

# Environmental Sustainability as the Core Component of the 2030 Agenda

## *La sostenibilidad ambiental como eje transversal de la Agenda 2030*

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### **Abstract:**

This essay reviews the environmental protection actions Mexico has taken over the last five years with a view to complying with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. An analysis is made of the progress achieved to date and the challenges that lie ahead.



### **Resumen:**

En este texto se hace un repaso sobre las acciones de México en torno al tema del cuidado al medioambiente durante los últimos cinco años, a fin de dar cumplimiento a los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible de la Agenda 2030. Se analizan los avances y se reflexiona sobre los retos para lograr el cumplimiento de las metas.



### **Key Words:**

Mexico, UN, 2030 Agenda, SDGs, environment, sustainability, ecosystem, UNEP, UN-Habitat.



### **Palabras clave:**

México, ONU, Agenda 2030, ODS, medioambiente, sostenibilidad, ecosistema, PNUMA, ONU-Hábitat.

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## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda were conceived by the community of nations in the heart of the UN as a proposal for mitigating the problems and correcting imbalances that have arisen among populations worldwide in recent decades.

Five years down the line, it behooves us to reflect on the actions Mexico has taken to progress toward the SDGs and, within this framework, what the country's experience has been as regards environmental protection.

In this essay, I will analyze Mexico's starting point and aspirations *vis-à-vis* the SDGs specifically related to the environment—water, energy generation, sustainable cities, production and consumption, climate, oceans, climate change and ecosystems. I will then review the main actions implemented both nationally and internationally to achieve these goals, and discuss the challenges that face us in the decade we have left to meet them.

## The SDGs and the Environment

Of the 17 SDGs that comprise the 2030 Agenda, in principle, seven are directly linked to the environment: SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 11 (sustainable cit-

ies and communities), SDG 12 (responsible production and consumption), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water) and SDG 15 (life on land). However, it should be pointed out that this is a cross-cutting issue that impacts all the SDGs, since taking care of the environment is essential to the preservation of human life.

First and foremost, we need to take a closer look at the origin and objectives established by the Mexican government<sup>1</sup> for each of the seven aforementioned SDGs.

## Origin of Environment-Related SDGs and Objectives of the Mexican Government

### *SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation*

Poor water quality, its unequal distribution and its scarcity in several regions of the world are the main problems affecting the health and living conditions of millions of people. The Mexican government aims to guarantee the general population access to water via its sustainable management and proper administration and distribution.

### *SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy*

Fossil fuels remain the energy source of millions worldwide. To meet its projections, the government needs to provide incentives for the production and use of sustainable energies and make these affordable for the general population.

### *SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities*

The world's cities currently face countless problems, such as pollution, lack of basic services for many and the deterioration of their infrastructure.

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<sup>1</sup> Mexico 2030 Agenda, “¿Qué es la Agenda 2030?”, at <https://www.gob.mx/agenda2030> (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

In 1950, Mexico had a population of 25.8 million and in 2015, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Inegi) registered almost 120 million.<sup>2</sup> Actions taken in this area by the Mexican government include the design and implementation of housing, basic services and transportation programs that foster the development of sustainable cities and human settlements.

### *SDG 12: Responsible production and consumption*

Mexico and the world in general have experienced exponential demographic growth in recent years, while lifestyles have become more sophisticated, especially in urban centers, translating into a tremendous increase in consumables to meet the needs of these populations. Consequently, government plans are required to ensure responsible consumption, coupled with a reduction in waste and its proper management.

### *SDG 13: Climate action*

Climate change and some of its more tangible manifestations, such as toxic emissions, have a serious, generalized impact. In 2015, Mexico emitted 683 million metric ton carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO<sub>2</sub>e) of greenhouse gases (GHG),<sup>3</sup> reason why the government is taking urgent measures to preserve the environment and revert the effects of climate change.

One of these is the implementation and follow-up of guidelines set forth in legal instruments and national programs designed to mitigate the negative impact of environmental degradation, such as the General Climate Change Law, the National Climate Change Strategy, the National Atlas of Climate Change Vulnerability and the National Strategy for the Reduction of Emissions related to Deforestation and the Degradation of Forests and Jungles, among others.

<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Inegi), "Población," en Cuéntame..., at <http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/poblacion/habitantes.aspx?tema=P> (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> National Ecology and Climate Change Institute (INECC), "Inventario Nacional de Emisiones de Gases y Compuestos de Efecto Invernadero," May 18, 2018, at <https://www.gob.mx/inecc/acciones-y-programas/inventario-nacional-de-emisiones-de-gases-y-compuestos-de-efecto-invernadero> (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

Actions are also being taken with regard to the National Atlas of Risks, which is compiled based on data furnished by the National Disaster Prevention Center, the National Seismological Service, the National Earth Observation Laboratory at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and several international institutions.

By the same token, support has been provided for projects to mitigate the effects of climate change and adapt to these via initiatives like the Climate Change Fund, whose national tender, still in course, was launched in 2019.

On the international arena, Mexico has assumed several commitments, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP) and the Paris Agreement, ratified at COP 25 in December 2019 in Madrid. Under this convention, Mexico committed to generating 35% of its electricity from clean sources by 2024 and 43% by 2030, and to reducing short-lived greenhouse gases by 22% and black carbon emissions by 51%, among other goals.

#### *SDG 14: Life under water*

The dumping of ever-greater quantities of trash and waste into our oceans has severely polluted them, threatening marine life, ocean ecosystems and economies.

Flanked by two oceans, Mexico has 11,122 kilometers of coastline, a continental shelf stretching for 500,000 square kilometers and an exclusive economic zone that takes in 3,149,920 square kilometers.<sup>4</sup> At World Oceans Day, held in Nagoya, Japan, in 2010, the Mexican government committed to extending protection to 10% of our marine surface by 2020.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, national coverage of protected zones as a proportion of marine

<sup>4</sup> Secretariat of the Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat), “Océanos y mares de México”, October 16, 2018, at <https://www.gob.mx/semarnat/articulos/oceanos-y-mares-de-mexico> (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Semarnat, “México, uno de los países con mayor riqueza marina”, June 8, 2015, at <https://www.gob.mx/semarnat/prensa/mexico-uno-de-los-paises-con-mayor-riqueza-marina-7740> (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

zones was 1.54%.<sup>6</sup> Actions that need to be taken in this area are based on the development of a sustainable ocean economy and the preservation of coastal and marine zonas.

Among other commitments, Mexico has taken on those derived from the international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea pertaining to the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in zonas outside national jurisdiction. Passed in a resolution issued by the UN General Assembly on December 24, 2017, this instrument provides for the preservation and responsible use of living marine organisms in waters outside exclusive economic zones.

### *SDG 15: Life on land*

The progressive and indiscriminate felling of trees and the over-exploitation of farmland affects natural resources such as water, soil and forest surfaces, which, along with mineral resources, are limited and constitute a country's "strategic natural capital".<sup>7</sup> Mexico is one of the 12 most diverse countries in the world, home to some 70% of the planet's species.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, 67% of productive farmland in Mexico has suffered some level of degradation.<sup>9</sup> To revert the damage, the Mexican government seeks to combat desertification and deforestation, and to preserve and restore ecosystems.

<sup>6</sup> Mexico 2030 Agenda, "Objetivo de Desarrollo Sostenible 14: vida submarina," September 11, 2017, at <https://www.gob.mx/agenda2030/articulos/14-vida-submarina> (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Semarnat, *Informe de la situación del medio ambiente en México. Compendio de estadísticas ambientales. Indicadores clave, de desempeño ambiental y de crecimiento verde. 2015 edition*, Mexico, Semarnat, 2016, 153, at [https://apps1.semarnat.gob.mx:8443/dgeia/informe15/tema/pdf/Informe15\\_completo.pdf](https://apps1.semarnat.gob.mx:8443/dgeia/informe15/tema/pdf/Informe15_completo.pdf) (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (Conabio), "México Megadiverso," June 2, 2020, at <https://www.biodiversidad.gob.mx/pais/quees.html> (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Mexico 2030 Agenda, "Objetivo de Desarrollo Sostenible 15: vida de ecosistemas terrestres," September 11, 2017, at <https://www.gob.mx/agenda2030/articulos/15-vida-de-ecosistemas-terrestres> (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

## Mexico in Action

### *National Actions*

Once the 2030 Agenda was approved and, with it, the SDGs, Mexico took immediate and concrete steps to make progress towards its targets. Thus, in 2015, a Technical Committee Specialized in the Sustainable Development Goals (CTEODS) was set up to coordinate information and design and assess actions to achieve the SDGs. The following year, Inegi mapped the global indicators to identify which ones would be applicable to Mexico. The SDGs were also reflected in reforms to the Planning Law and a National Council for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was created.

Following the 2018 elections, ad hoc actions continued and on February 26, 2020, the new Mexican government announced its National Strategy for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda, whose motto is: “For the good of everyone, first the poor, environmental protection and an inclusive economy.” The strategy has six working pillars:<sup>10</sup>

- Pillar 1: Increase investment that encourages sustainable development.
- Pillar 2: Design sectorial and derived programs based on the vision of the 2030 Agenda.
- Pillar 3: Guide the work of State Councils for the 2030 Agenda.
- Pillar 4: Accompany legislatures in the drawing up of sustainable laws.
- Pillar 5: Consolidate the Working Committees of the National Council for the 2030 Agenda.
- Pillar 6: Maintain a territorial approach and implement it in municipalities.

The National Strategy is based on previous actions and the 2019-2024 National Development Plan, with sustainability as its scaffolding.

<sup>10</sup> Mexican Presidency, *Estrategia Nacional para la Implementación de la Agenda 2030 en México. Para no dejar a nadie atrás: por el bien de todos, primero los pobres, el cuidado del medio ambiente y una economía incluyente*, Mexico, Presidencia de la Republica, November 2019, pp. 17-20, available at [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/514075/EN-A2030Mx\\_VF.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/514075/EN-A2030Mx_VF.pdf) (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

To date, the work of the Mexican authorities has centered on the creation of a legal framework and working and coordination structures, planning and the design of strategies, projections of the financial resources required and the inclusion of groups representing all three levels of government and society. Public policies that apply to sectors involved in achieving the SDGs have also been reshaped.

### *International Actions*

While there are many environmental-oriented agencies, conferences and initiatives in which Mexico actively participates, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the agency responsible for coordinating the actions of the UN in this area, and the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) is the forum where related policy is drawn up.

The UNEA is held in Nairobi and, so far, four meetings have been called. During the second session (UNEA-2), which took place in 2016, 24 resolutions were adopted by consensus. One of these—“Integration of biodiversity for wellbeing”—was submitted and promoted by Mexico.

In 2017, at UNEA-3, 14 resolutions were adopted by consensus. On this occasion, Mexico contributed two proposals, the first of which—“Mitigation of pollution via the incorporation of biological diversity in key sectors”—recommends the implementation of plans and programs to preserve and restore biodiversity in certain essential sectors. The other,—“Contributions of the UNEA to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development”—is of enormous transcendence, its purpose being to define a mechanism that allows the UNEA to present the environmental component of sustainable development at debates held by this body, which is responsible for following up on the 2030 Agenda. At this meeting, Mexico voluntarily undertook three commitments:

- Promote marine spatial planning and other coastal and marine planning efforts, and manage these instruments in Mexico.
- Improve the National Network for the Integral Measuring of National Waters.
- Investment in Research and Development to create environmentally safe alternatives to known pollutants.



At UNEA-4, held in 2019, 26 resolutions and three decisions were adopted. The Mexican delegation submitted a resolution on the governance of mineral resources, which was subsequently approved, and spoke at debates on the combatting of marine debris, women and the environment, the need to reduce food waste, the use of natural resources and innovative policies and solutions to foster a circular economy.

At each of these assemblies, Mexico actively participated in working and contact groups, promoting dialogue, helping move negotiations along and contributing to a series of discussions, forums and debates. We are now busy preparing for the fifth session (UNEA-5), which is scheduled for 2021.

Aside from the above, also deserving of mention are the three sessions of the ad hoc open-ended working group towards a Global Pact for the Environment, held at the UN seat Nairobi in 2019. The outcome of these meetings was the approval of resolution 73/333. Adopted on August 30, 2019, it aims to identify possible loopholes or omissions in international environmental law and other legal instruments.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Mexico agreed to submit two voluntary reports on its progress in achieving the SDGs at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The first of these was delivered in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

## The Coming Decade

As we have discussed, in the five years since the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs were adopted, Mexico has taken tangible steps towards achieving them, both at home and abroad. During the period in question, we have seen a change in government administration and power will change

<sup>11</sup> UN General Assembly, "Follow-Up to the Report of the ad hoc Open-Ended Working Group established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 72/277," A/RES/73/333, September 5, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Mexican government, *Informe nacional voluntario para el foro político de alto nivel sobre desarrollo sostenible. Bases y fundamentos en México para una visión del desarrollo sostenible a largo plazo. Avance en el cumplimiento de la Agenda 2030 y los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible*, Mexico, 2018, available at [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20242Informe\\_Nacional\\_Voluntario\\_folleto\\_ESP\\_WEB.PDF](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20242Informe_Nacional_Voluntario_folleto_ESP_WEB.PDF) (date of reference: June 25, 2020).

hands again in 2024, with the ensuing institutional reshufflings. Nonetheless, the country has taken on this task as a State commitment, meaning it needs to be developed over the short, medium and long terms. In the remaining decade, there are some challenges that should be mentioned.

To begin with, the development and achievement of the targets Mexico has committed to will require the political will of the various authorities involved. In its 2019-2024 National Development Plan, the federal government acknowledges that it is “committed to promoting sustainable development, which, in the present age, has proven necessary to wellbeing”.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, all actions and development plans of the current administration need to be aligned and geared toward achieving the SDGs, and the next administration needs to provide continuity.

It should be noted that some of the most important plans and programs of the current government administration, like the ones mentioned below, are directly tied in with environmental issues:

### *Dos Bocas Refinery*

Construction on the refinery began in 2019 in Paraíso, Tabasco, the goal being to meet domestic demand for gasoline and diesel and achieve energy self-sufficiency, thereby adding value to these mining resources.

Critics of the project argue that its construction and operation will have a substantial environmental impact, not to mention constituting a move away from renewable energies.

Nonetheless, it was authorized by the Security, Energy and Environment Agency, an independent body of the Secretariat of the Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat), based on an environmental impact study carried out pursuant to the General Ecological Equilibrium and Environmental Protection Law, its regulations pertaining to environmental impact assessments, and other applicable provisions of the law. The government has said the project is vital to the country’s energy security and that it will promote development in the region.

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<sup>13</sup> Mexican Presidency, “Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019-2024”, *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, July 17, 2019, morning edition, p. 23.

## *Maya Train*

The project was initiated a few months ago and is expected to follow a route covering 1,525 kilometers through the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco and Yucatán.

Its detractors warn of possible damage to flora, fauna and water sources, as well as a loss in soil productivity, the risk of pollution and an impact on demographic structure, among other negative repercussions in areas the train passes through.

The authorities, however, highlight its highly positive economic, social, environmental and cultural impacts, since the project is designed to promote the development of the country's southern and southeastern states, where millions live in conditions of poverty and extreme poverty. A large part of the route will be built on existing track and an effort will be made to revert environmental impacts of the past. Also, the agency overseeing the project, the National Fund for Tourism Development (Fonatur), is obliged to adhere to Mexican legislation and international commitments.

As a complementary measure, UN-Habitat has entered into an accompaniment agreement with the Mexican government for the "Comprehensive Territorial and Urban Development of the Southeastern Region of Mexico-Maya Train Regional Corridor", which is intended to provide support for Fonatur, both financial and technical, and that will have an impact on social, economic and territorial development.

## *Comprehensive Development Plan with Central America (PDI)*

Designed to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, this initiative launched by Mexico aspires to develop a strategy that touches on issues like migration, sustainable development and regional cooperation. To date, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have adopted the plan, which enjoys the technical assistance of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the support of the UN. Generally speaking, the Comprehensive Development Plan (PDI) consists of a set of initiatives and projects focused on economic development, social wellbeing, environmental sustainability, adaptation to climate change and management of the migratory cycle.

While the initiative is expected to incorporate recommendations and projects proposed by ECLAC, its execution will depend on available funding, but because these are put forward or endorsed by UN agencies, it is only to be expected they will be implemented in keeping with the SDGs.

Just as important to achieving the SDGs is the proper functioning of the agencies involved. In the early years, considerable effort was made to provide a structure for the coordination and implementation of projects. Aside from the National Council for the 2030 Agenda, structures to facilitate work on the Agenda's goals have been established within the National Governors' Conference (Conago), Congress and state and municipal governments, among others still in the pipeline, while non-government actors are also designing their own mechanisms. Parallel to these efforts, international organizations like the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) are actively lending their support and providing financing.

All these structures need to be capitalized on to create a model of participation that encourages stakeholders to work together and that makes use of the entire system, from the bottom up and the top down and sideways, in synchronicity and harmony.

Another obstacle to achieving the SDGs is financing. The reform of the Planning Law has helped enormously. That said, it does not directly instruct those who intervene in the drawing up of budgets to take the SDGs into account, but leaves it to their criteria, meaning resources need to be earmarked.

Also important will be oversight mechanisms for the follow-up and assessment of progress, so feedback that facilitates the redesign, broadening, cutting back or discontinuation of projects can be obtained.

Finally, we must not lose sight of the fact that sustainability is the pillar on which the SDGs rest and that, as such, the environment should be considered central to all actions taken.

## Conclusions

By supporting the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the Mexican government has demonstrated that it is firmly committed to achieving these goals.

Five years have passed and although there has been a shift in the focus of the projects underway, the main positive outcome has been the creation of working structures that include government bodies and other relevant social actors, not to mention the inclusion of the SDGs in legal guidelines that provide them with essential political and economic backing and impetus.

Like the rest of the world, Mexico's primary goals should be to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and progress toward greater social inclusion and economic development, all in balance with environmental protection, which, in Mexico's case, is of particular importance for demographical and geographical reasons.

Time is running out. In all likelihood, we will have to forge ahead at a faster pace or implement additional policies if we are to achieve all the targets and indicators of the SDGs. On the upside, the change of government has been overcome and the new administration has managed to bring continuity to previously adopted initiatives. The baton will be handed over again in 2024, but we still have ten years in which government and society need to work together on all levels.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected millions the world over, causing economic hardship so severe it will take years for countries to recover, while poverty rates are rising exponentially. This will no doubt delay plans and projects aimed at achieving the SDGs and make them harder to realize.

Yet the current situation serves to drive home the importance of the SDGs and the need to work harder to protect the environment, given its inextricable impact on human health. Now more than ever we need the political will of international actors to address climate change, counteract pollution and preserve our ecosystems.

The crisis we are experiencing and that is bringing the world to its knees is also an opportunity to reflect and act. It might very well be the last one we get. Once we are past the critical phase of the pandemic, the UN would be well advised to call on its members to make an assessment of the situation and draw up short, medium and long term strategies to preempt disasters like this in the future, and step up efforts to achieve the SDGs, which are the only effective, comprehensive means of responding to crises like these. Indubitably it is a commitment we need to assume, for the good of the planet and all of us who live on it.