

THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY WITH A TERRITORIAL APPROACH:

Contributions from Amazonian
Indigenous Food Systems to global
Life-Care Policies





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Comprehensive vision of the right to food and food sovereignty

In the eastern Colombian Amazon, the knowledge systems of Indigenous Peoples support comprehensive life systems that guarantee the Amazon's health and integrity. These ways of life include their own food systems that promote the abundance of nutritious food in reciprocal relationships with nature. The natural vegetation cover of the Macroterritory of the Jaguars of Yurupari¹, located in the eastern Colombian Amazon, remains 97% intact², storing around 515 million tons of carbon in its aboveground biomass³. This demonstrates that the ancient practices for territorial

management—which include sacred sites, ecological calendars, and food systems—favor biodiversity, ecological connectivity, territorial integrity, and life care.

For Indigenous Peoples, food is an essential part of a complex system that, beyond nourishing bodies, **nourishes identity, collective memory, and the material and spiritual connection with the territory**—aspects that come together to truly nourish existence.

Food sustains life in its broadest sense: at a communal, territorial, spiritual, and cosmogonic level. Thus, thinking about food as a

¹ The cultural and territorial complex known as the Macroterritory of the Jaguars of Yurupari is shared by the Indigenous Peoples of the Miriti Paraná, Yaigojé Apaporis, Pirá Paraná River, and Tiquié River territories, and is located in the eastern Colombian Amazon.

² MapBiomias Colombia Project. (2025). Collection 3.0 of the annual land cover and land use maps [Data set]. Retrieved October 8, 2025, from [https://plataforma.mappbiomas.org/coverage/coverage_lcu?tregionKey=colombia&tids=18-1-1&tdivisionCategory=3&tld=1&tthemeKey=coverage&tsubthemeKey=coverage_lcu&tlegendKey=default&tyear=2024&t\[pixelValues\]=5&t\[pixelValues\]=3&t\[pixelValues\]=6&t\[pixelValues\]=49&t\[pixelValues\]=23&t\[pixelValues\]=24&t\[pixelValues\]=25&t\[pixelValues\]=30&t\[pixelValues\]=68&t\[pixelValues\]=75&t\[pixelValues\]=31&t\[pixelValues\]=33&t\[pixelValues\]=34&t\[pixelValues\]=9&t\[pixelValues\]=21&t\[pixelValues\]=35&t\[pixelValues\]=74&t\[pixelValues\]=11&t\[pixelValues\]=12&t\[pixelValues\]=13&t\[pixelValues\]=29&t\[pixelValues\]=32&t\[pixelValues\]=50&t\[pixelValues\]=81&t\[pixelValues\]=82](https://plataforma.mappbiomas.org/coverage/coverage_lcu?tregionKey=colombia&tids=18-1-1&tdivisionCategory=3&tld=1&tthemeKey=coverage&tsubthemeKey=coverage_lcu&tlegendKey=default&tyear=2024&t[pixelValues]=5&t[pixelValues]=3&t[pixelValues]=6&t[pixelValues]=49&t[pixelValues]=23&t[pixelValues]=24&t[pixelValues]=25&t[pixelValues]=30&t[pixelValues]=68&t[pixelValues]=75&t[pixelValues]=31&t[pixelValues]=33&t[pixelValues]=34&t[pixelValues]=9&t[pixelValues]=21&t[pixelValues]=35&t[pixelValues]=74&t[pixelValues]=11&t[pixelValues]=12&t[pixelValues]=13&t[pixelValues]=29&t[pixelValues]=32&t[pixelValues]=50&t[pixelValues]=81&t[pixelValues]=82)

³ Data on carbon stocks and changes in aboveground biomass provided by Chloris Geospatial based on peer-reviewed methods established by Baccini et al. (2017).



fundamental right implies recognizing the diversity and complexity of Indigenous food systems, their holistic ways of life, and their reciprocal relationship with nature, as well as the ways in which they bring together material, immaterial, spiritual, political, economic, and territorial governance aspects.

It also implies recognizing the complementarity between the different specialties and roles that men and women have in ensuring the abundance of food, where women play a key role in caring for and conserving seeds, transmitting knowledge and all practices for obtaining, transforming, and preparing food, and caring for life in all its manifestations.

The right to food for Indigenous Peoples must be understood and realized within the framework of

their special attributes as **political subjects with the right to self-determination, autonomy, self-government, and territory**; that is why it can only be fully guaranteed if the enjoyment of food sovereignty with a territorial approach is considered a right in and of itself.

The right to food sovereignty is associated with control over the territory and its resources, an indispensable condition for the reproduction and sustainability of food systems. It is not possible to speak of food sovereignty without guaranteeing full territorial rights, which include both legal recognition and material and political guarantees that ensure its implementation. **Territory is the path leading to the expression and enjoyment of the right to food in interdependence with the other rights of Indigenous Peoples.**



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Food sovereignty means having the tools and guarantees of governance to enforce the laws of origin and the correlating duties of caring for nature and territory that Indigenous Peoples have assumed as part of their culture.

As a collective and fundamental right, food sovereignty is based on transmitting ancestral knowledge, caring for native seeds, conserving biodiversity, and protecting water and other shared resources. In effect, preserving culturally

relevant diets, respect and care for sacred sites, healing practices, and preventive health knowledge around holistically caring for human and territorial life creates **collective well-being and thus guarantees the physical and cultural survival of the peoples, as well as the integrity of their territories.** These diverse relationships and elements in Indigenous food systems must be recognized in order to exercise the indivisible right to food and human dignity.

The right to food sovereignty involves the ability to decide what and how much to eat, how and where it is produced, who produces it, with what methods and for what purposes, and how it is distributed and consumed; **these processes are non-linear and are governed by Indigenous Peoples' own norms, knowledge, and cultural principles.**

Respecting cultural plurality implies recognizing the various expressions of territorial govern-



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ment and governance that arise from cultural diversity, which is essential for creating fair and effective food policies that promote life and global sustainable development that satisfies the idea of well-being across various knowledge systems.

The Colombian Constitutional Court has moved in this direction. In Ruling T-106 of 2025, it recognized the “*principle of no food substitution*” stating that the food systems of Indigenous Peoples are the result of millennia of knowledge and adaptation, therefore (i) they cannot be replaced by external alternatives, (ii) they must be protected in their entirety, (iii) their preservation is essential for environmental conservation, and (iv) they are indispensable for food sovereignty.

The Court has established that it is not enough for people to merely subsist; rather, **they must be guaranteed the right to life and development with human dignity**, understood as: (i) autonomy and the possibility of designing a life plan and self-determination in accordance with one’s own preferences, that is, to live as one wishes

or chooses; (ii) material conditions to live well or in conditions of well-being; and (iii) protection of physical, moral, and spiritual integrity, which means living free from any kind of harm⁴.

These guidelines must form part of and translate into a comprehensive and culturally relevant vision of the right to adequate food and nutrition, where **human dignity guides the attributes of availability, accessibility, and sustainability**—rather than these attributes being guided by the many policies aligned with a hegemonic industrial and extractivist agrifood model, which renders the attribute of cultural adequacy invisible and has had devastating impacts on the planet. In response to this, Indigenous food systems offer concrete, effective, and sustainable alternatives that enrich and realign these attributes.



⁴ Constitutional Court, rulings T-401 of 1992, T-505 of 1992, T-465 of 1996, SU-062 of 1999, T-881 of 2002, and SU-696 of 2015.



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Right to seeds for the safeguarding of Indigenous food systems

Seeds are the fruit of millennia of Indigenous selection and improvement, and they are a pillar of biodiversity and food sovereignty, representing the biocultural heritage of peoples and communities. Recognizing the right to free seeds implies excluding them from monopolies and protecting the interdependent relationships within Indigenous food systems that sustain diversity in regions such as the eastern Colombian Amazon.

Their agricultural practices of rotation, shifting, and exchange are essential for conservation, but are often ignored in traditional policies that prioritize protected areas or gene banks. **Therefore, conservation and connectivity strategies should be built based on the ways of life of Indigenous Peoples, integrating their cultural practices, customary uses, and forms of governance as an indivisible part of their territories and socio-ecosystems.**

Environmental crisis and challenges

The hegemonic extractivist agri-food system, which treats food as a commodity, has contributed to the current environmental and climate crisis; this has seriously affected Indigenous Territories and food systems, whose biodiversity and traditional knowledge are threatened. In contrast, Indigenous food systems not only **guarantee adaptation to climate change and the right to a healthy**

climate and healthy food, but also comprehensively fulfill the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (conservation, sustainable use, and fair distribution of benefits) based on a logic of balance and natural restoration. **Amazonian Indigenous Food Systems (AIFS) play a key role in safeguarding a healthy global climate system for all.**

While global policies tend to separate the agendas, objectives, and goals related to biodiversity, food, climate action, culture, public health, and development, **Indigenous food systems are a living example of effective territorial management that knows how to read the environment and respects the entirety of its support systems.** In this way, Indigenous Territories are orga-

nized and managed in order to support and sustain life, where food systems play a fundamental sustaining role, demonstrating a model that makes great contributions to their own—and global—agendas of well-being.

For all these reasons, it is essential to promote the right to food with a territorial approach and food sovereignty focused on the protection

of Indigenous food systems as one of the areas of coordination among the agendas related to food, health, and the environment, understanding that these are inseparable struggles. This implies that in order to measure the impact of food policies, **both qualitative and quantitative indicators should be created.** These indicators should not only measure nutritional status and

food insecurity, but also reflect Indigenous food systems as a whole, respond to territorial priorities, coordinate with their own information systems, and enable Indigenous governments to make decisions and make progress related to community well-being, territorial integrity, and the realization of their life plans.



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Closing summary:

The efforts to guarantee Indigenous Peoples' right to food must recognize the various ways food relates to their systems of knowledge, life, and territorial governance. Focusing on food security reduces the possibility of understanding Indigenous food systems as a whole, so we propose to position food sovereignty with a territorial approach not only as a technical or political alternative, but as an ethical, cultural, and spiritual proposal that questions the hegemonic models that jeopardize all forms of life.

This proposal paves the way towards respecting and guaranteeing the rights of Indigenous

Peoples, in which territorial rights are fundamental for building more just, sustainable, and diverse societies. It is a concrete expression of the right to food, to a dignified life, to cultural identity, to territory, and to autonomy. Because food is not only about nourishing bodies, but also about sustaining lives, cultures, and territories in all their complexity and diversity. And in this task, Indigenous Peoples have much to teach and the right to decide.



AMAZON TERRITORY



CONVENTIONS

	International borders		Eastern Colombian Amazon
	Colombian borders		Amazon region
	Main rivers		