

Opinion – Governments Have Failed in Latin America’s Fight Against Climate Change

Written by Maria Areyan Hernandez and Shauna N. Gillooly

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MARIA AREYAN HERNANDEZ AND SHAUNA N. GILLOOLY, OCT 21 2023

Climate change, as we are discovering first-hand today, means an increase in natural disasters such as droughts, intense storms, water scarcity, and wildfires, that impact every community and their ways of living, such as access to quality food, housing, and health. Indigenous communities, pregnant women, children, and individuals with chronic illnesses are among the groups most vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. If governments and corporations actively reduce greenhouse emissions, they could alleviate the severity and impact of these disasters, which consist of reassessing domestic climate action policies and cooperating with other countries in ways that go beyond signing agreements with no teeth.

With government inaction, communities, and non-governmental organizations find themselves developing alternatives to accelerate the process of tackling climate change. One such example is the development of local environmental ‘working tables,’ which are comprised of local community leaders and activists who monitor the activities of extractive industry projects in their areas.

The United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2022 report revealed a disappointing lack of action on government and corporate initiatives toward a “net-zero carbon” world. Although both types of actors have demonstrated interest in contributing to a more environmentally friendly world, the report shows little progress. Even sentiment towards climate action is not as optimistic due to the little tangible results accomplished by governments. According to recent polls, 51% of Americans believe they are taking adequate individual actions to mitigate the effects of climate change. Conversely, around 43% feel they are not doing enough.

Regardless of their political stance, numerous governments have pledged to tackle climate change. However, their frequent delays in taking action have drawn sharp criticism from local environmental advocates, who are deeply concerned about the fallout from this governmental inaction. Leaders like Brazil’s Lula Da Silva permitted a hydroelectric dam project that violated the native population’s human rights per the International Criminal Court in 2008. Other Latin American leaders, such as Ecuador’s right-wing former President Rafael Correa, shut down multiple environmental efforts during his term. Bolivia’s Evo Morales, a leader known to have promised the protection of the Bolivian Indigenous people, has let them down again by allowing mineral extraction in already designated protected areas. The Maduro regime in Venezuela increased illegal mining activity, which increased the number of oil spills that happen in the area. Brazil’s former President Bolsonaro rejected the science and real effects of climate change, calling it a “left-wing conspiracy.”

Across the ideological spectrum, Latin America’s leaders have disappointed when it comes to environmental governance and management. Ideological denialism is one possible root cause of these disappointments. Scholars have identified climate change denial as contributing to the lack of policy implementation and reform. They call it ideological denialism, which perpetuates the current social order, even as climate change puts different communities at risk. Despite identifying climate change as a problem, creating large scale solutions has become difficult in our current cycle of late-stage capitalism.

Division and delay in climate change policy implementation are further attributed to the complexity, accountability

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measures, and lack of collective action when it comes to climate change. Associating greenhouse gas emissions with the leading economies and their reporting programs means less international accountability that could “reward or punish” those contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. The Paris Agreement aimed high, setting goals to limit the temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. However, despite these ambitions, progress has been limited.

Failing to act has consequences, and these impacts are felt by those who are already at a higher risk. In Venezuela, Maduro’s regime claimed to prioritize the welfare of Indigenous populations and the everyday citizens of Venezuela. Instead of being protected, Indigenous populations and working-class citizens in Bolivar, Venezuela face environmental degradation from mining activity, leading to a resurgence of malaria in southern Venezuela. The inhabitants of this region are mostly migrant workers that live in poorly constructed, unofficial housing, increasing their potential risk of contracting the disease. In the northeast of Bolivar, where mining activity is prevalent, there is a link between the ecological environment and a higher exposure to areas that attract mosquitoes. The study found that areas with higher temperatures and environmental degradation due to illegal mining experienced more malaria cases and exposure.

Another case of climate inaction and failure in environmental policy in Latin America is that of Colombia’s former President Ivan Duque and his ‘war on deforestation.’ His administration intended to eliminate illegal logging and mining, illegal usage of land for cattle, and drug trafficking by about 50% by the end of his four-year term. Promises were big, but delivery was underwhelming. Duque’s plan for deforestation ended up going wrong on all fronts when an aggressive, hands-on military campaign approach ended up resulting in a significant increase in violence in the countryside, escalating pre-existing issues between different armed groups in the country.

These security consequences leave the indigenous communities of Colombia unprotected and forced to take care of such matters on their own. In the Tacueyo indigenous reservation located in the Department of Cauca, escalating violence from criminal factions has forced the local community to defend their land against drug cultivation attempts that exploit their resources. This has led to more confrontations, with the Tacueyo community frequently facing death threats as they strive to protect their territory. This situation underscores the government’s inconsistency in its commitments to address different facets of climate change in the area. Despite grand promises, continuous policy failures and poor implementation by the government exacerbate the dangers faced by the local population.

Across the ideological spectrum, Latin American governments have failed their citizens regarding environmental governance and protection. A part of this failure can be attributed to foreign economic pressures placed on those same governments by multinational corporations involved in some of the most damaging extractive industries, most of which are from the Global North. However, governments carry most of the blame and often struggle to implement the environmental protection policies they put in place. For example, despite having a significant amount of ‘protected land,’ deforestation remains a problem, with forest cover steadily dwindling in the region.

In the face of often-impotent domestic policy implementation, there are many different communities and environmentally-focused NGOs investing in alternative governance structures in the region. Digital, transnational connections, in part spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global lockdowns, have created spaces that increased youth activism in Brazil around environmental issues. Despite feeling “abandoned” by the government, at-risk populations in the so-called ‘sacrifice zones’ of Chile continue to petition their government for legislative change.

Our on-going research engages with some of these new mobilizations, or attitudes toward governance in Latin America. For example, a new project looks at two different types of attempts of alternative governance structures in Latin America: the practice of local ‘environmental tables’ in the Caribbean region of Colombia, and community associations in Chilean sacrifice zones. In both cases, marginalized communities have suffered some of the public health effects we briefly describe above. In the case of Colombia, community rights have been steamrolled over by extractive industry in the region, primarily due to its oil rich land and waters. In Chile, the sacrifice zones are impacted by heavy metal exposure due to mining and industrial waste.

Governments from both sides of the ideological spectrum have failed communities in Latin America. Communities are

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actively developing alternatives to accelerate the process of tackling climate change, like the local environmental ‘working tables,’ we describe here. Even as different communities try to leverage their governments to make changes in domestic policy around issues such as extractivism, and the larger climate and public health impacts that are the consequences of those issues, more international and transnational solidarity is needed to create change surrounding these increasingly urgent difficulties.

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