

Climate Action Movements in Latin America: Templates for a Just Transition

by
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Latin American campaigns for environmental justice serve in a vanguard role as a model to move forward amid an accelerating global climate crisis. In particular, active participation in the international climate movement and institutionalized climate action, community level struggles over raw material, fossil fuel and green economy extraction, and the call for climate reparations place the region in a critical position to offer just transition pathways across the world.

Foundational debates in the pages of *Latin American Perspectives* provide the broad contours for the current climate struggle. These exchanges include Dependency Theory (Chilcote, 1974; Gunder Frank, 1974) and Extractivism (Farthing and Fabricant, 2018). Former *Latin American Perspectives* Honorary Editor, James O'Connor, also centered political economy of the environment discussions by focusing on the second contradiction of capitalism or the undermining of ecological conditions for continued economic growth and sustainability (O'Connor, 1988). These theoretical contributions have evolved and become incorporated into ecologically unequal exchange theory in terms of the climate crisis. An ecological debt is owed to Latin American populations and the broader global South via under-valued resource extraction, pollution, global warming and associated damages generated by northern states' GHG emissions (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Roberts and Parks, 2007; Jorgenson, 2007). Indeed, Latin America only generates nine percent of global carbon emissions (Santelices Spikin and Rojas Hernández, 2016), but suffers increasing climate vulnerabilities of drought, crop loss, flooding, wildfires, deforestation, monster hurricanes, excessive heat waves, and vector-borne diseases (e.g., dengue). All of the above climate risks are especially experienced among marginalized and subaltern groups producing further hardships and displacements.

Latin American states and civil society also mobilize in response to the climate threats imposed by the structures of ecologically unequal exchange with innovative collective action strategies. Twelve major Latin American cities are members of the C40 city initiative, dozens more are members of Local

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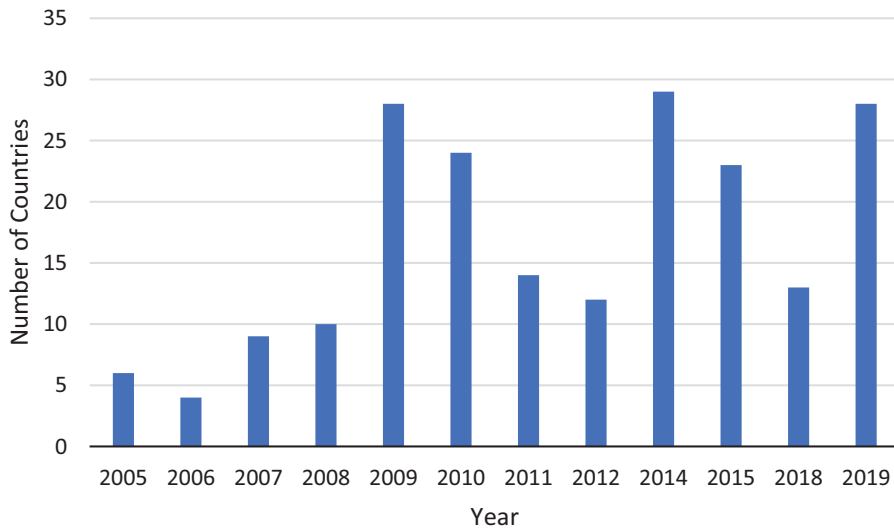


Figure 1. Number of Latin American/Caribbean Countries Participating in International Days of Climate Action, 2005-2019.

Sources: 350.org; Avaaz; People's Climate Campaign; and FFF.

Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI), while hundreds of Latin American towns and cities have affiliated with the Covenant of Mayors, all to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at the city level. These are institutionalized climate actions led by city governments that at times partner with progressive environmental movements and organizations. The more municipal level governments build equity into their climate action planning, the sooner they can engage in longer-term approaches of a just transition. Other institutionalized climate actions involve central state level initiatives, such as the Bolivian and Chilean governments decision to nationalize their Lithium reserves to ensure social redistribution in a future the green economy. Also, the Costa Rican and Salvadoran governments have banned large-scale mining operations (Spalding, 2023).

In terms of non-institutionalized action, Latin American and Caribbean states are well represented in the international climate movement. Between 2005 and 2019, during days of global protests to pressure United Nations bodies and member states to take steps to curtail GHG emissions, climate movements throughout Latin America have participated (see Figure 1), with dozens of individual protest events in the larger Latin American countries of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Mexico. At the local level, Latin America serves as a major world region with protest campaigns over mining, especially since the commodity boom of raw materials and precious metals in the early twenty-first century, leading to neo-extractivism (along with neoliberal de-regulation of the mining industry in many cases). Currently, communities collectively contest 284 active extraction projects in Mexico, Central and South America, up from 209 such conflicts in 2016 (OCMAL, 2023). Over half of current global extraction struggles occur in Latin America as the region holds the world's largest mineral reserves and the second largest petroleum deposits (Arce, Hendricks,

and Polizzi, 2023). These mobilizations add an important element of environmental justice to ecological struggles in Latin America. Anti-mining and extraction campaigns often occur in excluded and indigenous communities and are frequently led by women (Svampa, 2019). While mobilizations against fossil fuel extraction directly relate to climate movements, many of the minerals and raw materials in contested mining projects are exported for industrial manufacturing, contributing to overall GHG emissions. A major strategy of confronting extraction projects beyond the disruptive tactics of mass road blockades involves *consultas populares* and *cabildos abiertos* often combined with an indigenous cosmivision of *buen vivir* – at times even challenging “post neoliberal” regimes committed to neo-extractivism. These efforts at direct democracy in addressing environmental threats offer templates to engage mass publics over the climate emergency. Overcoming urban/rural divides by bringing groups together from the city and countryside into larger coalitions may accelerate effective strategies and popular education in addressing the common ecological threat of global warming.

Finally, at the global level, Latin America offers democratic strategies to coordinate international cooperation on reducing global warming. A key starting point was the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in Bolivia in 2010 (as a direct consequence of the failure to reach binding climate agreements at COP 15 in Copenhagen). Over 35,000 people participated in the international summit. Some of the key recommendations included reparations for the global South from the GHG emitting countries in the global North as well as more civil society participation in transnational climate policy (Aguirre and Cooper, 2010). The spirit of the conference continues in the 2020s with such individual climate actions as indigenous Peruvian farmer Saul Luciano Lliuya’s lawsuit against a German energy firm’s historic GHG emissions and the melting of glaciers that threaten his highland Andean city with massive flooding. Climate activists and scholars interested in a just climate transition, would benefit from a closer study of climate-related and resource struggles in the region than those briefly outlined here, but found in rich detail in the past fifty volumes of *Latin American Perspectives*.

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