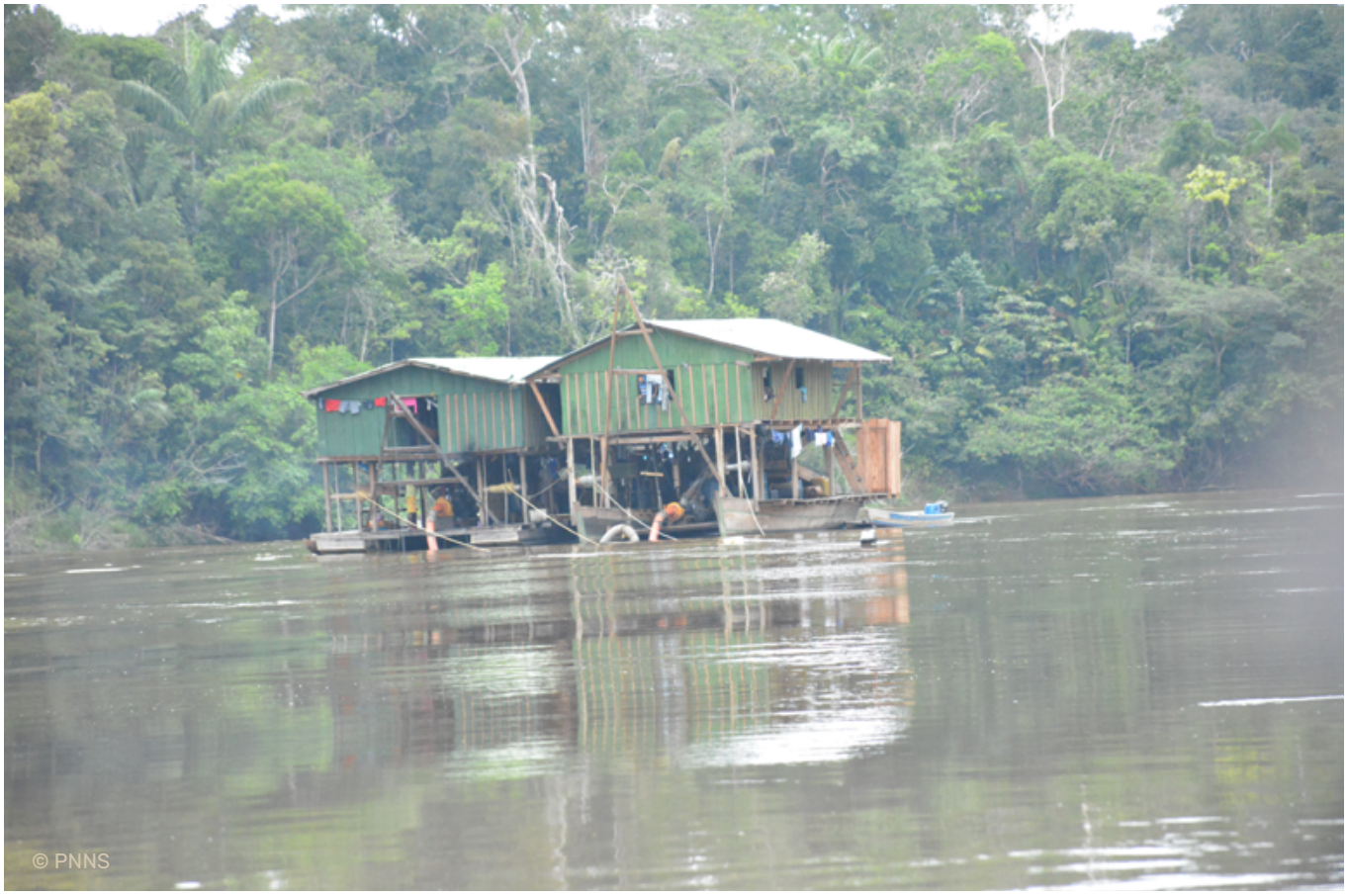
Illegal gold mining has significant impacts on indigenous peoples and forest communities, affecting women and children differently. Recent studies conducted in the Nanay and Pintuyacu river basins in Loreto Province, Peru (CINCIA, 2025), reveal that 79% of those sampled had mercury levels exceeding the World Health Organisation (WHO) maximum limits. This concerning situation is not isolated; it affects indigenous peoples across the Amazon region in Colombia (PNNs, 2018) and poses a threat to their survival due to mercury accumulation in fish species that are vital to their diet (Frankfurt Zoological Society, 2025).

The alarming impacts on human health occur in parallel to the ecological impacts, particularly affecting ecosystems and rivers. By 2023 (MAAP), experts had identified at least 58 active mining sites in the Amazon, predominantly for forest

and river-based mining, with 49 of these sites likely operating illegally and overlapping with protected areas and indigenous territories. Currently, illegal gold mining is a significant driver of deforestation and a primary source of water pollution across the nine countries that make up the Amazon.

This situation further exacerbates violence, extortion, and corruption throughout the region. There has been a notable rise in violence against leaders and communities in Amazonian countries. Most incidents involve leaders defending their territories against mining activities carried out by companies and armed groups. The intersection of illegal gold mining further exacerbates this problem within a broader system of environmental and non-environmental crimes, including human trafficking, forced recruitment of children (GAIA, 2024), money laundering, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, wildlife trafficking, and illegal logging (**Igarapé Institute**, 2022 and **Amazon Underworld & Amazon Watch**, 2025).

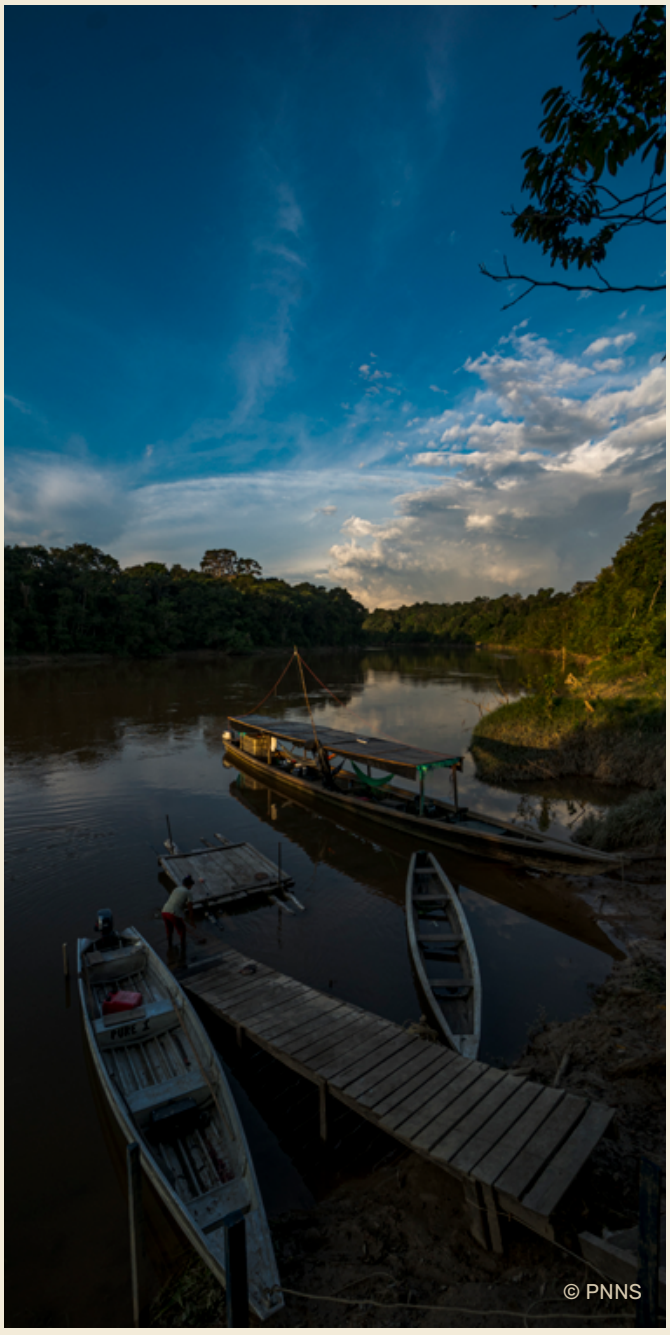
It is crucial to acknowledge that a deeper understanding of the devastating impacts of illegal gold mining and mercury use in the Amazon biome is still needed, and the role of civil society and indigenous voices is to communicate our shared messages and support the ongoing efforts led by the Parties and the Minamata Secretariat. Together, we aim to create meaningful change in the fight against the harmful impacts of mercury in the most bioculturally diverse region on Earth.



Actionable recommendations

We urge the Minamata Convention to consider four actionable recommendations that will address critical challenges and contribute to achieving its targets:

1. **Encourage and support the efforts of Parties and stakeholders to urgently accelerate the end-of-use and trade of mercury.** "It is time to prohibit the trade in, and use of, mercury for the sake of our health and the health of our planet" (IPEN, 2025). Geopolitical shifts are driving gold prices higher, significantly impacting indigenous and local communities and ecosystems across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In Latin America, the Amazon region is one of the most severely affected by the expansion of illegal gold mining operations, which often combine with other illegal economies controlled by armed groups and international criminal networks. Although the full extent of mercury pollution in the Amazon is not yet fully understood, there is increasing evidence of high mercury levels in fish and in numerous indigenous communities. This situation poses a serious threat to their health, rights, and traditional ways of life. We support and emphasise the urgent message from the International Pollutants Elimination Network (IPEN) to amend the Convention to accelerate the end of primary mercury mining, further restrict the trade of mercury, and establish a phase-out date for the use of mercury in ASGM. Our message is also aligned with the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights, Marcos Orellana, for amendments to the Convention, who investigates human rights violations and environmental injustices, including the structural racism faced by indigenous peoples due to mercury use in small-scale gold mining (A/HRC/51/35).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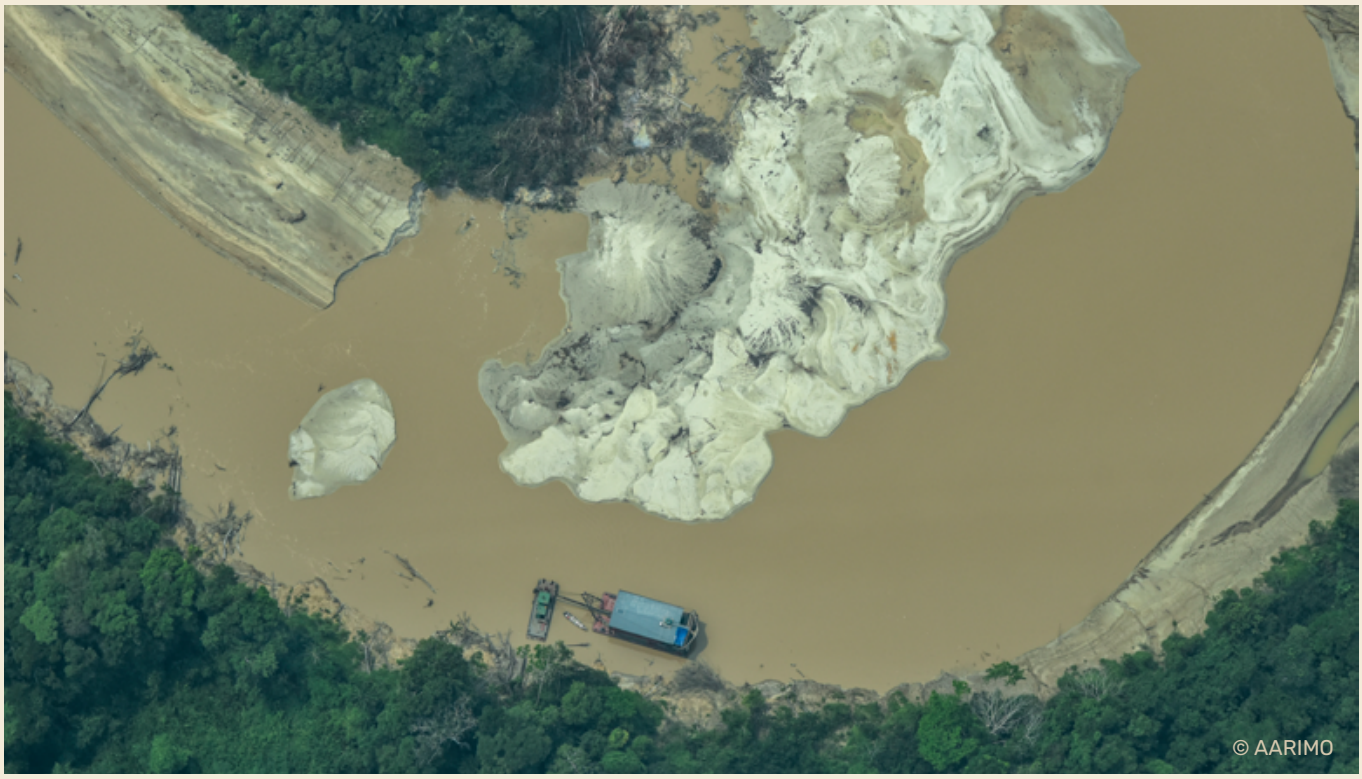
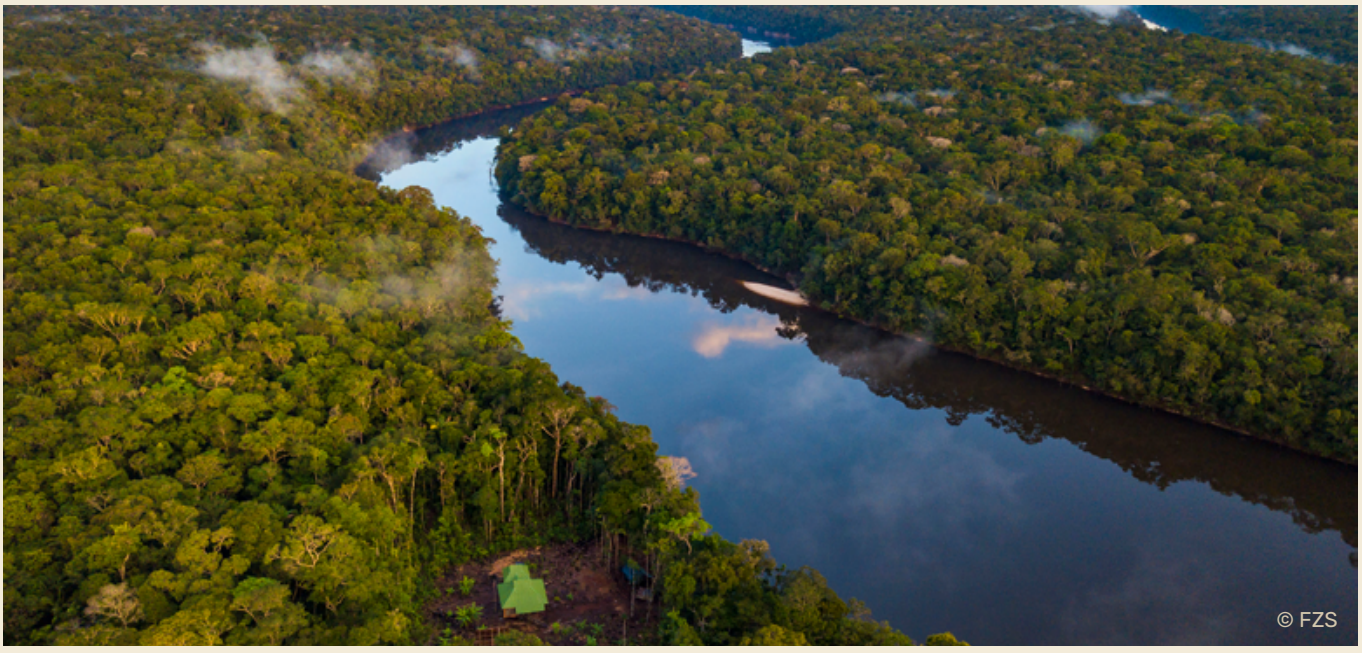
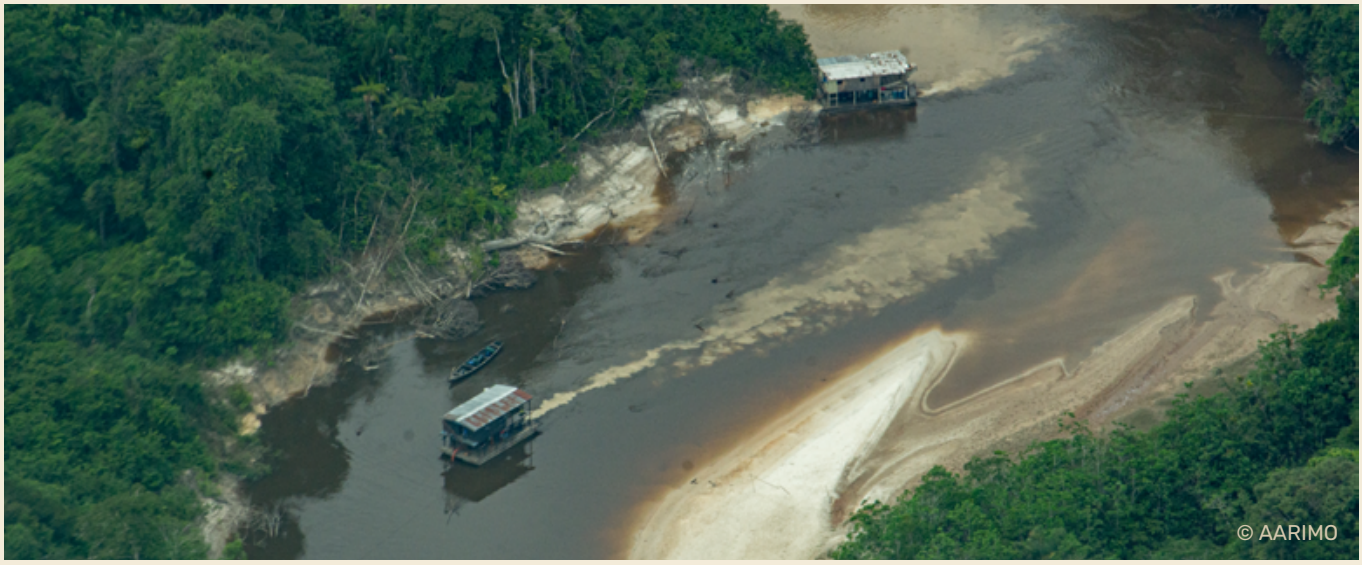
2. **Strengthen the evaluation of the effectiveness of the Minamata Convention with a complementary advisory subgroup to report on the socioenvironmental impacts of mercury in highly biodiverse regions** (UNEP/MC/COP.6/16). We encourage the Convention to enhance the evaluation of the effectiveness of the Minamata Convention on Mercury. This can be accomplished by forming an advisory group that includes a variety of knowledge and perspectives. Members should consist of representatives from civil society, indigenous leaders, academics, experts, and other stakeholders and rights holders interested in understanding, preventing, and controlling the impacts of gold mining. This advisory group might provide valuable insights into the health and environmental impacts in highly biodiverse countries that are impacted by ASM and the use of mercury, which are vital for biodiversity conservation but are also home to indigenous peoples and other forest communities. This group might report evidence to the Evaluation Group, particularly focused on achieving the full evaluation of Sub-group B indicators, which includes analyses of the following articles: *Article 7:* Artisanal and small-scale gold mining, *Article 8:* Emissions, *Article 9:* Release, and *Article 12:* Contaminated sites and the indicators included in Sub-group D: *Article 16:* Health aspects, *Article 17:* Information exchange, *Article 18:* Public information, awareness and education, and *Article 19:* Research, development and monitoring. Additionally, the group will also strengthen the common agenda defined by the Convention with various stakeholders across countries and regions to identify shared challenges and potential solutions to the mercury crisis.



3. **Present an Amazonian perspective from indigenous peoples regarding the technical documents and draft decisions derived from Decision MC-5/1 and Decision MC-5/7.** We recognise a gradual opening of the Convention to the participation of indigenous peoples and local communities. Decision MC-5/1 marked a milestone at the last COP, as well as the global surveys conducted to understand their needs and priorities. However, we believe the survey results are not fully reflected in the proposed Decision on enhancing the effective participation of indigenous peoples and local communities (UNEP/MC/COP.6/17). In other words, the proposals do not adequately address the root causes of mercury contamination affecting these populations' bodies and territories, including ASGM, its impacts in Latin America, and the promotion of culturally appropriate measures (UNEP/MC/COP.6/INF/24). Additionally, while we support proposals to increase participation through the voluntary financing fund and the creation of a provisional advisory group of indigenous delegates, we are concerned that the Amazon as a whole remains overlooked, despite its crucial role in global climate regulation and biocultural diversity. The Amazon biome spans nine countries, leading to varied dynamics in the mercury trade and ASGM expansion along its rivers. We therefore invite the parties to review the representativeness of the Amazon region within the proposed structure of the provisional advisory group and the self-appointment process for its members. Finally, we view the proposed guide for effective participation of these populations in national action plans, aligned with Decision MC-5/7, as a helpful tool (UNEP/MC/COP.6/INF/11). However, it falls short when countries have already developed their plans without ensuring Indigenous Peoples' rights. We recommend promoting a comprehensive, rights-based approach in this guide and others that address issues related to ASGM, indigenous peoples, and local communities.

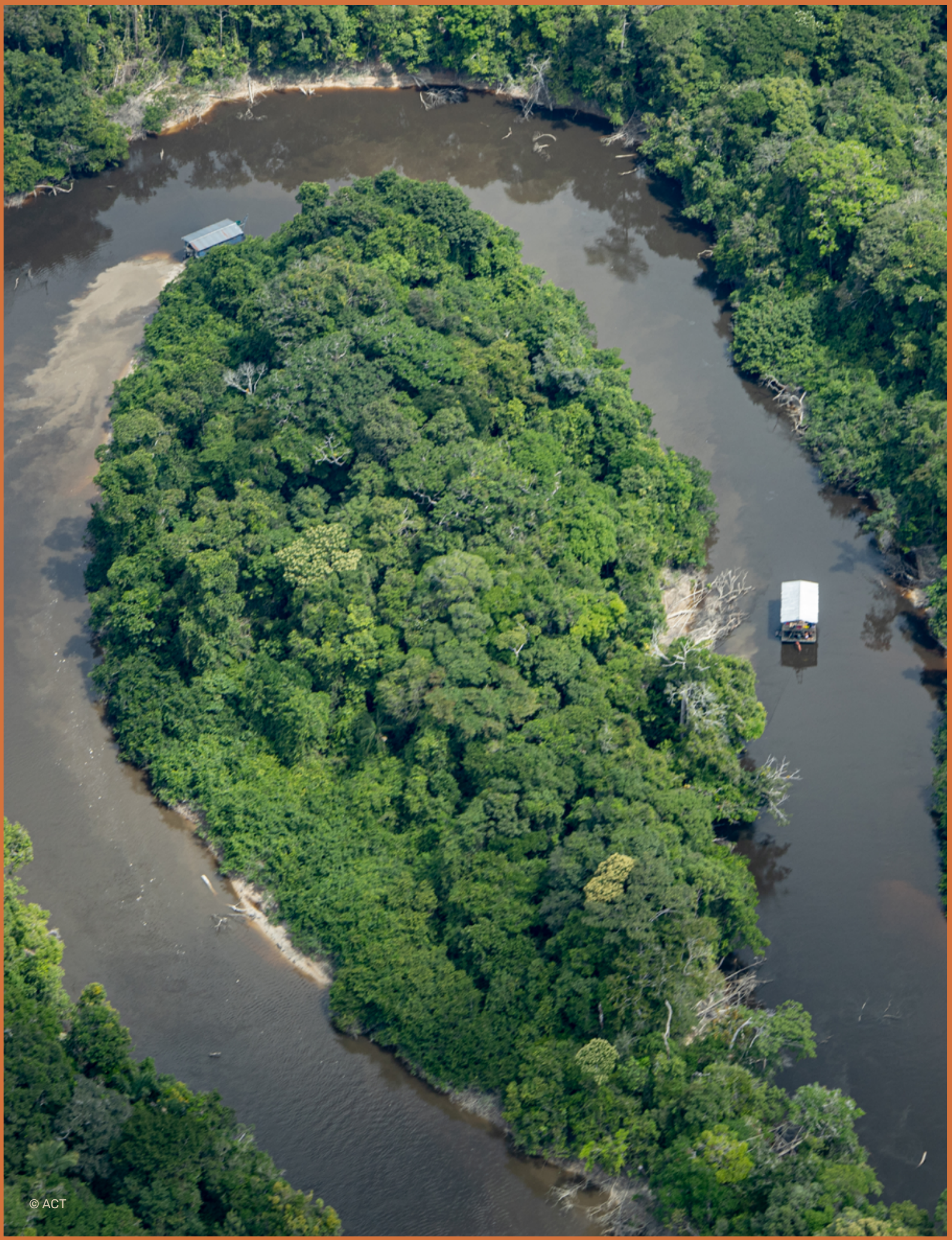




4. **Enhance collaboration between the Minamata Convention and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework by 2030.** In accordance with the Roadmap for enhancing co-benefits from the implementation of the Minamata Convention and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (UNEP/MC/COP.6/20), we offer our capabilities as a coalition of civil society, academia, experts, and indigenous voices to collaborate and coordinate efforts to reach the Minamata Convention and other Conventions' shared targets and goals. We specifically will support efforts led by the Minamata Convention in response to decision MC-5/17, including: 1. To inform on the impacts of mercury pollution on biodiversity across the Amazon biome in support of the work led by the Open-ended Scientific Group established in decision MC-4/11, 2. To inform about potential new indicators or tools related to biodiversity and health that can help address gaps in the monitoring framework as outlined in the Roadmap, and 3. To strengthen the three key pillars of the Roadmap for enhancing co-benefits from implementing the Minamata Convention and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. In particular, actions related to Pillar II: including mercury reduction actions and targets in national biodiversity strategies and action plans, as well as national biodiversity targets, and Pillar III: creating an enabling environment for increased co-benefits. This collaboration could be extended to other international frameworks. It is essential to strengthen traceability systems and, more broadly, access to information on mercury pollution and trafficking. This strengthening must be guided by the relevant framework of international obligations, emphasising the synergy between the Minamata Convention and treaties on environmental democracy, such as the Aarhus Convention and the Escazú Agreement. Progress in this area will lead us toward accessible traceability and information systems that are especially inclusive of intercultural and gender perspectives.

5. **Encourage and support the Parties in using and analysing trade data to detect TBML risks linked to mercury trade.** Governments should enhance their capacity to collect, analyse, and cross-reference trade data on mercury exports and imports to identify potential cases of trade-based money laundering (TBML) and misuse of Harmonised System (HS) codes (UNEP/MC/COP.6/5). This includes detecting inconsistencies between declared quantities, values, and trade partners, as well as the use of unrelated or generic HS codes to disguise the true nature of mercury shipments. To achieve this, it is recommended that inter-agency mechanisms be established to integrate customs data, financial intelligence, and environmental enforcement information. Governments should also invest in capacity building for customs officers, financial intelligence units, and environmental authorities to strengthen their technical understanding of TBML methodologies and trade data analytics. Training should cover techniques for anomaly detection, network analysis, and risk-based targeting of suspicious trade flows. Such measures would enable authorities to identify better illicit financial flows linked to mercury trafficking and related environmental crimes, improve enforcement coordination, and align national responses with international standards on financial transparency and environmental protection.

6. **Support Parties' efforts to develop guidelines and mechanisms for the seizure and custody of mercury**. It is recommended that the Parties to the Convention support efforts to establish clear guidelines, procedures, and mechanisms for the seizure, handling, and custody of mercury, aligned with international standards for hazardous materials management (UNEP/MC/COP.6/8) (UNEP/MC/COP.6/5). These guidelines should define practical, operational steps for identifying, securing, transporting, and storing seized mercury in a safe and legally sound manner. This is particularly urgent at the law-enforcement and police levels, where the absence of clear procedures and storage mechanisms has become a significant bottleneck in efforts to combat illegal mercury trade. Without proper protocols, police and customs officials often face significant barriers to seizing mercury or managing it once it is confiscated, limiting the effectiveness of criminal investigations and environmental enforcement actions. Parties should therefore be encouraged to seek technical and financial assistance—through international cooperation, donor support, and partnerships—to strengthen institutional capacities and ensure the safe management and final disposal of seized mercury. This includes developing secure storage facilities, providing specialised training for enforcement and customs personnel, and establishing inter-agency coordination frameworks. By addressing this operational gap, parties will enhance their ability to disrupt mercury trafficking networks, protect human and environmental health, and advance the Convention's overall objectives of reducing mercury supply and trade.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