



World Wildlife Fund - Latin America and the Caribbean can tell the world that it is possible to fight climate change

By Mariana Panuncio*

Latin America and the Caribbean, a region that comprises more than 40 countries, with different political, varied economies and diverse visions on how to face the effects of global warming, does not negotiate as a group in climate summits.

Nevertheless, the region shares a common vulnerability to climate change and the leadership potential to face it. The region has the chance to be a driving force at the Conference of the Parties of the Framework Convention of Climate Change (COP) that will take place in Lima, where its countries have the possibility to speak as one, in a constructive and purposeful way. And the good news is it has enough credibility to do so. In spite of the many challenges that wait to be addressed, it has shown prominent efforts in adopting ambitious measures to fight climate change.

The REDD+ agenda was introduced by Costa Rica and New Guinea at the Montreal COP in 2005. In 2010 the COP was hosted in Cancun, where the Mexican government managed to boost the negotiations after the failed summit that took place the year before at Copenhagen. Important achievements, such as the establishment of the Green Climate Fund, to which Mexico just contributed with the sum of 10 million dollars, were achieved in Cancun.

Now it is Peru's turn. The Amazonian country will preside one of the most important climate summits in history: this event will define the grounds of the new climate deal that will be negotiated in Paris 2015. This task is essential because Paris 2015 has been set as the deadline to reach a new binding global agreement that replaces the Kyoto Protocol and defines climate change regulations from 2020 onwards.

On top of the contributions that Latin American countries have made on the international arena, many countries have also assumed commitments on a national level, and these commitments are the basis for the effectiveness of global actions against climate change.

On a regional level, deforestation and land use change have historically constituted the main source of emissions. Yet, several countries in Latin America have made commitments to reduce them. Brazil proved economic growth and conservation can go hand in hand by reducing its deforestation rate by 70% while increasing soya production by 80% in the last decade. Colombia and Peru have raised zero net deforestation goals for themselves by 2020 and 2021 respectively.

Latin America is also placing its bets on the development of renewable energies. In Uruguay renewables already account for over 80% of their electricity demands. Costa Rica has been taking big steps in this direction and wants to become a carbon neutral

state by 2020. Mexico has set the goal of having renewable energy account for 35% of its electric matrix by 2018. And at the Climate Summit organized by U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, the Chilean President, Michelle Bachelet, declared her country has the goal to produce 45% of their electricity with renewable energy sources by 2025.

But although these are bold actions, they are not enough. The latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) left no doubts about the deep –or possibly irreversible– impacts of climate change if fossil fuels are not left behind.

Climate change will have negative repercussions in every sector that strives to promote sustainable development and to reduce poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean. A significant decrease in agricultural production will also come around, as well as risks to water supply coming from tropical glaciers and the collapse of a significant portion of the coralline biome that not only sustains fisheries but also tourism in the Caribbean.

It is urgent that every country, including the Latin American ones, chooses different development model: one that pushes fossil fuels away and focuses on low carbon economic growth, climate resilience and the conservation of its natural heritage.

This decision will not be an easy one. Although Latin America's emissions have been relatively low in comparison to other regions of the world, this could easily change. If economic growth continues to be based on the conversion of natural habitats to arable land in order to expand the agricultural frontier and on the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure to satisfy a growing energy demand, the emissions will increase dramatically.

However, Latin America and the Caribbean have shown change is, in fact, possible and fruitful. It is the path to a new development engine and a magnet to attract new investment capitals. The region's potential for renewable energy (excluding hydroelectric power) is so big it is estimated that if the region could harness just 4% of that potential it could satisfy all of the energy demand.

It is with this scenario in mind that the world should come to Lima, so that Latin America and the Caribbean can tell them, speaking with one voice, that it is possible to fight climate change and that everybody, according to their possibilities, has a protagonist role to play.

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