

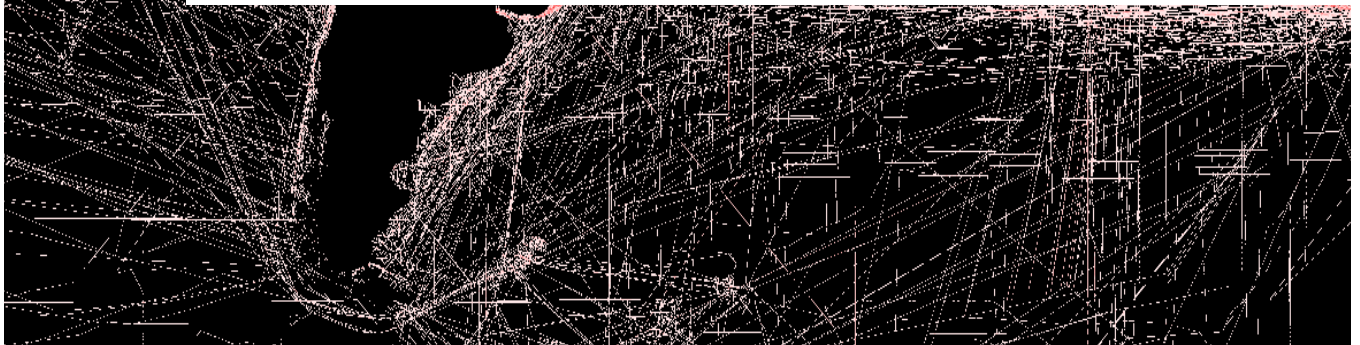


# report



**THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY IN LOCAL VIOLENCE:  
EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CORPORATIONS, TRADE AND  
LOANS IN THE KILLINGS OF SOCIAL ACTIVISTS**

Fenja Heinrichs // Christin Stühlen // Jonas Wolff





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All around the world, civil society actors face manifold restrictions, including administrative hurdles, discursive delegitimation, judicial prosecution, and extralegal attacks. The killing of social activists is one particularly dramatic form of violent repression, with severe consequences for the social movements and local communities confronted with such targeted use of force. In recent years, reports by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and academic studies have significantly improved our understanding of the patterns and causes of these killings. Research shows that this form of deadly repression against activists is primarily a localized phenomenon, shaped by specific subnational conflict settings, particularly in rural areas, and concentrated in a limited number of countries in the Global South. At the same time, available evidence clearly indicates that this form of violence is influenced by transnational flows of resources and external actors, especially multinational corporations, international loans, and investments, as well as global value and supply chains. Understanding activist killings, therefore, requires investigating the role of the global political economy – understood as the interplay of political and economic forces in a world characterized by asymmetric economic interdependencies and uneven schemes of global governance – in shaping these seemingly local incidents in remote, marginalized areas.

However, this nexus between the global political economy and the killing of social activists has not yet received systematic attention. Research to date has mainly focused on national and subnational dynamics. In this PRIF Report, we therefore review existing academic studies and policy reports in order to explore the different ways in which the transnational flow of resources and the activities of external actors – multinational corporations as well as states and international organizations – contribute to causing the killing of social activists. More specifically, we investigate what existing data and research tell us about the role of global value and supply chains, multinational corporations, international banks, and investors, as well as the political actors (foreign governments and international organizations) that accompany and support, but potentially also regulate and constrain such transnational economic activities and relations.

This report finds that a notable proportion of documented cases of lethal violence against activists target individuals and organizations challenging business interests, including multinational corporations and other actors embedded in transnational politico-economic relations. While such patterns in and of themselves do not establish direct corporate responsibility, they reveal a consistent empirical association between business-related activities and lethal repression. A significant share of victims are land and environmental defenders, many of whom are members of indigenous communities protecting territory and local livelihoods from export-oriented resource extraction and large-scale land use transformations. Datasets provided by organizations such as Global Witness, Front Line Defenders/HRD Memorial, and the EJAtlas Collective show that killings are disproportionately concentrated in sectors characterized by extractive and land-intensive economic activities, including mining, oil and gas extraction, large-scale agribusiness, logging, hydropower, and infrastructure development. Mining and extractives, along with agribusiness, repeatedly rank among the most frequently implicated sectors. Quantitative analyses further link activist killings to mineral dependency and foreign direct investment (FDI), suggesting that contexts highly integrated into global value chains are structurally more prone to lethal repression.

Qualitative evidence from individual country cases indicates that transnationally operating corporations tend to be implicated in activist killings in indirect ways. In a limited number of emblematic cases, companies or executives were also directly involved in sponsoring or commissioning killings, including by “outsourcing” violence through informal subcontracting practices as well as via private security companies. However, given the high levels of impunity and opaque chains of responsibility, it is impossible to assess how widespread such direct corporate involvement is. More widely documented is indirect involvement, where, through their business practices, corporations and investors create or reinforce incentives for local armed groups to employ or sustain violent strategies against dissenting communities and activists. Case studies also show how, at times, international financial institutions and development banks help enable anti-activist violence. Empirical evidence highlights cases in which funding for mining, agribusiness, and infrastructure projects was continued despite documented patterns of violent conflict and, in some instances, misused in ways that directly supported activist killings. Additionally, foreign governments and multilateral institutions contribute to violence by legitimizing controversial projects associated with heightened conflict risks and by failing to adequately regulate corporate behavior. Corporate stakeholders, international investors, and the political actors supporting their activities may therefore not explicitly order violence. Yet their operations and investment decisions can create conditions that facilitate repression and make activist killings more likely.

Overall, the findings presented in this report highlight how lethal repression is shaped by multiscalar dynamics in which local violence intersects with global investment patterns, supply chains, trade structures, and asymmetric economic dependencies.

Admittedly, these findings are only preliminary. More robust data and systematic empirical studies are needed to assess whether, to what degree, under what conditions, and how exactly different features of the global political economy contribute to the killing of activists. In addition to furthering our understanding of the causes of the phenomenon, this is also crucial for developing or improving policy responses meant to protect civil society actors against this form of lethal violence. In this latter regard, however, the evidence presented in this report is already sufficient to conclude that national and local responses are not enough to comprehensively address the problem at hand. Given that a significant share of activist killings are clearly related to dynamics within the global political economy, foreign governments, international organizations, and multinational corporations bear more than just a general kind of shared responsibility. They can – and should – also do more to shape their own transnational activities in ways that reduce the likelihood of social activists being killed. This underlines the relevance of binding human rights obligations of transnationally operating corporations, including through corporate due diligence regulations for value and supply chains.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to international NGOs, no fewer than three to four hundred social activists are killed worldwide every year, a significant share of them environmental and land right activists (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 6–8; for the most recent numbers see Front Line Defenders 2025; Global Witness 2025). These activists include indigenous leaders resisting the destruction of their local livelihoods by mining projects or the expansion of agribusiness, members of peasant communities struggling for access to land, environmental activists mobilizing against large infrastructure programs, and human rights advocates challenging authoritarian practices. What unites this diverse range of individuals as well as the local communities, social movements, and/or civic associations they represent, is that they struggle to peacefully demand and defend their and others' rights. In doing so, they confront local or national, formal or de facto authorities as well as powerful external actors that threaten their local livelihoods. These activists are therefore usually referred to as human rights defenders (HRDs) or, more specifically, land and environmental defenders.

Academic studies and NGO reports show that most of the killings affect social activists at the local level, particularly in marginalized, rural areas of the Global South (Albarracín et al. 2023, 2025; Krain/Joyce 2026; Middeldorp/Le Billon 2019). At the same time, these publications suggest that this seemingly localized violence often results from complex interactions between local, national, and transnational forces (Butt et al. 2019; Le Billon/Lujala 2020; Menton/Le Billon 2021). In particular, global value and supply chains related to the extraction and trade of natural resources, as well as to export-oriented agribusiness, appear to be fueling the violence against social activists in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, and the Philippines, as do large infrastructure projects (Butt et al. 2019; Global Witness 2022; Middeldorp/Le Billon 2019; Scheidel et al. 2020). Multinational corporations, along with banks, international financial institutions, and foreign governments supporting FDI and international trade with loans, guarantees, and political backing therefore contribute to the violence faced by activists opposing such economic activities – even if they rarely figure as direct perpetrators. Yet the extent to which these transnational politico-economic forces can be seen as causing activist killings remains poorly understood – not only empirically, but also theoretically – as does the nature of their specific causal role.

When it comes to the violence and repression civil society actors face around the globe, the assassination of social activists is merely the “tip of the iceberg” (Butt et al. 2019: 742). The killings are usually embedded in broader “atmospheres of violence” (Menton et al. 2021). Research has documented a whole range of violent and non-violent restrictions that constrain the capacity of civil society actors to organize, mobilize, and make their voices heard (see Brechenmacher 2017; Chaudhry 2022; Menton/Le Billon 2021; Wolff 2023). Hence, lethal violence targeting social activists is intertwined with broader dynamics that shrink civic spaces, deter dissent, and make politics more authoritarian and exclusionary (Nord et al. 2025; Poppe/Wolff 2017; Riedl et al. 2023). That said, in this report, we have still chosen to focus on activist killings as the most extreme and therefore also the most visible and well-documented form of violent repression (Albarracín/Wolff 2024). As will be seen, serious knowledge gaps and high levels of impunity also characterize the phenomenon, but it is still the type of violence for which, comparatively speaking, we have the best evidence to draw on.

Reports published by NGOs on the killing of human rights defenders frequently highlight the role of the international (commodities) trade and multinational corporations and document cases that show the latter's involvement in anti-activist violence (e.g., Front Line Defenders 2025; Global Witness 2025). Existing research, however, mainly focuses on national-level causes as well as subnational dynamics that help explain the occurrence and frequency of activist killings. The nexus between the global political economy – understood as the interplay of political and economic forces in a world characterized by asymmetric economic interdependencies and uneven schemes of global governance – and the assassination of activists thus remains poorly understood. This suggests, as Gilbert and Tanzimuddin Khan highlight, a “shift in emphasis” from focusing on “governance shortcomings” at the national level to investigating the “violence footprint” of multinational corporations and international development agencies (2021: 122).

It is precisely this shift in emphasis that the present report seeks to contribute to. Drawing on the fragmented empirical evidence in academic studies and policy reports, it explores the nexus between transnational politico-economic relations and the killing of social activists by assessing what we know about the different ways in which cross-border resource flows and the activities of external actors contribute to (lethal) violence against activists in the Global South. This concerns the role of transnational extraction, production and distribution networks, multinational corporations, international banks, and investors, as well as of the political actors (foreign governments and international organizations) that accompany and support, but potentially also regulate and constrain such transnational economic activities and relations. The countries examined in this report differ considerably in terms of their economic size, political influence, and development strategies. Rather than systematically comparing national political economies, our aim is to identify recurring patterns of violence across diverse contexts and explore how these relate to transnational political-economic processes and conflicts surrounding resource extraction, large-scale land use, and infrastructure development.

The report is structured as follows. In Section 2, we briefly situate our study in the broader literature, review some key features characterizing the killing of social activists, and introduce our analytical framework. The next two sections then use this framework to systematically review existing empirical evidence that links transnational flows of resources and the activities of external actors – especially corporations, but also states and international organizations – to the killing of social activists. In Section 3, we focus on quantitative data and identify descriptive patterns and statistical correlations that support the overall argument that transnational resource flows and external actors contribute at least indirectly to anti-activist violence. As we will show, existing research consistently points to the investments and operations of multinational corporations and international trade relations being empirically associated with the killing of social activists in the Global South. This particularly concerns economic activities related to resource extraction and the assassination of activists defending land rights and the environment. While most available empirical evidence is on the role of private companies, foreign governments and international organizations are also implicated in that they enable, politically back, and/or financially support economic projects associated with violence. However, the empirical association between key features of the global political economy and the killing of activists in the Global South leaves a crucial question unanswered: Through what exact processes and mechanisms do resource flows and external factors contribute to anti-activist violence?

In Section 4, we therefore analyze qualitative evidence from country case studies, including selected cases of individual activist killings. While not at all representative, the cases for which reasonably reliable information exists give us a more precise idea about the indirect and at times also direct ways in which multinational corporations, as well as international financial institutions and foreign development agencies, contribute to anti-activist violence. In the concluding section, we summarize and discuss our main findings.

## **2. ACTIVIST KILLINGS AND THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY: TOWARD AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 VIOLENT ECONOMIES**

In this report, we examine the nexus between the global political economy and violence in one of its most drastic forms: targeted killings. To do so, we draw on scholarship concerned with the links between violence and conflict on the one hand, and commodities, (particular) economic actors, and economic orders on the other (for an overview, see Franzki et al. 2024).

Studies from political ecology and critical geography have highlighted how capital accumulation, in contexts of resource extraction, occurs via a process of dispossessing public and private entities and communities of their wealth, land, or environment (Harvey 2005; Hall 2013; Riofrancos 2025). These dynamics are embedded in legal and institutional property regimes, structuring access to land and subsoil resources. In many resource-rich countries, rights to land and rights to mineral resources are governed by separate legal regimes, meaning that those who own, occupy, or use the land surface do not necessarily hold rights to the resources beneath it. As a result, governments may legally grant extraction licenses to corporations, even where local communities hold formal or customary rights to the land surface (Andrews et al. 2017: 62) In this vein, Conde and Le Billon (2017) show how extractive projects trigger social mobilization and environmental protest, thereby increasing the likelihood of violent confrontation. Similarly, a report by ARTICLE 19 (2016) links the rise in attacks on land and environmental defenders to neocolonial patterns of resource control and development, where states and corporations employ coercion to secure access to land and raw materials. These killings typically occur within escalating cycles of resistance and repression, in which violence functions as a strategic tool to manage dissent and secure capital accumulation (see Dunlap 2019; Peluso/Lund 2011).

These conflict dynamics are linked to a global political economy shaped by postcolonial forms of asymmetric interdependencies and uneven schemes of global governance. In large parts of the Global South, dependence on natural resource extraction as well as on primary goods exports in general has persisted long after formal decolonization, as have the conflict dynamics associated with large-scale, export-oriented land use. These postcolonial legacies also concern the privileged role of multinational corporations, which benefit from the political support of powerful host states as well as international legal frameworks (e.g., postcolonial licensing arrangements, concessions, and

investment agreements). Meanwhile, the changing nature of transnational economic actors and the emergence of global production networks have added new dimensions to violent conflicts (Franzki et al. 2024; Tsing 2009; Vestena/Scheper 2024). Scholars have foregrounded the role and behavior of multinational corporations, as well as their legal and social responsibility for human rights violations in general (e.g., Lasslett 2014; Borrás et al. 2016). This literature also documents the weakness of international legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms, which persistently fail to curb violence against activists. Despite the proliferation of global human rights norms, their enforcement remains uneven and frequently subordinated to economic imperatives. Studies highlight the structural asymmetry between the strong protection of corporate and investor rights and the weak enforcement of environmental and human rights obligations (Larsen/Lador 2021; Gilbert/Tanzimuddin Khan 2021).

At the same time, corporations, particularly in extractive sectors, have increasingly adopted corporate social responsibility (CSR) approaches (Conde/Le Billon 2017). These initiatives are typically framed as voluntary efforts to mitigate social and environmental harm and manage corporate-community relations, yet are often criticized as inadequate or for being primarily reputational instruments (Sinclair 2024). Nevertheless, their proliferation points to an underlying tension in the interests at stake. While companies have a strong interest in securing access to natural resources, violence, especially killings that can be linked to their activities, can undermine corporate reputations, disrupt operations, and give rise to political and legal risks.

This tension reveals the limitations of strongly actor-centered approaches to responsibility that focus primarily on attributing wrongdoing to specific corporate decisions or misconduct. Hence, we treat activists' killings not solely as the result of individual intentional actions but highlight the distinction between intentionality and causality. Rather than asking whether corporations deliberately intend to inflict such violence, we examine how corporate activities and the institutional environments that enable them may contribute causally to conditions in which violent repression is more likely.

## 2.2 THE PHENOMENON OF ACTIVIST KILLINGS

The killing of civilians participating in peaceful collective action, whether to promote social change or defend a given status quo, is not a new phenomenon. It has, however, received increasing attention thanks to systematic monitoring by civil society organizations. Front Line Defenders and Global Witness have documented killings of social activists in more than 60 countries (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 8). Since 2012, Global Witness has recorded 2,253 assassinations or forced disappearances of environmental and land defenders worldwide, including 146 in 2024 alone, which corresponds to an average of around three people being killed or disappearing each week (Global Witness 2025: 16). For the same year, based on the HRD Memorial database, Front Line Defenders reports 324 killings of human rights defenders in 32 countries (Front Line Defenders 2025: 9).

At first glance, these absolute numbers might seem small. Yet significant underreporting suggests that actual figures are likely to be higher (Le Billon/Lujala 2020: 2; Global Witness 2025: 16). Moreover, killings only represent the "tip of the iceberg": "For every defender murdered, thousands more face direct violence, threats and psychological intimidation, and more invisible cultural and structural

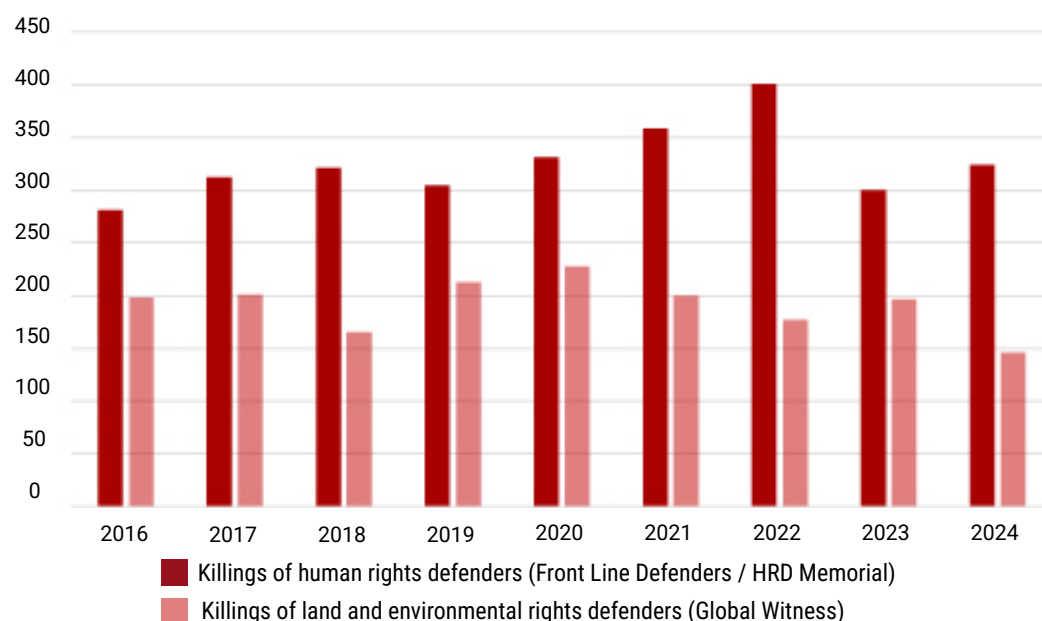


Fig. 1: Annual Killings of Social Activists Worldwide

violence (or ‘slow violence’)” (Butt et al. 2019: 742). Assassinations are thus the most extreme and visible form of repression, with far-reaching chilling effects on social movements and local communities, while also being the most systematically documented (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 8).

Academic studies and NGO reports show that the killing of social activists is concentrated in a limited number of countries in the Global South, particularly in Latin America. According to both Front Line Defenders and Global Witness, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and the Philippines consistently record the highest numbers of cases (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 8; see also Krain/Joyce 2026: 8). Comparative research further indicates that activist killings are more frequently documented in political systems combining formal democratic institutions with weak enforcement of civil liberties and rule of law (see Butt et al. 2019; Krain et al. 2024; Le Billon/Lujala 2020). Such contexts allow civil society actors to mobilize while simultaneously limiting accountability for violent repression. However, such a simple explanation is insufficient here: not all democracies with weak rule of law experience high levels of activist killings, and violence in more authoritarian settings may occur preemptively or remain unreported due to restricted information environments. Moreover, much of the violence is highly localized. Killings tend to be concentrated in specific subnational regions – often peripheral, rural, or resource-rich areas – where localized conflict dynamics and struggles over land and natural resources intersect (Albarracín et al. 2023, 2025).

Another overarching feature of activist killings is the high level of impunity, which severely limits access to reliable information about the identification and prosecution of perpetrators. As Global Witness summarizes, even if the direct authors of the violence – “usually a hired hitman” – are identified, the “intellectual authors” typically remain unprosecuted (2025: 24). Identifying specific perpetrators

is also “complicated by the frequent connections between organized crime, government, and corporate interests” (Global Witness 2025: 24; Albarracín et al. 2025; Butt et al. 2019: 743). According to Front Line Defenders, 54.6 percent of the 2024 killings were attributed to non-state actors and 15.1 percent to state actors (2025: 10). Based on Global Witness data for the years 2015–2018, Le Billon and Lujala find that a third of the killings were “directly perpetrated by government authorities,” 15 percent by hitmen, 13 percent by criminal gangs, and 9 percent by paramilitaries and landowners (2020: 7; see also Global Witness 2018: 7).

### 2.3 TOWARD AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF ACTIVIST KILLINGS

In order to understand the multifaceted role of the global political economy in the killing of social activists in the Global South, it is important to look beyond the narrow question of the actual perpetrators. As Le Billon and Lujala emphasize, “there are many degrees of responsibility and forms of complicity involved, from carrying-out the killing itself, to recruiting the killers, ordering and paying for the killing, knowingly promoting and/or investing in a resource project that could possibly result in a killing, and benefiting from the project without having taken part in the decision (e.g. pension fund holders; commodity consumers)” (2020: 70). In this report, we therefore adopt a broad approach to the causal role of the global political economy, distinguishing between three types of causal contributions.

First, external actors such as multinational corporations or foreign governments can contribute directly to causing the killing of social activists. While these actors rarely commit acts of lethal violence themselves, they can still directly contribute to these killings by commissioning and/or sponsoring violent repression carried out by private security guards or criminal groups. This phenomenon is explicitly addressed in research on transnational repression (Dukalskis et al. 2022; Moss 2016). While this literature focuses on authoritarian regimes that target dissidents in the diaspora, transnational practices of repression are not limited to state-diaspora relations and may also be carried out by democratic governments and non-state actors, including multinational corporations (Garbe/Maerz 2025).

Second, transnational flows of resources and the actors that organize and/or facilitate them contribute to activist killings in an indirect sense when, for instance, these resources stem from activities “on the ground” – e.g., mining projects – that incentivize local actors to use violence against civil society actors. This indirect role is what Nathalie Butt and colleagues refer to as the “supply chain of violence,” emphasizing the responsibility of “governments, businesses and investors [...] for their role in supply chains that drive violence” (2019: 746). Here, specific business actors, states, or international organizations have no direct relationship with the perpetrators, but their activities are part of a causal chain that leads to lethal violence and is in principle traceable. Their specific investment, purchasing, or financial practices generate or exacerbate local conflict, thereby creating conditions that enable, trigger, or incentivize activist killings. Analyses of development finance institutions similarly highlight how project financing, often channeled through financial intermediaries, can contribute to environmental destruction, displacement, and social conflict while obscuring lines of responsibility,

as such financing structures allow institutions to distance themselves from the impacts of the projects they help enable (urgewald 2015).

Third, beyond identifiable actors and concrete projects, anti-activist violence is embedded in structural patterns of global economic interdependence. As Le Billon and Lujala argue, even beneficiaries such as “pension fund holders” or “commodity consumers” are somehow implicated in activist killings (2020: 70). Butt et al. highlight “transboundary effects,” linking violence at extraction sites in the Global South to companies and consumers in the Global North (2019: 744). In line with the notions of “externalization” (Lessenich 2019) and an “imperial mode of living” (Brand/Wissen 2021), the socio-environmental costs of the prevailing consumption and investment patterns among the privileged parts of the world population are being shifted elsewhere. On the one hand, this logic of externalization, which refers to systemic relations, runs from countries of the Global North (increasingly including rising economies such as China) to the Global South. On the other hand, given the socioeconomically highly uneven patterns of resource use, it also has a class dimension. In many countries in the Global South, dependence on foreign investment, export revenues, and extractive industries incentivizes governments to protect projects from resistance, including through repression (ARTICLE 19 2016; May 2018; Menton/Le Billon 2021). Companies, governments, and consumers are thus part of a global socioeconomic formation that reproduces extraction and export dependence, increasing the risk of lethal repression (Butt et al. 2019).

Figure 2 illustrates these three different ways in which political and economic forces associated with the global political economy can play a role in the killing of social activists in the Global South. In line with global political economy research, our analytical framework distinguishes three types of transnational forces: business actors operating across borders (multinational corporations, international banks, and private investors); political actors (foreign governments and international organizations); and material and financial flows, including goods, natural resources, and capital flowing through global value chains, international trade, aid, and lending arrangements. While the figure might suggest that these forces – and hence the global political economy as such – are somehow external to the local contexts in which activist killings occur, this is certainly not the idea. As argued above, it is precisely the embeddedness of Global South countries within a unified, if segmented, hierarchical, and asymmetric global political economy that shapes the local violence under study.

The analytical distinction between the three causal roles is meant to capture the range of ways in which transnational processes and external actors can contribute to violence against social activists in the Global South. Some of these contributions may seem self-evident yet abstract, while others are quite tangible, but empirically harder to detect. The deliberate killing of an activist in the context of protests against a mining project in a given country is, for instance, clearly connected to the international trade in mineral resources. This implies that the companies, governments, and societies involved in and benefiting from this trade bear at least some general responsibility for what is happening at the end of the “supply chain of violence” (Butt et al. 2019). In a similar vein, this form of violence is also clearly structurally related to national development models and broader transnational economic arrangements based on the large-scale extraction and export of raw materials in the Global South (Menton/Le Billon 2021).

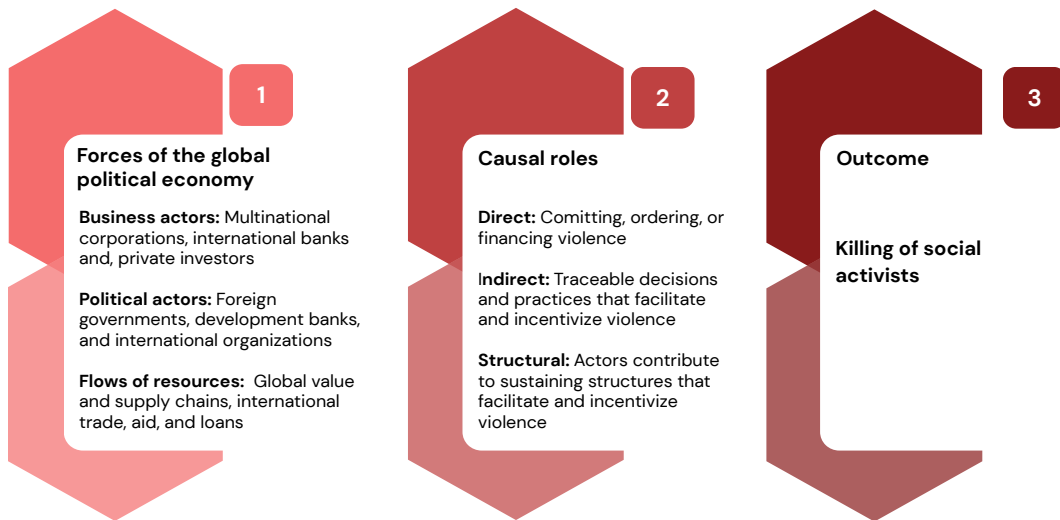


Fig. 2: *The Global Political Economy of Activist Killings*

Whether concrete activities by specific actors directly or indirectly contribute to causing the killing of activists is nevertheless still much more of an open question and empirically difficult to establish. In this report, therefore, we place particular emphasis on actor-based mechanisms, focusing on the direct and indirect contributions, which are more tangible and, in theory, easier to trace – albeit often difficult to prove in practice. This includes analyzing the role of resource flows as a third transnational force. Although such flows are clearly not actors with intentions and cannot, therefore, directly contribute to violence, they can constitute indirect causal forces as they establish incentives and constraints. In this sense, our focus on direct and indirect contributions is by no means intended to suggest that the structural dimension is of less importance. On the contrary, structural economic and political conditions form the broader context within which the forces investigated in this report operate.

### 3. QUANTITATIVE DATA: DESCRIPTIVE PATTERNS AND STATISTICAL CORRELATIONS

In this section, we present and discuss two types of quantitative evidence that link activist killings to the global political economy: (1) descriptive patterns that suggest the killing of social activists occurs in relation to specific economic sectors or activities and targets specific types of civil society actors and activism; and (2) findings from regression analyses that more systematically establish empirical associations between activist killings and transnational processes or the activities of external actors.

The quantitative data used in the reports and studies reviewed here mostly comes from the datasets compiled by Front Line Defenders/HRD Memorial and Global Witness, both of which draw on national-level data provided by local civil society organizations. Complementary datasets include the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (EJAtlas) and information provided by the Business and Human Rights Centre (BHRC).

### 3.1 ECONOMIC SECTORS

A first important finding highlighted in many reports and studies is that a substantial share of activist killings worldwide occur in contexts characterized by particular economic structures, especially primary commodity production and extractive industries such as mining. The fact that these sectors tend to be export-oriented and dominated by multinational corporations is not direct evidence that the latter actively participate in, or contribute to, the killing of social activists. Yet the numerous cases of violence linked to economic activities and sectors — such as large-scale resource extraction — that would not exist the way they do if they were not integrated into the global political economy point, at the very least, to an indirect role of multinational corporations, global supply chains, and international trade and investment relations in this violence.

According to Global Witness data on killings that can be linked to a specific sector, mining and other extractives, including oil and gas, feature the highest numbers. For 2024, 20 percent of land and environmental defender killings (29 out of 146) were linked to these sectors (Global Witness 2025a). For the years between 2012 and 2024, the share is 17 percent (374 out of 2,254 killings or disappearances) (Global Witness 2025a). Other sectors that are ranked high are agribusiness and logging (each around 8 percent). Given its focus on environmental and land defenders, Global Witness data is arguably biased against the primary goods sector. Yet Front Line Defenders similarly concludes that “agribusiness, extractive industry and energy and development projects are amongst the most dangerous sectors for HRDs to work on” (2024: 25). It is important to note, however, that oil and gas may be less visible in the sectorial patterns discussed here, not because violence is absent in these contexts, but partly because the datasets we draw on do not consistently treat them as a separate categories. Global Witness, for instance, groups these activities under “mining and extractives,” while Front Line Defender uses broader categories such as “extractive industries/megaprojects.” Individual cases of lethal violence linked to oil extraction have nevertheless been documented. A prominent example is the conflict in the Niger Delta, where activists protesting against environmental destruction caused by Shell’s oil production were executed by the military regime (Amnesty International 2009).

Geographical patterns reinforce this observation. The countries with the highest numbers of activist killings are also characterized by intense socio-environmental conflict around export-oriented resource extraction and agribusiness (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 11). The Amazon region, for example, is considered a critical hotspot for violence against land and environmental defenders. This clustering is closely linked to export-oriented activities that involve resource extraction, extensive land use, and the dispossession of local populations, including through large-scale deforestation (Global Witness 2022; see also Albarracín et al. 2025; Crisis Group 2024; Menton/Le Billon 2021). Across Latin Amer-

ica more broadly, violence against environmental human rights defenders tends to be concentrated in areas marked by resource extraction, the expansion of large-scale development projects, and the corresponding presence of national (and foreign) companies (ARTICLE 19 2016: 4).

Statistical studies confirm the empirical association between extensive land use for resource extraction and export-oriented agriculture and activist killings. According to Butt et al. (2019), mining and agribusiness are the sectors empirically most strongly associated with the killing of environmental and land defenders, although the dominant sectors vary by country. Le Billon and Lujala (2020) report that mineral dependency is empirically associated with such killings and that FDI as a share of GDP is statistically correlated with this type of assassination. Similarly, Poulos and Haddad report that “the most intense cases of violent repression (cases with five or more deaths) all involved extractive industries,” with violent repression generally being most prevalent in mining, hydroelectric power, and logging industries (2016: 5). In this study, international funding, a variable that captures either investment by multinational corporations or funding by international organizations such as the World Bank, proved to be “strongly associated with the most extreme cases of violence” (Poulos/Haddad 2016: 8). Finally, based on the EJAtlas database, Scheidel et al. observe that mining conflicts are the deadliest type of environmental conflicts, “with assassinations occurring in one out of five conflict cases” (2020: 5; see also Prause/Le Billon 2021)

These quantitative patterns and correlations confirm the structural role of the global political economy in the violence faced by activists, and particularly land and environmental defenders in the Global South. They suggest that a significant share of killings are linked to dependence on primary goods exports and large-scale extraction of natural resources. Investigations into development finance institutions likewise document controversial financing practices. For instance, a report on the German public development bank KfW highlights how financing for projects in sectors such as mining, fossil energy, and plantation agriculture has repeatedly been linked to environmental damage, land conflicts, and the displacement of local communities (urgewald 2015).

The frequent presence of multinational corporations and international funding in these contexts indicates that external actors contribute at least indirectly. As a report by Front Line Defenders puts it:

“The complicity of businesses in attacks or the failure of businesses and financial institutions to tackle abuses linked to their operations, value chains and investments, create an enabling environment for reprisals against HRDs. In addition, state security forces are often deployed to secure and protect corporate interests rather than to protect the rights of citizens” (Front Line Defenders 2024: 26)

### 3.2 TARGETS

Another type of descriptive pattern linking activist killings and export-oriented economic activities, and multinational corporations in particular, concerns the targets of violence. Two observations stand out: First, a disproportionate share of the activists who were killed defended land, environ-

mental, and indigenous rights at the center of socio-environmental conflicts around land use and resource extraction; Second, a not insignificant share of targeted activists explicitly challenged corporate (mis)behavior.

The category of human rights defenders as used by Front Line Defenders covers a broad range of human rights-related issues. The main groups targeted, when looking at attacks more broadly, include those working on women's rights, LGBTIQ\* rights, human rights violations in conflict, and environmental rights, along with human rights movements in general. According to Front Line Defenders, in 2024 activists working on environmental rights and indigenous peoples' rights each represented 6 percent of documented violations, while land rights defenders accounted for 3 percent (2025: 18). When focusing specifically on lethal violence, however, 20.4 percent of those killed in 2024 defended land rights and 17.9 percent indigenous rights (Front Line Defenders 2025: 11). A comparison of Front Line Defenders and Global Witness data since 2017 suggests that between 40 and 70 percent of the killings involve activists focused on land and environmental issues (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 6). Around one-third of these were members of indigenous peoples (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 8; Butt et al. 2019: 743; Global Witness 2025: 15; Global Witness 2022: 16). This disproportionate representation reflects the overlap between extractive projects and indigenous territories, particularly in rural Latin America and Southeast Asia. As indigenous communities are frequently excluded from decision-making over land use and extraction, they remain at the center of violent disputes over resource governance (Butt et al. 2019; Scheidel et al. 2020). Overall, marginalized groups dependent on natural resources are particularly at risk (Butt et al. 2019: 743; see also Pouls/Haddad 2016: 5).

A second type of descriptive quantitative evidence links private (multinational) corporations even more directly to anti-activist violence. Of the 324 killings of human rights defenders documented by HRD Memorial in 2024, a total of 59 cases (18 percent) were directly or indirectly connected to their efforts to challenge business or corporate interests (Front Line Defenders 2025: 11). These cases spanned 16 countries, with mining accounting for nearly half (29 out of 59), followed by logging and agribusiness, as well as infrastructure and hydropower projects (Front Line Defenders 2025: 24).

Reports by UN Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights defenders likewise highlight the increasing exposure of defenders to reprisals linked to business activities and large-scale development projects. For example, Forst's 2017 report cites 450 cases of attacks against activists working on corporate accountability in 2015–2016 (Business and Human Rights Centre 2017a: 2). He notes that "of those attacks, 25 percent were connected to companies headquartered in three countries: Canada, China, and the United States of America" with the types of attack ranging from criminalization to killings (Forst 2017: 3). Similarly, a background note by a UN Working Group reports 185 defenders killed in 2015 in the context of development projects, including "mining, agribusiness, hydroelectric dams, and logging" with nearly 40 percent of them indigenous (UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights 2017: 4).

#### 4. QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE: EXAMPLES AND CAUSAL LINKS FROM COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

The quantitative evidence reviewed in the previous section generally confirms the role of the global political economy in the violence against activists. While most of the attacks, including killings, occur in the context of local conflicts, a significant share are related to and shaped by global capital flows, transnational value and supply chains, as well as international trade, loans, and aid. This particularly concerns economic sectors – such as mining and other extractive industries – that involve forms of large-scale land use or even destruction that tend to provoke resistance by local communities. In these contexts, external actors are at least indirectly contributing to lethal violence by creating incentives for the repression of local resistance. This includes multinational corporations investing in violence-prone sectors, foreign governments and international organizations supporting such projects, as well as states importing products and resources from these contexts. The evidence supporting these preliminary findings, however, is mostly indirect and does not establish clear-cut causal connections. The reported empirical associations do not show how exactly external actors contribute to anti-activist violence and certainly do not imply that they participate directly, by commissioning or sponsoring violence. To establish such direct links, in this section we turn to qualitative evidence on well-researched cases, focusing on four countries from two regions: Colombia and Honduras from Latin America, along with Indonesia and the Philippines from Southeast Asia. In addition to general findings on these countries, we zoom in on several microlevel cases – individual companies and individual assassinations – where the most concrete evidence exists.

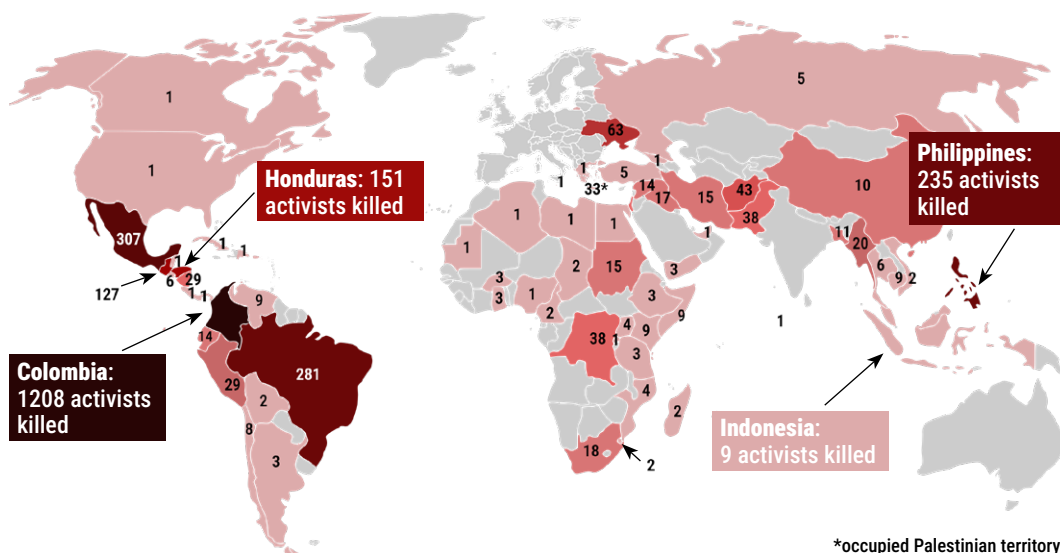


Fig. 3: The Killing of Human Rights Defenders around the World (2016–2024). Source: Data taken from Front Line Defenders annual reports, available at <https://frontlinedefenders.org>, World map: Ca-nuckguy via Wikimedia Commons | Public Domain

## 4.1 LATIN AMERICA

As mentioned above, Latin America is the region which, according to available datasets, has the highest concentration of activist killings, with Colombia, Brazil, Honduras, and Mexico being the most affected countries (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 8). In general terms, these high levels of anti-activist violence can be attributed to illicit economies, criminal groups and governance; frequent socio-environmental conflicts over extractivist economies, agribusiness, and large-scale infrastructure projects; and democratic states with weak rule of law, coexisting with subnational authoritarian orders (see Albarracín et al. 2023; Albarracín et al. 2025; Blume 2025; Middeldorp/Le Billon 2019).

Despite a series of peace processes that led to the demobilization of major non-state armed groups, such as the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo – FARC-EP), Colombia remains among the deadliest countries in the world for social activists (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 6–8). In 2024 alone, 157 killings of HRD were registered in Colombia, nearly half of the 324 cases worldwide (Front Line Defenders 2025: 9). With 48 killings or disappearances of the 146 worldwide in 2024, Colombia was also rated the “deadliest place” for land and environmental defenders by Global Witness (2025: 14). Over the years, Colombia has consistently ranked among the top three most affected countries in the Global Witness reports. Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities have been disproportionately targeted.

Recent violence is partly linked to the aforementioned demobilization of the FARC-EP, which has contributed to a fragmentation of non-state armed groups competing for territorial control and populations that are of strategic relevance to the booming illicit economies, as well as to resistance to the local implementation of pro-peace policies in this very context (see Albarracín et al. 2023; Gutiérrez Sanín et al. 2020; Prem et al. 2022). At the same time, Colombia’s current dynamics are rooted in longstanding conflicts over land and resource extraction, involving land grabbing and armed actors, as well as transnational mining corporations and agro-industrial expansion (Krause et al. 2025; see also Global Witness 2022; Somos Defensores 2023).

A prominent case concerns Chiquita Brands International, a US/Swiss company formerly known as the United Fruit Company (UFC), one of the largest fruit producers worldwide. In 2017, after years of litigation, Chiquita “was found liable under US domestic law principles of ‘negligence’ and ‘wrongful death’ as well as Colombian principles of tort liability” and ordered to pay USD 38.3 million to families of Colombian trade unionists who were murdered in the 1990s (International Center for Transitional Justice 2024; Taylor 2024). While the killings were carried out by Colombia’s AUC, Chiquita admitted financing the paramilitary organization from 1997 to 2004. The company made at least 100 payments to the AUC totaling USD 1.7 million, even after the group had been designated a terrorist organization by the US government (Kennard 2017; Taylor 2024).

While violence linked to export-oriented agriculture in Colombia persists, mining has become particularly controversial due to its social and environmental impacts. A report by the Dutch-based NGO PAX documented extensive paramilitary violence in the coal-mining region of César, including

“selective killings, massacres, enforced disappearances, and forced displacement” (PAX 2014: 10). The report examines alleged links between multinational mining companies, including Drummond and Prodeco (acquired by Glencore in 1995), and paramilitary actors. Based on sworn testimonies, including from former paramilitary commanders, the report suggests that the companies provided financial and logistical support, while paramilitary violence resulted in forced displacement and weakened resistance to mining operations.

A related lawsuit against Drummond was filed before a US court in 2002, accusing the company of hiring paramilitary groups to torture and assassinate labor activists. While parts of the case went to trial, it was ultimately dismissed in 2015 without a substantive ruling on the allegations (Business and Human Rights Centre 2015). At the same time, human rights organizations have documented widespread paramilitary violence against trade unionists and other human rights defenders in Colombia during this period, with Amnesty International reporting over 140 murdered trade unionists by late 2002 (Amnesty International 2002).

Similar dynamics can be found in Honduras. This small Central American country has barely a fifth of Colombia’s population, but nevertheless consistently ranks among the top five countries with the highest numbers of social activists killed in recent years (Albarracín/Wolff 2024: 8). The victims are mostly land and environmental defenders (Front Line Defenders 2024: 57; Middeldorp/La Billon 2019: 330), 149 of whom were killed in Honduras between 2012 and 2023 (Global Witness 2024: 18).

While much of the violence is related to organized crime, state institutions, as well as political elites, private corporations, and business elites, are equally implicated, and the lines between the illicit and the licit economy have become blurred (Blume 2024; Chayes 2017; Global Witness 2017). Reportedly, criminal groups are preparing the ground for corporate investment in agribusiness, forestry, or energy by violently dispossessing residents, including indigenous communities, of their land. In addition, organized crime is running its own legal enterprises, such as cattle farming, oil palm production, and mining (McSweeney/Pearson 2013). In general terms, scholars have linked the killings of environmental and land defenders since 2010 to conflicts over land use related to the expansion of agribusiness (especially palm oil plantations), mining, and hydroelectric energy projects (Middeldorp/Le Billon 2019: 330; see also Global Witness 2017).

The murder of Berta Cáceres in 2016 is one of the best documented cases of lethal attacks on environmental activists in Honduras (Chayes 2017: 71–73; Global Witness 2017: 13–16; May 2018: 109–123; Middeldorp/Le Billon 2019: 331–333). Cáceres, indigenous leader, coordinator of the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares de Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH), and winner of the 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize, was a key figure in the local resistance against a hydroelectric dam project in western Honduras (“Agua Zarca”), one of 40 hydroelectric projects approved in 2010 (CIVICUS 2015: 27). The local Lenca people and COPINH organized blockades against the project, which were met by violent attacks and harassment from security guards and state security forces (Chayes 2017: 71–72). In the context of these protests, another member of COPINH, Tomás García, had already been shot dead by a Honduran soldier in 2013, after DESA had requested the Honduran army secure the site against the protesters. As a cofounder, Cáceres played a central role in the cam-

paign that “effectively stopped the hydroelectric project” (May 2018: 110). Additionally, COPINH filed complaints and brought the case before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (May 2018). On March 2, 2016, Cáceres was shot and killed by hired hitmen in her home. A Mexican colleague, Gustavo Castro, who was present at the time, survived the attack but was seriously injured (Mackey/Eisner 2021).

The direct responsibility lies squarely with the Honduran private company in charge of the controversial dam project: Desarrollo Energéticos S.A. (DESA). In 2021, Roberto David Castillo Mejía, head of DESA at the time of Cáceres’ assassination, was found guilty of being a co-conspirator in the murder and sentenced to 22 years in prison (Moskowitz/Castro 2023). In total, eight individuals, including DESA’s former head of security were convicted (Mackey/Eisner 2021; Asmann 2026). Members of the Honduran security forces were also directly implicated (Chayes 2017: 72; Global Witness 2017: 14). According to a report by Mackey and Eisner (2021), the killing resulted from a “compartmentalized chain,” implicating DESA’s top leadership. Internal messages show that Castillo Mejía and other executives were in direct contact with the hit squad while payments were being arranged (Mackey/Eisner 2021; Asmann 2026). Facing potential financial losses, DESA monitored Cáceres, infiltrated COPINH, and planned the killing with the knowledge of other senior staff. However, Castillo Mejía was the only one of DESA’s top leadership to be convicted (Asmann 2026).

External actors were indirectly involved in the killing. Foreign construction firms, including the Chinese hydropower company Sinohydro and the Guatemalan firm COPRECA, were contracted by DESA to start construction on the dam. International development finance institutions, most notably the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), the Dutch development bank FMO, and the Finnish, state-owned Finnfund, provided substantial funding for the project (Chayes 2017; Global Witness 2017; Middeldorp/Le Billon 2019). In fact, subsequent investigations revealed that these development banks were directly linked to the crime. An Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI), mandated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2025, concluded that a criminal network diverted around 67 percent of the USD 18.5 million project funds from CABEI and FMO to fund illegal surveillance, intelligence operations, armed incursions, and ultimately the assassination of Cáceres (Asmann 2016; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2025). Funds were funneled through a shell company established by Castillo Mejía (Asmann 2026).

A second case in Honduras links international financing to violence in the Bajo Aguán region, where conflicts between peasant groups and large landowners supported by the state resulted in at least 89 killings between 2010 and 2013 (Middeldorp/Le Billon 2019: 331). According to human rights organizations, one actor involved in the violence is the palm oil company Dinant, which has received direct financial support from the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC) as well as indirect financing via Banco Ficohsa (Human Rights Watch 2014; Global Witness 2017; Chavkin et al. 2015). Investigative reporting revealed that the loan was approved despite ongoing violent land conflicts in the region and long-standing allegations of abuses linked to the company’s private security (Chavkin et al. 2015). In 2014, the IFC’s compliance body concluded that the institution had failed to adequately assess and respond to risks of violence associated with the investment. A German development corporation was involved through Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft

(DEG), which continued lending to Banco Ficohsa after ending direct funding to Dinant. In 2024, a US court approved a settlement in a class action lawsuit against the IFC, including nearly USD 5 million in reparations to affected plaintiffs (Olson 2024).

In general terms, Sarah Chayes concludes in her analysis of Honduras' transnational kleptocratic networks that international development lending "has been critical to the dams and solar farms and palm oil plantations belonging to Honduran network members, because without it, they cannot muster the required capital for such projects" (Chayes 2017: 96). This dependence implies that external actors play a decisive, if indirect role in the violence associated with these economic projects.

## 4.2 SOUTHEAST ASIA

Although Latin America has the highest number of activist killings, similar dynamics can be observed in Southeast Asia, where corporate- and investment-driven activities fuel conflicts over land and forests. Local communities are often forcibly displaced by security forces, enabling large-scale land acquisition (Cherry 2013; Dressler 2021; Dressler/Smith 2022). This configuration, in which policy, military units, and paramilitary actors protect corporate interests, facilitates the expansion of resource extraction and export-oriented agribusiness (Dressler/Smith 2022: 4). While violence is often carried out locally, evidence also points to the role of international corporations and banks as buyers or financiers of extractive and agribusiness projects, thereby indirectly implicating them in the violence against land and environmental defenders.

Within the region, the Philippines stand out as the only non-Latin American country to consistently rank among those recording the highest numbers of activist killings (Albarracin/Wolff 2024: 8; May 2018: 115). Since 2012, at least 306 land and environmental defenders have been killed, placing the country among the five deadliest for activists worldwide for more than a decade (Global Witness 2022; 2024). Moreover, between 2014 and 2024, it repeatedly ranked as the most dangerous country in Asia, at the global level at times only being surpassed by Brazil and Colombia (Global Witness 2022; 2025).

A substantial share of the violence against land and environmental defenders in the Philippines is linked to the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. Between 2016 and 2020, at least 166 killings were recorded (Global Witness 2024a). A central feature of this period was the designation of social activists and political opponents as insurgents, thereby legitimizing surveillance, harassment, and violent attacks (Dressler/Smith 2022: 2). Within this context, Hindstrom (2025) documents how, particularly in nickel mining areas, military forces and state-backed paramilitary units such as CAFGU were deployed to protect investments and intimidate or even attack defenders (2025: 21–23).

These specific dynamics during the Duterte government are, however, part of a broader picture. As Dressler and Smith (2022: 7) argue, while the recent increase in environmental defender deaths is closely associated with Duterte, the establishment, expansion, and consolidation of extractive enclosures in the Philippines have been shaped by state and parastatal violence for much longer. Violence

against activists and local communities, they suggest, reflects interwoven political-economic trajectories varying in intensity across older and newer extractive frontiers, structured by unequal land ownership, extractive expansion, and discursive frameworks that normalize violence and militarized responses to resistance (Dressler/Smith 2022). Similarly, Global Witness attributes over 80 percent of the killings in the Philippines (2012–2021) to protests opposing company operations (Global Witness 2022: 19). More recent data also indicates that violence against land and environmental defenders has persisted beyond the Duterte presidency. While killings peaked under his administration, the violence has continued afterward, with further cases recorded between 2021 and 2024 (Global Witness 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025). This suggests that the targeting of activists reflects entrenched dynamics tied to extractive expansion rather than the policies of a single administration

The link between corporate activity and violence is particularly evident in the mining sector: around one third of killings in the Philippines between 2012 and 2022 targeted activists opposing mining operations (Global Witness 2023: 32). Since 2021, the country has been home to several of Southeast Asia's largest surface mines, including major copper, coal, nickel, and gold projects. Many use complex ownership structures combining domestic firms with transnational capital from countries such as Canada, Japan, and Singapore, to keep pace with global demand (Global Witness 2024a). Research shows that the Philippine nickel industry supplies global markets, including major electric vehicle manufacturers such as Tesla, Volkswagen, and Mercedes, underscoring indirect corporate and financial responsibilities (Hindstrom 2025: 4, 6, 25, 27).

A well-documented case illustrating the nexus between mining, energy, political-economic elites, and violence in the Philippines is the assassination of Gloria Capitan, a prominent anti-coal activist and community leader in Bataan. As head of a local association linked to the Coal-Free Bataan Movement, she played a central role in mobilizing local opposition to coal-related infrastructure projects in the region (Global Witness 2019: 42; Tran et al. 2020). She was actively involved in campaigns against the expansion of coal facilities, including the development of port and coal-handling infrastructure operated by the Philippine-based Seafront Shipyard and Port Terminal Services Corporation (Seafront), as well as the emissions and forced resettlement associated with the 600-megawatt Limay Power Plant (Global Witness 2019: 42, 45). She criticized these projects for having been implemented without adequate consultation processes, for adversely affecting her business and livelihood, and for generating negative health impacts within her community (Global Witness 2019: 41). Her activism exposed her to sustained harassment and death threats (Global Witness 2019: 41). On July 1, 2016, one day after Rodrigo Duterte assumed office as president, she was shot and killed by two hired gunmen (Global Witness 2019: 3).

At the time of her murder, the Coal-Free Bataan Movement was engaged in a dispute with Seafront over a coal facility regarding alleged pollution and a lack of permits (Global Witness 2019: 42). In the year preceding her murder, Capitan had reported repeated threats and attempted bribery, including direct intimidation by Carlo Ignacio, co-owner of Seafront (Global Witness 2019: 42). The coal-fired power plant against which she campaigned was operated by San Miguel Consolidated Power Corporation, a subsidiary of San Miguel Corporation (SMC), and was financed by international actors including the IFC, the UK-based Standard Chartered Bank, and the Japanese Mizuho Bank

(Global Witness 2019: 47–48; EJAtlas 2021). Further investment linkages extended to international financial institutions such as Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ, DBS Bank (Singapore), and the HSBC, also headquartered in the UK (EJAtlas 2021).

Despite extensive evidence and attribution of responsibility, the case of Gloria Capitan remains unresolved, with no prosecutions of the economic or local political actors implicated. Impunity also extends to the direct perpetrators. Although a suspect was identified and charged, the investigation stalled and those responsible were never held accountable (Global Witness 2019; Tran et al. 2020).

Another case from the Philippines involves former Palawan governor Joel Reyes. Reyes promoted palm oil and rubber plantation projects in partnership with Palawan Palm and Vegetable Oil Mills Inc. (PPVOMI) and Agumil Philippines Inc. (AGPI), both of which have been linked to Malaysian and Singaporean investors (Stockholm Environment Institute 2014; Dressler/Smith 2022). He was later accused of ordering the murder of environmental journalist and outspoken anti-mining advocate Gerry Ortega in 2011. This case illustrates how political elites can act as intermediaries between international business actors and localized repression (Stockholm Environment Institute 2014; Harbinson 2016).

Beyond the Philippines, similarly lethal dynamics can be observed in other parts of Southeast Asia. Indonesia constitutes one of the most salient cases. In recent years, the country has experienced an increase in social conflicts, many of which have involved targeted violence against activists and human rights defenders (Front Line Defenders 2025: 9; Global Witness 2022: 17).

Since 2012, Global Witness has documented at least 25 killings of land and environmental defenders in Indonesia (Global Witness 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025). While this absolute number is lower than in the Philippines, it nevertheless reflects a broader pattern of severe violence, including high-profile assassinations, persistent threats, and systematic repression.

A key driver of conflict in Indonesia is the large-scale expansion of oil palm plantations. Indonesia is the world's largest exporter, accounting for more than half of global palm oil exports (Benedict/Heilmayr 2024). While the sector is economically significant, its rapid growth has fueled social contestations as communities face land dispossession, inadequate compensation, environmental pollution, poor labor conditions, and unmet promises of partnerships (Berenschot et al. 2022: 39). Based on the reconstruction of 150 conflict trajectories, Berenschot et al. demonstrate how "the loss of access to land, inadequate compensation, environmental pollution, poor labor conditions, and unmet expectations surrounding profit-sharing schemes accumulate over time," intensifying community resistance (2022: 39). In response, companies frequently enlist local authorities, including police forces such as the Mobile Brigade Corps (Brimob), and the military, to suppress protest. Within this context, violence is predominantly perpetrated by company-affiliated actors and is frequently accompanied by arrests, demonstrating state-corporate entanglement and contributing to the intimidation of activists and suppression of protest (Berenschot et al. 2022: 43–45; see also Li 2018: 328). The authors report 69 incidents of police or military violence targeting community protests, underscoring the routine deployment of state security forces in defense of corporate interests (2022: 44). While

the producers directly implicated in the violence tend to be Indonesian companies, they are often part of broader corporate networks and supply global firms such as Unilever and Nestlé (Berenschot et al. 2022: 40).

A case illustrating this link between palm oil and anti-activist violence concerns the murder of Martua Parasian Siregar and Maraden Sianipar in October 2019 (Damiana/Widianto 2019; Reporters Without Borders 2019). Although both were journalists, their deaths were related to their activism, rather than their professional journalistic work. The two colleagues were members of the Indonesian environmental advocacy NGO WALHI. At the time of their assassination, both men were working as mediators in North Sumatra, where they collaborated with local farmers seeking to regain control over land and palm crops. Their work involved supporting local communities affected by palm oil expansion in Labuhan Batu, with particular focus on a land dispute between residents and a plantation operated by PT Sei Alih Berombang (PT SAB), which is linked to the cooperative KSU Amalia (Damiana/Widianto 2019; The Guardian 2019). Both were later found stabbed to death on this very plantation.

The plantation concession had been sealed the previous year, after authorities found about 750 hectares (1,850 acres) of forest that had been illegally cleared for oil palm cultivation (Damiana/Widianto 2019; Business and Human Rights Centre 2019; Karokaro 2019). Local residents had reported prior violent confrontations between plantation security guards and individuals attempting to access the land, indicating an escalating pattern of conflict surrounding the site (Karokaro 2019). Shortly after the assassinations, the North Sumatra police chief linked the incidents to a land dispute (Damiana/Widianto 2019). Police later arrested the head of KSU Amalia, Wibharry Padmoasmolo, on suspicion of having paid roughly USD 3,000 to have the two activists killed (Damiana/Widianto, 2019; The Guardian 2019; Business and Human Rights Centre 2019). Although he denied involvement and disputed ownership of the PT SAB plantation, he and four alleged assailants were charged with murder (Karokaro 2019).

A second case, which also involves a member of the environmental NGO WALHI, concerns the death of lawyer and activist Golfrid Siregar. Although local police attributed his death in October 2019 to a motorbike accident, his family, colleagues, and various human rights organizations dispute this conclusion (Business and Human Rights Centre 2025; ICUN 2019; Karokaro 2019). At the time of his death, Siregar was providing legal assistance to local communities involved in land conflicts with oil companies (EJAtlas 2022; Karokaro 2019). Perhaps more importantly, however, he was a key figure in WALHI's resistance to the Batang Toru hydropower plant project and had filed a lawsuit against the North Sumatra provincial government alleging forgery of operating permits (International Union for Conservation of Nature 2019). Before Siregar's death, WALHI's Sumatra branch, which led the campaign against the dam project, had started to receive intimidating calls, including explicit threats of violence should the organization not stop "speaking against the dam" (Kusnetz 2025).

The Batang Toru hydropower plant was developed by North Sumatra Hydro Energy (NSHE), owned at the time by a subsidiary of a Chinese energy equipment manufacturing company, together with an Indonesian state-owned utility and a Singapore-based company (Kusnetz 2025). Being

conceived as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the project was initially funded by the Bank of China, which reportedly later reviewed and withdrew its financial support (Kusnetz 2025; Simangunsong 2021). The preconstruction phase began in December 2015, following the signing of a power purchase agreement between NSHE and the state-owned electricity company PLN. After breaking ground in May 2021, construction has been carried out by NSHE in cooperation with Sinohydro Corporation Limited, a subsidiary of Power Construction Corporation of China (PowerChina). Over time, the project attracted growing international scrutiny due to its environmental and social impacts. Several international financing institutions, including the Asian Development Bank and the IFC, withdrew from the project citing environmental concerns (EJAtlas 2022). In 2023, the Norwegian Government Pension Fund Global recommended excluding PowerChina from its investment portfolio, concluding that the project failed to comply with IFC standards (Jong 2023).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

While the assassinations of social activists frequently appear as localized phenomena shaped by specific conditions in countries of the Global South, this report has aimed to investigate how such lethal repression is embedded within transnational political-economic processes. The high levels of impunity characterizing the assassinations as well as the political context in which they tend to occur make this a complicated endeavor, as hard evidence is often rare. However, this should not stop us from seeking to better understand how key features of the global political economy contribute to the assassinations of social activists.

To this end, we developed an analytical framework, intentionally foregrounding three sets of forces: (1) business actors (e.g., multinational corporations, investors, and international banks), (2) political actors (e.g., foreign governments, development banks, and international organizations), and (3) resource flows (trade, aid, and loans). We identified three ways in which these transnational forces contribute to lethal violence in the Global South. First, by directly sponsoring or commissioning violent repression. Second, through practices that indirectly generate or exacerbate local conflict, facilitating and incentivizing the use of lethal violence. Third, by contributing to the reproduction of the structural conditions in which these assassinations take place.

Drawing on the fragmented empirical evidence in existing academic studies, policy reports, and news coverage, complemented by quantitative analysis and in-depth regional case studies, we were able to identify a set of consistent patterns. Data on activist killings reveal that this form of lethal violence is disproportionately concentrated in resource- and land-intensive sectors such as mining, oil, and gas, as well as agribusiness. These sectors represent a critical intersection of global capital accumulation and localized conflict. Empirical studies demonstrate that extractive industries account for a significant share of the recorded cases, often in contexts characterized by foreign investment and international financing. Geographically, killings are concentrated in the Global South, particularly in Latin America and Southeast Asia. In terms of the targeted groups, indigenous peoples are disproportionately represented among the victims, as are activists defending land rights, which lends further support to the link between resource- and land-intensive, export-oriented economic activities

and activist killings. This also confirms the structural role of a global political economy marked by highly asymmetric patterns of economic exchange and, more specifically, by the large-scale export of natural resources and primary goods from the Global South. Furthermore, data shows that a significant share of the killings of human rights defenders concern activists challenging business practices, including those of multinational corporations.

The qualitative evidence from country case studies and investigations of individual killings complements these quantitative patterns. This evidence suggests that while multinational corporations, international investors, and international financial institutions undeniably contribute to anti-activist violence in structural terms, by helping reproduce the global politico-economic structures and processes that are at the root of violence in contexts of resource extraction and export-oriented agricultural land use, their involvement sometimes goes beyond this. In both Latin America and Southeast Asia, there were also instances of them participating directly by financing those implicated in the assassination of local activists. Mostly, however, we identify indirect contributions. Through investment decisions, contracting and subcontracting practices, cooperation with private security actors, and engagement in contexts marked by authoritarian governance or paramilitary presence, multinational corporations fail to constrain the use of violence among local actors, sometimes even incentivizing it. This logic also applies to international financial institutions and development agencies that fund local banks and companies involved in violent conflict with local communities. As documented in several cases, such international funding was at times continued even in the face of obvious risks of or actual violence. This shows how transnational economic forces, including multinational corporations, international investors, and development banks contribute – willingly or not – to causing activist killings. Foreign governments and international organizations may further enable these dynamics by legitimizing, financing, or failing to regulate projects associated with this type of systematic repression.

While the countries discussed in this report differ markedly in terms of their economic size, political contexts, and development strategies, we find that similar conflict dynamics emerge across these diverse settings. This suggests that the patterns identified here are less tied to specific national development models than to the structural characteristics of particular sectors. Extractive and land-intensive industries such as mining, agribusiness, or large infrastructure projects rely on extensive land use and frequently provoke resistance from affected communities. When such resistance threatens economic interests, it becomes more likely that local actors will resort to coercion and violence across otherwise very different political economies. The quantitative patterns and case studies reviewed in this report, therefore, also point to structural features of North–South relations that drive anti-activist violence.

The findings presented in this report are preliminary only. More robust data and systematic empirical studies are needed to assess whether, to what degree, under what conditions, and how exactly different features of the global political economy contribute to the killing of activists. This includes a more in-depth exploration of why specific economic sectors, social groups, and world regions seem to be more affected than others. It is also important to bear in mind that comparatively low numbers of killings do not necessarily mean low levels of violence, but may reflect different forms of re-

pression. For instance, research on the gendered logics of anti-activist violence shows that women, while killed less frequently, tend to be subjected to different, particularly sexualized forms of violence (Stallone/Zulver 2024; Tran 2023; Tran et al. 2020). This suggests a need to better understand the local social relations (including gender, race, and class relations) that shape this violence. Future research should investigate whether and how the forces associated with the global political economy analyzed in this report shape the varying patterns of violence facing civil society activists that can be observed in different economic sectors, countries, and regions, as well as social groups.

Taken together, the economic, political, and legal dimensions outlined in this report suggest that violence against activists is embedded in a complex web of mutually reinforcing transnational mechanisms. Economic pressures driven by extractivist demand, political repression rooted in authoritarian governance, and the persistent weakness of legal accountability frameworks do not operate independently; rather, they intersect and sustain one another. The structural convergence of these forces illustrates that global capitalism, resource dependence, and colonial legacies collectively create environments of impunity in which violent repression becomes a predictable outcome rather than an exception. One of the most extreme, and hence relatively rare, manifestations of such repression is the killing of activists examined in this report. Transnational business interests generate incentives for coercion, while local regimes provide the political permissiveness that enables it. Host governments supportive of “their” multinational companies, as well as weak or selectively enforced international norms, in turn, perpetuate this dynamic by shielding corporate and state actors from accountability.

Understanding transnational drivers of violence against activists therefore requires moving beyond siloed explanations of economic or political causality. These drivers are mutually constitutive, reinforcing each other within a broader global political economy that privileges capital accumulation over human and non-human life. Addressing such violence, consequently, demands an integrated approach that recognizes the systemic entanglement of economic globalization, political repression, and the enduring inequities of international norms and institutions.

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# THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY IN LOCAL VIOLENCE: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CORPORATIONS, TRADE AND LOANS IN THE KILLINGS OF SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

Fenja Heinrichs // Christin Stühlen // Jonas Wolff

This report examines the nexus between the global political economy and violence in one of its most drastic forms: the targeted killing of social activists. To understand the different ways in which the transnational flow of resources and the activities of multinational corporations as well as states and international organizations contribute to causing the killing of social activists, it reviews existing academic studies and policy reports. It finds that existing quantitative evidence generally confirms the role of the global political economy in the violence against social activists, highlighting resource- and land-intensive sectors and the disproportionate targeting of indigenous peoples as well as activists defending land rights. Furthermore, data shows that a significant share of the killings of human rights defenders concern activists challenging business practices. Four case studies in Colombia, Honduras, Indonesia and The Philippines give further insight into how exactly external actors contribute to anti-activist violence.

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