Local Governments and Sustainable Development From a Latin American Perspective

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Abstract

Over the years, an important debate has taken place over the role of national governments in advancing sustainable development. In particular, this debate has concentrated on the actions that developed and developing countries should take to decrease greenhouse gas emissions. The debate has advanced very little, however, because of the distributional consequences of these actions. Given the limitations of national efforts, this article addresses the importance of building a research agenda on the role that local governments could play in adopting sustainable strategies and policies. Understanding this role is relevant not only for U.S. cities but also for local governments in developing nations, given the difficulties of placing sustainable development on their national agendas.

Introduction

The idea of sustainable development was first introduced in the United Nations' (UN's) 1987 Brundtland Commission report. The report defined *sustainable development* as an appropriate rate of development that meets people's standard needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The UN developed major policy action at the first Rio Earth Summit in 1992, hosted by the government of Brazil. This summit led to Agenda 21, which created the "Blueprint for Sustainable Development," the first international action plan that expected developed and developing countries alike to meet and agree on how to diminish their carbon footprint. International agreements such as the most recent proposed in Cancun, Mexico (2010), in Copenhagen, Denmark (2009), and at Rio+20 (2012), however, have had difficulty establishing the acceptable criteria for many goals, such as the amount of pollutants to eliminate. At the heart of this global debate is the question of which countries are more likely and responsible to adopt the criteria and to take concrete action to eliminate carbon dioxide (CO_2) and decrease greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Cities and local governments need to be involved for sustainable development to advance. Recent evidence suggests that cities are major contributors to CO_2 emissions. Cities house more than 50 percent of the world's population, a figure estimated to exceed 60 percent by 2030 (OECD, 2001). They also consume 60 to 80 percent of global energy production, which represents an equivalent percentage of global CO_2 and GHG emissions (OECD, 2001). Major sources of GHG come from the use of electricity, heating and industrial fuel, industrial processes, ground transportation, aviation, and solid waste. According to OECD (2001), people's lifestyles, not urbanization, is at the heart of the problem. The success of a compact city is based on using transport links appropriately, planning the correct mixture of land uses, and providing high-quality urban services.

The Example of Sustainability in Mexican Local Governments

In Mexico, as in most Latin American countries, promoting sustainability has not been on the agenda of national, state, or local governments. Other than the participation of the national governments in various summits, most national agencies, regional governments, and municipalities have not adopted policies explicitly intended to promote sustainable development. Only recently have the efforts of various levels of government been intended to tackle environmental issues. Few state governments have introduced mitigation policies or policies to advance goals such as the protection and renewal of natural resources. For instance, in Mexico, some states have adopted programs for water reservoir protection, energy saving, and reforestation. Other states have adopted and implemented environmental education programs to raise societal awareness about the effect of human activity on the environment and programs to promote recycling reusable materials, with little to no success.

Surprisingly, city governments are adopting adaptation policies without their respective nation states necessarily signing on to these global agreements. In this sense, the government of Mexico City deserves specific attention, because it has the most cutting-edge policies and programs on sustainable development in Mexico. Because of its sizable population and budget capacity, Mexico City has characteristics closer to those of a state government than a municipality. The city's public report on climate change (Vasques, Del Valle, and Salinas, 2008) cited program plans to be implemented between 2008 and 2012 and beyond. The report set a goal of reducing CO_2 emissions by 7 million tons by 2012, which represents 12 percent of annual GHG emissions in Mexico City alone.

Despite such isolated efforts, the current challenge for Mexican and Latin American local governments is to create a minimum base from which to start promoting sustainable policies. For instance, creating more compact and tidy cities and preventing urban sprawl seem to be imperative. As traditionally designed by Spanish colonizers, city centers in Latin American cities consist of a main plaza, cathedral, public schools, and government buildings (Grindle, 2007; Ward, 1998). Beyond the urban center, however, most modern cities in these countries are characterized by random, unplanned growth, with large areas of housing facing inadequate accessibility to jobs and public services, and often to schools, parks, and mass transit options.

Appropriate urban growth is particularly important in rapidly urbanizing areas in developing countries such as Mexico, which has recently experienced a pronounced population growth and

a high level of population density. According to the National Institute of Geography and Statistics, in 1950, slightly less than 43 percent of Mexico's population (more than 2,500 inhabitants) lived in urban areas. In 1990, that number reached 71 percent. The latest figure, recorded in 2010, suggested that the urban population of Mexico had reached 78 percent of the national population.

Scale, Instruments, and Models of Governance

The articles in this symposium provide new insights directly relevant to the Latin American context. These ideas have the potential not only to stimulate research, but also to inform policy development in Latin American local governments. They could particularly help local governments to move from cyclical debates regarding the pertinence of the concept, redefinitions of terms, or the relevance of adopting sustainable policies (Barton, 2006; Bernal, 2004; Lezama and Domínguez, 2006; Lomnitz, 2005) to specific policies and programs that could be adopted and implemented at the local, state, or national level. The scale of the response, the specific instruments that could be used, and the applicable models of governance are important topics that deserve attention to identify the extent to which sustainable policies are viable in cities, not only in the United States, but also in developing countries.

The symposium articles make a consistent case that local governments are an appropriate level at which to address problems and policies associated with sustainability. Svara, Watt, and Jang (2013) show that sustainable policies are adopted when they are linked to specific economic benefits for local governments and communities. In the same sense, Portney (2013) and Hawkins and Wang (2013) make the argument about the compatibility of environmental protection and economic development. These studies could teach scholars and policymakers in Latin American the importance of appealing to local groups to advance sustainable policies. The previously mentioned studies, however, assume that economic growth is linked to more opportunities and jobs for most members of these communities, which would fulfill the social sphere of environmental policies. This assumption is hard to make for Mexico and other Latin American countries that are characterized by the concentration of income and opportunities in urban areas. Therefore, in these countries, making the case that protecting the environment can provide some sort of social justice at the same time may be more important to help rally public support to these policies, as it has in the case of policies that promote public transportation and mobility.

A second issue regarding the pertinence of the local level to adopting environmental and sustainability policies relates to resources—in particular, technical and financial resources—that local governments need to advance the adoption and implementation of these policies. For instance, the kinds of impact fees that Burge and Ihlanfeldt (2013) suggest require technology and technical expertise as well as professional planners who understand the complexity of growth management. They also require commitments from elected officials who are willing to leave the politically profitable business of deciding land uses to manage urban growth. Finally, adopting these instruments will require local governments to have a long-term perspective based on stable institutions that extend beyond elected authorities. These three elements are missing in Mexico and in most Latin American local governments (Rondón, 2009).

In addition, some of the technologies associated with energy saving and more efficient management of natural resources require substantial investments, which are particularly scarce in local governments that depend on transfers from national governments to deliver public services. For instance, according to Cabrero and Orihuela (2011), only about 20 percent of municipal revenue in Mexico was collected locally in 2008, and the remainder of public funds was transferred from the state or federal government.

The lack of resources in developing countries, however, has also been a recurring argument for developing countries' lack of commitment and involvement to adopting sustainable policies (Bernal, 2004; Chacón, 2009; Rondón, 2009; Rosales and Sánchez, 2011). This situation is related to another major factor in the global debate regarding whether developed or developing countries are responsible for the global climate crisis and how the international community can deal with these problems on an equal playing field. The bottom line of this debate relates to the cost of implementing instruments that contribute to sustainable development. In this sense, various articles in this symposium provide some examples of low-cost instruments of potential use in developing countries. For instance, Ramaswami (2013) discusses policies and programs that do not require substantial investments, such as reducing the demand for transportation energy through coordination with regional organizations or providing feedback to consumers via bills to promote a behavioral change. As Ramaswami notes, these policies may have a limited effect on GHG emissions but could be a first step.

Svara, Watt, and Jang (2013) also provide many policies and programs that would have marginal costs for local governments. Regarding all the programs and instruments that could be labeled as sustainable, however, Latin American countries face a similar situation as U.S. local governments. At first, it appears that any program could be labeled as part of a sustainable development program. For this reason, sustainable programs initially become a series of bins, wherein local governments or public agencies mix existing programs and actions that enable them to gain support from new interest groups. Some governments or public agencies, however, seem to take this opportunity to innovate and to generate new programs that allow for the integration of the "three Es": economy, ecology, and equity. Little is known about how this transition happens and what makes it possible. The responses to these questions are important to help local governments, in general, understand how they could develop sustainable programs, rather than merely repackaging what they are doing already.

Finally, the governance topic is also very relevant for Latin American countries. It seems that, for Latin American scholars and policymakers, the adoption and implementation of sustainable policies is basically a governmental affair (Barton, 2006; Miguel et al., 2011; Rosales and Sánchez, 2011) that, at best, concerns the private sector and local communities (Rondón, 2009). Sustainability is therefore often seen as a policy that should start from national initiatives and that only requires coordination among the different levels of government to be adopted and implemented. This perspective is limited compared with that offered by the articles in this symposium.

Previous research has shown that policies associated with sustainability, such as compact development, have important redistributive consequences for interest groups in cities (Ramírez de la Cruz, 2009). In these cases, the interest groups likely to champion and oppose sustainable policies need to be actively incorporated into the adoption debate and made participants in implementing

the instrument. The active participation from environmental groups is even more important in developing democracies, which lack the institutions and civic community that could serve as a counterbalance to economic growth interest (Denhardt et al., 2009). For this reason, the role of international networks such as ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability—are of particular importance (Daley, Sharp, and Bae, 2013; Weible and Elgin, 2013). In cities in developing countries, as in U.S. cities, these networks seem to provide public awareness and support for mayors to adopt and promote sustainable policies, as in the previously described case of Mexico City, which has been an active member of ICLEI. In addition, these networks can provide incentives to mayors looking to advance in their political careers by giving them national and international exposure and a reputation for being progressive. The articles in this symposium, taken together, make the argument that local co-benefits or the alignment of political and environmental incentives motivate sustainability. The example of Mexico suggests that aligning political incentives with sustainability is critical in the Latin American context as well, but the relevant co-benefits may be very different.

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