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Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard Beats Climate-Change Drum

By David Agren

Mexico City's Eje Central thoroughfare slices the Distrito Federal into eastern and western halves and funnels traffic from the southern suburbs into the Centro Histórico. It also is known as the zero-emissions corridor, with the original plans calling for the removal of cargo trucks and polluting public-transport vehicles known as microbuses, along with the advent of bicycle lanes and trolleybuses.

The corridor is but one example of local actions undertaken by subnational jurisdictions to combat climate change, which has been an issue being addressed during the past two decades by national governments. These local actions are increasingly being carried out in places such as Mexico City during an era when the threat of climate change is pressing but national governments have been unable to achieve significant international agreements.

The trend of cities taking local actions is expected to increase--and come independently from the policies implemented by national governments or the timetables outlined by international agreements. This trend might even reshape political and economic power dynamics in the coming decades as local governments take the policy lead on climate change and exert demands for resources from national governments lagging behind on the issue.

Mexico City is one such local jurisdiction taking the lead on climate change.

Mayor leads climate-change efforts

Mayor Marcelo Ebrard played host for the World Mayors Summit on Climate (WMSC) in mid November, when more than 130 local leaders signed on to the Mexico City Pact--an initiative that Ebrard and local environment secretary Martha Delgado had championed. The nonbinding pact outlined ways for cities such as Vancouver, Barcelona, and Rio de Janeiro to monitor and verify compliance with initiatives to combat climate change, and reporting will be recorded by the carbonn Cities Climate Registry (cCCR).

"Cities have great capacities to address climate change, even in the absence of a binding global treaty among nations, which is why we are here today," Delgado said at the time of the signing. "We are demonstrating the leadership of mayors and cities around the world to take action."

The Mexico City government has been given much of the credit for spearheading the initiative for cities to take the lead in climate change. The City Mayors Foundation just awarded Ebrard the top prize in its rankings of world mayors, citing, among other factors, his leadership on climate change.

Mexico City environmental and water-basin management consultant Valente Souza credits Delgado's experience at last year's climate-change summit in Copenhagen--where consensus was elusive--with fomenting the idea of cities taking their own actions.

"She saw that there was a big problem with federal governments in that they never commit themselves because the structure under which these international conferences are set up are strictly by 100% consensus," said Souza, who currently consults at the local environment secretariat. "The thrust of the [Mexico City] conference was: let's have cities commit themselves, regardless of what federal governments do, to a climate-change agenda."

Ebrard, chair of the World Mayors Council on Climate Change (WMCCC), later presented the Mexico City Pact on Dec. 6 at the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Cancún. His presentation highlighted some of the ways local governments were making maverick decisions on climate change and not waiting for national governments to set the agenda.

"The city of Los Angeles signed an environmental agreement, while the United States didn't. It's necessary to create one, but we haven't been able to because nations don't want to become responsible for the expense that implementing measures against climate change represents," Ebrard said Dec. 8 in Cancún. "If cities can make commitments, why not nations?"

The participants in the Cancún conference ultimately agreed to a deal to establish a green fund of some US\$100 billion that will be distributed in aid during the coming decade. While far from perfect, the deal provided a measure of creditability for a process that had been derided after the previous year's summit in Copenhagen. Some observers say Mexican leadership was key for that happening.

"The Mexican [leadership] was very constructive and very inclusive," said Sandra Guzmán, climate-change expert with the Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA).

Mexico, despite its ongoing problems with spiralling drug violence, has emerged as an unlikely leader in the fight against climate change--both because of Ebrard and the efforts of President Felipe Calderón, who has won international recognition for his attempts at establishing a green fund and reforestation initiatives.

The environment, some observers say, has become political, but not in a partisan way. It has become a way for Mexican politicians--such as Ebrard, whose presidential ambitions for 2012 are known--to burnish their reputations without wasting capital.

The public appears to be onboard. An October 2010 survey of Mexico City residents by the Grupo Reforma newspapers found 90% of respondents saying climate change would have a large impact on the capital, while 85% said human activities were entirely responsible. Still, 61% said the Mexico City government was taking insufficient action to address the problem.

Shortly after taking office in late 2006, the Mexico City government unveiled its Plan Verde (Green Plan) for improving the environment in a city with a previous reputation for pollution and near-lethal air-quality readings. The plan calls for expanding a transit system known as the Metrobus, making the city more bicycle friendly, and replacing old taxis with more fuel-efficient models. The Mexico City government aims to cut greenhouse-gas emissions by 7 million metric tons by 2012.

Guzmán expressed support for much of the plan but said there were "inconsistencies." The city was still focusing on roadways such as La Supervía Poniente to connect the isolated Santa Fe district with southern Mexico City, and the construction of Metrobus lines was behind schedule, she said.

Souza preferred to look at the big picture of what Mayor Ebrard was achieving--a possible readjustment of economic and political power based on environmental issues. Cities, he predicts, will continue exerting more influence--and demanding the resources and recognition for doing so.

"These actions are forcing federal governments to transfer rents to local governments...because they're more capable [of addressing issues] and much more nimble. Cities will also take action immediately," Souza said. "Nation states will be left behind by city-states. It's amazing what's happening."