

Sovereign and sustainable management of the Amazon: challenges and perspectives

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Introduction

The Amazon is one of the most emblematic regions on the planet. Located in nine South American countries, of which Brazil concentrates the largest part, it is home to the largest continuous tropical forest in the world, responsible for enormous biological diversity and climatic processes that transcend national borders. Therefore, it is considered a natural heritage of global importance.

However, the Amazon is not just an environmental issue. It also represents a strategic space for the sovereignty of the countries that comprise it, a reservoir of mineral, water and genetic wealth, as well as being home to millions of people, including indigenous peoples and traditional communities. The management of the region, therefore, requires reconciling multiple dimensions: preserving its biodiversity, guaranteeing quality of life for the population, promoting sustainable economic development and, at the same time, asserting national sovereignty.

This article discusses how it is possible to conduct sovereign and sustainable management of the Amazon, exploring its challenges, regional cooperation, and prospects for the future.

The Amazon as a strategic asset

The Amazon basin covers approximately 7 million km², of which about 5 million are in Brazilian territory. This vast area holds about 20% of the planet's surface freshwater and plays a crucial role in global climate regulation through the hydrological cycle that influences rainfall in various parts of South America.

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The Amazon's heritage goes beyond biodiversity: it contains strategic mineral reserves, energy potential, large timber stocks, and a vast genetic heritage that can serve as a basis for biotechnology and medicine. This wealth makes the region a target of international interest.

Recurring narratives that advocate for the "internationalization of the Amazon" or treat it as a common good of humanity often disregard the sovereignty of the countries located within it. While it is undeniable that the preservation of the forest has a global impact, the responsibility for deciding on its territory, its exploitation, and its conservation rests primarily with the Amazonian states. This tension between the national/regional dimension and the global dimension of the Amazon is one of the central points of sovereign governance.

In this sense, it is important to recall the signing of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (ACT) in 1978, initiated by Brazil, motivated primarily by the imperative need to assert the sovereignty of the eight countries over the area, countering repeated accusations of unsuitability to handle the challenge of promoting its "responsible" management. To this end, the Brazilian government relied on the strength of its defense of the link between development and the environment during the UN Conference held in Stockholm in 1972. It also relied on the successful negotiation and signing, shortly before, in 1969, of the Treaty of the River Plate Basin. With the ACT, therefore, formal diplomatic coverage was given to the two main hydrographic basins of South America.

Nationally, it is useful to recall the creation of the Calha Norte Program, established in 1985 within the context of Brazil's redemocratization. Originally conceived as a national defense initiative focused on military presence along the Amazonian border, the program sought to ensure territorial integrity in the face of external pressures such as, for example, the threats of foreign intervention in Suriname following the coup carried out by Sergeant Dési Bouterse in 1980. The Amazon region, sparsely populated and with low population density, was perceived as vulnerable to foreign interests. Therefore, the logic of Calha Norte was centered on security and territorial control. This same logic motivated, in relation to airspace control, the implementation of the Amazon Surveillance System – SIVAM.

Over time, however, Calha Norte and SIVAM incorporated civil and social dimensions. Renamed the Management and Operational Center of the Amazon Protection System (CENSIPAM), the program began to finance basic infrastructure, health, education, and sustainable development projects in municipalities in the Northern region. Thus, it became an



instrument not only of national defense, but also of State presence and support for regional development, reaffirming sovereignty through public policies.

This movement towards the northern part of Brazil cannot be fully understood without considering the holistic effect of the change of the federal capital to Brasília, also including the geopolitical and diplomatic dimension. The ACT is part of this construction.

Challenges of Amazonian sustainability

The Amazon rainforest faces constant pressures that compromise its sustainability. Deforestation is the most visible of these. The opening of new areas for agriculture and livestock farming, coupled with land grabbing and illegal burning, causes biodiversity loss and threatens the collapse of the region's ecosystem services. It is estimated that if deforestation exceeds a certain threshold, the forest could enter a process of *savannization*, losing its ability to maintain rainfall cycles and store carbon.

Another critical challenge is mining. While legal mining can be regulated and monitored, illegal mining is growing unchecked, especially on indigenous lands and in environmental protection areas. This activity causes mercury pollution, river degradation, and violence against local communities.

Climate change is exacerbating existing problems. Rising average temperatures and reduced humidity in some areas have already led to prolonged droughts and more intense wildfires. This compromises both biodiversity and regional agriculture, as well as increasing the risk of extreme events on a continental scale.

From a social perspective, Amazonian sustainability also involves the protection of indigenous peoples and traditional communities. They are guardians of vast territories and possess ancestral knowledge about the forest. However, they suffer from invasions, violence, discrimination, and lack of access to basic services. The inclusion of these populations in management processes is essential for any sustainability project.

Management models and public policies


Managing the Amazon requires integrated policies that combine environmental protection, economic development, and social inclusion. Among the existing instruments, the Ecological-Economic Zoning stands out, guiding land use according to its environmental and social

characteristics. Although it is a fundamental tool, recognized as such by the region's governments, its implementation throughout the biome is still partial and uneven.

Strengthening environmental enforcement is also essential. In Brazil, agencies such as IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) and ICMBio (Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation) play a crucial role in combating environmental crimes and, therefore, have been strengthened to overcome the ever-present budgetary difficulties, political pressures, and, at times, personnel limitations. They are indispensable actors in Brazil's leadership in implementing the ACT, through the tool of South-South cooperation, alongside centers of excellence and best practices such as FIOCRUZ (Oswaldo Cruz Foundation) and INPE (National Institute for Space Research), among others, always with the effective and recognized support of the Brazilian Cooperation Agency. Public policies for the Amazon, as prescribed by the ACT, must be strengthened to the point of becoming permanent and convergent state policies, aimed at reducing the double asymmetry that characterizes the region: between the co-owner countries, in terms of presence and institutional capacity, and in each country, in relation to the rest of the national territory. Hence the importance of South-South cooperation; without discarding the scientific and financial contribution of actors from outside the region.

On the other hand, and in addition, the effectiveness of public policies depends on monitoring capacity. Here, the role of excellent Brazilian entities such as INPE, with its expertise in capturing and analyzing satellite images of forest cover and water bodies, becomes apparent again. In this context of South-South monitoring and cooperation, it is worth mentioning Brazil's establishment of the Amazon Fund, with the support and significant financial contributions from Norway and Germany, which reserved up to 20% of its resources for monitoring projects across the entire biome and basin, including activities in neighboring countries.

Another central aspect of the ACT is the comprehensive and integrated management of water resources. The Amazon Basin is home to internationally important rivers and enormous potential for groundwater, such as the *Alter do Chão* aquifer in Brazil. A project is underway to map these resources in the subsoil of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, funded by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), which will certainly confirm the existence of extensive reservoirs. However, the abundance of freshwater does not eliminate the risks of local scarcity, decreased water quality, or conflicts over its use. Energy production, navigation, urban water



supply, fishing, agricultural irrigation, and ecosystem maintenance depend on coordinated policies among all countries. Integrated water resource management implies considering cumulative impacts, promoting social participation, reconciling different uses, and fostering cooperation among Amazonian countries. This systemic vision reinforces that water must be treated as a strategic element of sovereignty and as a factor in regional integration.

From a development perspective, the concept of bioeconomy is gaining strength, seeking to generate wealth from products of the standing forest. Production chains based on açaí, Brazil nuts, vegetable oils, sustainably managed timber, and biotechnology are examples of alternatives that combine preservation and income generation. To prosper, however, the bioeconomy requires infrastructure, scientific research, innovation, and access to markets. Closely related to the bioeconomy, perhaps even fitting into the broader concept, is sustainable community-based tourism, due to the beneficial effects described above and also its capacity to reduce the exodus of new generations to large urban centers.

Regional integration and international cooperation

The Amazon transcends national borders. The biome extends across eight countries besides Brazil: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, Venezuela, and the Department of French Guiana. This diversity makes regional cooperation indispensable for managing the forest, with a view to advancing integration.

In this context, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) is the main institutional mechanism. Created in 1998, when the ACT turned 20, and established in 2002, it brings together the Amazonian countries to promote cooperation in areas such as water resources, science, technology, health, education, indigenous peoples, cross-border illegal activities, and biodiversity protection. Although it has faced limitations in resources and political protagonism, ACTO has strengthened remarkably in the last six years, becoming an indispensable actor in promoting the sustainable development of the Amazon in its three dimensions: the basin, the biome, and the region, understood as the geographical space resulting from the sum of the territories declared by the countries as covered by the ACT.


The organization operates through technical cooperation projects, primarily funded by international agencies, banks, and funds, such as the German GIZ, IDB, UNEP, and GEF (through implementing agencies). Projects are developed with the unanimous agreement and participation

of the governments of member countries, without external constraints. Its agenda is positive: it mainly aims to build the capacity of the institutions responsible in each country for public policy to be benefited. This is the case with the hydrometeorological monitoring network of the basin, with hundreds of physical stations spread along the banks of international rivers, as well as the capacity building of countries to enable the implementation of the CITES Convention (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) on the protection of endangered species of fauna and flora within their territories.

The strengthening of the ACTO is directly proportional to the affirmation of the sovereignty of its members in the region, insofar as it represents a platform for articulating common positions before the international community, in the forums for negotiating the sustainable development agenda, aiming at the protection of biodiversity and the promotion of the well-being of the Amazonian people. Knowledge management, through the Amazon Regional Observatory, is an essential part of this strengthening, provided that its construction and operation result in an effective contribution to public policies and real appropriation by the inhabitants of the Amazon. The recently created Scientific Panel within the ACTO and UNAMAZ (the Association of Amazonian Universities), which is undergoing an accelerated process of revitalization, will contribute substantially to this.

A recent example of ACTO's actions occurred in the dispute over the top-level domain “amazon” (dot or dot amazon) with ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers). Amazon Inc. sought exclusive use of the domain, which would give it the right to use it globally as its corporate digital identity. The Amazonian countries, coordinated by ACTO, argued that the term “Amazon” refers not only to a company, but above all to a geographical and cultural region, essential to millions of people and to the planet's environmental balance.

Despite the pressure, ICANN's decision ultimately favored the corporation, which obtained the domain name concession, but indicated the need to establish a steering committee for the domain, which has not yet occurred due to resistance from Amazonian countries to the company's imposition of total control over the committee. The actions of ACTO, led by then Secretary-General Alexandra Moreira (2019-2024), represented an important affirmation: the defense of the digital sovereignty of the Amazonian states and the region's identity against private appropriation. This episode shows that Amazonian sovereignty also needs to be considered in new dimensions, such as the virtual sphere.



In August 2023, Brazil hosted the IV Summit of Presidents of the States Parties to the ACT, known as the Amazon Summit, in Belém, Pará. On that occasion, the Belém Declaration was approved, containing over one hundred operational paragraphs, resuming and expanding upon the agenda of Amazonian cooperation built over the 45 years since the signing of the Treaty. Two messages stood out: the need to incorporate civil society into the process of building the cooperation agenda and the commitment, linked to knowledge management, to base public policies for the Amazon on the best existing and available scientific information, always valuing the ancestral knowledge of the Amazonian peoples.

There was also consensus that mobilization should continue at the presidential level, due to the evident political effect on the international community of calmly and consciously asserting sovereignty over the Amazon. Thus, at the V Summit, held in Bogotá, Colombia, in August 2025, the leaders decided to move forward with the formal inclusion of presidential meetings as a superior instance in the governance of the ACT.

The ACT gained additional importance as a result of the unwelcome disbanding of UNASUR (Union of South American Nations), whose agenda was left adrift, not only in the field of diplomacy and integration, but particularly in relation to defense and public security/cross-border crimes, both with clear links to the Amazon. In the diplomatic sphere, the ACT became the remaining institutional and political link between Suriname and Guyana and their South American context. Regarding defense, the issues of the South American Defense Council have not yet found a foothold, despite the timid efforts of the Brazilian government. Regarding illegal activities, Brazil took an important step in September 2025 with the inauguration in Manaus of the CCCPI Amazônia (Amazon International Police Cooperation Center), a groundbreaking platform for cooperation with our Amazonian neighbors, for training and exchange in intelligence and joint actions to combat transnational crimes in the region (deforestation, illegal mining, illegal trade in endangered species of fauna and flora, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking), with investments of approximately R\$ 36.7 million from the Amazon Fund. In his speech at the CCPI inauguration ceremony, President Lula da Silva made an explicit connection to the theme of sovereignty: “...we do not need foreign interventions, nor threats to our sovereignty. We are perfectly capable of being protagonists in our own solutions.”¹

¹ Free translation by the translator.

Future perspectives

The future of the Amazon will depend on the ability of its countries to promote a new development model. The unlimited expansion of the agricultural frontier and mineral exploitation is not sustainable. On the contrary, it threatens to irreversibly compromise the forest and the environmental services on which Brazil, South America, and the world depend.

Among the alternatives are strengthening the bioeconomy, valuing the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities, investing in science and technology for biotechnology and medicine, as well as the sustainable management of forest resources. These strategies can generate employment, income, and innovation, while preserving the forest.

It is equally necessary to expand the State's presence in the region. This means not only strengthening environmental oversight, but also guaranteeing infrastructure, health, education, and security for local inhabitants. Sovereignty is affirmed by the State's ability to offer dignified living conditions to its population and exercise effective authority over the territory.'

Regional and international cooperation will continue to be an important pillar. However, it must be conducted on a basis that respects national sovereignty and strengthens the internal capacities of the Amazonian countries.

In this context, the holding of COP 30 in Belém, Pará, in 2025, is particularly noteworthy. For the first time, a Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change will be hosted in the Amazon. The event represents not only recognition of the region's centrality to global climate balance, but also a strategic opportunity for Brazil and its Amazonian neighbors to present concrete commitments regarding deforestation, energy transition, and biodiversity preservation. The conference will constitute a strategic opportunity for Brazil and other Amazonian countries to demonstrate their commitment to the sustainable development of the region and, specifically, to jointly address the challenges of climate change and global warming. Furthermore, the event will allow Amazonian countries to reaffirm not only their commitment to sustainable development, but also their sovereignty over the region, showing the world that the preservation of the Amazon must be guided by the decisions and priorities of the Amazonian states themselves.

Conclusion

The Amazon is simultaneously a national and global challenge. Its preservation is in the interest of humanity, but its management belongs, first and foremost, to the countries that comprise it. The balance between sovereignty and sustainability is key to guaranteeing the future of the forest.

Sovereign and sustainable management must articulate environmental protection, inclusive economic development, empowerment of local communities, and balanced international cooperation. Brazil, as the country that holds the largest portion of the forest, has a central role in this process, but the effort needs to be collective, involving all Amazonian countries and society as a whole.

Furthermore, Amazonian sovereignty is not limited to physical territory. It includes the protection of its water resources, the defense of its symbolic identity in digital spaces—such as the “.amazon” domain—and the strategic presence of the State through national and regional programs and projects, such as the Calha Norte program and the ACTO agenda. These elements broaden the understanding of sovereignty, showing that it must be comprehensive, encompassing environmental, social, technological, and cultural dimensions.

The holding of COP 30 in Belém reinforces this understanding: the Amazon is the center of global attention and, at the same time, a space for asserting regional sovereignty. This is a historic moment in which the Amazonian countries can show the world that it is possible to combine development, social justice, and environmental preservation. If well managed, the sovereign and sustainable management of the Amazon can transform the region into a global example of how to protect nature without sacrificing the autonomy and prosperity of the peoples who depend on it.