AG
EDITOR

## SHORT COMMUNICATION

# Inequality, conflicts and challenges in Latin American cities with socio-environmental transformation processes in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals

## Desigualdad, conflictos y desafíos en ciudades de América Latina con procesos de transformación socioambiental en el contexto de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible

Mariamna de la Caridad Collazo Castillo[1] ✉

[1]Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí. México.

**Corresponding author:** Mariamna de la Caridad Collazo Castillo ✉

## ABSTRACT

Over time, society appropriates space, transforming it into territory. Natural and social processes develop simultaneously, and it is precisely the increase in human actions that provokes diverse socio-environmental transformations. In Latin America, cities have experienced significant socio-environmental transformations due to economic development policies that have accentuated inequality and generated tensions around the use and distribution of natural resources. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework to address these challenges by promoting inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities. However, the implementation of the SDGs in Latin American cities faces considerable obstacles, such as rapid urbanization, population growth, environmental degradation and climate change, which put pressure on urban systems. Often, the SDGs are not tailored to the local scale and do not foster effective climate action, perpetuating inequity and marginalization of certain groups. This raises questions about what actions have been taken on sustainability, which cities embrace the SDGs, and how research on socio-environmental transformations have evolved in the context of the SDGs. This study, of a documentary nature and interpretative-explanatory approach, will use theoretical, statistical and empirical methods to critically synthesize existing literature and develop specific indicators to diagnose socio-environmental transformation processes in Latin American cities, highlighting gaps in current studies and proposing a Latin American approach.

**Keywords:** Socio-Environmental Transformation; SDGS; Inequalities; Latin American Cities.

## RESUMEN

A lo largo del tiempo, la sociedad se apropia del espacio, transformándolo en territorio. Los procesos naturales y sociales se desarrollan simultáneamente, y es precisamente el aumento de las acciones humanas lo que provoca diversas transformaciones socioambientales. En América Latina, las ciudades han experimentado significativas transformaciones socioambientales debido a políticas de desarrollo económico que han acentuado la desigualdad y generado tensiones en torno al uso y distribución de los recursos naturales. Los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) proporcionan un marco para abordar estos desafíos promoviendo ciudades inclusivas, seguras, resilientes y sostenibles. Sin embargo, la implementación de los ODS en las ciudades latinoamericanas enfrenta obstáculos considerables, como la rápida urbanización, el crecimiento demográfico, la degradación ambiental y el cambio climático, que ejercen presión sobre los sistemas urbanos.

A menudo, los ODS no se ajustan a la escala local ni fomentan una acción climática efectiva, perpetuando la inequidad y marginación de ciertos grupos. Esto plantea preguntas sobre qué acciones se han tomado en materia de sostenibilidad, qué ciudades adoptan los ODS, y cómo han evolucionado las investigaciones sobre transformaciones socioambientales en el contexto de los ODS. Este estudio, de naturaleza documental y enfoque interpretativo-explicativo, utilizará métodos teóricos, estadísticos y empíricos para realizar una síntesis crítica de la literatura existente y desarrollar indicadores específicos en función de diagnosticar los procesos de transformación socioambiental en las ciudades de América Latina, destacando vacíos en los estudios actuales y proponiendo un enfoque latinoamericano.

**Palabras clave:** Transformación Socioambiental; ODS; Desigualdades; Ciudades Latinoamericanas.

## INTRODUCTION

Over time, society appropriates space and dominates it, turning it into a territory. Both natural and social processes develop simultaneously, and it is precisely the growth of human actions in society that produces diverse transformations: socio-environmental transformations. For Fontaine, the regulatory context of these socio-environmental transformations emerged from the social and community domain of nature to break into the political and legal sphere of national and international order in the 1990s. This, led to a research boom on the subject that would emerge in the 2000s.

Specifically, cities in Latin America have undergone socio-environmental transformations marked by the implementation of economic development policies that have exacerbated inequality and generated tensions around the use and distribution of natural resources. This phenomenon has been reflected in territorial segregation, where urban areas of high population density and poverty contrast with areas of more significant development and access to essential services.

## DEVELOPMENT

In the background selection process, it became clear that cities in Latin America currently face a series of socio-environmental conflicts that threaten the quality of life and a sustainable future in the region. Research with different perspectives stands out, covering:

*The relationship between nature and society with authors such as Toledo, Garrido & Barrera-Basols (2003), Martínez Novosti (2012), Hudgson Reeves (2020), and Montes Hernández (2020)*

The authors of this section argue that socio-environmental transformations are rooted in the symbolic construction of the relationship between society and nature, where the separation between the two concepts is naturalized. These authors exhibit the position that has led to seeing nature as an exogenous object to apply ecological compensations and forms of exploitation according to each economic and social system. They also emphasize the distance between sustainable intention and its results due to the scarcity of local actions.

*Political power with Martínez Alier (2002), Ulrich Beck (2005), David Harvey (2010), Peter Newell (2010), and Rob Nixon (2011)*

In this case, fundamental perspectives are provided on how political power influences socio-environmental transformations. The authors' works emphasize the importance of understanding power dynamics to address inequalities and promote sustainable and equitable development. Their writings alert us to how capital and political power are intrinsically linked and affect urban and socio-environmental dynamics. In particular, they underline the relationship between political power, environmental justice, and social movements in the struggle for sustainable development. According to their positions, climate policies are influenced by global economic and political power structures that perpetuate environmental injustices and influence the implementation of policies in the short, medium, and long term.

*The perspective of inequality is presented by Trentini and Sarroche (2003), Ulrich Beck (2005), Fraser (2009), and Rob Nixon (2011)*

From the inequality perspective, the selected authors show how power relations and social inequalities affect socio-environmental transformations in the context of cities. Similarly, they indicate that both urban and development policies affect the distribution of resources, perpetuating socioeconomic and spatial inequalities. These inequalities disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups. Their work highlights the need to consider power dynamics when addressing environmental challenges.

*Environmental rationality: with contributions from Left with his text "Racionalidad Ambiental. México: Siglo XXI" in 2004; Arturo Escobar (2008); Anthony Giddens (2009)*

The studies in this category demonstrate the need to integrate ecological principles, social justice, and community participation into decisions and policies that involve the environment.

In this unit, the authors offer perspectives crucial for understanding and promoting environmental rationality that guides socio-environmental transformations towards sustainability; a balanced and sustainable relationship is promoted in which the material and the symbolic, the cultural and the natural, are integrated. Furthermore, the argument is made that environmental crises are primarily the result of social and economic conflicts. It is also proposed that societies reflect critically on the effects of modernization and move towards equity, advocating a rationality that values local knowledge and practices in managing natural resources.

It can be inferred, by the analysis of the four previous sections, that incorporating ecological and sustainability conditions into socioeconomic processes, as well as building environmental rationality and an alternative style of development, implies the increase of a set of social processes accompanied by national and international legal norms focused on the environment to limit the predatory and anthropocentric model of modernity.

Thus, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda have emerged on the international scene, offering a framework for addressing socio-environmental transformations by promoting inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities.

However, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in various Latin American cities faces significant obstacles. These include rapid urbanization, population growth, environmental degradation, and the impacts of climate change. These factors put considerable pressure on urban systems, exacerbating conflicts, inequalities, and challenges in the territories. On numerous occasions, the realities and interests of citizens are at odds with government interests, which shows a disconnect in implementing policies at the national and international levels.

The SDGs are often not adequately adapted to the local level, nor do they promote effective climate action. As a result, some sustainable development policies fail to close the inequality gaps, severely affecting certain Latin American territories. In addition, the unequal distribution of resources and unsustainable infrastructure perpetuate the marginalization of certain groups, exacerbating social, economic, and environmental differences.

Given this, attempts at socio-environmental transformation in cities also tend to trigger conflicts between various urban actors, including citizens, businesses, and governments. Furthermore, the lack of specific data and indicators at the local level that reflect the particularities of Latin American cities prevents an adequate evaluation of the progress of the SDGs and the actual impacts of the policies implemented in terms of socio-environmental transformations. Consequently, the need arises in Latin America to determine what has been done in terms of sustainability in cities. Which cities are adopting the SDGs? What is happening to those cities that are not adequately implementing the SDGs? How has research on socio-environmental transformations and the contextualization of the SDGs evolved?

It is imperative to address the socio-environmental consequences in Latin American cities, considering the commitments made by governments within the framework of the SDGs. The present research contributes significantly to the study of socio-environmental transformations by critically analyzing the existing academic literature on the subject, considering both quantitative and qualitative aspects and highlighting the areas where gaps are identified in recent studies.

## Section 1. Contextualization of the Sustainable Development Goals: appropriation in Latin American cities

Over the years, growing concerns about the environmental crisis have led institutions at various levels (local, national, regional, and international) to propose, oversee, and develop new discourses on modes of growth and consumption that could meet humanity's basic needs.

The objective was to reduce poverty, inequalities, and environmental tensions between countries. These objectives were embodied in the United Nations Agenda 21, signed by more than 178 countries at the Earth Conference held in Rio de Janeiro 1992. This event marked the first official call for developing an action plan with international policies and strategies that would promote the transformation of unsustainable models of production and consumption, promoting sustainable development as an achievable goal. (National Institute of Statistics and Geography [INEGI], 2000; United Nations [UN], 1992).

Although it varies according to context, sustainable development is generally defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN, 1987). This concept encompasses three essential dimensions: social, economic, and environmental. Thus, it seeks to reduce inequalities, improve opportunities, ensure basic living standards, and sustainably use natural resources sustainably, increasing ecosystems' resilience (UN, 2012).

In this scenario, the 2030 Agenda is an action plan arising from the commitment of the member states that comprise the United Nations (UN). It was approved by the General Assembly in 2015. It aims to strengthen universal freedom and peace in favor of people, the planet, and prosperity. It is considered an indispensable

requirement for sustainable development (UN, 2015). The key milestones that led to the 2030 Agenda include the Stockholm Declaration, the Brundtland Report, the Earth Charter, the Millennium Declaration, the Johannesburg Conference, and the Rio+20 Conference. Each of them addressed, according to their historical context, the consequences of environmental problems, the establishment of principles and recommendations for sustainable development, the reduction of environmental degradation through comprehensive green economy goals to improve well-being and reduce environmental risks, as well as the need for cooperation at the national, regional and local levels (UN, 2012).

The action plan of the 2030 Agenda describes 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets that comprehensively address areas of social reality. This international commitment involves a review of traditional development models based on resource exploitation and a different strategy in articulating socioeconomic policies. This is a new opportunity for developing countries.

With the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), "(...) a great opportunity presents itself for the countries of the world, including Latin America and the Caribbean, to propose a new sustainable development agenda that addresses, among other things, the unsustainability of cities and climate change; as happened at the Habitat III World Congress held in Quito (Ecuador) in October 2016; at which the New Urban Agenda for the next 20 years was approved" (Peralta, 2020, p.26).

In this sense, ECLAC maintains that, to achieve sustainable development, the new policies that emerge in the current context must be based on an analytical framework that emphasizes multidimensional equality, promoting economic growth that preserves the environment and the ecological integrity of shared resources. However, in contrast to global agendas, the dominant style of development in the Latin American region is based on a productive structure whose competitiveness depends on the abundance and exploitation of natural resources. This skews sustainable development, encouraging an intensive and predatory use of these resources. (ECLAC, 2016). Thus, the region moved towards the exploitation and extraction of hydrocarbons, metals, and minerals, producing biofuels, and agribusiness driven by the growing demand for raw materials.

"This model, which causes serious socio-environmental conflicts and territorial disparities, has been adopted by both progressive and conservative governments in the first decades of this century" (Gudynas, 2012). Authors such as Svampa and Viale (2014) have characterized it as the "Commodity Consensus".

In the case of Santos and Silveira, it is pointed out that in the perversity of the globalization process (Santos, 2001; Campos, Canavezes, 2007) with hegemony, there are neoliberal interests:

Neoliberalism brings with it important changes in the use of territory, making this use more selective than before and thus punishing the poorest populations, those that are more isolated, dispersed, and distant from the large centers and from the productive centers (Santos and Silveira, 2001, p.302).

It is therefore argued that the predatory and anthropogenic model of societies in Latin America positions urbanization as an element governed by market mechanisms that have reproduced some urban territories without planning or long-term vision where transformations have been carried out through extractivist interests. For these reasons, the report "Multidimensional Panorama of Urban Development in Latin America and the Caribbean" emphasizes that the city model is a central debate for discussing sustainability and socio-environmental transformations, as it is recognized that, although cities are the main contributors to climate change, they are not the cause of pollution, but rather the dominant (i.e., political, economic or social) development model in them. The city-society-environment triad is considered an indivisible entity that must be approached holistically (ECLAC, 2017).

The development and application of the SDGs in Latin America, as a case in point, has been carried out with marked inequality between countries in the region; however, it is worth highlighting the support given by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), UNEP through the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative (LACI) and the Alliance between the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) and the World Bank (WB). (Peralta, 2020). Thus, most cities in Latin America face challenges related to SDG 11, especially in terms of inclusion, sustainability, safety, resilience, climate change mitigation, adaptation, reduction of its effects, and early warning.

These elements are crucial in the region'sregion's socio-environmental processes. Therefore, current urban expansion positions cities not only as hotbeds of problems, transformations, and opportunities but also as centers of global decision-making (González-Medina et al., 2018). The above statement shows that Latin America faces significant challenges regarding sustainable urban development amid changing socioeconomic and environmental dynamics (Samper and Martínez, 2023).

In this context, fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals becomes an essential tool for analyzing and understanding the current state of sustainable development in cities. This translates into the construction of more resilient, inclusive, and equitable cities, where their citizens can participate in decision-making and in proposing actions to strengthen public policies. In addition, sustainable models of production, land use, consumption, and management of at-risk cities must be applied to facilitate a new way of planning and managing territories in terms of the environment. Urbanization and the sustainability of cities are receiving increasing

attention as strategic elements for successfully implementing a more sustainable style of development.

## Section 2. Cities in Latin America: sustainable?

During the 20th century, and especially in the second half, the city, as a social habitat, became increasingly complex, rapidly transforming into an object of research and specific study as it came to be understood as a space, a place, and an object of development policies. In turn, the development and improvement of habitats are part of sustainable development. According to United Nations estimates, by 2015, 54 % of the world'sworld's population already lived in cities,. This percentage will increase to 60 % by 2030, meaning that living in a city is increasingly the dominant way of life on the planet (United Nations, 2014). Even recognizing that there is heterogeneity in the way countries define and report their urbanization rates and that, therefore, demographic definitions have a specific limitation in detailing the process of urban transformation, it is a historical phenomenon whose character is affected by socio-environmental transformations and the current style of development (Brenner and Schmid, 2016; Scott and Storper, 2014).

The urgent need to adopt sustainable development policies in the regional context has arisen due to the intense urbanization that all countries have experienced and the tensions that this has generated in cities. Added to these challenges are new problems on a global scale, such as cross-border pollution, the depletion of the ozone layer, and resource consumption.

Hence, according to Winchester: After the loss of specific natural resources, the deterioration of the urban environment is the most serious problem facing the Latin American region. In general terms, the causes of the increase in air, soil, and water pollution are linked to unplanned urbanization processes, agriculture (the use of non-sustainable techniques and agrochemical substances), and inadequate environmental management. The uncontrolled growth of cities has exposed a large proportion of the population to the deterioration of air and water quality, to pollution from solid and hazardous waste, and the degradation of coastal areas. Overcrowding, lack of infrastructure, and uncontrolled urban expansion increase the degree of exposure to pollutants, resulting inresulting in the poorest sectors being being the first victims of pollution. (Winchester, 2006, p. 10)

As a result of these challenges, the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services characteristic of globalization are consolidated as an "(…) instrument of economic development" (ECLAC, 2003). In this context, the city plays a crucial role as its functionality can limit or facilitate the possibilities of sustainability.

It should be noted that the issue of sustainability in cities must also be addressed through the capacity to manage it democratically, taking into account problems such as city density and the availability of resources that will guide the strategy to be used.

Models of universal sustainability, constructed in extraterritoriality, cannot be applied in the same way to different territorial and demographic conditions, even when they focus on the same region of study, such as in Latin America, given its wide sociocultural and environmental diversity. This territorial issue could be extended using the criteria of Escobar (2005b), who states that: "(…) sustainability consists of an articulation of the life projects of communities with the political project of social movements, where territory and region are articulated" (Escobar, 2005b).

Another element to consider is understanding cities as transitory concepts, as they are in constant transformation (Ascher, 1995). The sustainable city cannot exist as an end in itself but as a continuous process since the natural evolution of cities must lead to valuing actions over results and especially to promoting socio-environmental transformations. Any product that claims to be sustainable but does not value the process only results in an appropriation of sustainability based on the fashion of using concepts.

This is evident in many new projects claiming to be sustainable in Latin America simply because they incorporate advanced technology. This belief in the ability of modern science to overcome the risks derived from human activities is maintained in the pro-development discourse. It is observed in many eco-designs adopted in the face of climate change and that, in most cases, do not solve the contradictions in the territory. Therefore, toto be considered truly sustainable, each city must have a solution adapted to its territory, resources, means of production, climate and culture.

Two contextual elements that characterize the current process of territorial structuring in Latin America are the high population urbanization rates and the socio-environmental transformation processes in line with the internationalization of markets and the extractivist use of natural resources that presents a divorce from sustainability. (Balbo, 2003). An analysis of the discourse of specific organizations specifies that Latin American cities are a physical and symbolic matrix of the modernity of societies. They show more clearly the tensions and contradictions of the region'sregion's urban development (evidently unsustainable), characterized by very high levels of inequality and the appropriation of concepts and variables alien to the region's context. This has repercussions for various social problems such as residential segregation, gentrification, gaps in mobility and use of time, insecurity, and socio-environmental impacts. Consequently, the challenges demand comprehensive

conceptual approaches and policies based on broad agreements that facilitate sustainability. (UN-Habitat, 2016; CAF/UN-Habitat, 2014; ECLAC, 2016b).

In short, assertive public policies are needed to improve urban management. A comprehensive approach that incorporates the urban and territorial planning experiences of previous decades and designs an adequate combination of direct and indirect management instruments in line with socio-environmental transformations is needed.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

1. Acselrald H. Sentidos da Sustentabilidade Urbana. A duração das cidades: sustentabilidade e risco nas políticas urbanas. Editorial: Lamparina; 2009. p. 43-70.

2. Ascher F. Metapolis: ou l'avenir des villes. Odile Jacob; 1995.

3. Balbo M. La nueva gestión urbana. En: Jordan R, Simioni D, compiladores. Gestión urbana para el desarrollo sostenible en América Latina y el Caribe. Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, Cooperazione Italiana; 2003. p. 71-92.

4. Brenner N, Schmid C. La 'era urbana' en debate. Eure. 2016;42(127).

5. CEPAL. Agenda 2030 y los objetivos de desarrollo sostenible. Una oportunidad para América Latina y el Caribe. Publicación de las Naciones Unidas; 2016a.

6. CEPAL. Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe. Horizontes 2030. La Igualdad en el centro del Desarrollo Sostenible. Publicación de las Naciones Unidas; 2016b.

7. CEPAL. La matriz de la desigualdad social en América Latina y el Caribe. Publicación de las Naciones Unidas; 2016c.

8. CEPAL. Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe. Panorama multidimensional del desarrollo urbano en América Latina y el Caribe. Publicación de las Naciones Unidas; 2017.

9. Escobar A. Más allá del Tercer Mundo Globalización y Diferencia. ICANH; 2005b.

10. González-Medina M, Navarro C, Gregorio Hurtado S, Ospina Vargas S, Vázquez D, Salinas P, Vilalta M. Más poder para la ciudad global: una alianza Iberoamericana. Documento de trabajo OPEX 95. Unión de Ciudades Capitales Iberoamericanas (UCCI), Fundación Alternativas y Madrid; 2018. Disponible en: [URL no proporcionada].

11. Gudynas E. Estado compensador y nuevos extractivismos. Las ambivalencias del progresismo sudamericano. Nueva Sociedad. 2012;237.

12. Naciones Unidas. World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights. División de Población; 2014.

13. ONU-Hábitat (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para los Asentamientos Humanos). World Cities Report. Urbanization and Development. Emerging Futures. Nairobi; 2016.

14. Peralta J. Cuaderno de Investigación Urbanística. 2020;131. Edita: Instituto Juan de Herrera. DOI: 10.20868/ciur.2020.131.4465.

15. Samper M, Martínez M. Análisis geohistórico multi-escalar en América Latina: Abordajes conceptuales y metodológicos en estudios con apoyo de SIG y bases de datos históricas georreferenciadas. Diálogos Revista Electrónica. 2023;24(2):1-44.

16. Scott AJ, Storper M. The nature of cities: the scope and limits of urban theory. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. 2014;39(1).

17. Svampa M, Viale E. Mal Desarrollo. Editorial Katz; 2014.

**FINANCING**
    None.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**
    The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORSHIP**
    *Conceptualization:* Mariamna De La Caridad Collazo Castillo.
    *Writing - Original Draft:* Mariamna De La Caridad Collazo Castillo.
    *Writing - Revision and Editing:* Mariamna De La Caridad Collazo Castillo.