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## Mexico's Environmental Crisis, a Step Backwards?



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To some, September 27, 1962 will sound like the remote past; however, certain discussions of that time have returned to remind us that humanity, and Mexico in particular, has a long road ahead for building what we can truly call sustainable development.

On April 3, 1963, the CBS television network published Rachel Carson's report *Silent Spring*, which shows how the rates of production and consumption prevalent then were not sustainable over time and were profoundly affecting the natural foundation that sustains life on this planet, including human life. After that, debates arose over the limits to growth. In the 1980s the first global strategies for the conservation of nature were announced, and international institutions were established to focus on this problem. Later, at the 1992 Rio Summit, the first major global agreement on the environment and development was reached.

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More than 60 years ago, humanity became aware of the limits of a civilization model that has made great progress in terms of health, life expectancy, reducing poverty, and improving the quality of life but that, nevertheless, is putting the existence of humanity as we know it today at grave risk.

To resolve this conflict between economic growth, well-being, and the planet's sustainability, the key elements for sustainable development, we have generated scientific knowledge, trained many specialists, and established global and national institutions that are creating the tools to relaunch our civilization toward a new way of enjoying nature that will allow for its recovery and sustainability.

Over this same time span, we have seen the world's population grow from almost 3 billion in 1960 to 7.8 billion in 2020—and we are expecting it to reach more than 9.2 billion by 2050—and we have experienced the expansion of the capitalist economic model through globalization. Both processes, along with the accelerated devastation of nature, have caused enormous social inequalities that have

produced global political changes, expressed in recent years in the emergence of government leaders with populist, xenophobic, and anti-liberal tendencies.

In Mexico, the change of government in December 2018 produced a real shake-up in national environmental policies and institutions. Since the 1980s, in response to global discussions on the problems derived from economic growth, the country had been building a legal and institutional framework in favor of environmental sustainability. The current administration considers that this framework is part of what it classifies as a neoliberal economic model and has taken on the task of dismantling it.

However, the first blow to Mexico's environmental agenda was in December 2013, when Enrique Peña created the Hydrocarbon Sector National Agency for Industrial Safety and Environmental Protection (ASEA) as a decentralized body of the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat), with technical and managerial autonomy. It was given authority to manage, evaluate, and sanction everything in the hydrocarbon sector related to the environment, becoming both judge and jury, and, in effect, removing all powers to limit the energy sector from the Semarnat, the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (Profepa), and the rest of the environmental institutions. The objective was to eliminate all obstacles to energy reform in order to, as explicitly stated, restore economic growth, prioritizing the economy over ecology.

That administration continued to weaken environmental policies by amending the General Law for Ecological Balance and Environmental Protection, approved during Felipe Calderón's administration (2006-2012), and making other legal provisions like the General Law for Sustainable Forest Development. The pretext was to eliminate overregulation of the sector and promote sustainable forest management and forest conservation; however, it opened the door to changes in land use to allow for the growth of urban centers and infrastructure.

The general trend during those years was to promote legal changes that seemed positive for protecting the environment and the ecological system, but incorporated critical modifications in the legal and regulatory framework that, in fact, permitted setbacks in environmental measures. This was accompanied by taking political control of the sector's emblematic institutions such as the National Commission on Protected Natural Areas (Conanp) and the National Forestry Commission (Conafor), which

up until then had been headed by environmental specialists, and reducing the sector's budget as of 2016.

When Andres Manuel López Obrador's administration (2018-2024) began —characterized by notable presidential centralism, imposing his agendas without consensus, affirming he was elected by 30 million votes (53 percent of the votes cast)—, Mexico turned toward what has been called an anti-neoliberal government. The goals are to put an end to corruption and “governing mafias,” make social justice a reality, and recuperate the state's role as the axis of development, including recovering leadership in the energy sector through the state enterprises Pemex and the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE).

The 2019-2024 National Development Plan (PND) states that it will promote the country's sustainable development based on the definition used in the Bruntland Report in 1987,<sup>1</sup> and explicitly states,

Ignoring this paradigm not only leads to generating all kinds of imbalances in the short run, but also leads to severely violating the rights of future generations. Therefore, the Federal Executive will always take into account the impact its policies and programs will have on the fabric of society, on ecology, and on the country's political and economic future. Additionally, it will be guided by a concept of development that remedies social injustices and promotes economic growth without affecting peaceful coexistence, ties of solidarity, cultural diversity, or the environment.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the above, the PND mentions no objectives, no goals, nor any specific actions in this area, and assumes that sustainability will be promoted through nine social programs. Most of these are based on direct transfers to the beneficiaries, and with the exception of one (Sowing Life) have nothing to do with the environment, ecology, or improving the conditions of natural resources.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, while the Sowing Life program is based on the logic of restoring a million hectares by implementing agroecological systems for food production in regions with high levels of marginalization, it has been sharply criticized for apparently inducing deforestation in critical parts of the country such as Chiapas, Tabasco, and the Yucatán peninsula, and for its limited results thus far.<sup>4</sup>

The 2020-2024 Sectoral Program for the Environment and Natural Resources (PMA), published July 7, 2020, un-

derlines that the problems in this area are due to overwhelming human appropriation of resources and that “natural resources are not infinite.” While this perspective is fundamentally correct, it sounds like it was taken from The Club of Rome’s discussions in the 1960s, possibly a simplistic version that overlooks the alternatives for transforming Mexico’s economic foundations, constructed over more than 40 years, such as promoting renewable energy sources or technology for treating waste waters.

Looking beyond the policy documents that regulate Mexico’s new environmental policies, what is most important is the underlying questioning of the legal framework and the institutions created. They were viewed as structures that accompanied and facilitated the neoliberal model, wherein the government apparatus did not question or limit the excesses caused by economic growth and, above all, where economic and social inequality grew while the degradation of ecosystems and natural resources continued.

Most of the country’s environmental specialists and activists see the government’s change of course on environmental policies as a good thing. They believe it attacks the deepest roots of the problems derived from a system that does not consider the planet’s limitations or the natural cycles required to replenish resources. That model caused serious problems such as climate change and the accelerated extinction of species —the same issues that have been present since the 1960s. Nevertheless, beyond rejecting previous policies, this government does not seem to have a clear proposal for solving environmental problems. There have been two ministers of the environment in less than two years. The second resigned after severely criticizing the government’s —and the president’s— incoherence regarding the policies they seek to implement. The current minister, María Luisa Albores González, is a specialist in social economics, not in environmental issues.

The profiles of those now in charge of the environmental ministry and their lack of experience in the area do not necessarily imply that they will manage it poorly. However, anecdotes and information do suggest total subordination of the environmental institutions to major projects and six-year programs and what appears to be a development policy dictated by a very small group within the federal government, rather than policies that aim to limit the excesses of unsustainable economic growth and seek to assure the sustainability of productive activities and infrastructure construction. Therefore, it is not clear that the

new policies, as described in federal programs, are appropriately designed to build a sustainable economy based on sound ecological reasoning. They may be merely part of a discourse that has not really defined the priorities required for sustainability in a country that loses between 150 000 and 200 000 hectares of forests and jungles each year, is undergoing severe desertification, and suffers from extreme contamination of its bodies of water, to mention only some of the most urgent problems.

### Impact of the Absence of a Clear Environmental Policy

Until now, Mexico had held a privileged place for international cooperation because of its commitment to the major international environmental conventions. However, the current administration has not endorsed the goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, has shown no clear interest in advancing the biodiversity agenda —in fact, the previous head of the environmental ministry, Victor Manuel Toledo Manzur, threatened to eliminate the National Commission on Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (Conabio)—, and has shown signs of willingness to eliminate the status of protected zones (as in the case of the Lacandon Jungle) by promoting farming activities inside them.

All this is causing Mexico’s gradual withdrawal from international cooperation in this area and a decline in resources to meet the agenda. The president himself has called out and publicly attacked environmental organizations opposed to his projects, such as those who oppose the Maya Train,<sup>5</sup> and to date has no strategy to defend the territory and the environment. As a result, in 2019 alone, 15 people were killed for opposing projects related mainly to energy, infrastructure, mining, and water extraction.<sup>6</sup>

Budget reductions are another indication of how little importance is given to environmental issues. While significant cuts began in 2016, funding is now so low that it paralyzes government activity aimed at protecting and promoting sustainable management of forest resources, proper management of protected areas, and even legal actions against those who violate environmental regulations.<sup>7</sup> This situation has put the sector at risk and, with the economic crisis derived from COVID-19, there will probably not be much improvement for the remainder of the six-year term.

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In spite of that, Mexico still has the opportunity to maintain and rebuild its environmental institutions and policies. The legal framework exists and can be improved; it has a large number of professionals and experts in environmental issues that constitute an invaluable capital for correcting and applying environmental policies and programs. A significant number of NGOs contribute to filling institutional and financial gaps to address regional problems. Institutions and budgets can be strengthened to comply with legal mandates and generate initiatives to promote changes favoring sustainability. Furthermore, international donors are still interested in this country given its great importance in terms of biodiversity and climate change.

The change of government in the United States along with the USMCA coming into effect, which makes greater environmental regulation obligatory in the region, will surely pressure Mexico to improve its policies in this area in coming years. Nevertheless, the country still faces the challenge of returning to a progressive environmental agenda that can respond to the current government's false dilemma of "the environment or economic growth" that was expressed in a revealing phrase uttered in reference to the Maya Train project: "People come first. We gain nothing as a country by having fat jaguars and starving children; there has to be a balance."<sup>8</sup>

The change of era worldwide, Mexico's economic crisis because of COVID-19, along with enormous social inequality and poverty make it very tempting for the Mexican government to abandon more than 60 years of constructing an environmental agenda that, over time, would bring us closer to a more sustainable society where people's well-being does not have to come at the cost of destroying nature. There will be no future if we do not shift to an economy based on renewable energy, circular economies, food production without inputs that degrade the soil, the water, biodiversity, and a better distribution of the wealth generated from

the use of nature. The country has great opportunities if it follows this path. However, it will require not only rebuilding environmental institutions, but also a broader political change that strengthens democracy and the balance of power, and an environmental agenda based on technical and scientific criteria rather than ideology.

Today the saying, "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him to fish and he will eat every day" is no longer sufficient. People need to learn about nature's cycles and develop technologies to make sustainable use of fisheries, otherwise it will be useless to teach them to fish. ■■■

## Notes

- 1 It was originally named "Our Common Future," <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>. [Editor's Note.]
- 2 The 2019-2024 National Development Plan (PND) defines sustainable development as the satisfaction of the current generation's needs without compromising future generations' capacities to satisfy theirs. See *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, July 12, 2019, [https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=5565599&fecha=12/07/2019](https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5565599&fecha=12/07/2019).
- 3 The programs considered in the area of sustainable development are of a social nature, without a direct relationship to the environment.
- 4 The National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (Coneval) published the document "Evaluación de diseño con trabajo de campo del programa Sembrando Vida 2019-2020" (Design Assessment with Fieldwork of the 2019-2020 Sowing Life Program), which presents the *chiaroscuros* of that initiative, [https://www.coneval.org.mx/Evaluacion/IEPSM/Paginas/Evaluaciones\\_Disenio\\_De\\_sarrollo\\_Social.aspx](https://www.coneval.org.mx/Evaluacion/IEPSM/Paginas/Evaluaciones_Disenio_De_sarrollo_Social.aspx).
- 5 For additional information, consult the article "Exhibe AMLO ONG opositoras al Tren Maya que presuntamente reciben dinero de empresas," *Reporte Índigo*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.reporteindigo.com/reporte/exhibe-amlo-ong-opositoras-al-tren-maya-que-presuntamente-reciben-dinero-de-empresas/>.
- 6 Mexico is currently one of the five countries in the Americas with the highest numbers of environmental defenders killed each year, according to the "Informe sobre la situación de las personas defensoras de los derechos humanos ambientales 2019" (2019 Report on the Situation of Defenders of Environmental Human Rights), published by the Mexican Center for Environmental Law (Cemda), March 2020, <https://www.cemda.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/informe-personas-defensoras-2019.pdf>, pp. 20-21.
- 7 "The data speaks for itself: in the period 2015-2019, the accumulated budget reduction for the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat) was 61 percent; for the National Forestry Commission (Conafor), the decrease was almost 70 percent; and in the case of the National Water Commission (Conagua), the adjustment reached 60 percent." Enrique Provencio and Julia Carabias, "Un trato injustificado y desproporcionado," *Este País*, April 3, 2019.
- 8 This statement by Rogelio Jiménez Pons, engineer and head of the National Fund for the Promotion of Tourism (Fonatur) and the Maya Train project, was published by the digital medium *Animal Político* in an article by Claudia Ramos, "Tren Maya: el beneficio social compensa el impacto ambiental, justifica Fonatur," February 5, 2019, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/02/tren-maya-proyecto-construccion-comunidades-indigenas/>.