



Facing the Challenges of Climate Change – Latin American Perspectives

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COLLECTION:
FACING THE
CHALLENGES OF
CLIMATE CHANGE –
LATIN AMERICAN
PERSPECTIVES

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

This special collection builds on a two-day interdisciplinary workshop held in November 2022 at the Nordic Institute of Latin American Studies (NILAS) at Stockholm University. The workshop was part of the network project “New Approaches and Synergies in Nordic Latin-American Studies: Applying Area Studies in a Multipolar World” (2022-2024), funded by the Nordic research councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS) and including researchers from five Nordic universities (Copenhagen, Oslo, Gothenburg, Stockholm, and Helsinki). The discussions Nordic and Latin American scholars at different career stages had in Stockholm shaped the articles included in this special collection. The articles approach these aspects in a transdisciplinary perspective – based on the joint discussions during the workshop – which includes political science, geography, economy, anthropology and law studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change is fundamentally affecting life on the planet. Existential dangers increasingly impact more people and ecosystems worldwide. Latin America is especially challenged due to the region's particular conditions regarding geography, social structure, economy and politics. Like elsewhere, extreme weather events represent the most obvious phenomenon which is constantly on the media agenda. While some areas like the Southern Cone and the Brazilian East Coast experience increased rainfall, others like the Amazon basin face hitherto unknown drought conditions and elevated temperatures. Pictures of floated cities and catastrophic landslides or the dusty plains of dried out riverbeds and burning rainforests have been shocking the world audience repeatedly. The Andean region as well as Mexico and Central America observe a variety of unpredictable changes in precipitation patterns regarding rainfall intensity and timing. Changes in glacier melt rates also influence water availability and hydrological systems in the mountainous regions. These events lead to loss of life, displacement of populations, destruction of infrastructure and reduction of agricultural productivity which threatens food security and livelihoods, particularly for rural inhabitants which are often forced to migrate. As most Latin American countries are still or again heavily reliant on the primary sector, this poses also a macroeconomic and geopolitical problem in the long run. Especially water scarcity does not only affect agriculture and industry but turns access to clean drinking water for millions of people across the region a daily challenge.

In spite of performing clearly above average regarding the usually applied indicators of sustainability, Latin America's own contribution to climate change is considerable. Deforestation, driven by factors such as agricultural expansion and logging, contributes to carbon emissions and loss of biodiversity, further exacerbating climate change and provoking breakages in ecosystems balance. Being notoriously the world's region with the highest levels of social inequality and violence, climate change affects disproportionately marginalized populations who have fewer resources to adapt to and recover from its impacts. This includes indigenous peoples, rural communities, and urban poor.

Few experts would not agree that addressing these challenges requires coordinated action at the local, national, and international levels, including efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, design and implement public policies to mitigate the impact and adapt to changing conditions, and especially to support vulnerable communities in building resilience. More specifically, there is urgency to discuss questions regarding human and nature rights, ethics, accountability, legislation, policies, and short- and long-term strategies

to mitigate, cope with, but also shift systems away from unsustainable modes of living together with nonhumans and the environment. Cooperation and exchange of experiences and knowledge are key tools in facing these challenges.

But what are the concrete experiences from Latin America to face the challenges of climate change? This special collection brings together five case studies on different though connected realities in Latin America. The authors explore anthropogenic sources of climate change and their multiple impacts through the lens of three specific topics: deforestation, water and migration. While the phenomenon is universal, these studies focus on elaborating a specific Latin American perspective on how to handle the regional effects.

This special issue is based on four lines of inquiry which are combined in different ways and with varying priorities in the articles:

- The implications of geopolitical changes and transformations of the economic world system on Latin America.
- Deforestation – environmental regulations, fires, indigenous land management, land grabbing, desertification.
- Water – water management (drinking water, sanitation, hydroelectric plants), flooding, droughts, land-use change.
- Migration – displacements connected to climate disaster and other extreme environmental conditions, unlivable areas.

Three articles take a micro-perspective to study Peruvian highland communities, Mayangna people in Northern Eastern Nicaragua and the rural population in the Brazilian Northeast exposed to the social impact of wind farms. Two articles explore from a broader perspective two factors that are predominant for the changes these local populations experience: agriculture commodities production related to greenhouse gas emissions in Brazil, Argentina and Peru; as well as China's new role on climate change mitigation and green transition in Latin America.

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and Nordic expertise on challenges of global importance. The discussions Nordic and Latin American scholars at different career stages had in Stockholm shaped the articles included in this special collection. The articles approach these aspects in a transdisciplinary perspective – based on the joint discussions during the workshop – which includes political science, geography, economy, anthropology and law studies.

The first article, “Adaptive Migration: Climate Change, Climate Migration, and Climate Adaptation in Peru’s Highlands Communities” is written by Karsten Paerregaard, Professor Emeritus of Social Anthropology at the School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University. He argues for understanding climate-induced migration not as a failure to cope with climate change but rather as a means of adapting to it. To scrutinize this argument and assess the applicability of the notion of “adaptive migration” he examines the role migration plays in the climate adaptation of two communities located in Peru’s southwestern highlands, showing how climate change impacts agriculture and water management, threatening the villagers’ lives and livelihoods, but also how the communities adapt, especially regarding crop shifts and reorganization of irrigation routines. Furthermore, Paerregaard highlights the role of migrants engaging in their home communities, concluding that returning migrants sometimes act as promoters and implementors of climate adaptation.

The second contribution is authored by Julie Wetterslev, PhD fellow at the European University Institute in Florence and visiting researcher at the Iberian and Latin American Studies Forum (ILAS) at the University of Copenhagen. Under the title “When the Forest and the Rivers is Home – Managing Indigenous Territory and Settler Relations in Northeastern Nicaragua” she presents insights from an ethnographic case study on conflicts over lands, resources and identity in the Mayangna territory of Awas Tingni, in the Northern Caribbean region of Nicaragua. Using ethnographic excerpts and analysis of interviews and observations, Wetterslev demonstrates that judicialization and land titling has not brought security and stability for rights bearing indigenous communities. Rather, the titling process has been followed by a process of monetization of the land that has facilitated colonization with a range of detrimental environmental and socio-cultural consequences, leaving fractioned indigenous communities in a vulnerable position to protect eco-systems.

The following article takes the reader to Brazil. In “Unjust Winds of Change: The Politics and Narratives of Wind Farms in the Brazilian Northeast”, Veronica Olofsson from the Stockholm Resilience Centre and Azucena Castro from the Department of Iberian and Latin American Cultures at Stanford University look behind the curtains of the success story of fast wind power expansion in the state of Bahia in Northeastern

Brazil. Although wind energy is known for its positive sustainability aspects, conflicting wind energy narratives and politics are abundant in this region. The creation of wind parks has caused socio-environmental conflicts due to land related conflicts and expulsion of traditional communities. The authors use document and frame analysis to critically explore the multiple narratives surrounding wind energy expansion and conclude that perspectives of civil society and local communities are made invisible in policy documents and decision-making processes, perpetuating exclusion and marginalization.

Larissa Basso, researcher affiliated to the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA) in Brazil, puts regional environmental issues in a global economy perspective. In her article “Deforestation for export? The role of global supply chains in climate action in Latin America” she takes as starting point that in Latin America reducing greenhouse gas emissions from land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) is more relevant than energy transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewables. As Latin America’s agriculture commodities production is traded in global markets, she explores the role global value chains play in climate change mitigation. The comparison of the LULUCF emissions profiles of Brazil, Argentina and Peru shows how coalitions formed around LULUCF issues influence the institutions that define and regulate the political struggle on the topic and frame climate action in each of the countries.

Finally, Benedicte Bull, professor at the Center for Development and the Environment, at University of Oslo, builds the bridge from local effects to new global geopolitics. In her article “China and the New Geopolitics of Climate Multilateralism in Latin America” she scrutinizes the changing role of China in Latin America where during the first two decades of the 2000s China has become a leading trading partner and a major investor and lender. Furthermore, China is currently taking global leadership through many initiatives and emphasizing the need to strengthen existing multilateral institutions. In her contribution to this special collection, Bull examines how China’s quest for climate leadership influences Latin America’s climate change mitigation agenda by problematizing two key dimensions in the Chinese vision: the need to prioritize ‘development’ and to move the world towards carbon neutrality and an ‘ecological civilization’ wherein humans live in harmony with nature. Examining three cases of Chinese collaboration, she reveals how the Chinese approach involves major contradictions related to climate adaptation.

We hope that this special issue will contribute both to a deeper understanding of the concrete localized effects of Climate Change in Latin America and opening the horizons to perceive the major global drivers of this worrying and risky development. Our thanks to all participants of the workshop who contributed to the

very fruitful discussions and especially to the authors of this special issue who invested their time to convey their research in the form of these innovative articles.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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