

Say “no” to the climate stowaway policy!



Although Latin America and the Caribbean are not great greenhouse gas emitters, they cannot keep being timid players in the imperious need of mitigating climate change, the most concerning civil and government problem of the 21st century. Urgent matters are restricting deforestation, fostering a cleaner agriculture, and decarbonizing their economies.

By Amira Abultaif Kadamani

Photos Ximena Serrano, Milagro Castro

DOI https://doi.org/10.12804/dvcn_10336.35994_num6

China emits 23.9 percent of greenhouse gases (GG); the United States, 11.84 percent; Russia, 4 percent; and Indonesia, 3.48 percent, according to 2020 data from [Climate Watch](#). India is not included in these metrics, although there are [others](#) that state it is responsible for around 7 percent of the worldwide total emissions. Meanwhile, the European Union, that is considered a block even because of the common climate policies and goals shared by all 27 member states, emits 6.81 percent.

Within this top 6 biggest emitters an intense battle is fought, as in many other countries, to align economic growth with



environmental sustainability. Amid the geopolitical turmoil, different arguments have appeared related to the climate crisis, such as “until the other parts commit and show real actions, I will not do so; I won’t make efforts on my own,” or “let’s wait until the others react, so I can profit.” This “climate stowaway” thought embodies a double tragedy: on the one hand, it has made most nations abide by that logic and feel less responsible, and on the other hand, it led to the dilemma of cooperation, as it is known in scientific literature. Because in the end, with this logic, nobody does anything.

The planet is heating up quite rapidly. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), [between 2030 and](#)

↑
Renewable energy sources contribute to the emitting profile of the region.

[2052, the global surface temperature increase will be very close to a 1.5°C](#), which would make Earth lose its stability before expected. In this context, the [Paris Agreement \(AP\)](#) was signed in 2015 as a regulatory framework agreed upon by 196 countries that, before the IPCC alerts, have defined goals for mitigating GG emissions as established by nations according to their own criteria. This was called the [nationally determined contributions \(NDC\)](#), which, it should be said, are not binding or subject to compliance assurance by an independent, multi-lateral scientific body. In this sense, the [Sustainable Development Goals \(DSG\)](#) were outlined and accepted that year. These goals set out the principle of action by governments, companies, academia, and other organizations in sustainability.

However, some years later, results have been scarce. At this stage, these acquired commitments, as stated by the [United Nations \(UN\)](#), would only help reduce a third of the amount required to avoid a 2°C temperature increase by 2100. “The

environmental governance stage, almost seven years after signing the AP and adopting the SDG is heterogeneous, ambiguous, and, ultimately, negative,” says Franchini, professor at the Faculty of International, Political and Urban Studies at Universidad del Rosario, and his colleague [Ana Carolina Evangelista](#), professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.

Latin America and the Caribbean are a clear representation of this scenario. For the internationalist [Matías Franchini](#), who has done research on global environmental governance and climate change policies for more than a decade, “analyzing the bigger picture, the degree of commitment in the region to mitigate the climate crisis is low to medium, and given its emission level (8 percent), it is conceived as a moderately conservative player within climate governance.”

Naturally, this is not a complimentary conclusion, considering that the atmosphere is a global asset, and it is less so knowing that the majority of the population in this side of the world, at 660 million people, [is at high or extreme climate risk](#), especially in the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, and certain areas in the Andes. The vulnerability is not only given by the physical exposure to increasingly stronger climate events but also by the limited capabilities of adaptation, as expressed by Franchini in a study published in 2021 by [Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics](#). In the study, he analyzes the performance of several Latin American and Caribbean countries to fight against the climate crisis.

In his analysis, Franchini starts from two fundamental axis: the trajectories of GG emissions and the type of public policies in each country, taking as a main reference those countries with a higher impact in the regional



When countries reopened business activities after the lockdowns, economies resumed their old ways.



aggregate (which, in order, would be Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Venezuela). These five nations represent 80 percent of regional emissions, and only Brazil represents a third thereof (see chart with relevant information by country). Moreover, since the Paris Agreement, the level of climate commitment in the region has deteriorated, as a consequence of the environmental governance degradation in Brazil and Mexico.

For the author, the three main characteristics of the emitting profile in the region are the high but decreasing emissions related to agriculture and land use changes, mainly due to deforestation and cultivation in forested areas, the relatively high but declining participation of renewable energy sources in the energy matrix, and agriculture emissions higher than the global average. Thus, the bigger challenges in the region are to

“Ambiguity is Duque’s environmental legacy”

For Matías Franchini, Iván Duque’s government management in environmental matters, in general, and climate matters, in particular, is ambiguous. By the end of 2020, his government presented before the United Nations Climate Convention a new nationally determined contribution that involves reducing 51% of the greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, a rather ambitious goal that caused surprise nationally and globally. However, according to Franchini, the technical basis to determine said figure is unclear, as is its viability. Truth is, this statement generated a positive impact that allowed Duque to project the country as an environmental leader.

“However, there is a very marked ambiguity: on the one hand, an international speech that shows Colombia as a climate leader renowned by the international community, especially the United States; on the other hand, within the country, we can see an increase in the deforestation levels and in murders of environmental leaders, a situation that shamefully puts the country in the first place in this category. Also, there weren’t many big green growth measures in the economic recovery package after the pandemic and, additionally, there is still support for fracking, a measure that certainly does not show climate leadership.” In turn, for Germán Poveda, professor at



control deforestation, foster a cleaner agriculture, and decarbonize the economies. However, a measure that does not help in this sense is that all countries in this region of the world are subsidizing fossil fuels, even those that have established taxes on carbon, which are actually [extremely low](#) (from US\$1 to 3 in Mexico, up to US\$6 in Colombia, by ton emitted, compared to US\$140 in Sweden, for instance).

Faced with [environmental governance](#) (all the rules, tools, practices, and institutions that preserve, protect, and also exploit the environment), Franchini highlights how, in the previous five years, it has dwindled in the main state players. Brazil and Mexico are the most outstanding cases: the former, being led by a president who openly denies the climate crisis, and the latter, being led by one who thinks oil is the key to develop its economy. They both decide on their own, some-



Matías Franchini, Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Government and International Relations at Universidad del Rosario, has been researching global environmental governance and climate change policies for over a decade.



thing that is common in the region. “Except for some blocks of Central American and Caribbean nations, countries in Latin America do not negotiate together or have similar positions in climate change negotiations for two main reasons: their economic and foreign interests are different, and their integration strategies change depending on the governing party. Thus, any integration project stays a myth,” explains Franchini.

Individual actions matter a lot

Even though States are usually repositories of all the responsibilities, this is merely a mirage that does not take pity in the reality shown by this new period we are living in: the Anthropocene, determined by the impact exerted by the human being on the environment.

Universidad Nacional de Colombia and former member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, since 2015, the management of the last two government offices is rather poor in climate terms:

“Although Colombia has cleared its conscience saying that we emit less than 1% of greenhouse gases, this argument is not valid to have maintained for so long real -not ideal- politics of inaction before threats, risks, and impacts caused by climate change. This is a very timid and late goal.”

Considering that a third of the Colombian emissions arise from deforestation, we should focus our public policies there, in order to mitigate climate change. Now, the overwhelming loss of forests, particularly in Amazonia, is a problem that

did not arise in the recent years, and that was known to aggravate after signing the Peace Agreement with FARC, as warned by environmental entities of different levels and the very government of Juan Manuel Santos. However, the right measures to contain or counterbalance the impacts were not taken. What are these measures? “Controlling the territory, having State presence, implementing the Peace Agreement and establishing new mechanisms so that populations that enter illicit economies can have licit substitutes for their economic sustenance. The matter has such a magnitude that one may say that, if Colombia manages to control or mitigate deforestation, it will be able to solve a series of historical problems in the country,” concludes Franchini.

México

- It has national policies for climate since 2007, and a national law on climate change since 2012. Thanks to these, the [Sistema Nacional del Clima \(Sinacc\)](#) [National Climate System], an organization and bureaucracy structure to fight climate change, and the [Ley General de Cambio Climático](#) [General Act on Climate Change], were created. And, in 2016, the [Ley de Transición Energética \(LTE\)](#) [Act on Energy Transition] was issued. However, the impact of these measures in GG emissions has been limited. The climate agenda has declined since the government of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) and keeps losing strength with López Obrador, for whom oil is the engine of economic growth.
- In 2014, it became the first country to establish a carbon tax of U\$S 1-3 per ton emitted from fossil fuels.
- Spends around 3.7% of its GDP to subsidize fossil fuels.
- Although it aimed at reducing per capita emissions to 5 tons of CO₂e in 2030, this is an insufficient goal for Climate Action Tracker.

Panorama of the five climatic powers in the region

Argentina

- In 2016, the Gabinete Nacional de Cambio Climático [National Bureau on Climate Change] was created, which defined action plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate its impact.
- In 2019, a national climate law was issued, establishing a basic guideline for climatic measures and bureaucratic structures to fight climate change. It also outlined a program of adaptation and mitigation, but it has had little impact. During the government of Alberto Fernández (2019-ongoing), the exploration of fossil fuels has been a priority.
- The carbon tax applied in this country is U\$S 5 per ton emitted.
- Spends around 4.6% of its GDP to subsidize fossil fuels.
- Aims to reduce CO₂e per capita emissions to 10 tons by 2030, but according to Climate Action Tracker, this is insufficient even considering the lack of development of programs to mitigate climate change.
- Expanded the share of solar and wind energy within its energy matrix from 2% in 2016 to 8% in 2019.

Colombia

- In 2015, it launched its low carbon development strategy, which includes sectorial plans to achieve mitigation objectives in energy, transportation, agriculture, industry, waste and housing areas.
- In 2018, the [Ley del Cambio Climático \[Act on Climate Change\]](#) was issued.
- Spends around 2.8% of its GDP to subsidize fossil fuels.
- One of the most severe environmental issues is rampant deforestation. According to data from the [Ministry of the Environment](#), in 2021 174,103 hectares of natural forest were lost, 1.5 % more than in 2020, although the way to showcase the data has been criticized by several environmental organizations ([more information here](#)).
- [Since 2021](#), the carbon tax applied in this country is of around \$17.660 Colombian pesos (around US\$ 6 then) per ton emitted, the highest in the region, but still way beyond necessary.
- Its goal is to diminish CO_{2e} emissions by 11.2 tons by 2030, and this objective helps having a climatic law and a low-carbon development strategy.

Venezuela

- This country has not issued information on greenhouse gas emissions since the 1990s, so it is very difficult to assess its nationally determined contributions to face the climate crisis on a scientific basis.
- According to the available data, the goal to diminish per capita emissions to 8.5 CO_{2e} tons by 2030 is not very ambitious and quite improbable (not to say impossible) to be met, considering the lack of experience and capacity to address climate issues.
- From information published in 2013, we know that this country spent 26.5% of its GDP to subsidize fossil fuels that year, which made the gas gallon price to be the cheapest in the world.
- There are no climate change policies established nor programs or strategies to limit emissions in terms of forest protection or management of energy matrix.
- Its speech follows the argument of holding western developed economies accountable for climate change, so they should be handling this crisis.

Brasil

- This country saw a dramatic increase in deforestation, reaching 13.235 km² between August 2020 and July 2021, the largest devastation of tropical forests in 15 years, according to the [Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Espaciales \(INPE\)](#) [National Institute of Space Research].
- Since 2010, there is national legislation on climate including mitigation goals and long-term adaptation, and the transition to a sustainable, low carbon economy. It also established the need for having tools such as carbon markets, carbon taxes and climate funds.
- Since 2011, the development and implementation of climate policies in the country stalled, and receded during the - offices of Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), Michel Temer (2016-2019) and Jair Bolsonaro (2019-ongoing). The latter is especially negligent to control deforestation, which increased 34% within the first year of his tenure.
- Spends around 3% of its GDP to subsidize fossil fuels.
- Its goals are to reduce per capita emissions to 5,2 tons of CO_{2e}* by 2030, but this is an insufficient goal for [Climate Action Tracker](#), an independent scientific organization that analyzes and monitors actions in every country compared to the commitments agreed upon at the Paris Agreement.

* CO_{2e} means "equivalent carbon dioxide" and is used to assess the "emission impacts (or avoid emission) of different gases that produce the greenhouse effect."
Source: [Mongabay](#)

Under this perspective, it is not a set of powers or government agents who sovereignly fix, in absolute terms, the climate path; better yet, individual actions magnify themselves in synergies.

Clearly, the States' reaction and ability to act is insufficient to make the drastic changes that this crisis demands. In this sense, it is essential to intervene individually, including agents in various levels, such as universities, cities, regions, social movements, political parties, etc.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us that both the interrelationship of global matters and individual actions spread and contribute to our shared future. However, this flashing conscience from the pandemic in its roles was just "a swallow that, precisely, did not foretell the summer," as the popular saying goes.

Months after the first reopening after quarantine, economies retook the practices of what they knew how to do in the old ways, amid the limitations that were still imposed by the global sanitary emergency.

Today, two and a half years later, the recovery is evident, but no less overwhelming. "The global economy has recovered from the pandemic recession with some particularities, such as the high public indebtedness, the disruption of global value chains, and high inflation; however, the structure of stimuli that guide the economic players is still being short-term profit without big transformations in terms of sustainability," comment Franchini and Evangelista in a [joint publication in April on the environmental crisis, the pandemic and the worldwide geopolitical conflict](#).

For the researchers, "the most valuable, and painful, lesson that the pandemic has taught us to address the global environmental crisis is that, when faced with existential crisis, humanity can react, but in a late, costly, and excluding way."

The window to moderate climate effects is getting smaller, and the severity of the complex environmental challenges require "a deep, global and transversal governance that means progressively substituting the dominance of selfish, immediate interests of societies and individuals with the search of the global well-being in the long term."

It is true that Latin America and the Caribbean have, for decades, suffered from poverty, lack of growth, authoritarianism, insecurity, and violence, among others. Their social, political, and economic agendas have these issues as a priority over other topics. But, hopefully, it is not too late to understand that speaking of environmental imbalance, the urgent matters are, indeed, the most pressing. ■