

# Strengthening Amazonian Governance Through Local 'Cooperation Tables':

## A New Paradigm for MDBs

By Juan Diego Villacís

### Executive Summary

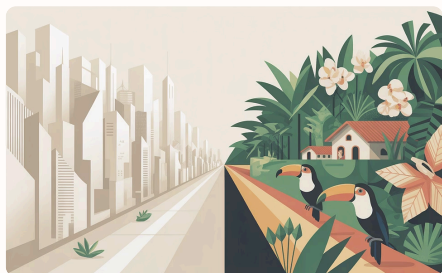
The Amazon Basin faces a critical juncture, with global conservation efforts often failing to translate into effective local action due to a disconnect between macro-level initiatives and ground-level implementation. This document proposes 'Cooperation Tables' as a crucial paradigm shift: locally-owned, multi-stakeholder governance platforms designed to bridge this gap by fostering direct collaboration among diverse actors within Amazonian territories.

Drawing lessons from successful models such as the Morona Santiago province in Ecuador and the Amazon Sacred Headwaters Initiative (ASHA), these cooperation tables demonstrate the potential to enhance participatory governance and ensure equitable resource management. For Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), we recommend integrating support for these localized governance structures into their strategies, promoting their replication, providing technical assistance, and facilitating direct financial flows to strengthen their operational capacity, thereby empowering communities to drive sustainable development and conservation efforts.

The Amazon Basin's fate is a global concern. Spanning eight countries and harboring unparalleled biodiversity, Amazonia stores vast carbon stocks while regulating climate and hydrological cycles across the continent. Yet the rainforest faces acute threats from deforestation, extraction, and climate change, with scientists warning of an approaching ecological "tipping point".

# The Challenge: Bridging Global Ambition with Local Action

Despite significant high-level frameworks and international financing, a critical gap persists between global ambitions and tangible conservation outcomes within Amazonian communities. Traditional top-down approaches often fail to empower local actors where environmental challenges are most acute, leading to an implementation deficit that jeopardizes the region's future.



## The Global-Local Divide

High-level programs, such as the IDB's "Amazonia Forever", aim for broad policy reforms and large-scale infrastructure. However, they often fall short in addressing immediate issues faced by local communities, like illegal mining and deforestation. This fundamental disconnect between international frameworks and the complex realities of local Amazon communities—with diverse indigenous cultures, varied land tenure, and geographic remoteness—remains a significant barrier to effective conservation and sustainable development.

## International Financing Flows

The Inter-American Development Bank has a long history in the Amazon, with its involvement dating back to 1959. Its "Amazonia Forever" initiative is targeting up to \$5 billion over ten years. Yet, due to the Amazon's vast scale and fragmented governance, these funds often struggle to reach the grassroots level. Local communities frequently lack the capacity, connections, or transparency mechanisms to effectively access and manage such funds. This results in well-intentioned capital failing to reach beneficiaries or translate into sustainable impact.

## Translating Policy into Action

The challenge remains: how can international financing and national policies translate into tangible conservation and sustainable livelihoods locally? This is critical in the Amazon due to its immense biodiversity, hundreds of distinct indigenous groups, and weak government presence in remote areas. The difficulty lies in respecting local autonomy, building trust, overcoming cultural barriers, and adapting broad policies to specific ecological and social contexts. Innovative mechanisms are needed to empower local communities, build their capacity, and bridge this profound implementation gap with culturally sensitive approaches.

# The Solution: Locally Owned "Cooperation Tables"

Cooperation tables are locally owned, multi-stakeholder governance platforms. Convened by subnational authorities and local leaders, these platforms foster direct dialogue, joint decision-making, and collective action, ensuring contextually relevant solutions that bridge macro-level policies with local realities.

## Multi-Stakeholder Inclusion

Indigenous nations, government, NGOs, and local leaders collaborate.

## Local Ownership

Agendas driven by local context and leadership.

## Complementary Approach

Bridges MDB programs with local realities.

## Why Traditional Approaches Fall Short

Traditional top-down coordination often fails in complex Amazonian systems due to a lack of local contextualization, ignoring indigenous knowledge, and an inability to resolve land-use conflicts or translate frameworks into concrete local action.

## The Mechanics of Cooperation Tables

Cooperation tables are dynamic, adaptive governance platforms rooted in participatory and multi-level governance. Their effective operational model includes:

1

### Inclusive Structure

Forums convene diverse representatives: indigenous, government, and NGOs.

2

### Joint Agenda Setting

Agendas co-created from local priorities.

3

### Consensus-Based Decision Making

Decisions reached through deliberation and consensus.

4

### Resource Mobilization

Identify local needs to direct impactful financing.

# Top-Down Coordination: Strengths and Limitations

Top-down mechanisms, such as ACTO and IDB's Amazonia Forever program, mobilize significant resources, enforce common standards, and address transboundary issues. For example, IDB's Amazonia Forever identified a \$1 billion project pipeline for 2023, coordinating funding and aligning countries on visions like "zero deforestation" and national integration of Amazon concerns.

## Global Reach & Resource Mobilization

Attracts international funding and political will for large-scale challenges.

## Policy Alignment & Standard Setting

Facilitates common environmental standards and targets across nations.

## Addressing Transboundary Issues

Crucial for coordinating efforts against cross-border threats.

## Persistent Weaknesses: The Disconnect

However, high-level initiatives often disconnect from local realities. Policies made in distant capital cities risk being out of touch with on-the-ground complexities, creating a structural gap.

### Lack of Local Contextualization

Policies often overlook the Amazon's ecological and socio-cultural diversity, making blanket policies unsuitable.

### Exclusion of Indigenous Knowledge

Despite centuries of sustainable land management, indigenous knowledge is often marginalized from policy.

### Implementation Hurdles & Limited Local Agency

Translating broad objectives into local action is challenging; centralized decisions limit local communities' agency.

## Parallels from Other Regions and Sectors

This policy disconnect is not unique, with similar challenges seen in:

- **African conservation efforts**, where protected areas created without local consultation led to human-wildlife conflict.

These examples highlight the critical need for top-down strategies to integrate bottom-up approaches, harmonizing global goals with local realities for sustainable outcomes.

# Bottom-Up Innovation: The Cooperation Table Model

Locally owned "cooperation tables" are multi-stakeholder platforms convened at subnational levels to coordinate conservation and development efforts. Typically initiated by forward-thinking provincial governments or local leader coalitions, these tables invite all relevant actors to participate as equals.

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## Stakeholder Convening

Indigenous nations, government agencies, NGOs, and community representatives gather regularly

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## Joint Planning

Participants develop shared territorial visions and coordinate project implementation

03

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## Resource Alignment

Previously isolated initiatives are pooled and aligned under local leadership

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## Accountability

Regular meetings create mutual accountability and transparent progress reporting





## Case Study: Morona Santiago's Breakthrough

Morona Santiago, Ecuador's second-largest province, achieved a groundbreaking milestone in 2023. The provincial government and four major indigenous organizations came together to establish the "Territory of Life and Ancestral Use Tarímiat Pujutai Nunka," protecting over 1.23 million hectares through joint provincial-indigenous framework.

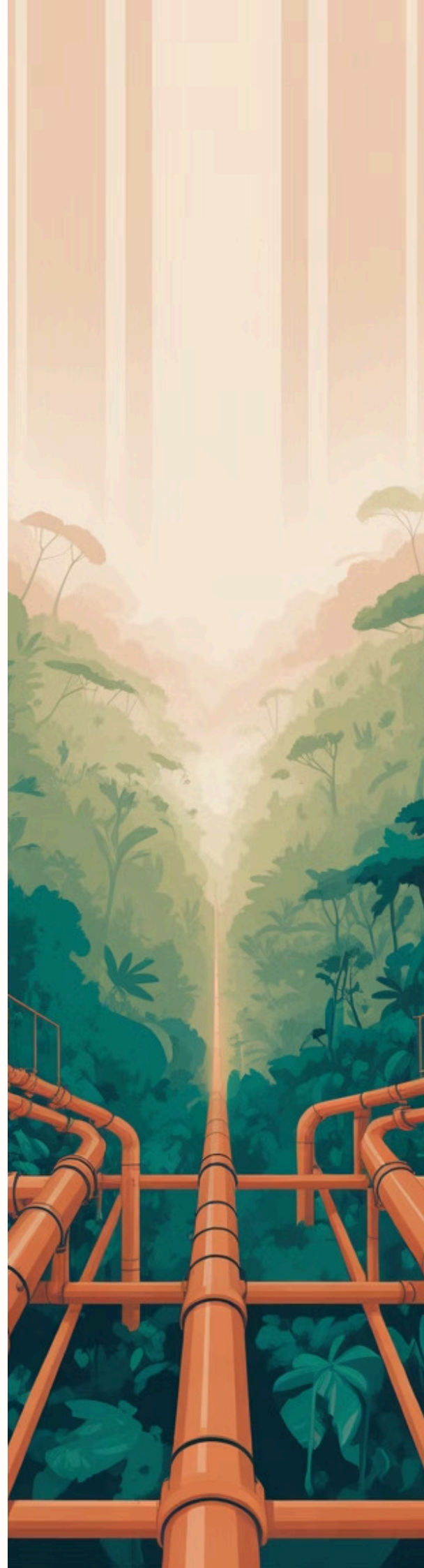
Following this territorial conservation initiative, Morona Santiago launched the first Cooperation Table for Conservation and Sustainable Development in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Led by the Provincial Prefecture's International Cooperation Office, the table convened more than 20 institutions, including indigenous federations, local governments, national ministry field offices, and international NGOs.

The cooperation table translated high-level agreements into tangible results. On June 27, 2025, the Prefecture and indigenous leaders signed the first seven Conservation Agreements with Shuar and Achuar communities, providing non-monetary incentives like solar-powered internet connectivity, home energy kits, and water purification systems.

# Scaling Success: Sucumbíos Replicates the Model

Inspired by Morona Santiago's success, Sucumbíos province launched its own Cooperation Table for Conservation and Sustainable Development in mid-2025. This northern Amazonian province, rich in oil reserves but facing intensive deforestation, demonstrates the model's adaptability to different contexts.

On July 30, 2025, the official launch workshop convened 50 representatives from environmental and social organizations. Participants collectively agreed on a participatory roadmap with three strategic axes: biodiversity conservation, sustainable production, and governance.



# Innovation at Scale: Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance

The Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance (ASHA) demonstrates bottom-up governance at bioregional scale. This coalition of over 30 indigenous nations and partner NGOs aims to protect 86 million acres of pristine rainforest in Ecuador and Peru's Amazon headwaters, a critical biodiversity hotspot and climate regulator.



## ASHA: A Coalition for Conservation and Culture

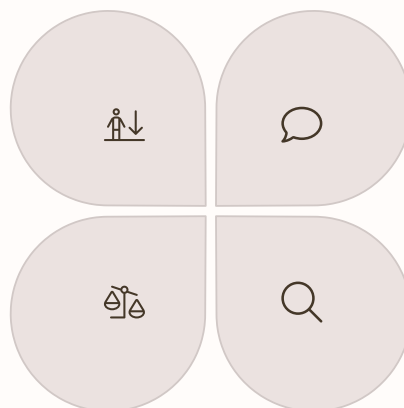
ASHA's unique structure integrates indigenous leadership with scientific and legal expertise. It's built on a foundation of mutual respect and shared objectives, empowering local communities who are the frontline guardians of the rainforest. The governance model emphasizes self-determination, ensuring that conservation strategies are culturally appropriate and community-led.

### Indigenous Nations

Over 30 nations, including Kichwa, Waorani, Achuar, and Shuar, lead conservation efforts rooted in traditional knowledge.

### Legal Counsel

Specialized lawyers assist in defending indigenous territorial rights and advocating for policy changes.



### NGO Partners

Strategic alliances with environmental and human rights organizations provide technical, legal, and financial support.

### Scientific Advisors

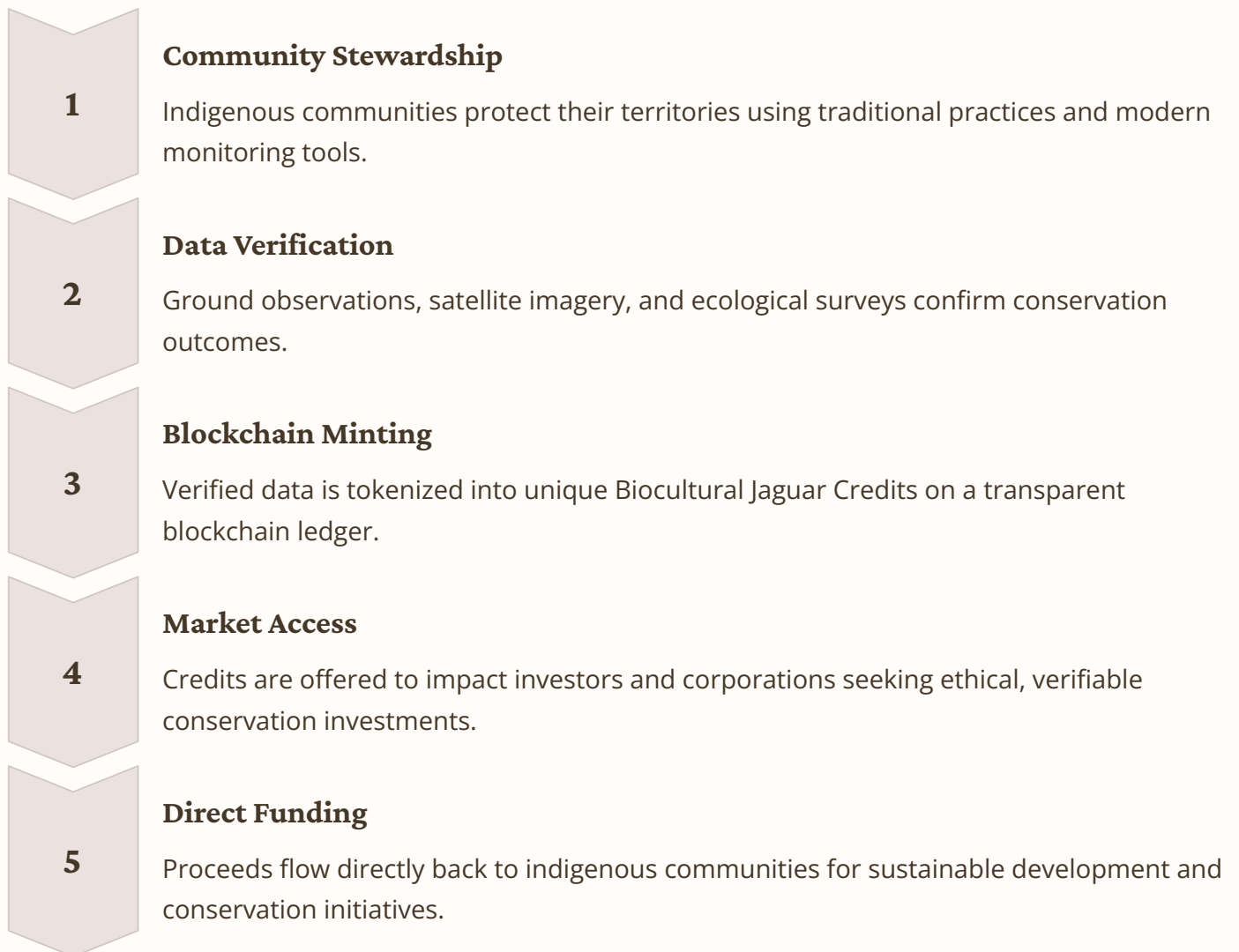
Ecologists, biologists, and climate scientists contribute data and expertise for evidence-based conservation.

# ASHA's Biocultural Jaguar Credits System

## Biocultural Jaguar Credits: A New Economic Model

ASHA's innovative "Biocultural Jaguar Credits" launched in March 2024, creating blockchain-based conservation tokens that channel resources directly to indigenous conservation efforts. These credits represent verified ecosystem stewardship, offering a novel market mechanism to fund vital preservation work.

Each credit signifies a unit of verified conservation impact, verified through a robust system combining indigenous ground monitoring with advanced satellite data and AI analytics. This ensures transparency and accountability, distinguishing Jaguar Credits from traditional carbon offset schemes by focusing on holistic biocultural preservation.



# ASHA's Impact and Future Vision

## Pilot Achievements and Future Vision

The pilot program for Jaguar Credits generated immediate and significant results. The initial launch event saw \$16,000 worth of credits purchased, with an additional \$27,500 committed by April 2024. This early success underscores a strong market demand for community-originated conservation solutions that respect indigenous sovereignty while delivering tangible environmental outcomes.

**86M**

### Acres Protected

Targeted area of pristine Amazon rainforest under bioregional conservation.

**\$43.5K**

### Initial Funding

Amount raised in the first month through Biocultural Jaguar Credits.

**30+**

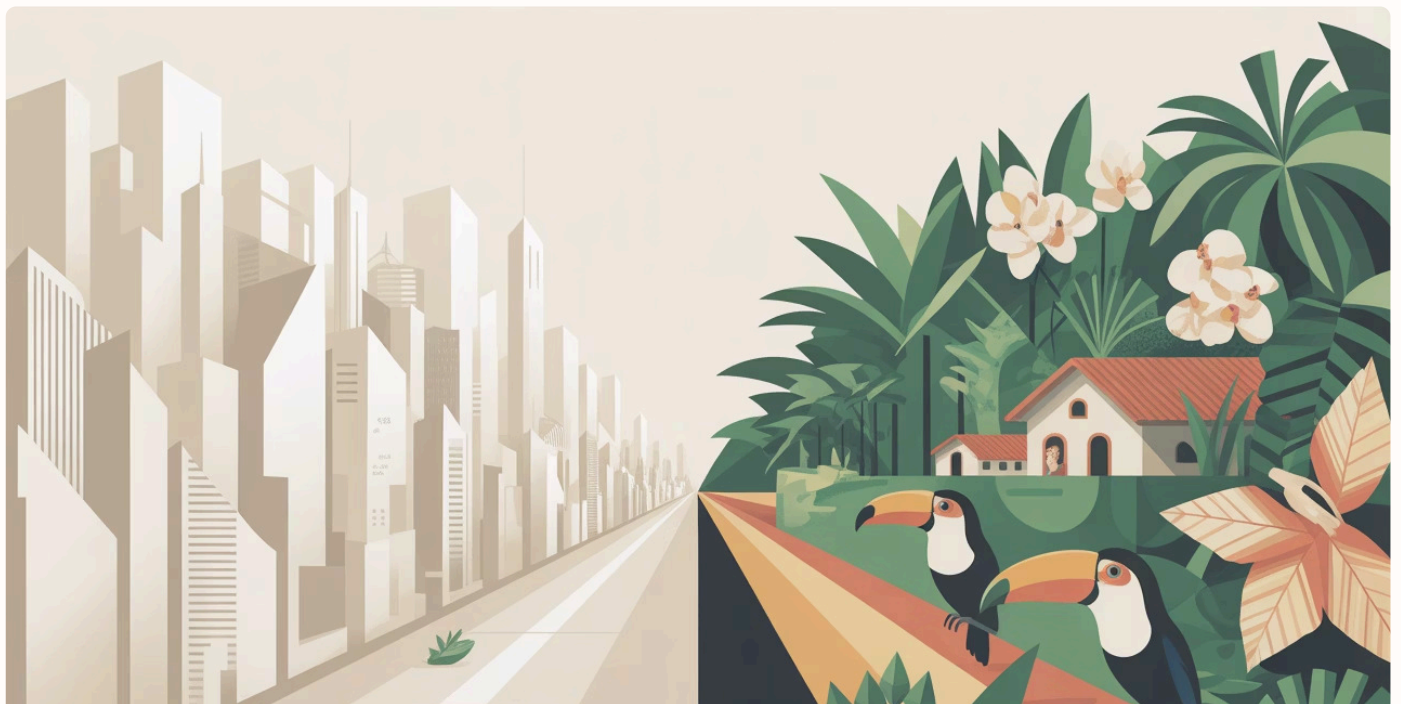
### Indigenous Nations

Coalition of diverse indigenous groups leading the conservation efforts.

Challenges include scaling the verification process, ensuring equitable distribution of funds, and navigating the complexities of international markets. Lessons learned emphasize the importance of continuous dialogue with indigenous communities, transparent technical infrastructure, and strategic partnerships for broader adoption.

## Broader Implications for Bioregional Governance

The ASHA model offers a powerful paradigm for the future of conservation, demonstrating that effective environmental protection can be achieved by empowering local stewards and creating innovative financial mechanisms. It highlights the potential for a new form of bioregional governance where ecological integrity and cultural preservation are intertwined, providing a blueprint for other critical ecosystems worldwide.





# The Promise: Why Cooperation Tables Work



## Local Context Integration

Indigenous and community leaders ensure traditional knowledge and actual needs shape agendas, resulting in culturally appropriate strategies with genuine buy-in.



## Horizontal Coherence

Different sectors coordinate within territories, reducing fragmentation that plagues top-down efforts and creating synergies between previously isolated initiatives.



## Nimble Response

Constant communication and trust-building enable rapid responses to emerging issues by leveraging collective capacities and resources.



## Capacity Building

Local leadership gains direct experience coordinating international cooperation, strengthening governance from the bottom up with lasting impact.

# The Fragility: Challenges to Sustainability

Despite their promise, cooperation tables face significant vulnerabilities that must be addressed for long-term success. Understanding these challenges is crucial for MDBs seeking to support such platforms effectively.



## Political Turnover

Local electoral cycles can disrupt continuity when new officials lack enthusiasm for predecessor initiatives. Formal institutionalization through ordinances and multi-year agreements is essential for mitigation.



## Leadership Dependency

Cooperation tables heavily rely on key champions. Without neutral secretariat support and robust accountability, platforms may falter if crucial conveners lose credibility or leave.



## Resource Constraints

Effective coordination requires stable funding for meetings, travel, communications, and dedicated coordinators. Without this operational support, inclusivity suffers and momentum dissipates.



## External Shocks

Crises such as oil spills, wildfires, or social conflicts can derail cooperation efforts, rigorously testing their crisis response capabilities and conflict resolution protocols.

## The Wider Movement: Polycentric Amazon Governance

Cooperation tables are part of a broader evolution toward polycentric and inclusive Amazon governance. Various initiatives echo the same principles, reinforcing this approach's credibility and momentum. Brazil's Consórcio Amazônia Legal formally unites nine Amazonian state governments in collective engagement with international partners like IDB. Indigenous organizations have formed cross-border networks, with COICA advocating for "Amazonia 80x25" (protecting 80% of the Amazon by 2025) through empowered indigenous territories.

Major environmental NGOs increasingly adopt participatory, landscape-level approaches. WWF's "Amazon Vision" emphasizes working with local communities and subnational authorities, while TNC invests in local governance capacity through indigenous ranger training and community conservancies. UN programs like UNDP's PROAmazonía explicitly support provincial climate and forest committees, creating territorial development councils that integrate agriculture, environment, and livelihoods - resonant with the cooperation table model.

# Strategic Recommendations for MDBs

## 1. Invest in Maintenance, Not Just Launch

MDBs should allocate dedicated funding for ongoing cooperation table operations throughout project lifecycles. Include budget lines for coordination platform support covering facilitator salaries, meeting costs, and small priority projects. Success indicator: Each Amazon-focused operation includes 1-2% budget for strengthening local multi-stakeholder platforms.

## 2. Embed Accountability and Transparency

Provide technical assistance for monitoring dashboards, public reporting portals, and independent observer systems. Partner with local NGOs or universities to issue accountability reports on partner commitments. Create annual "Amazon Territorial Governance Forums" where tables present results to national policymakers.

## 3. Leverage Tables for Global Commitments

Use cooperation tables as vehicles for COP30 and climate finance implementation. Pilot "Cooperation Table Challenge Funds" where provincial platforms submit proposals aligned with international goals, ensuring global funds reach local projects efficiently and transparently.

## 4. Pilot Hybrid Coordination Models

Design "Territorial Governance Accelerator" projects blending top-down and bottom-up coordination. Select representative regions across countries, establish enhanced cooperation tables, and link them to Regional Coordination Task Forces. This creates two-way flows, enabling local tables to inform regional policy while receiving guidance and resources.

## 5. Strengthen Local Leadership Capacity

Develop "Territorial Governance for Sustainable Amazonia" curriculum through IDB Academy, offering training in inclusive facilitation, conflict resolution, and participatory planning. Sponsor exchanges between successful tables and provide leadership fellowships for women and youth from Amazon communities.

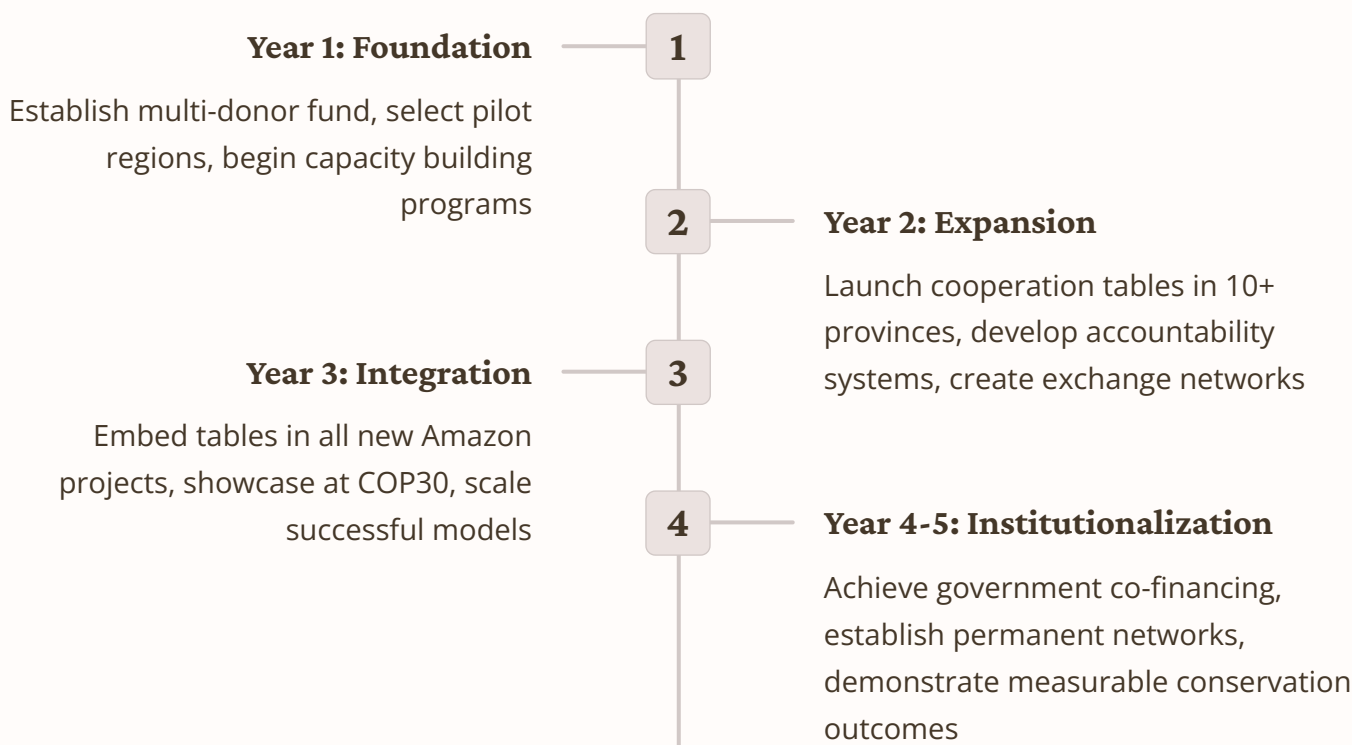
## 6. Integrate Tables into Project Design

Formally recognize cooperation tables in stakeholder engagement plans and safeguard policies. Use existing tables as primary consultation channels rather than creating parallel structures. Link disbursements to functioning multi-stakeholder platforms with regular meetings and published reports.

# Final Recommendation and Implementation

## 7. Foster Multi-Donor Collaboration

Lead coalition-building among MDBs, UN agencies, bilateral donors, and NGOs to establish joint Amazon territorial governance fund. Share financial loads while maintaining common standards and lesson-sharing protocols. Engage Amazonian stakeholders in fund governance to ensure responsiveness to ground needs.



## Conclusion: A New Paradigm for Amazon Conservation

The Amazon rainforest stands at a critical juncture, demanding adapted approaches. Locally owned cooperation tables offer a practical vehicle to implement global goals, operating where policies meet reality—among the people who ultimately decide the forest's fate. For MDB professionals, the message is clear: supporting these tables—through dedicated funding, integration into projects, and active listening—will vastly increase intervention effectiveness.

In a few short years, we can envision a pan-Amazon network of cooperation tables covering vast rainforest areas, embodying the essence of polycentric governance. Looking towards COP30 and beyond, MDBs should champion a new narrative: international financing empowering local institutions to strengthen Amazonian governance and uphold the dignity and agency of its peoples, ensuring forest guardians are also architects of its future.

The Amazon is not just the "Lungs of the Earth," but also its heart. Strengthening local cooperation tables ensures that heart beats strong.