Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Leadership in Loss and Damage Solutions



“World leaders should look to indigenous groups on how we can together resolve the future. Our communities aren’t about commercialisation, we’re about living in harmony with our Common Home.”

– Lucy, Indigenous Leader, Chocó, Colombia

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Loss and Damage refer to the negative effects of climate change that go beyond what can be mitigated or adapted to.

These include both economic losses, such as destruction of infrastructure, crops, and homes, and non-economic losses, including cultural heritage, biodiversity, and spiritual identity. Now recognised under the UNFCCC and through the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage, Loss and Damage is a critical pillar of climate justice for countries and communities least responsible for global emissions.

List of Acronyms

CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CIVP	Comisión Interétnica de la Verdad del Pacífico (Interethnic Truth Commission)
COP	Conference of the Parties (to the UNFCCC)
FRLD	Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions (under the Paris Agreement)
NELD	Non-Economic Loss and Damage
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WIM	Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage



Usy and Nely, Young Guardians of the river Atrato.

Foreword by Msgr. Juan Carlos Barreto

My sisters and brothers, we stand at a threshold in human history. The era of Loss and Damage has arrived. No longer is climate change a distant warning; it is the lived reality of millions. Floods sweep away homes and livelihoods, droughts parch the land until it cracks, heatwaves scorch both body and spirit. These losses are not only counted in ruined harvests or broken infrastructure; they are also the immeasurable sorrows of lost cultures, displaced families, and diminished hope.

This is a perilous moment. Already global temperatures have risen around 1.5°C. The science tells us that on our present path, we may still reach 2.4°C. We can only begin to imagine what that would mean: an escalation of suffering, upheaval, and injustice beyond what we already endure.

And yet, just when humanity most needs solidarity, our common institutions falter. Wars break out across continents, the rules-based order is shaken, and the multilateral system—painstakingly built from the wreckage of past conflicts—is under threat. It is as though, facing the greatest test of our time, we are tempted to scatter rather than stand together.

But friends, the wisdom to meet this crisis already exists. Indigenous peoples and marginalised communities, often those most harmed by climate change, have long known truths that the powerful too easily forget: that the whole depends upon the smallest part, that those on the margins often hold the key to renewal. In the forest, every root and leaf is vital. In the river, each tributary feeds the current. In the family of nations, no one is expendable.

This is also the truth of the multilateral system, when it works at its best. It is the truth of the climate negotiations, and it is the truth of addressing Loss and Damage. For what integrity can global debates about fossil fuels or financial flows towards net zero truly have, unless they also honour the people who are already suffering, here and now, from the consequences of a crisis they did not cause?

From diverse expressions of spirituality, we have a strong point of connection to fight together for the care of our Common Home and universal fraternity. Let us not forget this anthropological reference that commits us to the defence of the ecosystems that give life and sustain generations. Ecological spirituality, as the globally recognised Pope Francis called it, must lead us to listen to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

That is why this report is so vital. It makes plain the urgency of directing resources to the fringes, to the places where the cry is loudest and the need greatest. It insists that the international community must finally set a target for Loss and Damage finance that meets the scale of the challenge before us. And it offers a principle that is both practical and moral: subsidiarity. The new Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage must empower action at the local level, guided and led by those whose lives are most directly at stake.

If we listen to the voices at the margins, if we allow them to lead, then from their wisdom and resilience a better path can be built. A peaceful, green, and just world is not beyond our reach. But it demands courage, humility, and the recognition that even the smallest among us is precious in the eyes of God, and essential for the healing of the whole.



Msgr. Juan Carlos Barreto, President of Caritas Colombia

The global urgency of addressing Loss and Damage

As the world turns its attention to COP30 in Belém, Brazil, the stakes for climate justice have never been higher. While attention may focus on mitigation and adaptation in updated NDCs, millions already face irreversible climate impacts. Loss and Damage reflect lives, livelihoods, and ecosystems lost to a crisis unfolding at rapid pace.

Since the creation of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD) at COP27, progress has stalled. Despite pledges made at COP28, no funds have been disbursed. The initial $700m commitment is negligible against the vast scale of global losses.

This paper brings evidence from Colombia, where Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in Chocó face the compound effects of climate change and historical injustice. Communities are living through the devastation of extreme rainfall, flooding, landslides, drought and sea-level rise. The impacts of these expressions of climate change are layered upon centuries of injustice: colonial-era exploitation, illegal mining, deforestation, land grabs, structural poverty, systemic neglect, environmental destruction, and conflict. Extreme weather events are hitting an already vulnerable region hard.

Chocó's crisis is also cultural: the destruction of land and sacred rivers is eroding identity and spiritual practices, described by local leaders as environmental ethnocide: the destruction of people's identity through the destruction of their land, livelihoods, and culture.

Loss and Damage is not just about what cannot be adapted to, it is also about what has not been adapted to. It is the result of a global failure to mitigate fast enough, and to adapt fairly and comprehensively. It exists on a spectrum: we can avoid it through mitigation, we can reduce it through adaptation, but because we have failed to do both adequately, we now face the consequences. The UNFCCC's decision to establish the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage is a recognition of that reality.

Local communities, especially women, hold deep knowledge of resilience, biodiversity, and recovery. Their leadership is vital to deal with Loss and Damage. As with locally led Adaptation, Loss and Damage responses must be rooted in communities.

This report demonstrates in a precise way why locally led solutions are so important and how local actors can be best placed to respond, whilst also underlining an emblematic case of why Loss and Damage finance must dramatically increase to truly meet the scale of the needs.



Arcadio, Cocoa farmer, Chocó, Colombia.



Playing in the Atrato River basin, Chocó, Colombia.

This report adds weight to the growing global demand for decisive action at COP30. Based on the case from Colombia and expert consensus on climate justice, the following outcomes are essential:

- Conclusion of the WIM review with strengthened commitments to implementation and reporting. Crucially, this reporting should include the establishment of a new, regular Global Loss and Damage Needs Assessment and formal guidance to countries on how to incorporate Loss and Damage needs in NDCs.
- A credible roadmap for scaling up finance under the Baku to Belém process, including specific targets for Loss and Damage.
- Operationalisation and full capitalisation of the FRLD, with a community funding window designed for direct, locally led access.
- Indigenous and Afro-Colombian knowledge and leadership integrated into the design of FRLD
- Stronger institutional support and recognition for Non-Economic Loss and Damage (NELD), such as cultural and spiritual harm.
- Formally commit to aligning climate and biodiversity action, recognising that the twin crises of climate breakdown and ecological collapse are deeply interconnected and disproportionately impact the most vulnerable.
- Recognise biodiversity loss and biocultural damage as forms of NELD within the scope of the FRLD.

The situation in Colombia is not isolated—it is emblematic. As Caritas Brazil's Position Paper for COP30 makes clear, these are issues faced by communities across the region and should be understood as "consequences of a development paradigm marked by government omission, neglect in territorial planning, and a lack of effective adaptation and prevention policies" (Cáritas Brasileira, 2025).

COP30 must respond not only to the data, but to the lived realities of people on the frontlines. Only then can we begin to heal the wounds of climate injustice and build a future rooted in dignity, equity, and resilience.

Loss and Damage in Chocó

The Colombian Pacific region, and Chocó in particular, is a stark illustration of the Loss and Damage crisis. Here, climate impacts collide with historical injustice, creating a crisis that cannot be measured solely in economic terms. These impacts sit atop deep structural vulnerabilities such as historic poverty, decades of armed conflict and illegal extractivism. Chocó's communities (mostly Afro-descendant and Indigenous people) have contributed minimally to global carbon emissions but suffer disproportionately from the impacts of climate change.

Chocó, one of Colombia's most biodiverse regions, has endured widespread environmental destruction. Deforestation has destroyed habitats, and illegal mining has polluted rivers. Indiscriminate logging of tropical forests for cattle ranching and illicit crops have created environmental deterioration and affected biodiversity. Due to all this Chocó's communities have suffered a catastrophic loss of livelihoods and food systems.

Climate change is amplifying an already dire situation: it has intensified rainfall, floods, landslides, droughts, and sea-level rise. In November 2024 floods impacted 27 of 31 municipalities, affecting more than 150,000 people (La República, 2024). Deforestation and mining have weakened ecosystems that once acted as a natural barrier to flooding: the deforestation along rivers reduces water absorption and increases erosion, making floods more violent. Similarly, wetlands clogged by mining sediments no longer mitigate floods as they used to. In short, Chocó's ecological buffer has thinned, so that the extreme weather hits harder. Public infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals, has been repeatedly damaged because of this. And diseases are spreading more easily due to changing climate conditions. Forecasts predict longer droughts, higher humidity, and extreme heat, compounding risks to health, housing, and food security.

The Loss and Damage in Chocó goes beyond environmental destruction. Deforestation has not only destroyed habitats; it has disrupted traditional land use. Illegal mining has not only polluted rivers like the Atrato and San Juan—the desecration of these sacred rivers has disrupted traditional fishing and burial practices. Communities have been forcefully displaced from their ancestral territories, and ethnic and cultural identity has been eroded through the destruction of the land.

The discussion of Loss and Damage in Colombia must go beyond the quantification of environmental damage or the recording of extreme weather events. For Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, repair must address both environmental degradation and the Non-Economic Loss and Damage (NELD). Biodiversity loss is inseparable from cultural loss in this region, where territory, spirituality, and identity are intertwined.

Recognising Chocó as a frontline region for Loss and Damage requires responses grounded in justice. Technical adaptation is not enough. A just response must include protection of ethno-territorial rights, access to direct climate finance, and the leadership of local communities in defining solutions. Chocó's experience calls for action under the FRLD that centres local knowledge, spiritual links with nature and the autonomy of peoples to decide on their future in a context of climate crisis.



Illegal mining in Chocó, Colombia.

CASE STUDY 1:
Unresolved wounds of Loss and Damage: the case of Bojayá's floods

In Bojayá, Chocó, territory is more than a physical space: it is the setting where memory, spirituality and community converge. Yet this deep connection to land is being steadily eroded by climate change impacts, particularly flooding, which has devastated communities and disrupted cultural practices central to Afro-Colombian and Indigenous life.

Between 2023 and 2025, Colombia experienced some of the most severe rainfall in recent history, prompting a national disaster declaration. Chocó, one of the country's most climate-vulnerable places, became an epicentre of devastation. Over 85% of its territory was flooded. In Bojayá, entire villages—including Pogue and El Salto—were flooded, and communities lost crops, homes and roads.

Yet the losses went far beyond infrastructure. Bojayá's communities still carrying the trauma of the 2002 massacre which took place in the context of the internal armed conflict, and in which seventy-nine civilians, including forty-five children of Bojayá were killed while seeking refuge in the town's church. And now they face a new form of violation: the desecration of sacred land. Repeated flooding has impeded traditional burial practices and contributed to the erosion of social cohesion, a rupture described by local leaders as a disorder of the spirits. This spiritual dislocation, documented by the Interethnic Truth Commission (CIVP), has triggering psycho-emotional impacts, and has been linked to rising suicide rates among Emberá youth (CIVP, 2022).



Bojayá, Chocó, Colombia.

Local voices attest to the depth of this crisis. "In Bojayá we are living a situation which we haven't seen since more than 40 years ago," said Sebastián Palacios, a Risk Management Coordinator. "The harsh rainy season that is hitting our region is significantly affecting the economy of our people, as we are an agricultural territory and our crops are located on the banks of the rivers, which are the most affected by the continuous rains." Pedro Luis Lezcano Correa, from the village of Pogue, elaborates: "The indigenous community of El Salto on the banks of the Uva River lost everything... and we ask for help for them, their families and the community, because most of them lost their belongings, crops and animals", while social leader Máxima Asprilla noted that "The winds have taken roofs off and knocked down houses in the village of Pogue and destroyed houses in La Loma de Bojayá and in the community of Cuití. In many communities in Bojayá, the wind has taken the roofs off houses, but in those I mentioned, it has completely destroyed them" (Tapias, 2024).

This is not simply a natural and spiritual disaster —it is a case of unresolved Loss and Damage. The damage experienced in Bojayá is both tangible and intangible: the loss of sacred sites, disrupted rituals, and severed ties to ancestral lands. These are forms of Non-Economic Loss and Damage that receive little recognition in global policy or finance mechanisms. The case of Bojayá makes clear that climate justice must include spiritual and cultural reparation, not just economic recovery. COP30 must address unresolved losses like these by scaling up funding under the FRLD, ensuring locally led solutions, and recognising biocultural harm as central to the Loss and Damage agenda.

CASE STUDY 2:

Biocultural rights and climate justice in Chocó: the case of the Atrato River

On the River Atrato, Chocó, Colombia.



In Colombia, the T-622 ruling of 2016 represents a global milestone in the recognition of the rights of nature and a concrete example of how States can respond to Loss and Damage from extractivism, ecological crisis and climate change. The Atrato River, in the heart of the biogeographic Chocó, has been devastated by decades of illegal mining, mercury contamination, deforestation and armed violence. In an unprecedented decision, the Colombian Constitutional Court recognised the river as a subject of rights and consolidated the legal approach of biocultural rights, which highlights the inseparable interdependence between nature and the cultures that inhabit and care for it ancestrally.

This case is emblematic because it directly links the rights of nature with environmental justice, by placing the relationship between degraded ecosystems, structural inequalities and historically excluded communities at the centre. The Atrato case can therefore be read as a concrete experience of restorative justice in the face of a pattern of structural vulnerability and institutional marginalisation (Matamoros, 2025).

Through Ruling T-622, the Court ordered the creation of a shared governance model —the Commission of Guardians—composed of a State guardian (the Ministry of Environment) and a Collegiate Body of Guardians made up of seven representative organisations from the region. It thus embodies the environmental co-responsibility between the government and the communities living in the basin.

One of the most profound contributions of this structure is its biocultural approach, which is not an add on, but the heart of the ruling and its implementation. It recognises that nature cannot be separated from the people who inhabit and care for it. Biocultural rights, in this framework, are collective rights that guarantee the autonomous guardianship of territories according to the ways of life, spiritualities, knowledge and governance systems of local communities.

This model recognises communities as active subjects in environmental management and not as passive beneficiaries of policies

imposed from above. In line with the UNFCCC's Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage (WIM), this experience offers a concrete way to address both economic losses and non-economic losses (ancestral territories, spirituality, cultural practices) through locally-led forms of integral reparation.

Preliminary results of this process include, among others, the development of two action plans for the decontamination of the Atrato River and for the protection of biocultural rights. Although the creation of structures to identify, manage, minimise and repair climate Loss and Damage under WIM was not explicitly mentioned in the judgement, many of the actions in the plans contribute—if they are to be implemented—to this objective. The plans include:

- actions to strengthen comprehensive monitoring systems for ecosystems, ecosystem services, natural disasters, and damages and losses;
- activities supporting the recording and analysis of non-economic, tangible and intangible assets in the region facilitating climate damage analysis;
- support for the formation of strategic alliances between communities, ethnic organisations and governments that can contribute to the management of environmental, cultural and economic compensation for climate damage;
- economic training programmes that can support the creation of alternative sources of income in the event of losses due to climate change;
- initiatives to diversify food production, such as sustaining traditional species, which can support the transition to alternative foods in the event of loss of other varieties
- capacity building for environmental conflict management, ethnic-territorial governance, and the development of international partnerships.

The most significant achievements have been driven by the community guardians, who lead processes of political advocacy, environmental monitoring and ecological education throughout the basin. The accompaniment of partner organisations, such as the Centro Sociojurídico Siembra, has been key to supporting this process without interfering with community autonomy.

An example of these advances is the restoration pilot project developed in the community of Paimadó, in Río Quito. Here—within the framework of the implementation of action plans and with the support of institutional and civil society partners—a process was carried out to restore areas degraded by illegal mining, using the biocultural knowledge of the community. This process used traditional knowledge to plant native species, both fruit and timber trees, which allowed for soil recovery and, at the same time, generated sustainable economic livelihood alternatives for the communities.

The pilot also included a relevant gender component, as it actively involved a group of women in the production of fertilisers and soil restoration, becoming an emblematic case of community-based and inclusive environmental recovery resulting from the ruling. Important challenges remain, such as the continuity of illegal mining and the limited institutional response. However, after nine years of implementation the Atrato case clearly illustrate that it is possible to build models of environmental governance that articulate local knowledge, historical reparation and climate justice in contexts of high socio-ecological conflict. The case offers a replicable model to address the losses and damages associated with the climate crisis in other territories of the Global South.



Bernardino Mosquera (Right) replants an area devastated by gold mining along the Atrato in Chocó, Colombia. Rodrigo Rogelis of SIEMBRA stands alongside.

Policy asks for COP30: Grounded in justice, proven by practice

1. Community access window in the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage established by the UNFCCC

Local and ethnic communities in the Colombian Pacific face enormous barriers in accessing resources from FRLD established by the UNFCCC. Although these funds aim to address territories affected by severe climate impacts, in practice the current mechanisms are complex, centralised and inaccessible to grassroots organisations. The CIVP supports the creation of a community access window that allows resources to be channelled in a differentiated and agile manner, adapted to the reality of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples. This demand is based on the evidence that the lack of access to funding has also meant the impossibility of initiating environmental and cultural recovery processes, perpetuating the circle of vulnerability, as illustrated by the case study from Bojayá. It is also proposed that a percentage of the funds are earmarked to be allocated to Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities to further support their access to these resources.

The desired outcome is the implementation of a simplified and direct access scheme for recognised community organisations, with clear procedures, technical assistance and guarantees of effective participation in the definition of priorities. This window should contemplate the ethnic-territorial and cultural specificity of the Colombian Pacific, allowing funds to contribute not only to the rehabilitation of infrastructure, but also to the recovery of degraded ecosystems, historical memory and the strengthening of community resilience. Creating such a mechanism would be a concrete step towards climate justice and a sign of coherence with international commitments made in the Paris Agreement and the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage.

2. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian knowledge and leadership integrated into the design of Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage

The integration of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian knowledge and leadership in the design of the FRLD is essential because top-down and centralised models have proven ineffective and unable to incorporate the cultural, ecological and organisational realities of local communities. The CIVP has raised the need to establish a permanent inter-ethnic climate roundtable to ensure the active and binding participation of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples in decision-making on funding and restoration priorities. As illustrated with the case of the Atrato River; when processes are designed with respect for community governance and traditional knowledge, the outcomes are more sustainable and culturally appropriate. It is therefore proposed that FRLD governance frameworks and mechanisms are built collaboratively with representatives of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples, ensuring that their perspectives, ancestral practices and territorial priorities are reflected in the planning, implementation and monitoring of resources.



A member of the Embera Dobidá, Chocó, Colombia.

3. Stand-alone target on financing for Loss and Damage at COP30

A credible roadmap for scaling up finance under the Baku to Belém process is urgently needed, with clear and measurable targets for Loss and Damage. Establishing a stand-alone funding target at COP30 is critical: current financial flows are fragmented, unpredictable, and far too small to address the scale of impacts faced in regions like Chocó, where historical environmental degradation collides with intensifying extreme weather. This gap between international pledges and actual delivery has created damaging delays in restoring livelihoods and ecosystems. To close this gap, COP30 should adopt a clear, quantified, time-bound commitment to mobilise Loss and Damage finance that reaches the most affected territories in a timely and transparent manner. This target should be linked to climate financing shortfalls, making visible the stark imbalance between the climate responsibility of high-emitting countries and the disproportionate damages borne by vulnerable communities.

Strengthened commitments to implementation and reporting are also essential. In particular, a new, regular Global Loss and Damage Needs Assessment should be established, alongside formal guidance to help countries integrate Loss and Damage needs into their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). These steps would provide the credibility, accountability, and scale of finance required to respond to the urgency of the crisis.

4. Recognise biodiversity loss and biocultural damage as forms of Non-Economic Loss and Damage within the scope of the FRLD

Recognising biodiversity loss and biocultural damage as NELD within the FRLD is essential, as Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples of the Colombian Pacific have sustained the biological wealth of their territories for generations through biocultural systems of knowledge and management that are now at risk of disappearing. Explicitly including biodiversity and biocultural rights and practices in this area would allow international funding not only to repair infrastructure, but also to support the restoration of degraded ecosystems, reforestation with native species and the protection of biological and cultural corridors that are fundamental to the identity and survival of these communities. This would help align the design of the FRLD with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, recognising territories as subjects of rights and allowing community-led ecological restoration projects to access direct funding, ensuring that environmental restoration is also a process of cultural redress and climate justice.



A member of the Embera Dobidá, Chocó, Colombia.

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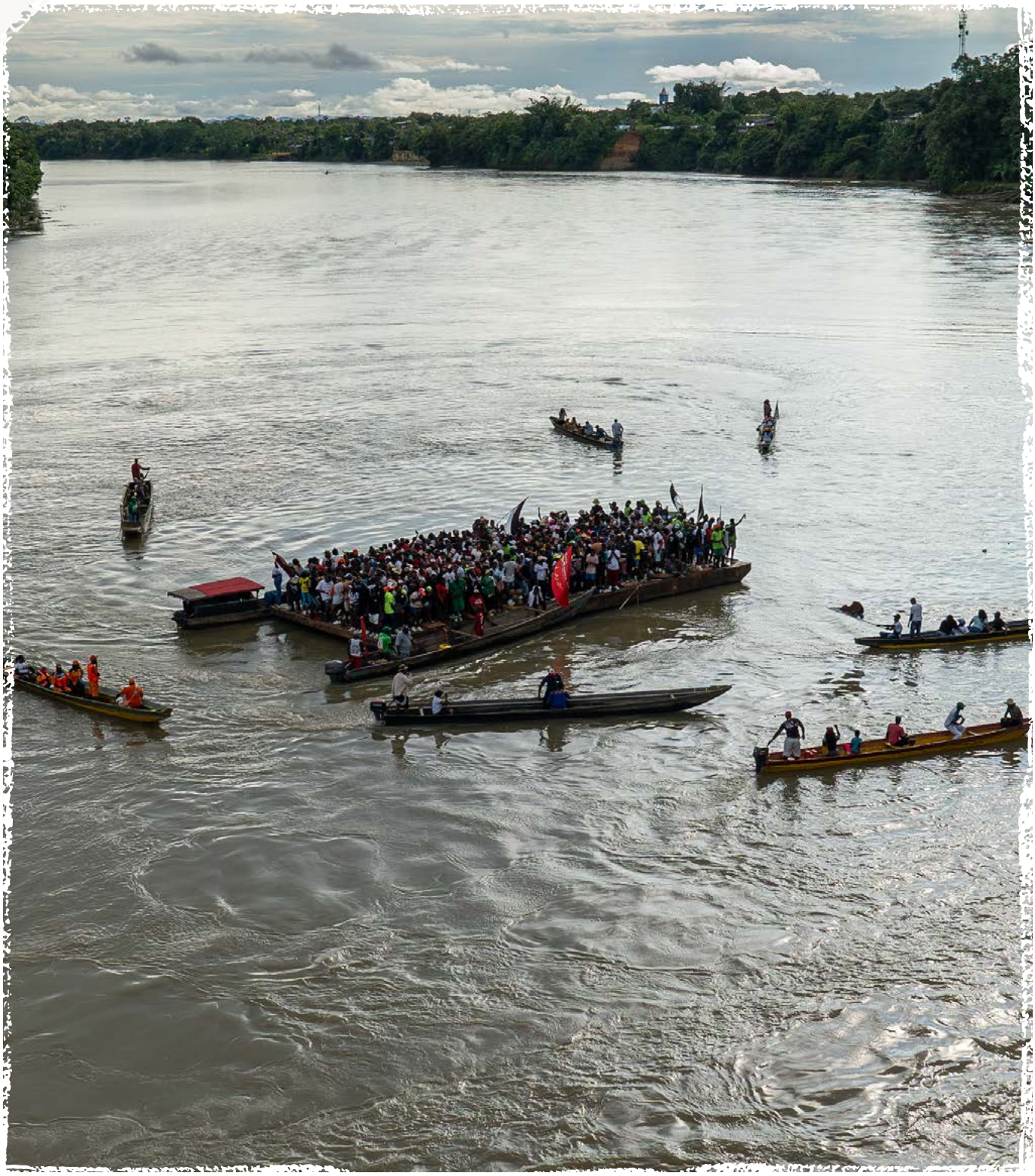
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River festival on the Atrato, Chocó, Colombia.



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