

# Mexico and the International Environmental Agenda

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Beawiharta Beawiharta/REUTERS

Flooding is one of the most visible consequences of climate change.

Few in the world today would deny the importance of the environmental agenda and the need for international cooperation to deal with the challenges of climate change and other ills endangering the life of the planet. Fortunately, the community of nation's interest in environmental problems is increasing, among other reasons because of

1. the end of the Cold War, which makes it possible to pay attention to issues other than militarism and the arms race;
2. the growing amount of information available about the challenges to our ecosystems;
3. recurring natural phenomena like hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and/or earthquakes, that become disasters because of many countries' scant preparation;
4. the increased perception that environmental problems are closely linked to other challenges for societies, for example, in the fields of sanitation and food production and distribution; and
5. the enormous economic cost of environmental deterioration.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

For these reasons one concept more and more frequently used by ecologists and social scientists is "environmental security."

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This alludes to different issues, outstanding among them the effects of environmental deterioration on societies and its associated potential for conflict. However, there is no consensus on the definition of the concept. For example, one definition couples it with the adverse affects of human activities on the environment, including military activities, since it is conceived as a global public good, valuable for current or future human life. Another weighs the effects of environmental changes, particularly scarcity due to environmental degradation, on the stability of the most vulnerable countries. In this sense, it recognizes that this degradation may not be the only cause of violent conflicts, but could very well contribute to their breaking out, particularly when combined with other elements of vulnerability or government weakness, low legitimacy of authorities, and other factors. It would also be wise to weigh unsustainable behavior by some companies (like those in the fields of oil and mining) and the corruption related to the use of natural resources.

Another definition of the concept underlines the effects of environmental changes in human security and the well-being of populations. This includes, among other things, natural disasters with variable degrees of anthropogenic causality. Despite societies' being increasingly aware that environmental devastation endangers human life and that ecocide is a threat to security, voices have been raised to express concern about what they consider the "securitization" of the environmental agenda. One argument is based on the interpretation that the concept of environmental security was coined with the sole aim of situating the environment in the sphere of "high politics" for "sinister purposes." There is also a risk of militarizing the issue, that is, that the military participate in determining agendas that, presumably, do not fall within their purview. Some say that it is not unthinkable that environmental security rhetoric could be used to justify military operations in the name of "protecting global resources." The case of the Chinese soldiers stationed in Darfur to protect oil platforms is just one example.

Others find in the environmental security discourse another hegemonic resource of the "North," since its definition depends to a great extent on how "someone's security" is defined. These same people point to the need to include the vision of the countries of the "South" in any concept developed. Some oppose an analysis of the dynamics of the control of resources like oil, diamonds, or precious woods to the vision of environmental security threatened by resource degradation.

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#### THE ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In 1987, the *Our Common Future* report introduced the concept of sustainable development: the practice that assigns responsibilities to today's generations in their interrelationship with their natural surroundings, which has been, and clearly continues to be, very destructive.<sup>2</sup> Thus, sustainable development is defined as satisfying the needs of today without compromising those of future generations.

The concept itself implies a very important change in the idea of sustainability, mainly ecological sustainability, and proposes an analytical framework that also emphasizes the economic and social context in which development takes place. The aim of sustainable development is to satisfy human needs assuming that there are restrictions of different kinds:

1. ecological: that is, it promotes the conservation of the planet Earth;
2. moral: based on renouncing consumption levels that not all individuals can aspire to;
3. regarding economic growth in places where the most basic needs are not satisfied, that is, in the poor countries;
4. demographic control, mainly regarding birth rates;
5. not endangering the natural systems that sustain life on Earth;
6. the conservation of ecosystems must be subordinate to human welfare, since not all ecosystems can be preserved in their virgin state; and
7. the use of non-renewable resources must be as efficient as possible.

Aspiring to sustainable development requires understanding that inaction will have consequences and that, therefore, institutional structures must be changed and certain forms

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of individual and social behavior fostered to attain the aforementioned ends.

Despite increased environmental awareness worldwide, this is not reflected in the actions of the institutions necessary for attacking the problem. Suffice it to mention that, to date, no multilateral international body is specifically dedicated to environmental issues. The UN has only one environmental program, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), created on the recommendation of the 1972 UN Conference on Human Development in Stockholm. Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, the UNEP coordinates activities in this area, offering assistance to member countries to implement appropriate environmental policies and foster sustainable development.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE KYOTO PROTOCOL

In the absence of a full-fledged international body, it has been necessary to deposit environmental responsibility in specific instruments like the Kyoto Protocol. This international agreement's aim is to reduce approximately 5 percent compared to 1990 levels the emissions of six gases responsible for global warming (carbon dioxide, or CO<sub>2</sub>; methane gas, CH<sub>4</sub>; nitrous oxide, N<sub>2</sub>O; and three industrial fluoride gases: hydrofluorocarbons, or HFC; perfluorocarbons, or PFC; and sulfur hexafluoride, or SF<sub>6</sub>) between 2008 and 2012.

This instrument operates in the context of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), written in 1992 during the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit. The protocol made binding what the UNFCCC could not at that time. The main objective is to diminish anthropogenic climate change based on the greenhouse effect. According to UN figures, the average temperature of the planet's surface will increase between 1.4 and 5.8 degrees Celsius from now until 2100, which

could make life on Earth impossible. In reference to the Kyoto Protocol, the European Commission has stated that these changes will have a grave impact on the ecosystem and its economies.

#### FROM COPENHAGEN TO CANCÚN

Thus, given that the Kyoto commitment must be renewed to avoid further global warming, the UNFCCC has been organizing international climate change conferences since 1995. Last year, Copenhagen played host to the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Climate Change, which proposed coming to a consensus on a legally binding agreement about the measures for mitigating climate change starting in 2012. The discussion centered on three topics:

1. The reduction of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) by the developed countries. The European Union, for example, announced a plan to reduce its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 20 percent by 2020 (a goal adopted in 2008), but no other country has set concrete reduction goals. Barack Obama also announced the United States' desire to reduce its emissions, and decided to participate in the summit, where he promised large investments in renewable energy sources. However, the developing and poorest countries demanded bigger efforts by the United States and that developed countries drastically reduce their polluting emissions.
2. The dilemma in the developing countries is how to promote development without damaging nature. These countries argue that most climate change has been caused by the richest countries. Nevertheless, some developing countries have also committed to reducing their emissions. In March 2009, Mexico was the first developing country to propose a drastic reduction in polluting gases, committing to cut its emissions 50 percent by 2050. Worldwide, Mexico is responsible for 1.6 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, it introduced into the debate the issue of voluntary commitments, in addition to the mandated-contractual commitments that are hoped for at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Climate Change.
3. With regard to aid to poor countries so they can adapt to the imperatives of reducing emissions, Mexico once again has shown leadership by proposing something

new: a World Fund for Climate Change (or Green Fund) to complement the current system.

#### MITIGATION, ADAPTATION, AND THE GREEN FUND

The so-called Green Fund would create a financing system under the aegis of the convention and with the participation of all its members for increasing the scale of global mitigation efforts. Two issues are at play in the current negotiations: mitigation and adaptation. The first refers to concrete actions for attacking the problem, and the second is based on a financial package to help countries to implement those measures.

Certainly, opinions are divided between those who support the Green Fund proposal and those who are reticent, particularly with regard to earmarking funds. To solve this problem Mexico also proposed the concept of differentiated responsibilities, so that all the developed countries who want to use the fund can participate and contribute to it. In exceptional cases, the nations officially known as “least developed” could also benefit from the fund without contributing money to it. This financing system would come under the most intense scrutiny to guarantee it be used appropriately.

Mexico’s role in the negotiations in support of policies to fight climate change can also be seen in the fact that the 16<sup>th</sup> United Nations Conference on Climate Change will be held in Cancún next December, where it is hoped there will finally be a binding agreement. As mentioned before, a series of countries are pushing for voluntary commitments, many of them discretely. This is a matter for concern because if nations do not comply with what they promise, they assume no legal responsibility and are not accountable at all. In any case, voluntary commitments should complement and not replace binding commitments, because without the latter, there can be no appropriate environmental governability in the face of the global warming challenge.

It should be remembered that Mexico’s experience has been good in dealing with the environmental issue, even in trade negotiations, as demonstrated by the 1994 side agreement to the North American Free Trade Agreement. That agreement created the Commission on Environmental Cooperation of North America (CEC), whose aim is to deal with environmental matters of common concern, contribute to preventing environmental conflicts arising from trade relations, and promoting effective enforcement of environmental leg-

islation in the three member countries. The CEC is not a supra-national but rather an intergovernmental body; its strategic objective is to ensure environmental sustainability in markets and regional protection of the environment.

The CEC is not only important because it links economic and trade activities to the environment, but also because it puts forward a series of opportunities to promote environmentally friendly technologies, which in today’s conditions, create a variety of alternatives in a world in need of “clean economic options.” Proposals like making polluters pay for environmental damage are echoed in the spirit of that accord.

Environmental problems respect no borders, which is why concerted action is needed to deal with them. We need go no further than to cite the April 20 explosion in the Gulf of Mexico’s Macondo Prospect, which sparked an oil spill of tens of millions of gallons in the area, considered the worst oil accident in history. The U.S. government blames oil giant British Petroleum, which has used different mechanisms to “plug” the leak, unsuccessfully, at least at the time of this writing. Part of the problem is the huge depth of the oil spill. And while the contamination is particularly affecting the United States, Mexico is also suffering from the fallout, which is why Mexican legislators have voted to investigate it. It would be important, then, for example, for the CEC to take this issue in hand, given that it affects two NAFTA signers.

Unfortunately, few trade agreements reflect any concern about the environment. Nevertheless, Mexico has important experience in this area that it could share with other nations, precisely at a time when the international community is forced to join forces to overcome the environmental problems plaguing it. ■■

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#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> This socio-economic report was written for the UN by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), headed by Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, which is why it is also known as the Brundtland Report. It is available at <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>. [Editor’s Note.]