Mexico has been busy. Or at least, its energy and environmental ministers have been. Over the last several years, Mexico has held its first auction for renewable energy contracts, opened its energy market to private competitors, and increased its renewable energy capacity by more than thirty times the level in 2008. At the same time, the Environment Ministry recently issued a temporary emergency regulation after the air pollution index in Mexico city surpassed 150, considered Phase 1 pollution in Mexico and far above the level at which the government warns children and the elderly to stay inside (100). Oh, and on Tuesday, Mexico’s climate policy director announced that the country is aiming to ratify the Paris Climate Agreement by the end of this year, which would make it one of the first major developing countries to do so.



Mexico City haze

Mexico is displaying an odd, almost internally-conflicted environmental progression.

As a politically and economically important global player, and a country that, like most poorer nations, stands to suffer immensely from climate change impacts, Mexico seems to be taking the challenge seriously. The overhaul of its energy sector over the last several years may have had more to do with economics than the environment, but it also included national targets for renewable energy. Both national and subnational government leaders have been active in a number of international agreements and meetings other than Paris, such as the Under 2 MOU (two Mexican states were among that agreement's founders), a bilateral agreement with California to reduce GHG emissions, and the Clean Energy Ministerial meeting held earlier this month. Meanwhile, those living in its capitol, including most of those government leaders, are dealing with dangerous levels of air pollution.

This is what it looks like when a developing country tries to skip directly to a clean energy economy, and over all the intervening years of making fossil fuel sources less hazardous to human health. While Mexico is ramping up its climate change efforts, it has taken a step backward in traditional air pollution (what U.S. environmental lawyers might call criteria pollutants). Last year on July 1, the Mexican Supreme Court rolled back Mexico City's air pollution program called "Hoy No Circula," or No-Drive Days. Essentially, the program categorized private vehicles by age, and older vehicles had to stay off the streets one day a week, and the oldest vehicles were prohibited from use on Saturdays as well. The Court held that limiting car use based on vehicle age was effectively economic discrimination and violated anti-discrimination laws. As a result, an estimated additional 1.4 million cars travel Mexico City streets each day. Fast forward to March 2016, and Mexico City is experiencing its first Phase 1 air quality warning in eleven years. That's not to say the Supreme Court was wrong – Hoy No Circula almost certainly had a larger impact on the poor – those that can only afford older cars and can't afford to buy a second car or use taxis for that one day a week. It's just an unfortunate example of the unique challenges facing a state that wants to address climate change and other environmental problems without inhibiting, or possibly even undoing, economic development.

Another example of this tension between being a climate leader while still dealing with rudimentary environmental challenges is the planned new airport for Mexico City, Nuevo Aeropuerto Internacional de la Ciudad de Mexico (NAICM). The airport will be, in the words of one of the architects, "the most sustainable airport in the world" and will connect to the city's metro system. But, perhaps ironically, the choice of a large, undeveloped site on the outskirts of the city may create new

environmental problems. First, the site is not in good shape. I lived in Mexico City last year and drove past the site with a friend. We didn’t even have the windows down, but the smell was obvious; my friend told me the sewers let out there. Now, I don’t know if I should take an offhand comment from a Mexican claiming no professional connection to the project as fact, but the powerful smell that followed us for several minutes, despite going 70 on the highway, is evidence enough for me that some level of clean-up is needed. Second, there’s the water issue. Mexico City is plagued by water scarcity, partly due to inefficient infrastructure and partly due to natural geology. The valley that once was a large network of lakes has been covered in concrete, inhibiting the recharge of aquifers and increasing runoff of pollutants. But the area of the proposed airport is in one of the few places where there are still lakes and open space (albeit potentially polluted) that provide much needed ecosystem services like groundwater recharge and filtration.

So what do developing countries that are also international advocates of climate change mitigation do? I’m sure China, India, and Brazil are facing similar quandaries, and I don’t envy them the hard road ahead.