

The Politics of Climate Change in Mexico: Initial Steps towards Effective Governance

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Abstract

The centralised style in the working of Mexico's political and institutional structures signifies an erroneous approach to the resolution of climate change (CC). Subnational governments share responsibilities for climate alterations. This paper addresses the politics of CC in Mexico, focusing on three aspects: the broad national scenario, the institutional framework and reforms at the federal level, and the role of local governments. The results reveal that the National Strategy on Climate Change (NSCC) sets the groundwork for the operation of federal institutions; however, state and municipal governments remain playing an insignificant role. The researcher concludes that Mexico should favour a plural perspective of governance, where national and subnational governments collaborate on CC mitigation and adaptation measures. Further, Mexico should adopt a vision of integrity and commitment to the objectives of social progress and sustainability of resources that support human needs.

Keywords: Climate change politics, environmental governance, Mexico, National Strategy on Climate Change

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Introduction

Climate change (CC) challenges affect governance at all levels. In Mexico, political and institutional structures operate according to a centralised style where the federal government is the unique decider, thus refusing the plural participation that is necessary to deal with public affairs. The centralist inertia condemns subnational governments to playing a marginal role. It might be said that this circumstance is practical if the national perspective means that policies and actions are adequate and widely shared. However, this is not so. Because the results and consequences of those initiatives affect territories under state and municipal jurisdictions, local governments have obvious responsibilities for one reason: they tolerate development projects that trigger climate modifications.

Mexico's centralist perspective clashes with the complexity of CC and with the country's international compromises in fighting the phenomenon. To counter such an erroneous approach, the challenge is to reorient the workings of the government. National and subnational governments must agree and collaborate on the issue and defend a vision of society-nature sustainability. Bearing in mind that even internationally CC is a discourse under construction, obtaining successful results within Mexico appears to be a difficult task.

This paper addresses the politics of CC in Mexico. Specifically, the researcher argues that Mexico has established wide-coverage institutions at the federal level; however, local governments remain far behind. States and municipalities have just begun synergistic actions toward the common goal of fighting CC, and they need resolute support. The next section offers a short note on definitions and summarises of the broad scenario of CC that Mexico faces. The third section presents the institutional framework and reforms at the federal level. The paper follows with a discussion on the role of subnational governments with emphasis on the necessity to reinforce arrangements vis-à-vis national objectives. In the conclusion, the paper exposes thoughts on progress and pending tasks.

The scenario

The debate on CC starts from its definition. On the one hand, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defined the problem as an alteration attributable directly or indirectly to human activity that modifies the atmospheric composition and adds to the natural climate mutability observed over comparable periods. On the other hand, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change defined the phenomenon as any change in climate, for periods of decades or more, due to natural variability or because of human activity (United Nations, 1992; IPCC, 2007). Nevertheless, scientific evidence makes clear that human intervention is decisive (IPCC, 2013). In fact, "The denial of climate change as a matter of anthropogenic nature has lost the battle" (Semarnat, 2012a: 20). Phenomena such as melting of ice caps, retreat of glaciers, sea level rises, increases in average global temperature, and changes in rainfall regimes (e.g., increases in the frequency and intensity of extreme events) contribute to accelerate CC. Furthermore, the appearance and spread of pests and diseases are consequences of those alterations in the ecosystem balance (IPCC, 2007; Semarnat, 2010a; PACC Peru, 2012).

Effective governance is one that finds a solution to problems. Some have mentioned that governance suggests plural participation in decision-making through networks (Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1996). Others have pointed toward the quality and stability of the interaction in networks (Prats, 2005; Hager and Versteeg, 2005; Santes-Álvarez, 2009). Regarding CC, it is hard to agree not only on a definition of problems but also on solutions; therefore, effective governance is difficult to accomplish.

Mexico is actively seeking solutions to CC, despite its reduced contribution of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere. In 2006, its emissions of carbon dioxide represented $\pm 1.6\%$ of the global 715 million tonnes (emissions from burning fossil fuels), while it decreased in 2009-2011, ranging between 1.38% and 1.4% (Semarnat, 2010a, 2013, The Guardian, 2011). The country is innovative in fighting CC, which it judges as a “national (and world) security problem” (Garcia, 2008: 3; CICC, 2006: 3). Mexico is not included in ‘Appendix I’ of the UNFCCC; therefore, its actions represent voluntary commitments. For that purpose, it has sketched specific goals for action against CC (Semarnat, 2010b). In similar way, Mexico is not obliged by the Kyoto Protocol, but has agreed to develop and keep updated programs on mitigation and adaptation. In addition, it participates in the so-called Clean Development Mechanisms (United Nations, 1998; Gob. del Distrito Federal, 2008).

Mexico’s most significant actions are summarised in the 1998-report México ante el Cambio Climático/Mexico facing climate change, and in the national communications to the Conference of the Parties of 1997, 2001, 2006, 2009, and 2012 (Semarnat, 1998; Del Villar, 2011; Semarnat, 2012b). It may be expected that those efforts will increase Mexico’s institutional and technical-scientific capacities, mainly in view of the 2011 Durban Platform for Enhanced Action, which set binding commitments for all parties from 2020 onwards (United Nations, 2012; Semarnat, 2013).

National institutions

General framework

At the federal level, Mexico presents an institutional design to fight CC that appears acceptable. This design consists of rules, organizations, instruments, and means of action. Since 1988, the General Law of Ecological Equilibrium and Environmental Protection has been the main ordinance on natural resources. In 2011, it added measures on mitigation and adaptation to CC to provide coordinating mechanisms between Federation and other levels of government (Gob. de México, 2011).

Another key resource is the Climate Change Act, which Congress approved in June 2012, and the government described as “The main policy instrument [...] to address climate change” (Semarnat, 2013). The law pursues six goals. Two are social and environmental: (1) to ensure the right to a healthy environment and (2) to reduce human and ecosystem vulnerabilities by means of creating/strengthening capacities. Three targets are administrative and regulatory: (1) to establish the concurrency of different levels of government in policy, (2) to set the basis for consultation with society, and (3) to regulate emissions and actions for mitigation and adaptation. Finally, one goal is economic: to transit toward an economy of low-carbon emissions (Gob. de México, 2012a). In addition, Mexico has led reforms on the structure of the environmental institution; the most conspicuous was the creation of the National Institute of Ecology and Climate Change in 2012, which replaced the former National Institute of Ecology (Gob. de México, 2012a).

In relation to planning, the National Development Plan is the governing instrument. The Plan for the period 2013-2018 presents CC as a risk to the welfare, wealth, and progress of the population and the public good. This plan stresses Mexico’s desire to lead the issue internationally. The plan also promotes ‘green growth’ with the inclusion and preservation of natural heritage through: (1) the advancement of a development policy that links environmental sustainability with social costs and benefits and (2) the strengthening of CC and environmental care policies that aiming for a “competitive, sustainable, resilient, and low-carbon economy.” For the sake of a Mexico, concerning global responsibility, the Plan suggests strengthening the country’s international role (Gob. de México, 2013). Furthermore, Mexico has elaborated a Special Program on Climate

Change, which defines the objectives of mitigation and adaptation, and identifies the entities responsible for these actions (Gob. de México, 2009; Semarnat, 2013).

National strategy on climate change

Looking for a wide roadmap of policy to address CC and to arrive at a competitive and sustainable economy, the federal government laid out the National Strategy on Climate Change (NSCC). The strategy aims to strengthen the standards, policies, and programs on emissions. The NSCC also convenes the government-societal responsibility on use and consumption practices, and guides advances on mitigation and adaptation (Semarnap, 2000; Gob. de México, 2012a).

To address the vulnerabilities and risks of the country and set up appropriate measures, the NSCC included the creation of the National Action System on Climate Change (Gob. de México, 2005, 2012a; Semarnat, 2013). The overarching initiative consists of five elements; three of which have the primary responsibilities of a coordinating body (Interagency Commission on Climate Change); a consultative body of representatives from the social, private, and academic sectors (Council on Climate Change); and a research organization (NIECC). Two more elements play a significant role in the success of the system: subnational governments (32 states and 2,462 municipalities, including 16 territorial delegations of the Federal District), and Congress. In conceptual and methodological terms, 6 pillars, 8 strategic axes, and 199 lines of action constitute the system. The first defines the policy goals, the second expresses adaptation and mitigation objectives, and the third indicates routes to reach objectives (Table 1).

Table 1. National Action System on Climate Change. Pillars, Axes and Lines of Action

Pillars for building policies	Lines of Action
P1. Having policies and crosscutting actions, articulated, coordinated and inclusive.	18
P2. Develop fiscal policies and economic and financial instruments.	18
P3. Implement a platform for research, innovation, development and adaptation of technologies, and institutional capacity building.	20
P4. Promote the development of a 'climate culture'.	7
P5. Implement mechanisms for measuring, reporting, verification, and monitoring and evaluation.	12
P6. Strengthen strategic cooperation and international leadership.	8
Subtotal	83
Strategic axes for adaptation	
A1. Reduce vulnerability and increase the resilience of the social sector	13
A2. Reducing vulnerability and increasing the resilience of strategic infrastructure and production systems	12
A3. Conserve and sustainably use ecosystems and maintain the services they provide.	16
Strategic axes for mitigation	
M1. Accelerate energy transition towards clean sources.	14
M2. Reduce energy intensity through efficiency and responsible consumption schemes.	14
M3. Move to sustainable city models, with mobility systems, integrated waste management and buildings with low carbon footprint.	13
M4. Boosting best agricultural and forestry practices to increase and preserve natural carbon sinks.	15
M5. Reduce emissions of short-lived climate pollutants and promote co-benefits of health and wellness.	19
Subtotal	116
Total	199

Source: Semarnat (2013)

The described arrangement supports the model of action against CC. However, its success will rely on its existence within a framework of co-responsibility where stakeholders acknowledge their role and the consequences of their actions or omissions, as well as their “different influence with respect to shared goals” (Santes-Alvarez, 2009: 30). Co-responsibility is a main concept because both federal and subnational governments, as well as other stakeholders, are key players albeit with different capabilities. The following are steps to address essential policy and planning mechanisms such as coordination, conciliation, and compulsory measures that mandate the Constitution and the Planning Act (Gob. de México, 2012b, 2012c).

The NSCC is well covered on scientific and technical grounds. However, it is fragile on political and financial foundations. Its importance causes no effect on the allocation of budget by Congress. In the fiscal year 2013, the Environment branch was well behind sectors such as Defence, Communications, and Transport (Congreso de la Unión, 2013a). Under those circumstances, it is necessary to question how the pillars, strategic axes, and numerous action lines articulate the tasks of state and municipal governments.

Subnational governance

Table 2 summarises the progress at the subnational level regarding CC. To date, five Mexican states have developed their own laws on CC; however, considering that there are 32 states, it is clear that most are still inactive. In dealing with bureaucracies, 16 states have created interagency state commissions on CC (ISCCC), which are alternatives to coordinate activities among local agencies (IDLO, 2011, La Razón, 2013). Additionally, until March 2013, only 10 states had completed their respective State Program of Action on Climate Change (SPACC), which purportedly will serve to “develop institutional capabilities that make them resilient” to CC (Semarnat, 2011). Completion, though, does not mean implementation. By the end of 2013, INECC had not yet released notice on the progress of any finished program. Nevertheless, the INECC is confident that the rest of the states will complete their SPACC soon (INECC, 2013).

Adjustments to state government structures may have some affect on the municipalities; bodies as the councils for municipal development and planning might feel pressed to undertake concrete actions. In considering management tools, it is noteworthy that, by September 2013, 242 of 2,462 municipalities nationwide were involved in programs on CC, the so-called Pacmun. Presumably, this program will enable governments to establish local policies on CC (Pacmun, 2013). To date, only 30 municipalities have concluded their respective program, a datum that again reveals minimal progress.

Table 2. Progress of subnational governments in tackling climate change

Name	States			Municipalities	
	Law on CC	ISCCC	SPACC	Registered in Pacmun (% of state)	With Pacmun concluded
1. Aguascalientes				7 (63.64)	3
2. Baja California	Yes		Yes	1 (20)	
3. Baja California Sur			Yes	1 (20)	
4. Campeche		Yes		6 (54.55)	2
5. Chiapas	Yes		Yes	3 (2.54)	
6. Chihuahua					
7. Coahuila		Yes			
8. Colima					
9. Distrito Federal	Yes	Yes	Yes		
10. Durango		Yes			
11. Guanajuato		Yes	Yes	11 (23.91)	2
12. Guerrero		Yes		18 (22.22)	
13. Hidalgo			Yes	34 (40.48)	2
14. Jalisco		Yes		5 (4)	2
15. México				7 (5.6)	2
16. Michoacán		Yes		22 (19.3)	
17. Morelos				31 (93.94)	1
18. Nayarit					
19. Nuevo León			Yes	2 (3.92)	1
20. Oaxaca				43 (7.48)	1
21. Puebla			Yes	1 (0.46)	1
22. Querétaro		Yes		4 (22.22)	
23. Quintana Roo	Yes	Yes		4 (44.44)	3
24. San Luís Potosí		Yes			
25. Sinaloa				15 (83.33)	3
26. Sonora				10 (13.89)	1
27. Tabasco		Yes	Yes	5 (29.41)	
28. Tamaulipas		Yes		1 (2.33)	
29. Tlaxcala		Yes			
30. Veracruz	Yes	Yes	Yes	10 (4.72)	6
31. Yucatán		Yes		1 (0.94)	
32. Zacatecas					
TOTAL	5	16	10	242	30

Sources: IDLO, 2011: 16; Congreso de la Unión, 2013b; ICLEI, 2013; INECC, 2013; INEGI, 2013; La Razón, 2013.

Del Villar (2011: vi) contended that states and municipalities become active due to “the immediacy of its responsiveness to the effects of global warming.” Arguably, state laws, the ISCCC, SPACC, and Pacmun hold this assertion; however, it cannot be ignored that local governments, mainly municipalities, generally have three weaknesses:(1) ambiguous legal frameworks, (2) lack of administrative capacity, and (3) limited political responsibility (Ugalde, ca. 2004). These aspects make local governments hardly accountable, thus they seem untrustworthy to receive budgetary support from the central government (Semarnat, 2006; La Razón, 2013). The fragile relationship between national and subnational governments makes clear that plural participation in decision-making and better interaction among actors, which guide to better governance (Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1996; Prats, 2005; Hager and Versteeg, 2005; Santes-Alvarez, 2009), are pendant objectives of Mexico's climate change policy.

Conclusion

Climate change illustrates a global crisis of ecological and social systems. The apparent intention of international bodies to balance causes between human and natural, testifies the political side of the issue, which scientific evidence cannot overcome. In Mexico, the central government has taken the initial steps to addressing the deleterious effects of CC.

The NSCC seems appropriate to tackle the variability of CC; nevertheless, it should consider a pluralistic perspective of governance where political actors influence the decision-making process. In this respect, agreements for medium- and long-term planning will reveal the quality of governance. At least there exist four approaches for this purpose. One is coordination among federal, state, and municipal governments concerning policies and programs. Conciliation and induction are additional tools to achieve participation of non-governmental actors, which helps legitimize decisions and create agreement on long-term measures. Programming is another important approach to ensure the monitoring and surveillance of actions for mitigation and adaptation.

Any national initiative increases its possibilities of success by means of coordinated intergovernmental work. In the context of governance, intergovernmental relations represent, at best, the plurality of actors and their interaction in networks. In fact, the problem of governing CC in Mexico depends heavily on the relation between the national and subnational governments. Through NSCC, Mexico should depart from conventional views of government and promote inclusive, overarching policies for best governance. Further, Mexico needs to adopt a vision of integrity and commitment to the objectives of social progress and sustainability of resources that support human needs. All levels of government must agree on such orientation.

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