

The environmental tragedy of Latin America and the Caribbean

Nicolo Gligo, Gisela Alonso, David Barkin, Antonio Brailovsky, Francisco Brzovic, Julio Carrizosa, Hernán Durán, Patricio Fernández, Gilberto Gallopín, José Leal, Margarita Marino De Botero, César Morales, Fernando Ortiz Monasterio, Daniel Panario, Walter Pengue, Manuel Rodríguez Becerra, Alejandro Rofman, René Saa, Héctor Sejenovich, Osvaldo Sunkel and José Villamil

Sustainable Development

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This document is the work of a group of Latin American authors who have spent several decades studying and theorizing about the relationship between development and the environment. The group is called “foundational thinkers on sustainable development”, and its members are Nicolo Gligo, Gisela Alonso, David Barkin, Antonio Brailovsky, Francisco Brzovic, Julio Carrizosa, Hernán Durán, Patricio Fernández, Gilberto Gallopín, José Leal, Margarita Marino de Botero, César Morales, Fernando Ortiz Monasterio, Daniel Panario, Walter Pengue, Manuel Rodríguez Becerra, Alejandro Rofman, René Saa, Héctor Sejenovich, Osvaldo Sunkel and José Villamil. They were invited by the Sustainable Development and Human Settlements Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to share their thinking in a seminar on the topic of development and the environment, which was participated in by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, as part of the preparations for the position document of the thirty-eighth session of ECLAC, with support from the EUROCLIMA+ programme.

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Foreword

The environmental situation in Latin America and the Caribbean is becoming more and more disturbing. This is a region that is rich in natural resources and biodiversity but that, despite the efforts of national governments, is seeing them deteriorate inexorably. Environmental policies may be explicit or implicit; the former are those with stated environmental objectives, while the latter are those with unstated environmental consequences, usually negative. It is clear that implicit policies are at an advantage, and we see that environmental authorities do not always have the powers to influence large infrastructure projects, the forms taken by the modernization of agriculture or the orientation of domestic and foreign investments. Any effort to promote environmental sustainability clashes with a style of development that is still dominated by the exploitation of natural resources in ways that add little value.

The efforts of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to attain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between development and the environment date back to the 1970s and were originally informed by the work carried out as part of the ECLAC and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) project "Development styles and the environment in Latin America", which enabled the Commission to incorporate the environmental dimension into its economic thinking for the first time. Since that period, ECLAC has supported the countries of the region in their efforts to make their development strategies and policies more environmentally sustainable, an objective that has been limited in scope.

The task of achieving greater environmental sustainability is becoming more and more demanding, since the particular characteristics

and processes of environmental deterioration facing each country are increasingly compounded by the negative effects of climate change.

Aware of these difficulties, ECLAC sought the views of a group of individuals with outstanding academic, public and international credentials and the knowledge and experience to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of current development and its relationship with the environment. Because of the importance of the work they have done since efforts to analyse sustainability in the region began, we have called this group “foundational thinkers on sustainable development”.

The depth and importance of their thinking is set out in the following pages. Their contribution will serve as an input for the thirty-eighth session of the Commission, and we are convinced of its usefulness and timeliness for the countries of the region. It must be noted, however, that these analyses are the personal views of the members of this group and that, despite obvious convergences and points of agreement, they are autonomous and independent of ECLAC thinking.

I would like to single out and thank Nicolo Gligo, who has led the effort to compile the material and coordinate the preparation of the book we are presenting. He and Osvaldo Sunkel sowed the seed of sustainability in the field of ECLAC concerns and were our first guides to fruitful paths that I have been fortunate enough to travel.

I am also grateful to Joseluis Samaniego, Director of the Sustainable Development and Human Settlements Division of ECLAC, and to the European Commission’s EUROCLIMA Project, whose support was essential to the realization of the initiative that has taken shape in these pages.

Alicia Bárcena
Executive Secretary
Economic Commission for
Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

Preface

The present document sets out the authors' positions on the environment and sustainable development. As early thinkers and contributors in this field, they were invited by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to share the ideas and experience they have built up over many years spent working for greater incorporation of the environmental dimension into development at the local, national and regional levels. Their reflections also include concerns and frustrations at the inaction and, in many cases, the indifference of leaders in the face of the tragic evolution of the environmental situation in the region's countries.

This document does not contain a single perspective on the situation of the environment and sustainable development in the region; indeed, the opinions gathered here differ markedly from one another. However, the authors' contributions are organized, without citation, into a coherent structure with the idea that in the near future the document can provide a starting point for consolidating more fully developed, vigorous and realistic approaches to the environmental drama and the region's future.

The authors are grateful for the cooperation and support of Joseluis Samaniego, Director of the Sustainable Development and Human Settlements Division of ECLAC, and of the EUROCLIMA+ programme of the European Union.

Introduction

The 12 chapters that make up this document integrate a variety of contributions on the major environmental and development issues being debated in the region and the world.

The first five chapters address the issues of development and the environment, and they begin by affirming that humanity stands at a crossroads. They argue that increasing harm has been done to the planet's biosphere, aggravated by climate change, in the context of an international economic order that is unbalanced, unfair and uninclusive. They question the prevailing style of development, which is based on the unlikely hypothesis of economic growth projected forward in time without limit, but which has been presented as the only possible path for humanity. The document contends that the development model is not sustainable and that it is leading to environmental collapse and general crisis, while warnings and appeals for sanity from various national and international bodies are being ignored.

Consideration is given to the need for a structural shift to bring about true development, which is still a work in progress—a cultural and paradigm shift to create the conditions for better quality of life with real concern for environmental sustainability, akin to the Andean peoples' idea of “good living”. The document also puts the argument for an environmental perspective on development that can curb unchecked capitalism.

In the light of the difficulties involved in moving towards a radical structural shift to achieve a new form of development, the sixth chapter focuses on a strategic vision that emphasizes the need for greater knowledge of the territory and its ecosystems, recognizing the heterogeneity of the continent, its individual countries and their different territories. The document gives high strategic priority to land-use planning policies and instruments for determining degrees of suitability and vulnerability. It also deals with the concepts of the ecological, water and carbon footprints and applies the material balance perspective.

The seventh chapter goes more thoroughly into the subject of conflicts between economic growth and the environment, with successive sections addressing the appropriation of the environmental dimension by the economy and how this can be countered, the inadequacies of GDP and national accounts as yardsticks for environmental analysis, and the shortcomings of economic theory as regards the environment. The eighth chapter then goes into the need to use new technologies and science to transform economies and emphasizes that “interscience” is the tool required for research. It also highlights the region’s scientific passivity and dependence.

The ninth chapter, which deals with proposals, policies and measures for meaningful environmental management, examines in particular the concept of explicit environmental policies, those whose stated goals are environmental, and implicit environmental policies, those which have unstated environmental consequences, usually negative, and the need to harmonize public policy instruments. The document acknowledges that there has been progress with environmental legislation and institutions in the region, but their efficiency and effectiveness have been limited. It points to the need for national strategies that decisively incorporate the environmental dimension, in order to help reverse the unsustainability of the current model and make structural change viable.

The tenth chapter focuses on indigenous and campesino communities and their current and potential contribution to sustainable development, which must necessarily begin with recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and assertion of the role of the region’s campesinos. The chapter highlights the existence of a large number of cultures, societies and communities in the region, many of which are organized on the fringes of national society and have suffered centuries of discrimination, exclusion or harmful inclusion that has deprived them of the chance to participate effectively in the formation of nations. The region must explore alternative paths and draw on other types of knowledge and capabilities that can serve to forge different models capable of dealing with future crises and to build societies that are in balance with their natural environments. “Good living” is a case in point.

The eleventh chapter deals with greenhouse gas mitigation, calling for the impact of land and ecosystem management on carbon emissions and sequestration to be considered. The document argues that, notwithstanding the importance of climate change, the emphasis that has been placed on this and its effects in medium- and long-term scenarios could be overshadowing some of the main problems related to the conservation of natural goods and services. It suggests that efforts must be made to conserve and restore ecosystems whose impairment is at the root of the emissions leading to climate change. Seen in this light, climate change is merely the consequence, on a global scale, of a form of development that is predatory towards nature.

Lastly, the twelfth chapter highlights the need to move towards the implementation of multinational agreements governing research into and sustainable management of land and ecosystems or geographical spaces shared between two or more countries, particularly where significant processes of change are occurring.

The environmental tragedy of Latin America and the Caribbean

Sustainable Development

This book is the result of a collective analysis undertaken at the invitation of the Sustainable Development and Human Settlements Division of the

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) as part of the discussions supporting preparations for the thirty-eighth session of the Commission. With the collaboration of Nicolo Gligo, it was possible to bring together a group of pioneers in the analysis of sustainable development in Latin America and the Caribbean whose thinking has been informing this field of the social and scientific disciplines since the 1970s.

Their different contributions are integrated into the 12 chapters of this document, which address the great issues being debated in the region and the world in relation to development and the environment. In the authors' opinion, humanity is at a crossroads.

They argue that increasing harm has been done to the planet's biosphere, aggravated by climate change, in the context of an international economic order that is unbalanced, unfair and uninclusive. They contend that structural change is needed to bring about higher-quality development, a cultural and paradigm shift that creates the conditions for better quality of life with real concern for environmental sustainability. Their reflections highlight the urgent need to improve development metrics, currently dominated by the distorting yardstick of GDP, and address the problem of the predominance of implicit environmental policies over explicit ones.

High strategic priority is given to land-use planning policies and instruments for determining degrees of suitability and vulnerability. Stress is laid on the need to move towards implementation of multinational agreements governing research into and sustainable management of land and ecosystems or geographical spaces shared between two or more countries, particularly where significant processes of change are occurring.

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