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COP 21: Latin America Faces Uncertain Road Ahead
Following Paris Climate Agreement

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The world watched as nations made history in December at the UN climate change conference (COP 21) in Paris, reaching an agreement to limit global warming to less than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, and ideally below 1.5 degrees. Twenty years in the making, the agreement is the first to include commitments by developing as well as industrialized nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and officially marks the beginning of the transition from fossil fuel-based economies toward renewable sources.

The agreement is supported by Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) submitted by 187 countries. The INDCs outline each nation’s individual goals to make economy-wide emission reductions, increase renewable energy use and limit deforestation. The agreement has been applauded the world over. However, many non-governmental actors have pointed to the fact that it will remain purely a symbol of good intentions until the participating nations take the unprecedented measures required to make it a reality.

Regional recognition
Latin America emerged as a key regional player at the conference. Despite historically being less active on climate change issues and contributing only around 10% of global carbon emissions, the importance of its voice on climate change has grown in recent years due to its own experiences: The region is disproportionately suffering the effects of extreme conditions such as hurricanes, drought, flooding, and glacial melt (NotiCen, Jan. 7, 2016). A survey carried out by the Pew Research Center earlier in 2015 showed that concern about climate change is higher in Latin America than in any other world region.

In addition, there is increasing recognition of Latin America’s huge potential for renewable energy development. A Climatescope 2015 report ranked Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay among the 10 most attractive emerging economies for renewable energy investment. The region is also home to some of the world’s most significant oil and gas producers.

Almost all countries in the region have submitted INDCs outlining medium-term goals for climate change mitigation and adaptation, with the late addition of Venezuela and the exceptions of Nicaragua and Panama. Costa Rica and Uruguay in particular have received praise, as they both approach 100% renewable-based economies, and Mexico was among the first countries in the world to submit its ambitious reduction targets (SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2016). At the end of the conference, Brazil also made headlines by joining the High Ambition Coalition for stronger climate action (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2015).

COP 21 has highlighted Latin America’s commendable advances and commitments to tackle climate change. Looking ahead, however, the region now faces many political challenges that will determine how well it is able to follow through on these commitments.
Ideological divisions
One of those emerging political challenges has been the difficulty of achieving a united vision of the way ahead. Latin America’s well-known ideological differences, which affect so many other areas of collaboration and foreign policy, have made this united stance elusive.

The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which with 33 members brings together more countries than any other regional body, has issued collective statements on climate change. However, perhaps due to its efforts to be inclusive of so many interests, those statements have tended to be generalized, without addressing the main differences between country blocs.

The left-leaning Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), consisting of Cuba, Bolivia, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, among others, has been one of the most vocal sub regional blocs. Placing full responsibility for climate change on the shoulders of the world’s capitalist economies, ALBA refuses to accept that developing countries should have any obligation to be part of the solution and champions the concepts of climate justice and compensation, and the rights of the environment and Mother Earth. An ALBA declaration from UN climate talks in Germany in June said: “Those responsible for climate change must commit to the reduction of emissions and provide the means for other countries also to reduce them voluntarily.” The tensions caused by feelings of imposition and obligation from developed countries are also connected to the fact that ALBA includes some of the region’s main hydrocarbon producers.

In contrast, the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC)— consisting of Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru – has emphasized ambitious action and cooperation rather than looking to the industrialized world to resolve the whole problem. It seeks to be a balanced voice between the traditional North-South divide on climate issues. Finally, Brazil has traditionally aligned itself more with the emerging BASIC nations (including South Africa, India and China) than its Latin American neighbors on climate change issues.

Looking ahead, the potential for progress in Latin America’s transition to renewable-based economies will depend on the extent to which these ideological divisions persist and limit mutual cooperation. As long as fundamental differences remain, progress will be slower and negotiations with the rest of the world’s regions more limited in their effectiveness.

Domestic support
An issue that has been mentioned little in the media coverage of COP 21 is the fact that, for many countries, the policies necessary to meet the INDCs have not been implemented. The nations of Latin America face huge challenges to achieve enough domestic support among both the general public and their respective legislatures for this to happen.

The UN has recognized that the current INDCs alone are not enough to meet the target temperature outlined in the agreement. For this reason, it states that all countries are required to review their INDCs periodically to make them increasingly ambitious, starting in 2018. This will require Latin American governments not only to win support for their policies, but also to continue with deeper reforms over the coming years and through successive governments.

Governments will be under pressure to implement ambitious policies effectively, despite internal political tensions evident in the dramatic shifts in support for ruling parties seen recently in

Hydrocarbon-dependent economies such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia face perhaps the greatest challenge in garnering domestic support for emission-reduction policies. It is still unclear how these countries will achieve the economic diversification necessary to manage a worldwide transition away from fossil fuels, along with reducing emissions and increasing renewable energy sources. But while this may take decades, a necessary shift in public attitudes toward the consumption and eventual replacement of fossil fuels has nevertheless been set in motion.

**Securing finance**

Another political challenge facing Latin America is that, in most cases, the financing is not yet in place to meet the INDCs. Most countries in the region included both an unconditional contribution and conditional contributions, with the latter only being possible through external financing.

One of the most contentious elements of the Paris agreement was financing, given the divided opinions over whether industrialized countries should shoulder the burden alone for the rest of the world. Many consider, for example, that China and India and other developing countries responsible for high emissions should also contribute. In Copenhagen in 2009 and Cancun in 2010 (SourceMex, Jan 27, 2010, March 3, 2010, and Nov. 17, 2010), it was agreed that developed countries would provide a combined US$100 billion per year by 2020 to developing countries toward their climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. This amount was maintained in the Paris conference and is due to be increased in future agreements. It will be distributed through multilateral funds, institutions and governments.

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) was established by the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as a key channel for this financing. In November, Latin American countries were beneficiaries of two of the GCF’s first eight awarded projects (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2015). However, at least 50% of the GCF’s resources are allocated to the most vulnerable countries, which it defines as “Least Developed Countries, Small Island Developing States and African States.” As most Latin American countries do not fall into these categories, they cannot count on receiving sufficient funds from the GCF and similar sources to meet all their commitments.

Consequently, a major challenge for the region will be to secure sufficient private investment to implement the transformational measures necessary for meeting its INDCs. The approval of the Paris agreement has been a fundamental first step in giving security to investors, and Latin America is certainly an attractive region for investing in renewable energy; however, much work remains to make this a reality.

There is no doubt that the vast majority of Latin American countries have demonstrated their willingness to confront the issue of climate change and join with the rest of the world on the long transition to renewable-based economies. The road ahead, however, is far from clear. If these challenges to keeping the commitments made in Paris are to be overcome, governments will require strong leadership, interregional cooperation and enduring political will.