

## EDITORIAL OPEN



# Thinking climate action from Latin America: a perspective from the local

This editorial examines the intricate landscape of local climate action in Latin America. It explores the interplay between local initiatives, global agendas, and the potential for innovative and anti-systemic approaches. The paper recognizes the constraints faced by local actors, including limited capacity and the complexities of action, highlighting their differences and complementarity. Furthermore, this editorial underscores the role of local climate actions in challenging the dominant neoliberal global order, particularly through grassroots efforts prioritizing sustainability and equity. These initiatives offer alternative socioeconomic models and reframe issues beyond climate change, addressing broader challenges like inequality and resource depletion. In navigating these complexities, the editorial emphasizes the need to combine both localization and local climate actions, demanding inventive methods for progress measurement and support. It sets the stage for a topical collection that dissects local climate action in Latin America and its critical role within the global climate change agenda, and national policies.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is well documented by scientific research that climate change is having devastating effects on Global South populations, jeopardizing socio-economic development and accentuating global inequalities<sup>1</sup>. In this context, Latin America is projected to be one of the most affected regions: hurricanes, storms, floods, and landslides are every time more frequent and intense, causing significant economic losses, infrastructure disruptions, and human fatalities. Moreover, slow-onset climate change effects, including droughts and reduced productivity, affect various sectors, such as agriculture and water security. The shrinking of watercourses, deforestation, and the degradation of marine ecosystems further worsen the situation<sup>2</sup>. The economic damage and potential rise in extreme poverty are such that if no effective climate action is taken, millions of people could be forced to migrate by 2050, straining urban areas and increasing the vulnerability of the most impoverished communities to climate impacts<sup>3-5</sup>. Even though climate change is a matter of societal concern in Latin America, it is not perceived as an urgent or priority issue compared to economic, safety, and corruption<sup>6</sup>.

Current levels of exposure and vulnerability to climate change in this region are related to factors such as deep inequalities<sup>2</sup>, volatile politics and policies<sup>7</sup>, limited state capacity<sup>8</sup>, and economies dependent on external capital and deeply anchored in the extraction of their vast natural resources<sup>9,10</sup>. High levels of disparity in wealth, land, and income concentration deepen inequality gaps between and within countries<sup>2</sup>. Poverty levels are considerably higher among indigenous and Afro-descendant people and those living in rural areas; the situation is accentuated for women, who are more likely to live in poverty than those who are not indigenous or Afro-descendant or live in urban areas<sup>4</sup>. Women often have less adaptive capacity, which deepens structural gender gaps<sup>11</sup>.

Some of the challenges faced by the institutions in charge of national climate policies in Latin America include the cross-cutting nature of the climate agenda, the long-term perspective needed for climate-related issues (along with uncertainty levels), the power asymmetries between climate and other government

divisions, and shortfalls in the implementation of climate policies<sup>12</sup>. Some countries such as Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, and Uruguay have National Adaptation Plans as part of their long-term climate action strategies; however, almost half of the countries in the region lack a vision to 2050 and a roadmap for adaptation<sup>13</sup>. A comparative analysis of knowledge gaps and adaptation policies in six Latin American countries identified multiple challenges, such as fragmentation and lack of integration of the knowledge available, weak state capabilities to co-produce knowledge, and short-term collaborative initiatives in the policy process<sup>14</sup>.

Against this background, global institutions are growingly paying attention to Latin America<sup>15,16</sup>. This is certainly positive in the sense that international cooperation could help to close the financial and institutional gap that the countries of the region face in climate mitigation and adaptation action. However, on the opposite side, it could also bring 'green colonialism' into the region<sup>17</sup>, which in this case could be defined as the imposition of a climate agenda that responds to the donor interests' rather than to the recipients. Green colonialism perpetuates the South's dependency on the North and regularly involves infrastructure projects in which the costs of the green new world are transferred to global South countries<sup>18</sup>. The effects of the climate crisis in Latin America are intertwined with other socioeconomic problems, such as inequality, poverty, and high levels of indebtedness. Climate action, thus, cannot be separated from broader considerations of climate justice<sup>19</sup>.

This article introduces the topical collection "Local Climate Action in Latin America," a collective effort that seeks to examine, assess, and discuss current trends in the study and practice of local climate action in Latin American countries and to create a lively forum for discussion and reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of localization. It is motivated by the desire to ensure climate action is rooted in locally relevant definitions of the problems, ensures inclusion and equity, and contributes toward the broader sustainable development goals while also welcoming critique of those goals. The Topical Collection seeks to explore local climate actions as a necessary means to respond to the current climate crisis and to build on the progress made thus far.

Unlike global or national policies, local climate action is deeply embedded in the particularities of individual communities, considering their unique vulnerabilities, resources, and socioeconomic contexts. Drawing from Tosun<sup>20</sup>, we define local climate action as all activities and behavior of individuals, groups, and

organizations undertaken at the subnational levels (e.g., community, municipal, regional, or other scales) deliberately directed at preventing or reducing climate-related damages to society through mitigation and adaptation actions. These actions encompass various activities, from implementing renewable energy projects and waste reduction programs to adopting sustainable transportation systems, enhancing urban green spaces, or implementing nature-based solutions. Whereas global and regional institutions normally see local climate actions through the lenses of localization as complementary to national and international interventions<sup>4</sup>, we question that assumption. We argue that, depending on specific local conditions, local action can clash with other levels of intervention—being at the same time a source of innovation and anti-systemic thinking. The prevailing assumption that local climate action is an outcome of processes seeking to localize a global agenda assumes a high degree of specificity of the global climate agenda and oversimplifies the intricate dynamics at play. With this purpose in mind, this text distinguishes between three related but different concepts: local climate action, localization, and glocalization.

As we will see in the next sections, local climate action is deeply linked to national, supranational, and global phenomena. However, it is important to acknowledge that local climate action can be deeply disconnected from and even constrained by the dynamics occurring at other levels and scales. The next two sections offer a brief review of the concepts of localization, glocalization, and its critiques. Finally, we close this introduction by highlighting how local climate action can inform and inspire broader and more ambitious climate-related initiatives.

### CHALLENGING THE (TOP-DOWN) ASSUMPTION OF LOCALIZATION: WHY IS LOCAL CLIMATE ACTION NOT ALWAYS THE RESULT OF LOCALIZATION?

Since the global climate institutions were set off, a basic assumption guiding climate action has been that climate change is a challenge that can only be effectively addressed through global collaboration and a collective commitment to safeguarding the planet's future. This understanding of the problem has led to the adoption of international instruments such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement, putting in front debates linked to the modes of governance<sup>21</sup>. There is a consensus that climate governance has been evolving from a top-down logic following the Kyoto Protocol to a more bottom-up form of action related to the Paris Agreement<sup>22</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the Paris Agreement breaks new ground in international climate policy by acknowledging the primacy of domestic politics in climate change and allowing countries to set their ambition for climate change mitigation. Yet, instead of leaving mitigation efforts to an entirely bottom-up logic, it creates an international system of climate accountability where national-voluntary pledges can be compared and reviewed internationally<sup>23</sup>. In this context, the relevance of local (and subnational) actors has received increasing attention, as can be seen with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, only some global climate instruments acknowledge the actors of local climate action and their potential roles in contributing to the intended outcomes. Thus, these international instruments are a loose guide for the localization process and local climate action.

Localization is a term increasingly used in climate policy and international development communities that refers to the processes of formulating and implementing global climate and development goals on the local-level scale<sup>24–26</sup>. Local initiatives for mitigation and adaptation to climate change are regarded as the next frontier for advancing the global goals collected in Agenda 2030<sup>27</sup>.

In the Latin American context, ECLAC understands localization as the implementation of the Agenda 2030 by subnational and local governments and as a necessary condition to accelerate the development of adaptive capacity to climate change and reporting towards achieving the SDGs<sup>4</sup>. The rationale is that given some agreed global framework, a process that includes local actors will produce climate actions that, within that framework, contribute to reducing GHG or enhancing local adaptive capacity.

Although localization has been gaining traction in the IPCC reports and the broader literature that proposes principles and actions to improve the effectiveness of mitigation and adaptation strategies<sup>11</sup>, this enthusiasm neglects that the alignment of local initiatives with the goal of localization is not universal. Several factors contribute to the disconnection between local climate action and the top-down localization process.

1. Some local climate action initiatives arise from an anti-systemic stance that questions the prevailing economic and political structures, including capitalism, which have been implicated in exacerbating climate change. Grass-roots organizations, community activists, and alternative movements propose novel approaches challenging the capitalist growth paradigm. For these actors, addressing climate change involves not only reducing emissions but also reimagining social and economic systems. Such anti-capitalist efforts can intentionally diverge from global and national agendas, aiming to foster more equitable and just societies through transformative changes<sup>28,29</sup>.
2. Local actors, often experiencing the direct impacts of climate change, are motivated by an acute awareness of their vulnerabilities. This first-hand exposure drives them to aspire to higher levels of climate ambition, with the recognition that immediate and substantial action is necessary for their communities' survival and well-being. The recent pledges of cities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions<sup>30</sup> and other urban-scale actions<sup>31</sup> are iconic examples of this dissonance between global and local climate action.
3. Drawing from Eriksen et al.<sup>32</sup> and Taks<sup>33</sup>, we argue that local actors may not always frame issues solely as climate change effects. They might instead interpret these challenges through lenses of environmental justice, resource depletion, or economic disparities. By reframing issues in this manner, local actors can mobilize action that addresses underlying causes while simultaneously mitigating climate-related impacts. In principle, this is likely the case in local settings at the margins of transnational climate action networks and where the adoption of the climate agenda at the national level is weak.
4. Global and national climate initiatives can be complex and lengthy, requiring extensive coordination and resources. Local actors often grapple with relative limitations in terms of capacity, both in technical expertise and financial resources<sup>34</sup>. These constraints hinder their ability to engage effectively in localization efforts pursued by transnational actors and their national counterparts. As a result, local actors may opt for more feasible, context-specific actions that address immediate climate challenges rather than attempting to navigate complex localization agendas.

### GLOCALIZATION: REVIEWING SOME VENERABLE CRITIQUES

Localization could also be understood as a form of interplay between global and local processes, which in the literature on globalization that emerged since the 1990s was termed *glocalization*<sup>35</sup>. Several critiques have been pointed at the processes of

glocalization from the perspective of its promise to alleviate some of the most pressing social problems of our time.

First, critics argue that glocalization can perpetuate neocolonial tendencies, wherein global actors wield disproportionate influence over local initiatives<sup>36</sup>. Integrating global strategies might overshadow local knowledge and prioritize external agendas, potentially undermining community self-determination and true empowerment. The international development community has acknowledged the difficulties in generating local empowerment for climate action. In most countries, climate change has been captured by ministries of the environment that function as silos, often leaving local governments and communities outside the decision-making processes about climate-related investments. Therefore, some of the largest international donors are developing current strategies to increase the weight of local contributions in decision-making and project implementation. However, some stakeholders have resisted these initiatives<sup>37</sup>, leading to the so-called “localization wars”<sup>38</sup>.

Second, the push for glocalization may inadvertently lead to the standardization of climate action strategies across diverse local contexts. As with the more general critique of neoliberal or market-led globalization, critics worry that this emphasis on convergence could erase the rich tapestry of localized solutions, hindering the emergence of innovative and context-specific approaches to climate challenges. The assumption that global knowledge transfer will inherently benefit local actors overlooks the disparities in access to information and other resources. Critics stress the importance of equitable knowledge-sharing mechanisms that empower local communities rather than perpetuating hierarchies.

Third, glocalization presupposes equal partnerships between global actors and local communities. However, power imbalances usually persist, marginalizing local voices in decision-making processes<sup>39</sup>. This dynamic can result in climate action more reflective of global priorities than the genuine needs of local communities. Finally, in some cases, glocalization could be perceived as tokenistic, wherein global actors engage with local communities superficially to fulfill their agendas<sup>40</sup>. Such tokenism undermines the spirit of genuine collaboration and may not result in meaningful impact.

## LOCAL CLIMATE ACTION AS GLOCAL NETWORKS OF INNOVATORS

Scholars from Adam Smith to Karl Marx and Immanuel Wallerstein and others have observed that the domain of the economy does not remain confined to the contour of the national state; its scope is worldwide, ergo global. As the interconnections between economic agents increase in frequency and intensity with globalization<sup>41</sup>, the consequences of economic processes also create complex networks of problems that ultimately affect the balance of global systems. Earth’s climate systems operate as a complex web of interconnected processes that span the entire planet. Greenhouse gas emissions produced by industrial sources in one region can contribute to atmospheric changes that impact climates on distant continents.

In the face of these multifaceted and multiscale problems, actors also form regional and transnational networks that allow them to counteract with political interventions based on their sense of space and their projections into the interconnected -global- world<sup>42,43</sup>. These networks operate along the ebbs and flows of the international climate agenda that connect local and national realities with global decision-making progress. These networks facilitate the exchange of knowledge, strategies, and resources while fostering solidarity among diverse communities. However, as happens to other networks, climate coalitions and movements appear somewhat fragmented and, to an extent,

seem limited in their ability and willingness to exert political influence beyond particular localisms<sup>44,45</sup>.

In its latest reframing, the climate movement is developing close ties with the environmental justice movement<sup>46</sup>, drawing from place-based experiences of resistance. Climate justice highlights the experiences and demands of people worldwide who contribute the least to excessive greenhouse gas emissions but live with the most severe consequences of accelerating climate chaos: indigenous and other land-based peoples, organizers for racial and environmental justice, and the global justice movements (Tokar, 2015).

Local climate initiatives prioritizing sustainability, community well-being, and equity can effectively demonstrate alternative socioeconomic models. Some local climate initiatives promote degrowth, circular economies, and sustainable consumption practices. By showcasing successful examples of locally relevant and participatory approaches to strengthen local economies, enhance self-sufficiency, and foster social cohesion, these initiatives offer a counter-narrative to the notion that globalization and market expansion are the only avenues for prosperity.

In navigating these complexities, it is crucial to recognize that neither exclusive localization nor isolated local climate action initiatives offer a panacea for maintaining Earth’s systems within predictable boundaries. Instead, combining both approaches is required, demanding inventiveness in supporting and measuring progress. This Topical Collection seeks to unravel the intricate interplay between these factors by exploring diverse case studies and critical analysis. It offers a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics shaping local climate action in Latin America and its integral role in the broader global effort to address climate change.

In sum, supranational and national-level climate policies and actions have been deemed insufficient to generate enough progress towards reducing emissions and supporting adaptive measures. However, the current situation could be worse without them<sup>47</sup>. In this scenario, local climate action emerges as an urgent task for communities, governments, and other networked actors engaged in multiple forms in the politics and policy of climate change at different scales.

Transitioning from the overarching perspective to the specific inquiries at the heart of our investigation, we turn our attention to a series of critical questions that delve into the complexities of local climate action in Latin America:

- How do interactions between the sub-national, local, and other scales shape localization processes and outcomes?
- To what extent and how do local climate initiatives improve national policies for climate action?
- What institutional arrangements have emerged to implement climate policies at the local level?
- In which sectors and why is local action likely to succeed or, conversely, to fail?
- What types of participatory mechanisms have been put in place to formulate and design local climate policies?
- Which groups benefit from localization initiatives and receive burdens, and how is this related to climate justice debates?

By examining these questions through various theoretical and methodological lenses, the articles in this Topical Collection provide critical insights that enhance our comprehension of the distinctive attributes of local climate actions, the factors that enable them, and their repercussions within the region.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

No data were used in this Editorial.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to (1) substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of the data, (2) drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content, (3) final approval of the completed version, and (4) accountability for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.



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