

achieve these objectives have already been adopted; however, slow implementation due to the low political priority given to these issues raises concerns about

whether Peru will be able to stick to its plan. There is a danger that this will drive the economic costs caused by climate change even higher.

## VENEZUELA

*Henning Suhr*

Venezuela signed the UNFCCC in 1994, and the Kyoto Protocol in 2004 (the latter did not enter into force until 2005). Nevertheless, the country is – in proportional terms – Latin America's greatest emitter of CO<sub>2</sub>. According to data from the World Bank, per capita emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> totalled around seven tonnes in 2010, while in neighbouring Chile and Argentina this figure was only around four tonnes.<sup>1</sup> Venezuela is responsible for 0.56 percent of global carbon emissions.

Venezuela's plentiful supply of energetic resources has resulted in a feeling of entitlement on the part of both the government and the population to consume unlimited amounts of oil, gas and electricity at low prices. The market is subject to a range of distortions that evolved over time as a result of subsidies and price controls leading to higher consumption levels and offering no incentive for energy efficiency or savings. The result is an above-average energy consumption compared to other countries in Latin America and the rest of the world. What is more, environmental protection and sustainability have so far been considered to be of secondary importance in political terms. Major shortcomings can be particularly observed in areas such as waste disposal or wastewater treatment.

While climate change and environmental protection are intensively discussed in Venezuela, the debate is largely restricted to specialist circles. Numerous academics and other experts and a range of academic departments and courses are devoted to the topic. Issues such as climate or environmental protection are frequently covered by the media. However, there are very few civil society groups that approach the issue in such a way as to be able to exercise any political influence. The political sphere itself does very little to put climate change on the public agenda, although this is also due to the current political situ-

ation, which is characterised by repression, violence, economic crisis and increasing disorder.

The policies announced by the Venezuelan government frequently differ from those it actually initiates and executes, and it often does not involve civil society groups or experts that do not completely share the government's views. This is also the case with regard to environmental and climate protection. Not long ago, well-known politicians spoke out in favour of environmental concerns, but due to the ongoing political crisis the topic has practically no resonance in the political debate. Environmental and climate protection are not widespread concerns, and the population has only a limited knowledge of the issues, which does not in any way alter everyday behaviour (e.g. increased recycling) or result in political demands. The issue of sustainability has virtually no influence on the Venezuelan people's consumer behaviour, nor is it given priority in policy making.

Nonetheless, climate and environmental protection could become more prominent in the future. The government's National Plan 2013–19 (Plan de la Patria 2013–19) establishes, in Target 4, "the need to establish an eco-socialist [sic!] economic model based on a harmonious relationship between people and nature that guarantees optimal and rational use of and benefit from natural resources and respects natural processes and cycles". Whether and, more importantly, how this target will be implemented in terms of government policy remains to be seen. So far, it simply appears that the Chavista government has once again co-opted an issue for propaganda purposes. Accordingly, concrete results with regard to climate protection are unlikely. In late May 2014 the implementation of the eco-socialist model was announced, without any definition of the term's actual meaning.

1 | The World Bank, "World Development Indicators: Energy dependency, efficiency and carbon dioxide emissions", 2013, <http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/3.8> [28 July 2014].

President Maduro announced the formation of a climate change commission, but failed to specify which tasks would fall within the body's remit. Although universities, scientists and environmental movements were invited to take part in the commission, its actual composition is likely to be dependent on the participants' political convictions. Venezuela has also prepared proposals regarding the "protection of the planet", to be presented to the United Nations in September. "In order for the earth to be saved it is necessary to create awareness, to move the awareness of millions, to stop being passive victims of the damage caused by world's industrial capitalism and start being actors of change, protagonists of a technological, economic transition," was the somewhat nebulous description of the country's position by its head of state in a speech at a ceremony in a military barracks to mark the occasion of the "day of the tree".

In the meantime, the Venezuelan reality is rather different, contrasting heavily with the president's words. Alicia Villamizar, a professor at the Faculty for Environment Studies of the Simón Bolívar University in Caracas and the only Venezuelan expert to have contributed to the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report, gave a damning testimonial of the Chavista government's efforts towards prevention of and adaptation to climate change. For instance, according to Villamizar, protection of the roughly 4,000-kilometre coastline has been neglected, Venezuela's vehicle fleet has barely been renewed in 15 years and the oil industry operates with practically no environmental constraints.

Venezuela's environment and climate policy is rife with contradictions, such as the subsidies granted to petrol. Premium-grade petrol currently costs around €0.014 per litre. Nowhere in the world is petrol as cheap as in Venezuela – and the same can be assumed for the amount of petrol wasted. In conjunction with the lack of public security, the inadequate public transport system and the tropical climate, the petrol price policy results in private cars being indispensable to many Venezuelans. However, there are no incentives to avoid unnecessary travel, adopt fuel-efficient driving habits or even increase car occupancy rates over long distances. The resulting traffic jams make the misguided petrol price policy even more counter-productive: as well as harming the environment, it results in high costs to the state. Specialists from an environmental expert group of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Venezuela used official data to calculate that the petrol price would have to be at least €0.17 per litre to cover production costs. The resulting losses are estimated at around seven percent of GDP. This is not the only case of economic and climate policy madness in Venezuela's government. Increasing deforestation

is causing considerable soil degradation. This alarming development is accompanied by inadequate water conservation and water scarcity, which has a negative impact on ecosystems and hydropower electricity production. In many locations, electricity shortages are compensated for using generators, which drives down the carbon balance. In a centralised state, responsibility for energy and environmental policy lies in the hands of the national government. Municipalities and provinces wield little influence. The government's intention to promote the development of renewable energies has so far been manifested only in the form of minor wind farm projects in the Falcón province.



*Almost every year in Venezuela, prolonged rainfall is followed by heavy flooding in December. The Caracas region is the most affected, due to its position on the Guaire River.*

The Venezuelan government does not deny the phenomenon of climate change and its effects – however, nor does it take appropriate political action. On the international stage, the country takes the ideological view that the world's wealthier countries bear greater responsibility for climate change than the poorer nations, but are seeking to pass on this responsibility to the latter by means of international agreements, while also claiming that the wealthy nations are denying developing and emerging countries the funds they need to take the necessary mitigation measures. It calls upon the industrialised nations to abandon the "blockade" of compensation payments for the negative effects on the climate they have caused.<sup>2</sup>

2 | Venezuelan representative's speech at the UN Climate Change Conference in Warsaw: "Venezuela fijó posición en convención de la ONU sobre cambio climático", *TeleSUR*, via *Aporrea*, 22 November 2013, <http://aporrea.org/internacionales/n240398.html> [28 July 2014].

As long as the Venezuelan government stands by this ideologically embellished interpretation, there is little prospect of any changes to its stance towards international climate policy. In light of its critique of the current state of affairs, it would be fitting if Venezuela were to distinguish itself as a model of climate policy for other countries, rather than as a negative example.