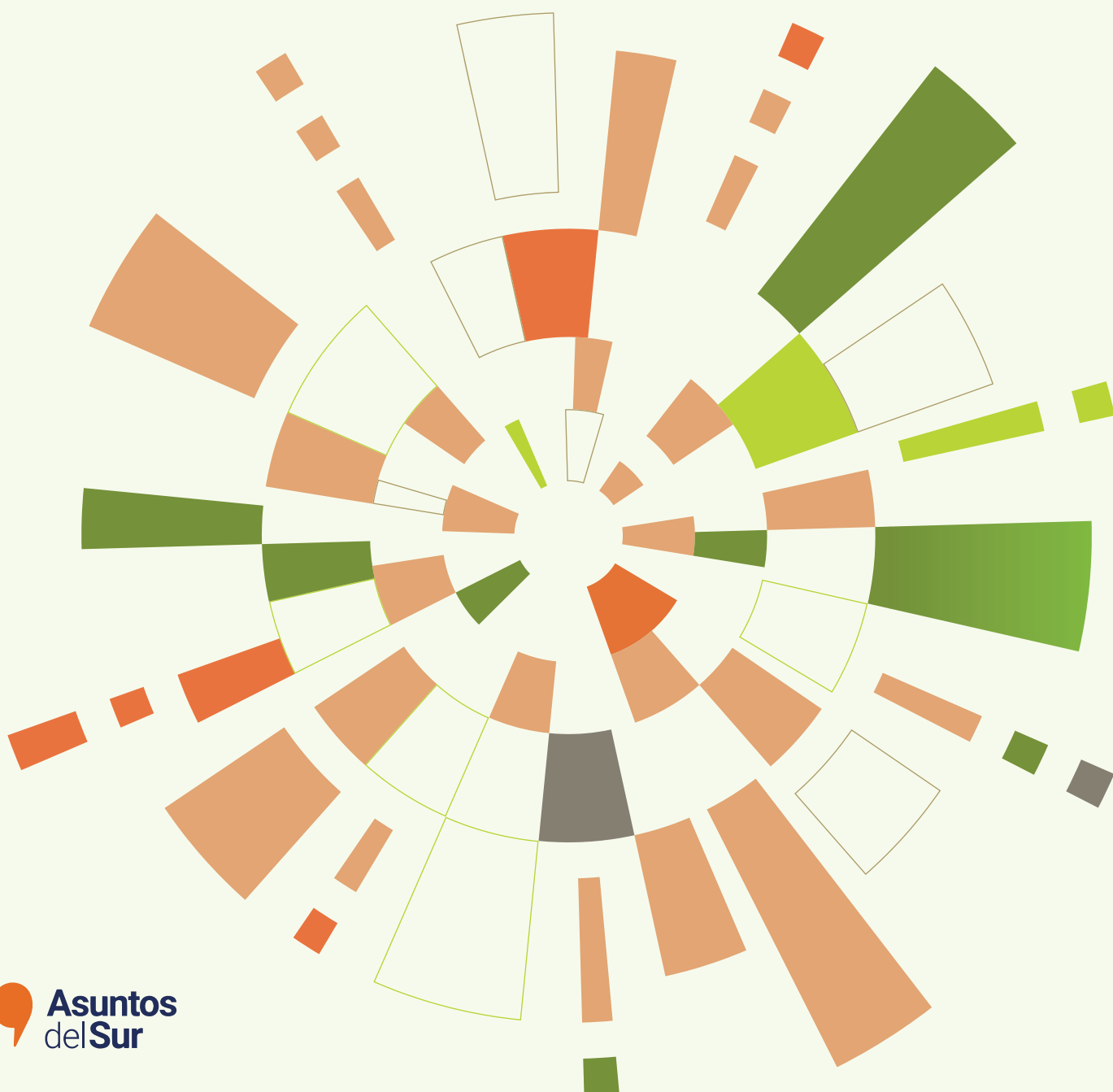


RECLAIMING THE
SOUTH

VOICES AND
PROPOSALS
FROM THE
GLOBAL SOUTH

When governance produces violence

IGNACIO F. LARA



Presenting the debate series

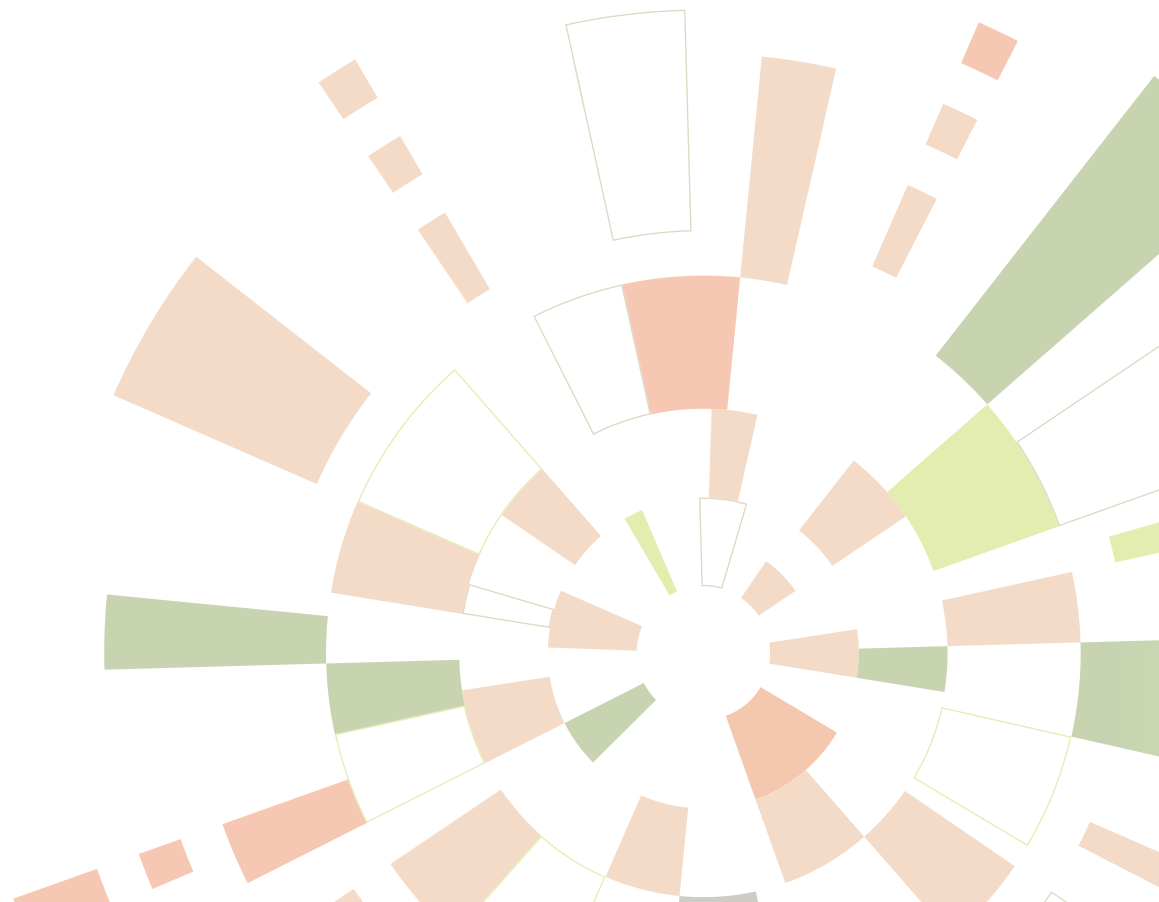
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How environmental defenders build
protection from the ground up

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Presenting the debate series

“Reclaiming the South: Voices and proposals from the Global South”



Around 43 BC, the Roman statesman Cicero wrote: “to err is human, but to persist in error is a mark of folly alone”. Many centuries have passed, and yet the phrase still seems to fit the challenge of our times perfectly. That challenge is to confront and respond to the multiplicity of global problems we have not only failed to resolve, from climate change to war, from worsening socioeconomic inequality to democratic backsliding, from the fraying of the international order to the relentless persecution of migrants, and the list could go on, but whose steady worsening, driven by the same logics that caused them in the first place, is now putting the future of our societies at stake.

The paper series *Reclaiming the South: Voices and proposals from the Global South* was born precisely from this observation. The set of rules and institutions built over the 20th century shows its limits with growing clarity, and the Global North has proven unable to offer solutions. In some cases, it has even become a driver of the very problems it should be solving, working against the horizon of a more equitable and sustainable order that guarantees human dignity.

Faced with this scenario, thinking through the Global South is not optional. It is essential to building a platform that can narrate the world as most of the planet actually lives it, and endures it, and from there, not only propose policies but also build bridges toward issues that today can feel insurmountable.

To do this, it is essential to keep in mind that the Global South is not merely a geographic space or an analytical category. It is, above all, a place of enunciation: a vantage point from which the inequalities of the system are felt most acutely, but also one from which practices, knowledge, and forms of organization emerge and take root that challenge the system’s very foundations. *Reclaiming the South* means making these experiences visible and recognizing their potential to reshape the frameworks through which we understand the world. It also makes it possible to identify the “souths” that exist within the Global North itself.

This series does not aim to offer a homogeneous or essentialist view of the Global South. On the contrary, it treats the region’s diversity, tensions, and contradictions as a source of analytical and political richness. Through an interdisciplinary and situated approach, it opens a space for the collective production of knowledge, one that contests dominant meanings, questions epistemological hierarchies, and helps imagine futures that are fairer, more

plural, and more sustainable.

In a context of steadily eroding public space, hollowed-out democracies, and growing concentration of power, ever less mediated and ever harder to contest, alongside deep and unsustainable inequalities, nostalgia for a return to an order that was already showing signs of exhaustion serves little purpose. Faced with a world in crisis like today's, aspiring to restore an unjust order should not even count as a "second-best option." Nor does it seem viable to leave the task of correcting the system's own structural failures to traditional international institutions, or to the very actors who not only created today's problems but have also failed, or refused, to address them. What is at stake is not the marginal reform of a model, but the chance to test new forms of cooperation, governance, and institutional design.

From this vantage point, Reclaiming the South seeks to contribute to a strategic body of thought that, without abandoning fundamental principles such as equity, dignity, nonviolence, and, why not, happiness, is able to propose alternatives that are pragmatic, politically viable, and grounded in territorial realities. The goal is to move toward orders that are more plural than universal, more political than technocratic, and more oriented toward cooperation than toward the mere reproduction of existing power balances: in short, more human orders, in which we can recognize one another in dignity and equality.

Each issue in the series addresses a different facet of today's overlapping crises, bringing together diagnosis and proposal, analysis and action. At that intersection, the South does not appear as an object of study but as an active subject of transformation: a key actor in the urgent task of imagining, and building, futures that are not only possible but, above all, desirable.

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When governance produces violence

How environmental defenders build protection from the ground up

Ignacio F. Lara

Resumen

Across the Global South, defending land and environment has become a way of being exposed. This paper asks how state, corporate, and hybrid governance arrangements produce violence against environmental defenders, and what forms of protection communities build in response. Drawing on nine research initiatives brought together through the Knowledge Alliance for Environmental Defenders (Kallied), it traces conflicts over critical minerals, climate policy, conservation, extractive projects, and digital infrastructure across Latin America, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, Africa, and transnational spaces.

The central argument is that violence against defenders is not a series of discrete abuses or governance failures. It is produced through the ordinary operation of climate and environmental governance: permissive regulation, selective enforcement, and participation that exists mostly on paper. Physical attacks, criminalization, online harassment, dispossession, and epistemic marginalization are interconnected expressions of the same uneven power over land, resources, and voice. Protection holds up best when it is collective, situated, and tied to territorial life. Assemblies, territorial monitoring, legal accompaniment, feminist care networks, and agroecological initiatives sustain collective agency under pressure.

The paper offers a framework for understanding violence as a continuum, governance as a producer of harm, and protection as collectively governed and territorially grounded, with implications for advocacy, donor support, and future research on environmental justice.

Keywords: environmental defenders, violence, governance, protection, Global South.

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When governance produces violence *How environmental defenders build protection from the ground up*

Ignacio F. Lara¹

Introduction

Across the Global South, defending land has become a way of being exposed. Conflicts over water, forests, pollution, energy, and increasingly digital infrastructure do not unfold in an institutional vacuum. They take shape where extractive development meets weak or exclusionary governance, and often alongside authoritarianism, forced displacement, racialized and colonial domination, and, in some territories, armed conflict and ecocide (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016; Global Witness, 2023; 2024). Environmental harm, seen this way, is not a technical problem to be solved with better climate finance or smarter regulation. It is the visible edge of deeper processes that expose specific communities and ecosystems to dispossession, neglect, and violence (Global Witness, 2023; Lawlor, 2023; OHCHR, 2025).

This matters because it forces a harder question: who actually counts as an environmental defender? International evidence and political ecology scholarship show that environmental struggles extend well beyond resistance to land grabbing or harmful infrastructure. They include mobilizations for public health, food sovereignty, labor rights, and climate justice (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016; Global Witness, 2023; OHCHR, 2023). The people involved are not only professional activists or environmental NGOs, but farmers, Indigenous and rural communities, Afro-descendant peoples, fishers, young people, women's collectives, and social movements. Many of them would never describe their own struggle as "environmental," even though it is inseparable from disputes over resources, jobs, survival, and who bears the cost of ecological damage (Global Witness, 2023; 2024; Lawlor, 2025).

International human rights practice, following the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998), defines environmental defenders as individuals and groups who protect the environment and the rights of those disproportionately affected by ecological harm. It is a useful definition, but not a sufficient one,

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was accepted and presented at the POLLEN Conference 2026 under the title "Strategies of Global South communities facing climate change and resource extraction". I would like to thank Julia Choucair Vizoso, Rana Al Habr, Shanwa Finnegan and Tanya Bandula-Irwin for their comments and suggestions. Their insights were valuable in achieving the final outcome of the final version of the work.

and it is worth pausing on why. Several of the research teams behind Kallied have found that many of the people documented in their work do not recognize themselves in that label. They talk about territory, livelihood, food systems, labor, and social reproduction, not “the environment” as an abstract category. The institutional use of the term can also flatten the everyday, gendered, and historically specific forms of violence these actors face. There is a bigger risk still: framing the issue only around ecosystem integrity obscures what is really at stake, namely collective survival, dignity, and political voice under conditions of deep inequality. For that reason, this paper works with a broad understanding of the term, one that makes it possible to look at violence and protection both in formal advocacy spaces and in the everyday practices through which communities defend territory, collective life, and their own social reproduction.

This paper draws on the Knowledge Alliance for Environmental Defenders (Kallied²), a community of practice bringing together nine research and advocacy initiatives led by dozens of organizations³ across Latin America, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Africa, and transnational digital spaces. The Kallied archive spans lithium extraction in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile; civic space and climate justice in Central America; environmental activism and land struggles across MENA; land, climate, and natural resource governance in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Liberia; harmful climate and extractive projects in Southeast Asia; and technology-facilitated violence against defenders in Brazil, Kenya, Mexico, and the Philippines. Through research, peer exchange, capacity-building, and advocacy, Kallied turns scattered experiences into shared knowledge about the conditions defenders face and the responses they are already building.

Building on this collective body of work, the paper asks two questions. First: how do state, corporate, hybrid, and geopolitical governance arrangements across Kallied territories produce violence, exclusion, and pressure against environmental and land defenders? Second: what forms of community-based protection emerge from these struggles, and what can civil society, donors, and policymakers learn from them?

The central argument is straightforward. The threats defenders face are not isolated abuses or unfortunate side effects of development policy. Across the nine Kallied cases, they are built into governance arrangements that normalize exclusion, weaken accountability, and shrink civic space. The evidence also points somewhere more hopeful: protection holds up best when

² For further information about this initiative, see: <https://kallied.org/>

³ The table in Annex 1 summarizes the information related to the name of each of the nine projects, the countries in which they operate, and the organizations involved.

it is built collectively, through territorial knowledge, relational care, political organizing, and the defense of the material and communicative conditions that make collective action possible in the first place.

This paper makes two contributions. Empirically, it offers a comparative account of how violence, governance, and resistance intersect across different regional clusters of the Global South, including the transnational reach of online attacks. Conceptually, it argues that protection should be understood as a collectively governed and territorially grounded process, rather than as something delivered to defenders from outside. This second contribution, a framework for understanding violence and protection, is not presented here as a theoretical starting point. It is a finding, one that emerges from reading the nine cases together and is developed in full in the paper's closing comparative section, once the evidence that supports it has been laid out.

Here is how the paper unfolds. The next section sets out the conceptual starting points: what we mean by violence, hybrid governance, and community-based protection, and why we use the term "environmental defender" with some caution. A methodology section then summarizes the research approach across the nine Kallied projects and the comparative strategy used to build cross-case insights. The core of the paper presents the nine cases by region and then puts them in conversation with one another. It is in that comparative section that the full conceptual argument takes shape, including the continuum of violence that runs across these very different contexts. The conclusion considers what this means for advocacy, policy, and future collaboration among those working to defend land, territory, and the environment.

2. Conceptual starting points

This paper treats green extractivism and climate governance as contested political projects, not neutral, technical processes. Across Latin America, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Africa, conflicts over mining, land, forests, conservation, climate policy, and digital infrastructure are shaped by unequal power. That power decides who is exposed to harm, who gets to participate, and whose knowledge counts when decisions are made about land and environmental futures (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016). Read side by side, the nine Kallied cases suggest that green extractivism, authoritarian environmental governance, donor-driven reformism, concessionary land regimes, and technology-facilitated attacks are not separate phenomena, but different faces of the same broader arrangement: one that pushes risk downward while concentrating control over land, resources, infrastructure, and public narrative (Abou Rouphaël & Abdelkhalek, 2026; Kayed, 2025; Choucair Vizoso, 2025).

Rather than building an elaborate theory before turning to the evidence, this section lays out three starting assumptions that guided how we read the nine cases: what we mean by violence against defenders, by hybrid governance, and by community-based protection. These are not conclusions but the lenses we brought into the analysis. What these concepts actually look like once tested against nine very different contexts is the subject of Section 5, where the paper's central argument takes shape.

On violence against environmental defenders, we do not start from a fixed set of exceptional, visible attacks such as killings, arrests, or threats. International reporting on defenders has already pushed against that narrow framing, documenting slower, less visible forms of harm: institutional neglect, ecological destruction, reputational attack, data exposure, and the erosion of a community's own knowledge and voice (Global Witness, 2023; Lawlor, 2025). We share that premise: violence is better approached as a continuum than as a discrete event. This is a starting hypothesis, one the Kallied cases will test extensively in the sections that follow.

On governance, we treat the state, corporate actors, investors, security forces, donors, and increasingly digital platforms as parts of the same hybrid governance field, in line with political ecology's long-standing account of environmental conflict as structured by unequal power (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016). Our working assumption is that governance does not merely fail to prevent violence. It can actively produce and normalize it, including when the language of rights, sustainability, or "just transition" is formally in place (OHCHR, 2025).

Whether and how this plays out across the nine cases is one of the central empirical questions this paper investigates.

On protection, we start from the premise that it is rarely built through individualized security measures or interventions delivered from outside. This follows a broader tradition in feminist and community-based research that treats protection and justice as relational and collectively produced, rather than delivered by external experts or institutions (Godden, Chakma, & Naidu, 2023). Our working assumption is that the most durable forms of protection are collective and grounded in territory: assemblies, monitoring networks, legal accompaniment, and the everyday infrastructures of trust and shared knowledge that communities build for themselves. This, too, is a starting point for the analysis, not its conclusion.

A note on the term “environmental defenders” is useful here. As already discussed in the introduction, this paper uses it with some discomfort. It is a useful shorthand for international advocacy and legal protection, but several Kallied research teams have pushed back on it, not as a matter of semantics but because many of the people at the center of this work do not use the term themselves, and because its institutional framing can understate the gendered, racialized, and historically specific violence they live with. We keep the term for practical reasons, while trying, throughout the paper, to stay close to how communities actually describe their own struggles.

These three starting points, violence as potentially more than episodic, governance as potentially generative of harm, and protection as potentially collective and territorial, are what we brought to the nine Kallied cases. What we found when we tested them against the evidence, and how they hold up once read comparatively across the different cases, is the subject of the paper’s closing section.

3. Methodology and research design

This paper is built on a comparative synthesis of Kallied, a Global South-led community of practice bringing together nine research and advocacy initiatives, implemented by 32 organizations across 22 countries. Between them, these projects cover lithium extraction in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile; civic space and climate justice in Central America; environmental activism and land governance across the Middle East and North Africa; land, climate, and natural resource governance in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Liberia; harmful climate and extractive projects in Southeast Asia; and technology-facilitated violence against defenders in Brazil, Kenya, Mexico, and the Philippines.

We did not treat these nine initiatives as identical case studies produced under one standardized protocol. They were never designed that way, and forcing that frame on them would flatten what makes each of them useful. Instead, we worked with a body of research that is genuinely heterogeneous but comparable, held together by shared political commitments: participation, co-analysis, and close engagement with affected communities. Methodologically, this puts the paper in a long tradition of participatory action research, which has always tried to break down the wall between researchers and the people whose realities are being studied (Fals Borda, 1987; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991). That shared orientation makes it possible to read across very different territories and issue areas without erasing what is specific to each one.

Three features run across most of the nine projects, though unevenly. The first is document-based inquiry. Research teams reviewed legal frameworks, public policy, environmental regulation, project documentation, media coverage, and organizational records to map the institutional and political terrain around each conflict. This groundwork mattered most for tracing the gap between how governance, consultation, and protection are supposed to work on paper and how they actually play out.

The second is qualitative, participatory fieldwork: interviews, focus groups, workshops, community exchanges, and conversations with key informants, used to understand how defenders and communities experience threats, read power relations, and think about their own options. The digital-violence project, for instance, relied on participatory, community-led research in Brazil, Kenya, Mexico, and the Philippines; other projects combined fieldwork with collective reflection and validation sessions.

The third, less consistently applied, is action-oriented, co-produced research. Several projects went further than standard qualitative fieldwork, using feminist participatory action research⁴, systematization of experience, community-based human rights assessment, participatory mapping, or community-led validation. In the lithium case, the *Community-Based Human Rights Impact Assessment* tool (COBHRA)⁵ was central to documenting harms and strengthening community-led claims (Aylwin et al., 2025). In Southeast Asia and in the digital-violence project, co-produced knowledge and community researchers shaped the research design from the outset (APNED, 2021; Dala Institute, 2025). This kind of work sits within a broader field of feminist and community-based action research on climate and environmental justice, one

⁴ For reference, we can mention the work led by APC on feminist internet research ethics. For more information, see: <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/white-paper-feminist-internet-research>

⁵ The Community-Based Human Rights Impact Assessment (COBHRA) is a community-based human rights impact assessment tool that helps affected communities document project impacts and strengthen their own rights-based claims. Rights & Democracy originally developed it, and Oxfam and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) have since advanced and promoted it globally.

that treats collaboration and power analysis as part of the method, not an add-on to it (Godden, Chakma, & Naidu, 2023).

For this paper, we did not go back to the raw data behind each project. We worked instead from what each project had already published, including reports, methodological notes, summaries, and internal materials, and looked across them for recurring patterns. The comparative process followed three steps: pulling out recurring themes across the nine bodies of work; sorting them under three broad headings, violence, governance, and protection; and asking how these three dimensions interact once read across regions rather than within a single case.

That third step is worth dwelling on, because it is where the paper's conceptual argument actually comes from. We started with three loose assumptions, set out in Section 2, and built the actual framework by tracking what changed and what held steady as we moved from one regional cluster to the next. Section 5 presents the result of that process: not a theory applied to Kallied, but a framework that Kallied produced.

This approach does not aim for exhaustive coverage of each project. Its purpose is to build a cross-case reading of how environmental conflict is politically organized across Kallied's territories, and how communities are already constructing grounded forms of protection in response.

4. Kallied cases

This section walks through the Kallied cases region by region, mapping the main issue areas, governance patterns, and forms of violence documented across the archive. The goal here is not to restate the conceptual argument that comes later, but to lay out the empirical ground the comparative analysis will stand on. Organizing the material by region keeps each context's specificity intact while still making it possible to see where similar pressures show up across very different settings, from the Andean lithium triangle to Southeast Asian conservation frontiers to online spaces where none of these boundaries hold.

4.1 Latin America: green extraction, civic-space closure, and territorial defense

In Latin America, Kallied's work spans two connected but distinct terrains. Both show the same underlying pattern: climate and environmental politics organized through extractive expansion, unequal participation, and real insecurity for the people defending land, water, and territorial life.

The project *Impacts of Lithium Development on Indigenous Territories in Argentina, Bolivia and Chile* looks at lithium extraction on Indigenous land

across the three countries. Rather than appearing simply as a decarbonization pathway, the energy transition is experienced on the ground as a new frontier of pressure over salt flats, water sources, livelihoods, and Indigenous self-determination, especially where access to information, participation, and justice remains highly unequal (Aylwin et al., 2025).

In Central America, the *APORTO* project tracks how climate vulnerability, shrinking civic space, and territorial defense feed into one another, particularly in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Environmental conflict here is inseparable from poverty, repression, weak institutions, and a public advocacy space that keeps getting smaller (RDS-Honduras, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c). *APORTO*'s regional mapping shows defenders fighting on two fronts at once: against threats in their own territories, and to keep open the spaces, community assemblies, municipal forums, national and regional mechanisms, where climate and environmental decisions can still be contested (*APORTO*, 2025a; 2025b).

The governance pattern across both subregions is not state absence, but selective, unequal regulation. In the Andes, consultation and environmental oversight lag far behind the pace of extraction (Aylwin et al., 2025). In Central America, the language of participation and resilience coexists with political conditions that are openly dangerous for anyone trying to influence decisions about their own territory (*APORTO*, 2025a; 2025b).

The violence documented here goes beyond overt attacks. On the lithium frontier, harm shows up as water depletion, pressure on pastoral livelihoods, and a narrowing of dissent (Aylwin et al., 2025). In Central America, defenders face death threats, judicial harassment, smear campaigns, and the kind of prolonged exhaustion that fragments organizations from within (RDS-Honduras, 2025b; *APORTO*, 2025b).

Protection here is collective and territorial, not individual. Indigenous assemblies, community-based monitoring, feminist and youth-led initiatives, and tools like the *Community-Based Human Rights Impact Assessment* (COBHRA) give local organizations a concrete way to document harm and defend their rights on their own terms (Aylwin et al., 2025; *APORTO*, 2025b).

4.2 Southeast Asia: authoritarian environmentalism, criminalization, and intersectional defense

Kallied's Southeast Asian projects focus on harmful climate and extractive projects in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, with particular attention to Indigenous and rural communities up against mining, agribusiness, renewable energy, conservation schemes, and carbon governance (APNED, 2021; Dala Institute, 2025). Across *Guardians Under Pressure* and *Enabling*

Climate Action, the same story repeats: development framed as green or climate-responsive, experienced on the ground as dispossession.

The specifics vary by site, but the pattern holds. In Indonesia, nickel mining on Wawonii Island and geothermal expansion in Poco Leok; in the Philippines, wind, hydropower, mining, plantation, and REDD+-linked projects on Indigenous land; in Thailand, conservation and carbon-oriented forest governance in Indigenous and coastal communities (Dala Institute, 2025).

Governance here brings together state agencies, corporations, security forces, and sometimes international financiers around pro-investment environmental policy (APNED, 2021; Dala Institute, 2025). Consultation and free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) exist on paper but are weakly enforced, while permits, zoning, and security narratives do the work of pushing projects through and containing opposition.

The violence is both direct and cumulative: intimidation, arrests, militarization, surveillance, and displacement, alongside slower harms like water contamination, land grabbing, and the erosion of customary authority (APNED, 2021; Dala Institute, 2025). Feminist and co-produced research in the region also surfaces something conventional security frameworks tend to miss: gender-based threats, reputational attacks, and care burdens that fall disproportionately on women defenders (Dala Institute, 2025).

Protection is built through collective repertoires that exceed legal defense alone. Communities combine documentation, legal advocacy, participatory research, alliance-building, media work, popular education, ritual practice, and territorial organizing to defend land, assert consent, and sustain political action under pressure.

4.3 Middle East and North Africa: environmental struggle, fragmented activism, and political economy from below

In the Middle East and North Africa, the Kallied archive is anchored in the *Developing Inclusive Research through Activism and Informed Advocacy* (DIRAIA) project, which conducted comparative work on environmental activism in Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq, together with the *Climate, Land, and Rights* project, related research on land, agroecology, environmental struggle, and green grabbing in Lebanon and the wider Arab region. Rather than starting from a consolidated field of “environmental defender protection,” these cases approach environmental politics through broader struggles over inequality, authoritarianism, donor agendas, public services, land, and everyday survival (Choucair Vizoso, 2025).

The issues on the ground are rarely framed in climate or conservation language. They show up as fights over waste, water, pollution, coastal access, land, and public health (Choucair Vizoso, 2025), a reminder that environmental grievance is often just the visible edge of a much larger political economy, tied to dignity, livelihood, and sovereignty (Abou Roupahël & Abdelkhalek, 2026).

Governance across the region is fragmented and opaque rather than simply absent. In Lebanon, sectarian neoliberalism blurs the line between ministries, parties, business elites, and donors, producing selective service delivery in water, waste, land, and energy (Kayed, 2025; Abou Roupahël & Abdelkhalek, 2026). In Iraq, environmental action is shaped by repression, donor incentives, and militia influence (Alkhudary, 2025). In Morocco and Tunisia, fragmented regulation and regional inequality limit what grassroots actors can actually shape (Madhi, 2025; Choucair Vizoso, 2025; MIPA, 2025a).

The forms of violence documented in these cases include bureaucratic obstruction, selective policing, discursive delegitimization, donor fragmentation, judicial and political pressure, civic fatigue, and the narrowing of public space. Communities also endure slower harms linked to pollution, land loss, exclusion from services, and deteriorating conditions of social reproduction (Abou Roupahël & Abdelkhalek, 2026; Kayed, 2025; Choucair Vizoso, 2025).

A further element that deserves stronger emphasis in the MENA cases is the extent to which environmental struggle unfolds within war ecologies and, in some contexts, through forms of destruction that local researchers and activists explicitly frame as ecocide (Khechen, 2024b; Hamade, 2026). This is especially important in Lebanon, where Israel's destruction of infrastructure, food systems, and access to land and water is reshaping the material conditions of social reproduction, and with them, the terrain of activism itself (Abou Roupahël & Abdelkhalek, 2026; Kayed, 2025; Hamade, 2026; Choucair Vizoso, 2025).

The MENA findings push back on a common assumption: that fragmentation among activists is simply a failure. In restrictive, crisis-ridden settings, small and tightly-knit networks may be exactly what allows activism to survive at all, even if that same structure makes broader coalitions harder to build (Abou Roupahël & Abdelkhalek, 2026; Choucair Vizoso, 2025). Kayed's (2025) research on Lebanon adds a necessary caution: community-based initiatives should not be read only through the lens of resilience or innovation. In a country marked by economic collapse and repeated war, neighborhood organizing around waste and water, informal repair of energy and food systems, and small-scale agroecological experiments persist alongside, not despite, widespread disenchantment with both the state and formal environmental NGOs. In parts of MENA, environmental action runs as much on fatigue and ambivalence as on hope, and any honest comparative account has to reckon with that.

Dayekh and Harb (2025) add real empirical weight here. Mapping 21 initiatives in Lebanon, they show how food sovereignty, seed preservation, and solidarity-based land practices have become central sites of environmental politics, tying ecological concerns to labor, gender, and community resilience, even as these efforts remain constrained by fragmentation, donor dependency, and limited policy reach.

4.4 Africa: layered violence, extractive governance, and community protection

Kallied's African projects focus on Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Liberia⁶. Environmental conflict here runs through pastoral, forest, oil, mining, and concession-based frontiers, compounded by the unequal political standing of ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples (IGW, 2026; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026). In these countries, environmental struggle is inseparable from broader questions of land control, climate vulnerability, exclusion from decision-making, and the uneven distribution of state protection and corporate power.

The African findings make something unusually clear: violence against environmental defenders is layered, not episodic. It combines direct, structural, slow, and epistemic harm. The project *Researching Green Activism* documents intimidation, arrests, beatings, abductions, fabricated charges, and killings across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, tied to conservation, oil, mining, and land struggles (IGW, 2026; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026). In Liberia, the *Combating Climate Change* project shows arrest and criminalization functioning as standard tools against communities resisting concession-based dispossession.

These visible forms of coercion sit on top of slower dispossession: drought, deforestation, landslides, and land degradation eroding pastoral and agrarian life, compounded by restrictive laws and the non-recognition of Indigenous peoples.

Governance is hybrid in the clearest sense. State institutions, private investors, conservation actors, and corporate interests combine to restrict civic space while pushing extractive or exclusionary projects forward. In Kenya, the Northern Rangelands Trust and large infrastructure initiatives show what public-private arrangements with major territorial consequences and minimal local accountability look like in practice (IGW, 2026). In Tanzania and Uganda, defenders face threats whenever they challenge land allocation

⁶ The absence of bibliographic references concerning the Liberia project is attributable to the fact that the corresponding reports have not yet been published; consequently, the information utilized for the analysis derives from internal research progress reports.

or extractive projects (Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026). In Liberia, a concession-based economy leaves communities with almost no formal protection against corporate encroachment.

As elsewhere, protection is collective: community-based safety networks, federated grassroots organizations, local bylaws, women-only groups, and the defense of Indigenous knowledge systems function as real protective infrastructure, sustaining advocacy and continuity under sustained pressure (IGW, 2026; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026).

4.5 Transnational digital spaces: online attacks, disinformation, and digital resilience

The *Resistance and Resilience* project adds a transnational layer to Kallied, examining technology-facilitated violence against defenders in Brazil, Mexico, Kenya, and the Philippines. Its core finding is direct: online violence is not a separate problem from territorial conflict. It is bound up with it.

Defenders face targeted disinformation, defamation, racist and sexist abuse, surveillance, and death threats online, often mirroring and amplifying what is happening to them on the ground. The effects are concrete: fear, mistrust, self-censorship, and a fragmentation that weakens collective organizing and reduces the political utility of digital platforms for environmental defense (Voces del Territorio et al., 2026).

Crucially, this project frames technology-facilitated violence as part of the same continuum as physical, structural, and epistemic harm, not a separate digital problem. Digital attacks amplify existing inequalities, such as gender, ethnicity, geography, connectivity, and language, meaning women defenders, Indigenous leaders, and traditional communities face compounded exposure both online and offline.

The governance dimension matters just as much. Platform design, weak moderation, and inadequate legal protection let state actors, local elites, and private interests weaponize communication infrastructure against defenders with little consequence (Voces del Territorio et al., 2026). Digital governance, in this sense, is another layer of the same hybrid state-corporate arrangements shaping visibility and vulnerability elsewhere in this paper.

The project also documents real digital resilience: community workshops, autonomous media practices, and basic digital security training, built through collective learning rather than purely technical fixes (Voces del Territorio et al., 2026). Community protection today has to include struggles over data, communication infrastructure, and narrative power, not just land and water.

5. Cross-case analysis: toward a framework for understanding violence against environmental defenders

Read on their own, the nine Kallied cases tell nine different stories. Read together, they tell one. This section makes that argument explicit. It returns to the three starting assumptions laid out in Section 2, violence as more than episodic, governance as potentially generative of harm, protection as collective and territorial, and shows what happens to each of them once tested against evidence from four regional clusters and one transnational digital space. What comes out the other end is not the same as what went in. It is sharper and more specific, and we think it is one of this paper's central contributions: a framework for understanding how violence against environmental defenders actually works, built from the ground up rather than imposed on it.

5.1 Violence is a continuum

Across the Kallied archive, defenders face killings, arrests, judicial harassment, and intimidation, the forms of violence that make headlines. But the cases insist, over and over, that stopping there misses most of what is actually happening. Alongside direct coercion, defenders confront institutional neglect, ecological destruction that unfolds over years rather than days, reputational attack, data exposure, and the slow erosion of a community's own knowledge and authority (APNED, 2021; RDS-Honduras, 2025b; Aylwin et al., 2025; IGW, 2026; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026).

The African cases make this layering unusually explicit. Both Researching Green Activism and the Liberia project show direct, structural, slow, and epistemic violence operating at the same time, on the same communities, often through the same conflict (IGW, 2026; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026). Drought, deforestation, and land degradation erode pastoral and agrarian livelihoods on one track, while arrests and fabricated charges silence dissent on another, and both tracks feed the same underlying dispossession.

Lebanon shows what this continuum looks like under conditions of a compounding crisis. According to Kayed (2025), debt, state collapse, sectarian patronage, war, and infrastructural breakdown have led to genuine disenchantment with institutionalized "green" agendas. This is not because communities have stopped caring about the environment, but because these agendas seem detached from their more immediate struggle for food, energy, and basic services. That disenchantment is a rational response to watching technocratic transition language coexist with war-related destruction that some researchers

call ecocide (Khechen, 2024b; Hamade, 2026).

The digital-violence project extends the continuum somewhere the original concept did not anticipate: online. Across Brazil, Mexico, Kenya, and the Philippines, disinformation, defamation, and platform-mediated harassment are not a separate virtual problem. They are technology-facilitated extensions of the same territorial violence, often aimed squarely at Indigenous and traditional communities defending land (Voces del Territorio et al., 2026). Women defenders and young people carry a disproportionate share of this exposure, and poor connectivity and low digital literacy make it worse, not better.

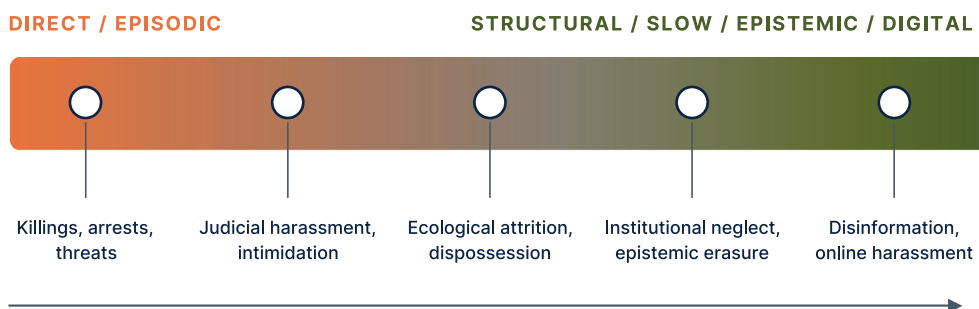
In Central America, APORTO's work shows the continuum operating across arenas rather than just across types of harm: killings, criminalization, psychosocial trauma, and the erosion of community influence in formal and informal decision-making spaces all reinforce each other as part of one field of conflict, not four separate problems (RDS-Honduras, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; APORTO, 2025a; 2025b).

Taken together, this is the first pillar of the framework: violence against environmental defenders should be read as a continuum spanning physical, structural, slow, epistemic, and digital harm, not as a set of discrete, exceptional events. What varies across the Kallied cases is not whether this continuum exists, but which of its dimensions dominates in a given context, and how tightly they reinforce one another. Figure 1 sets out this continuum in schematic form.

Figure 1

The continuum of violence against environmental defenders

Physical, structural, slow, epistemic, and digital harm as one connected field — not separate categories.



5.2 Violence is produced by governance

The second pillar concerns where this violence actually comes from. Across every regional cluster, the pattern is the same: state institutions, corporations, investors, security forces, donors, and increasingly digital platforms interact in ways that authorize harmful projects and preserve unequal exposure to risk (APNED, 2021; APORTO, 2025a; 2025b; Aylwin et al., 2025; Abou Rouphaël & Abdelkhalek, 2026; Dala Institute, 2025). This is hybrid governance: a specific political configuration in which responsibility is dispersed, accountability is blurred, and participation is reduced to a box-ticking exercise, even while the language of rights, inclusion, and “just transition” stays firmly in place (OHCHR, 2025).

The regional variation here is instructive precisely because the underlying mechanism holds steady. In Southeast Asia, “green” mining, geothermal, and carbon-market projects advance through information denial, militarized enforcement, and consultation processes that exist on paper but not in practice (APNED, 2021; Dala Institute, 2025). In the MENA region, environmental action is filtered through crisis governance, sectarian patronage networks, and donor-fragmented reform architectures that leave little room for grassroots influence (Abou Rouphaël & Abdelkhalek, 2026; Kaye, 2025; Choucair Vizoso, 2025). The Climate, Land, and Rights project shows this is not reducible to sectoral failure: it emerges at the intersection of land regimes, climate vulnerability, and exclusionary development (Dayekh & Harb, 2025; Khechen, 2024a). In East Africa and Liberia, the same underlying logic shows up as conservation-linked control, extractive investment, and weak legal guarantees for defenders (IGW, 2026; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026). In the Andes, it takes the form of weak consultation set against the pace of lithium expansion (Aylwin et al., 2025).

Digital platforms belong squarely inside this picture, not alongside it. Platform design, weak content moderation, opaque reporting systems, and data-extractive business models shape the conditions under which online attacks circulate and persist, usually without any real remedy for the defenders targeted (Voces del Territorio et al., 2026). Platforms do not replace states or corporations: they give repression and stigmatization a new set of infrastructures to travel through.

Violence against defenders, in short, is not a failure of governance. It is frequently produced through governance itself: through the ordinary, often legal, operation of permissive regulation, selective enforcement, and procedural participation stripped of real decision-making power. The right comparative question, across every Kallied case, is not whether governance exists, but whose interests it protects, whose knowledge it recognizes, and who it renders disposable in the process (Kaye, 2025; Choucair Vizoso, 2025).

5.3 Protection is collective, territorial, and already happening

The third pillar shifts from harm to response. The clearest finding across all nine Kallied projects is that protection does not scale up from individual security measures, panic buttons, relocation, emergency legal defense, even though those remain necessary in acute moments. It scales up from collective, territorially grounded practice.

This shows up almost everywhere in a strikingly similar form. Assemblies, self-help groups, women-only networks, legal accompaniment, community monitoring, participatory mapping, autonomous media, and agroecological practice appear across Latin America, Southeast Asia, MENA, and Africa as the actual infrastructure of defense, alongside less visible resources like trust, shared analysis, and intergenerational memory (APORTO, 2025b; Dala Institute, 2025; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026). In Lebanon, Dayekh and Harb (2025) document 21 agroecological and food-sovereignty initiatives that do exactly this kind of work, linking ecological concerns to labor, gender, and community resilience, even as fragmentation and donor dependency limit how far they can reach.

Protection is also, unmistakably, epistemic. Defenders across the Kallied cases are not only resisting material dispossession. They are defending their right to name what is happening to them, produce their own evidence, and pass on knowledge on their own terms (Aylwin et al., 2025; Choucair Vizoso, 2025; Dala Institute, 2025; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026). That is why participatory research, community-based assessment, and feminist storytelling are not just data-collection tools in this paper. They are part of the protective infrastructure itself (Aylwin et al., 2025; Voces del Territorio et al., 2026). The digital-violence project's community workshops and locally grounded digital-safety practices belong in this same category: protection built through collective learning, not imported technical fixes (Voces del Territorio et al., 2026).

None of this should be romanticized. These practices run on burnout, unequal resources, gendered caregiving burdens, and constant exposure to co-optation or repression (APNED, 2021; Dala Institute, 2025; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026). Dayekh and Harb's (2025) Lebanon findings make the limits explicit: agroecological initiatives are genuinely generative at the community level, but their reach stalls when they stay confined to fragmented project spaces without a path into higher-level policy processes. Community-based protection is not a substitute for institutional guarantees. It is a grounded political process, one already building real alternatives to narrow, individualized security frameworks, and one policy actors have consistently underestimated (RDS-Honduras, 2025b; Kaye, 2025).

5.4 Putting the three pillars together

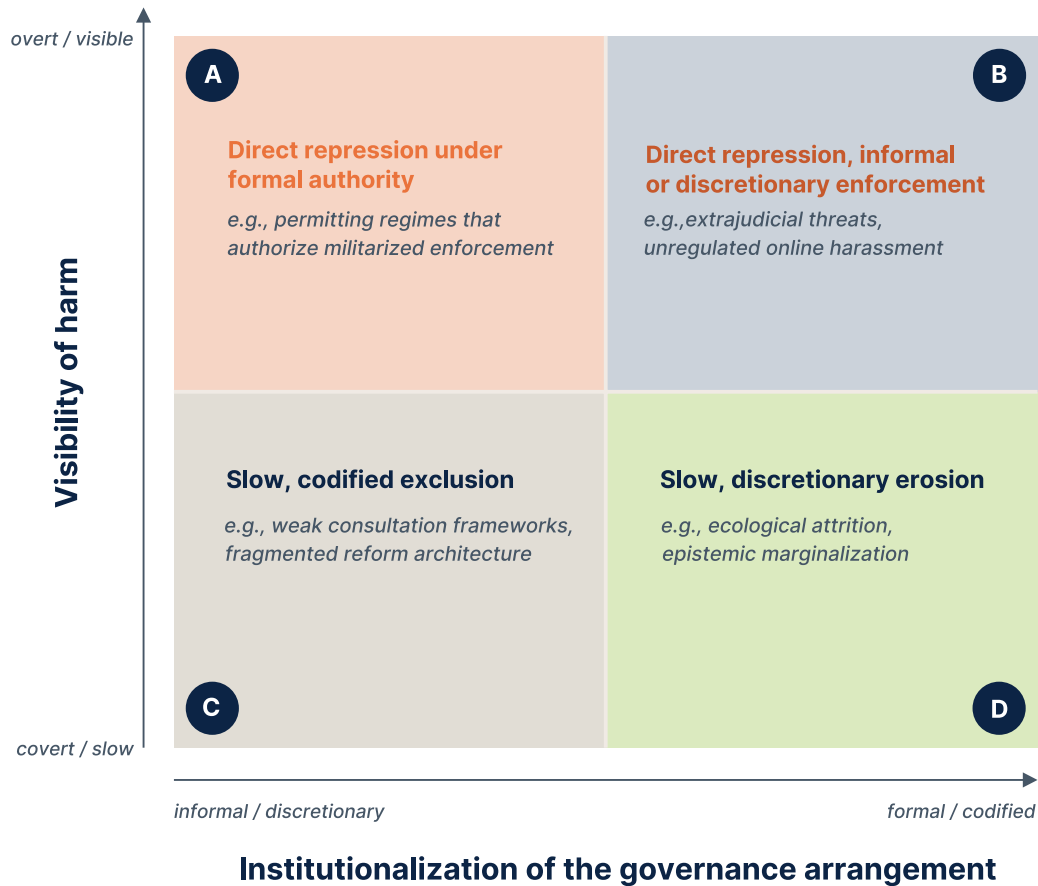
None of these three findings stands on its own, and that is the paper's core argument. Violence is a continuum because it is produced through ordinary governance rather than through isolated bad actors. Protection takes the collective, territorial form it does because that is what it takes to hold ground against harm that operates on so many registers at once. A framework that captured only one of these three dynamics would miss what actually connects the Kallied cases to each other.

This is also where the comparative payoff becomes concrete for anyone working in advocacy, donor funding, or policy. If violence runs along a continuum, protection strategies built only around emergency response to its most visible end, the killings, the arrests, will systematically miss the slower and more corrosive dimensions of harm, precisely where that harm is doing the most long-term damage. If violence is produced through governance rather than despite it, accountability efforts have to look at ordinary decision-making processes, not just extraordinary abuses. And if protection is already collective and territorial, the most useful thing outside actors can do is resource and defend what communities are already building, rather than design something new to replace it.

Figure 2 translates this second layer of the argument into a simple heuristic, crossing how visible a given harm is against how institutionalized the governance producing it tends to be.

Figure 2

Where violence meets governance



This reframes what “stronger support for defenders” should mean in practice: backing community-based monitoring, civic and legal education, feminist and intersectional protection practices, and genuine recognition of Indigenous and local knowledge, not as add-ons to legal remedy and emergency accompaniment, but as the core of an effective response (Aylwin et al., 2025; APNED, 2021; Dala Institute, 2025). It also means treating digital platforms as accountable actors in this system, not neutral bystanders to it (Voces del Territorio, 2026).

Kallied’s comparative contribution, in the end, is not just a fuller account of harm. It is a framework, continuum, hybrid governance, collective protection, that travels across very different political and geographic contexts, and that can do real analytical work for anyone trying to understand why violence against environmental defenders persists, and why protection cannot be reduced to a security problem alone.

Conclusion

This paper set out to answer two questions: how do state, corporate, and hybrid governance arrangements produce violence against environmental defenders, and what forms of protection do communities build in response? Nine cases, four regions, and one transnational digital space later, the answer to both turns out to be the same story told twice. The conditions that make defenders vulnerable are the same conditions that shape how they protect themselves.

This answer emerged from reading the cases side by side. The framework this paper proposes, violence as a continuum, governance as a producer of harm, protection as collective and territorial, is not a lens we brought to Kallied. It is what Kallied produced once we stopped treating nine research projects as nine separate stories.

On the first question, the evidence is hard to read any other way. Violence against defenders is not a series of discrete abuses or occasional governance failures (Aylwin et al., 2025; APNED, 2021; Voces del Territorio et al., 2026). It runs through the ordinary operation of climate policy, extraction, conservation, and digital communication, through permissive regulation, selective enforcement, and participation that exists mostly on paper. Physical attacks, criminalization, online harassment, dispossession, and epistemic marginalization are not separate problems occurring in parallel. They are interconnected expressions of the same uneven power over land, resources, and voice (Abou Roupahél & Abdelkhalek, 2026; Choucair Vizoso, 2025; OHCHR, 2023; 2025). Treating violence as a continuum, rather than a set of exceptional events, is what makes it possible to see this.

On the second question, protection holds up best when it is collective, situated, and tied to the defense of territorial life, not when it is reduced to individual risk management. Assemblies, territorial monitoring, legal accompaniment, feminist care networks, agroecological initiatives, and community-led digital safety practices do not eliminate vulnerability, and they are not always stable or easy to scale. But they are how communities sustain collective agency and keep acting under real pressure (Abou Roupahél & Abdelkhalek, 2026; Kaye, 2025).

That has real implications for how support gets designed. If harm is produced through ordinary governance, legal remedy and emergency accompaniment, while still necessary, will never be enough on their own. What the cases point toward instead is longer-term backing for the collective capacities communities are already building: monitoring networks, civic and legal education, feminist and intersectional protection practices, and real recognition of Indigenous and local knowledge (Aylwin et al., 2025; Dala Institute, 2025; OHCHR, 2023; Lawlor, 2025). Digital infrastructure belongs on that list too, not as an afterthought.

Platform design and unequal connectivity now shape whether defenders can communicate and organize at all (Voces del Territorio et al., 2026).

Three issues remain open, and they matter for anyone continuing this work. How do defenders sustain themselves through years of slow degradation and bureaucratic pressure, when direct repression is intermittent but exposure to harm never really stops (Kayed, 2025; RDS-Honduras, 2025c)? How should territorial and digital violence be studied together, given how tightly Kallied's own cases show them intertwined, rather than as a core issue and an adjacent one (Voces del Territorio et al., 2026)? And how do different political configurations, authoritarian, militarized, concession-based, donor-dependent, conservation-driven, change both how violence is produced and what protection becomes possible (Choucair Vizoso, 2025; IGW, 2026; Wazambi, 2025; RRA, 2026)? These are not gaps to flag and move past. They are the next phase of the research agenda Kallied's partners are already positioned to pursue.

Environmental defenders, in the end, are not only people exposed to harm. They are also the people who understand, better than almost anyone else, how environmental governance actually works on the ground, because they are the ones absorbing its consequences. This paper does not resolve the tensions it documents. What it offers instead is a clearer account of why violence against defenders persists, why protection cannot be reduced to a security problem, and why community-anchored defense will keep being central to environmental justice across the Global South.

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Annex I - Table of Kallied Projects and organizations

Project name	Participating organizations	Countries
Resistance and resilience	Association for Progressive Communications; Indigenous Peoples Rights International; Manila Observatory through the KLIMA Centre; Intervozes; Ogiek Peoples' Development Program.	Brazil, Kenya, Mexico, Philippines
Combating Climate Change by Strengthening the Participation of Environmental Defenders in Liberia	Green Advocates International; Alliance for Rural Democracy; Natural Resource Women Platform; Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Resource Rights and Governance Platform.	Liberia
Impacts of lithium development on indigenous territories in Argentina, Bolivia and Chile	Observatorio Ciudadano; Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales de Argentina; Posgrado en Ciencias del Desarrollo de la Universidad Mayor San Andrés de Bolivia.	Argentina, Bolivia, Chile
Enabling climate action	Asia Pacific Network of Environmental Defenders; Center for Environmental Concerns; Migrante; Walhi - Kalimantan Tengah; Palangkaraya Ecological and Human Rights Studies; Indigenous Rights Activist Members; Research and Building Community.	Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines
Developing Inclusive Research through Activism and Informed Advocacy (DIRAIA)	Arab Reform Initiative; Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis.	Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia
Climate, Land, and Rights: The Quest for Social and Environmental Justice in the Arab Region	The Policy Initiative; The Legal Agenda.	Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan
Aporto Project: Civic Space and Climate Justice in Central America	Asociación Red de Desarrollo Sostenible Honduras; FLACSO sede Guatemala; Fundación Comunicándonos.	El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras
Guardians Under Pressure	Dala Institute; Auriga Nusantara; Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center; Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development.	Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand
Researching Green Activism	Minority Rights Group-Africa; Resource Rights Africa; Buliisa Initiative for Rural Development; Isiolo Gender Watch; Legal and Human Rights Center.	Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya

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RECLAIMING THE SOUTH

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