Policy Brief. Strengthening Place-Based Initiatives for Bottom-up Sustainable Development in the Amazon

Marina Londres, Carl Salk, Krister P. Andersson, Maria Tengö, Eduardo S. Brondizio, Gabriela Russo Lopes, Sacha M.O. Siani, Adriana Molina-Garzón, Taís Sonetti-Gonzales, Diego Rázuri Montoya, Célia Futemma, Fábio de Castro, Daiana C.M. Tourne

Publication Date

06-11-2024

KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Policy Brief
November 2024

Strengthening Place-Based Initiatives for Bottom-up Sustainable Development in the Amazon

Marina Londres,[ab] Carl Salk,[cd] Krister P. Andersson,[e] Maria Tengö,[f] Eduardo S. Brondizio,[gh] Gabriela Russo Lopes,[i] Sacha M.O. Siani,[hj] Adriana Molina-Garzón,[k] Taís Sonetti-Gonzales,[fl] Diego Rázuri Montoya,[m] Célia Futemma,[a] Fábio de Castro,[i] and Daiana C.M. Tourne [a]

The Amazon Basin, the world's largest tropical rainforest, is not only a vital carbon sink and biodiversity hotspot, but also a region under immense pressure from deforestation, land concentration, illegal logging, mining, and agricultural expansion.[1] These activities threaten the region's ecological integrity, with dire implications for global climate stability and biodiversity conservation.[2]

In response to these challenges, numerous place-based initiatives have emerged throughout the Amazon, driven by local communities, grassroots organizations, and social movements. These initiatives strive to promote sustainable livelihoods, protect natural resources, and advance social justice in a region where external threats are pervasive and often overwhelming.[3]

This brief, which is based on a study that analyzed 157 place-based initiatives in Brazil and Peru, focuses on the factors that enable these initiatives to succeed and proposes a set of policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the initiatives' effectiveness and sustainability.

Summary

The Amazon has a diverse array of social and environmental initiatives that adopt forest-based land-use practices to promote rural development and support local livelihoods. However, they are often insufficiently recognized as transformative pathways to sustainability.

This brief 1) identifies the key factors that enable these place-based initiatives to achieve successful social-ecological outcomes and 2) suggests policies to better support these grassroots efforts in addressing environmental and social challenges in the region, such as:

- Promoting policies that prioritize and empower local grassroots leadership in sustainability initiatives.
- Encouraging diversification in activities and partnerships to increase resilience and impact.
- Promoting collaboration across different governance levels and sectors to support sustainability efforts.

The Amazon's Social-Ecological Context

The Amazon Basin is a complex and diverse social-ecological system, home to a wide range of ecosystems, cultures, and livelihoods. During the past five decades, the region has faced significant environmental degradation due to deforestation, driven by activities such as agro-pastoral expansion, land grabbing, mining, illegal logging, and oil extraction.[4] These activities have led to alarming levels of forest loss and degradation, with global consequences for climate regulation and biodiversity conservation.[5]

At the same time, the Amazon is also a region of great social diversity, with numerous indigenous and rural communities that have historically relied on the forest for their livelihoods. These communities have developed intricate relationships with their environment, managing natural resources through traditional practices that have sustained them for generations. However, these communities are increasingly under threat from external pressures, leading to the displacement of local populations, loss of livelihoods, and erosion of cultural traditions.

In response to these challenges, grassroots organizations, social movements, and local networks have emerged throughout the Amazon, advocating for more equitable, fair, and ecologically sustainable economies. These place-based initiatives focus on a wide range of issues, including land and

Background paper: This brief is based on Londres, Marina, et al. "Place-based solutions for global social-ecological dilemmas: An analysis of locally grounded, diversified, and cross-scalar initiatives in the Amazon." *Global Environmental Change*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2023.102718

resource governance, sustainable production systems, gender inclusion, food security, health, and territorial governance.[6] They represent an essential but often overlooked pathway toward sustainability in the Amazon.

Challenges Faced by Place-Based Initiatives

Despite their critical role, place-based initiatives in the Amazon face numerous challenges that hinder their long-term success. One of the most significant challenges is the external pressures these initiatives confront, including market forces, government policies, territorial conflicts and global environmental changes, which are often beyond their direct control. These pressures can undermine local efforts, leading to the failure of initiatives or the erosion of their sustainability goals. Additionally, these initiatives often operate in isolation, with limited recognition from governments, donors, and other external actors. This lack of recognition can result in insufficient financial, technical, and political support, making it difficult for initiatives to sustain their activities over time. Furthermore, many place-based initiatives are led by local communities with limited resources and capacity, which constrains their ability to scale up their efforts, engage with broader networks, or influence policy decisions that are critical to achieving their sustainability goals. Given these challenges, it is remarkable and even surprising that many local initiatives are successful in their pursuit of their sustainability goals.

Factors That Contribute to Success

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors that contribute to variable success of place-based initiatives and to aid in the development of policies that support and sustain these efforts over the long term. The authors employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses. They collected data from 157 initiatives across Brazil and Peru, which were selected based on their scope and recognition by local actors as striving for positive environmental and social change. The data-collection process included field visits, interviews, online and in-person workshops, and the use of publicly available information.

Quantitatively, the study used regression techniques to test hypotheses about the impact of local leadership, diversification, and cross-scalar interactions on the success of initiatives. The authors measured the degree of success as outcomes in terms of social-ecological achievements and amplification effects, such as the stabilization, growth, or replication of initiatives.

Case Study Initiatives:

Cofruta (Para, Brazil): A locally-initiated agricultural cooperative that started with over 600 family producers managing wild and domesticated tree fruits, particularly açaí. Cofruta successfully diversified its production and established multiple partnerships, securing markets locally, nationally, and internationally.

Amabela (Para, Brazil): A women-led initiative in Belterra municipality, born in response to the expansion of soybean monoculture. Amabela promotes agroecological practices and female empowerment through the production of organic goods. The association has leveraged partnerships with NGOs, universities, and government bodies to resist agricultural frontier expansion, enhance local food security, and support women's financial independence.

RECA (Rondônia, Brazil): The RECA project, founded by rubber tappers and migrant family farmers, focuses on sustainable livelihoods through agroforestry. Despite being located in a deforestation frontier, RECA has thrived by restoring forests for food production, creating a strong sense of community ownership and fostering long-term sustainability through decentralized, participatory management.

Rede de Sementes do Xingu (Mato Grosso, Brazil): Originating from a campaign to preserve water resources in the Xingu Indigenous Territory, RSX collects and sells native seeds for reforestation. It involves a diverse network of stakeholders, including indigenous peoples, family farmers, and urban dwellers, and partners with NGOs and international organizations.

Qualitatively, the study involved detailed case studies of selected initiatives to provide deeper insights into the mechanisms driving success identified by the statistical analysis. These case studies helped to contextualize the quantitative findings and offered a richer understanding of how local conditions, partnerships, and strategies influence the long-term sustainability of place-based initiatives in the Amazon.

The study identified three key factors that contribute to the success of place-based initiatives in the Amazon:

1. **Local Groundedness:** Initiatives that were locally founded or led, involved local stakeholders in decision-making, and relied on traditional knowledge and practices were found to be more effective in achieving their goals.[7] These initiatives were better able to adapt to local conditions, engage the community, and sustain their efforts over time.

2. **Diversity in Activities and Partnerships:** Initiatives that combined activities such as agroforestry, market engagement, and social mobilization were more likely to achieve positive outcomes. Similarly, initiatives that partnered with a variety of stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, and research institution actors, were better able to secure the resources and support needed to sustain their efforts.[8]

3. **Cross-Scalar Collaborations:** Initiatives that engaged in cross-scalar collaborations, such as partnering with national NGOs, participating in national and international networks, or securing funding from multiple sources, were more successful in achieving their goals. These collaborations provided access to additional expertise, resources, and political support, which enhanced the initiatives' effectiveness and sustainability.[9]

Policy Recommendations

The findings underscore the importance of these three factors in achieving sustainable social-ecological outcomes. However, while these initiatives have demonstrated significant potential, their continued success and broader impact require targeted support and strategic interventions. The following policy recommendations are designed to address the key challenges identified in the study and to provide actionable steps that policymakers can take to strengthen these initiatives, ensuring their resilience and effectiveness in the face of ongoing and emerging threats.

1. Promote policies that prioritize and empower local grassroots leadership in sustainability initiatives.

- **Empower Local Leadership:** Policymakers should prioritize funding and support mechanisms that empower local communities to lead sustainability efforts. This could include capacity-building programs, technical assistance, and financial support tailored to the unique needs of local actors. Additionally, policies should encourage the involvement of local stakeholders in decision-making processes, ensuring that their voices are heard and their knowledge is valued.
- **Promote Traditional Knowledge and Practices:** Policies should recognize and support the use of traditional knowledge and practices in sustainability initiatives. This could involve providing legal recognition for traditional land management practices, supporting the documentation and dissemination of traditional knowledge, and promoting the integration of traditional practices into broader sustainability strategies.
- **Foster Community-Based Organizations:** Policymakers should support the development and strengthening of community-based organizations, which are often the driving force behind place-based initiatives. This could include providing funding for organizational development, offering training and mentorship programs, and facilitating access to resources and networks that can enhance the capacity of community-based organizations to achieve their goals.

2. Encourage diversification in activities and partnerships to increase resilience and impact.

- **Incentivize Diversification:** Policymakers should promote policies that incentivize diversification within place-based initiatives. This could involve offering grants or loans to initiatives that expand their activities or partnerships, creating tax incentives for businesses that collaborate with local initiatives, and supporting the development of new markets for sustainably produced goods.
- **Create Platforms for Collaboration:** To support diversification, policymakers should create platforms for knowledge exchange and collaboration among diverse stakeholders. These platforms could facilitate the sharing of best practices, foster partnerships between local initiatives and external actors, and provide opportunities for joint ventures that leverage the strengths of different organizations.
- **Encourage Multi-Sectoral Partnerships:** Policymakers should encourage the formation of multi-sectoral partnerships that bring together stakeholders from different sectors, including government, civil society, academia, and the private sector. These partnerships can help initiatives access a broader range of resources, expertise, and networks, enhancing their ability to achieve their sustainability goals.

3. Promote collaboration across different governance levels and sectors to support sustainability efforts.

- **Establish Funding Schemes for Cross-Scalar Collaborations:** Policymakers should establish

funding schemes that specifically support cross-scalar collaborations. These schemes could provide grants or loans to initiatives that engage in partnerships with regional, national, or international organizations, helping them scale their efforts and align their activities with broader sustainability goals.

- **Facilitate Access to International Networks:** To support cross-scalar collaborations, policymakers should facilitate access to international networks and platforms that connect local initiatives with global actors. This could involve creating exchange programs, organizing international conferences, or establishing partnerships with international organizations that can provide technical assistance, funding, or other forms of support.
- **Support Regional and National Networks:** Policymakers should support the development and strengthening of regional and national networks that connect local initiatives with other actors in their region or country. These networks can help initiatives share resources, coordinate activities, and advocate for policy changes that support their sustainability goals.

Endnotes

[1] Sant'anna, A. "Land inequality and deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon." *Environment and Development Economics,* 2016. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355770X1600022X ; Lovejoy, T.E., & C. Nobre. "Amazon tipping point: Last chance for action." *Science Advances,* 2009. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aba2949

[2] Foley, J., et al. "Global consequences of land use science." *Science,* 2005. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1111772

[3] Allegretti, M., and M. Schmink. "When social movement proposals become policy: Experiments in sustainable development in the Brazilian Amazon." In: Deere, C., & F. Royce (eds.), *Rural social movements in Latin America: Organizing for sustainable livelihoods.* Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009. https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813033327.003.0011

[4] Sant'anna, A. "Land inequality and deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon." *Environment and Development Economics,* 2016. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355770X1600022X

[5] Foley, J., et al. "Global consequences of land use science." *Science,* 2005. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1111772

[6] Allegretti, M., and M. Schmink. "When social movement proposals become policy: Experiments in sustainable development in the Brazilian Amazon." In: Deere, C., & F. Royce (eds.), *Rural social movements in Latin America: Organizing for sustainable livelihoods.* Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009. https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813033327.003.0011 ; Lopes, G.R., M.G. Bastos Lima, and T.N.P. dos Reis. "Maldevelopment revisited: Inclusiveness and social impacts of soy expansion over Brazil's Cerrado in Matopiba." *World Development,* 2021. 10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105316

[7] Lawrence, A. "No personal motive? Volunteers, biodiversity, and the false dichotomies of participation." *Ethics, Place and Environment,* 2006. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13668790600893319

[8] Brondízio, E.S., et al. "Locally based, regionally manifested, and globally relevant: indigenous and local knowledge, values, and practices for nature." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources,* 2021. 10.1146/annurev-environ-

[9] Newman, L., L. Waldron, A. Dale, and K. Carriere. "Sustainable urban community development from the grassroots: Challenges and opportunities in a pedestrian street initiative." *Local Environment,* 2008. https://doi.org/10.1080/13549830701581879; Dale, A., C. Ling, and L. Newman. "Community vitality: The role of community-level resilience adaptation and innovation in sustainable development." *Sustainability,* 2010. https://doi.org/10.3390/su2010215; Ernstson, H., S. Barthel, E. Andersson, and S.T. Borgström. "Scale-crossing brokers and network governance of urban ecosystem services: The case of Stockholm." *Ecology and Society,* 2010. http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss4/art28/

Recommended citation

Londres, Marina, et al. *Strengthening Place-Based Initiatives for Sustainable Development in the Amazon.* Keough School Policy Brief Series. Notre Dame, IN: Keough School of Global Affairs, 2024. https://doi.org/10.7274/27613422

Author Affiliations

[a] NEPAM, State University of Campinas, Brazil
[b] LASTROP, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil
[c] Southern Swedish Forest Research Centre, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden
[d] Institute for Globally Distributed Open Research and Education, Sweden
[e] Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame, USA
[f] Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, Sweden
[g] Department of Anthropology, Indiana University-Bloomington, USA
[h] Center for the Analysis of Social-Ecological Landscapes, Indiana University-Bloomington, USA
[i] CEDLA, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[j] Department of Geography, Indiana University-Bloomington, USA
[k] Indiana University, Indianapolis, USA
[l] Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
[m] Centro Bartolome de las Casas, Peru