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# LATIN AMERICAN PLATFORM FOR THE INTERACTION BETWEEN SCIENTISTS AND DECISION-MAKERS

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KEY POINTS

- ✔ Knowledge platforms are virtual spaces of collaboration and interaction where scientists and decision-makers can reach understandings on issues of common interest.
- ✔ Asia, Africa and Europe have regional platforms with a "single window" approach to address adaptation to climate change. On the other hand, Latin America has a variety of websites that deal with the issue in an uncoordinated manner, making it difficult to keep up with maintenance and updating over time.
- ✔ Establishing a regional platform that functions as a gateway for the subject at a regional level, and coordinating and complementing the existing websites, will allow for greater scope and sustainability over time.
- ✔ One incentive for the scientific community to participate in the platform and interact with decision-makers could be including spaces for the search of collaborators or donors in citizen science projects, and science reviews of newspaper articles and/or evidence-based assessment of public policies.
- ✔ The regional platform itself could serve as a laboratory for the generation of new evaluation metrics that consider the impacts of scientific production, beyond academia, on public policies and people's quality of life.

## Executive summary

The use of scientific evidence in the development of public policies reduces arbitrariness and increases efficiency in the use of resources. To achieve this, it is necessary to create interactive spaces, such as knowledge platforms, that enable the collaboration between science and politics.

Unlike other regions, Latin America does not have a platform that functions as a "single window" for adaptation to climate change. In addition, existing websites have not fully developed spaces and tools for scientists and decision-makers to reach understandings on issues of common interest.

This paper aims at establishing a regional platform to coordinate and strengthen pre-existing websites, as well as including components and operating schemes that promote collective intelligence and the participation of the scientific community and its interaction with decision-makers.

## Resumen ejecutivo

La utilización de evidencia científica en el desarrollo de las políticas públicas reduce la arbitrariedad y hace más eficiente el uso de los recursos. Para lograrlo es necesario generar espacios interactivos, como las plataformas de conocimiento, que faciliten la colaboración entre ciencia y política.

En América Latina, a diferencia de otras regiones del planeta, no existe una plataforma que funcione como una «ventanilla de entrada única» en materia de adaptación al cambio climático. Adicionalmente, los portales existentes no han desarrollado en profundidad espacios y herramientas a partir de las cuales, científicos y tomadores de decisiones, alcancen entendimientos sobre asuntos de interés común.

Este trabajo se propone el establecimiento de una plataforma regional que coordine y potencie los sitios preexistentes, a la par de incluir componentes y esquemas de funcionamiento que promuevan la inteligencia colectiva, la participación de la comunidad científica y su interacción con los tomadores de decisiones.

## Introduction

In terms of adaptation to climate change, science and politics seem to be distant and parallel worlds. Differences in the issues they attempt to address, how they do it, and the languages used, as well as difficulties in implementing forms of co-production of knowledge, are all factors that hinder the development of evidence-based policies.

On the other hand, the use of scientific evidence in the development of public policies reduces arbitrariness and enhances the use of resources, and also provides leaders with objective criteria to select the best alternatives.

It is therefore necessary to generate a connection between the creation of collaborative dynamics and interactive spaces in which scientists and decision makers can reach understandings on issues of common interest.

These dynamics can be conducted on site by establishing scientific and technical offices in political bodies, and through virtual cooperation spaces that encourage knowledge sharing and interaction, offering tools for sharing experiences about adaptation to climate change.

Knowledge platforms are websites that offer a wide range of services and resources in an integrated manner, attempting to become a «single window» for key information about a certain topic.

Currently, the existence of a variety of tools that enhances the creation of websites, in addition to the benefits of generating a product that can be displayed in a short period of time and with little investment required, has led to a global increase in the number of portals (1). This fact, far from contributing to solving the problems that were intended to be addressed, has resulted in a duplication of efforts and processes of "reinventing the wheel".

In addition, the ease of creating websites contrasts the difficulties faced in their maintenance, an activity that is by the way, considerably less attractive to potential funders.

In Latin America, there are several portals that deal

exclusively with adaptation or that consider it within the framework of a broader approach that also includes other aspects of climate change<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, territorial scopes vary between local, national and regional. Regarding the services provided, they generally have the following elements and functions:

- Alternatives for the registration of users and sending newsletters to distribution lists. While most sites allow free access to all information, making contributions and participating in forums is restricted to those registered as members.

- Virtual Libraries. This is one of the most common elements within knowledge platforms, as it allows access to technical reports, guides, digital books, audiovisual material, etc. In the region, the Brazilian portal AdaptaClima (2) includes one of the most complete libraries, which presents the material in summary sheets, including links to the original sources. Additionally, it has a search tool to find content according to different criteria, such as subject, year, author, among others.

- News and Events. One of the sections that requires more updating and where the existing difficulties for the maintenance of these portals is clearly notable.

- Social media. Most include alternatives for receiving news through the RSS service and follow up or share opinions through social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.). Out of the regional platforms analyzed for this work, Latin Clima (3), with over 1,900 followers, is the most far-reaching on Twitter. However, it is well below platforms in other regions such as Africa Adapt (4) which has over 4,000 followers.

- Links to other sites. It has not been fully developed and can be very useful to enhance synergies and avoid duplication in the objectives and scope of the sites.

- Networking. The Action LAC platform (5) is aimed at identifying, drawing attention and strengthening networks of regional actors that implement climate actions. Latin Clima includes a search engine for communicators and professionals by country and area of expertise.

<sup>1</sup> This paper analyzed the following: 1) Action LAC; 2) REGATTA; 3) LEDS LAC; 4) SIMARCC; 5) AdaptaClima; 6) RIOCC; 7) Latin Clima; and 8) Regional Network on Climate Change and Decision Making;

- Country-specific information. Some portals, such as UN Environment REGATTA (6), have information on the integration of climate change into the planning and regulatory framework, as well as good practices that are being carried out in the region. On the other hand, the Regional Network on Climate Change and Decision Making (7) has identified knowledge gaps in adaptation to climate change for different countries in the region.
- Communities of practice (CoP). A collaborative space for groups of experts that meet virtually or on site to exchange knowledge and strengthen capacities around a specific theme (8). To be successful they require an active moderator who permanently encourages the participation of the members. The REGATTA platform includes CoPs with a regional approach (e.g. Southern Cone, Mesoamerica and Andes) and a thematic approach (e.g. Ecosystem-based Adaptation and Adaptation Plans). LEDS LAC (9) includes a COP on Climate Policy Monitoring and Evaluation.
- Interactive maps. The Argentine portal SIMARCC (10) includes an interactive online tool for visualizing and constructing climate risk maps<sup>2</sup>.
- Remote expert assistance services. LEDS LAC offers its members the possibility of accessing an expert technical assistance service to carry out tasks such as reviewing plan and strategy documents.

Some of these platforms summon members to meet regularly face-to-face in order to establish possible lines of work, as well as monitoring and coordinating existing activities. The RIOCC (11) has a Coordinators' Commission<sup>3</sup>, comprised of the directors of the Climate Change Offices of member countries, that meets formally once a year and informally during UNFCCC meetings<sup>4</sup>. The conclusions of the annual meetings are submitted to the Ibero-American Forum of Environment Ministers for consideration.

The leading role in the coordination of these platforms is under the responsibility of public sector organizations, generally of environmental bodies (RIOCC, SIMARCC and AdaptaClima), United Nations agencies (REGATTA and Regional Network on Climate Change and Decision Making) or Civil Society Organizations (Action Lac, Latin Clima and LEDS LAC). Either way, it is common for actors from different sectors to be represented in coordination bodies with different levels of decision-making and participation.

The initial development of platforms is usually funded through projects with a restricted budget and a specific period of time to achieve the expected objectives. The operation and maintenance sometimes will depend on the realization of new projects, and others are based on a long-term perspective through their integration into government policies financed by public funds.

The Spanish Agency for Cooperation, which supports the Latin Clima, REGATTA and RIOCC platforms, stands out in the region as a key actor in the financing of this type of initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> Climate Change Risk Map System. <sup>3</sup> Ibero-American Network of Climate Change Offices. <sup>4</sup> United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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## Issues

Based on a preliminary diagnosis of the situation of adaptation platforms in the region, it can be noted that some sites operate in an uncoordinated manner, and that in many cases they have a low level of maintenance and updating, with limited scope in terms of number of users. A survey carried out in 2016 among those responsible for climate change decisions in Latin American and the Caribbean (12), showed that very few of them obtained information from Latin-American knowledge platforms.

Unlike Asia (13), Africa and Europe (14), where platforms for regional adaptation have been established, Latin America lacks a «*single window*» for adaptation, that can help centralize and coordinate links between the existing portals<sup>5</sup>. In this aspect, the European Platform Climate ADAPT has been a pioneer in making its site available for members to add content and links to their portals, providing an appropriate environment for coordination and sharing information. Climate ADAPT has also successfully involved many information providers and users who have shared their knowledge and have contributed to better informed decision-making and policies (15, 16).

On the other hand, despite efforts, the existing platforms in our region still lack the ability to produce knowledge collaboratively between the scientific world and public policy. A key factor for this has been the lack of incentives for scientists to take part in this type of participatory processes of knowledge production. Historically, the scientific-academic system of the countries of the region has valued the production of knowledge, mainly through publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals and, to a much lesser extent, through contributions and services made to the State, social or productive sectors (17). It is therefore necessary to create more spaces for sharing information that strengthen the relationship between the world of science and decision-makers.

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## Proposals and recommendations

Latin America needs to imitate other regions in terms of having a platform that functions as a single window to the subject matter in the region. It should be able to coordinate and enhance the sustainability of existing sites, as well as include spaces and tools that encourage interaction between scientists and decision-makers.

One suggestion is to establish a platform that taps into the potential and elements of existing portals, such as:

- The information on institutional, regulatory and policy frameworks of the countries of the region that has been collected in RIOCC and REGATTA.
- The communicational power of the LAC Clima platform, which in addition to having a network of experts on the subject has a considerable number of followers on Twitter.
- The opportunity to coordinate regional networks based on Action Lac's ongoing diagnostic work.

<sup>5</sup> Although there are regional websites, they are not exclusively focused on the theme of adaptation, nor do they have a development and scope comparable to the European platform which, in this author's opinion, is one of the models to be followed.

- The working experience of the different CoPs of REGATTA.
- The lessons learned in order to work on the scientific-political interface of: a) the COP on Climate Policy Monitoring and Evaluation Practices of LEDS LAC; and b) the Latino Adapta project, of the Regional Network on Climate Change and Decision Making .
- The versatility of the SIMARCC portal to visualize future climate scenarios and build risk maps.
- The functionality of the search tool, the system of summary sheets, and the option of discussing the material offered by the AdaptaClima library.

The platform should also include new collective operating schemes that enhance its scope and at the same time contribute to the sustainability of the websites of its members.

(a) Reaching large online audiences is not simple, but it becomes even more difficult if the wide range of initiatives about the subject are disorganized and uncoordinated.

Centralizing all information in one single regional platform will increase activity and visits, resulting in ranking higher in search engines and indirectly in greater visibility of the sites of members who interact with the platform. A greater scope will also increase the interest of sponsors, providing new opportunities to access funds.

(b) One alternative is for partner sites to share their registered users information in a single common database and categorize them according to their interests. Subsequently, a system can be created to allow the information produced by any member to reach all platform users who have declared interest in a particular topic. Thus, every site will benefit from what others produce.

(c) Another possibility to consider is to group all future events in a particular section of the platform, in order to avoid overlaps that limit the audience and to coordinate joint events in subjects that bring about an increase in reach.

Finally, the new platform will require spaces and elements that encourage collective intelligence and strengthen interaction between scientists and decision-makers, including:

(d) Secondary documentation that uses understandable language to summarize and describe scientific articles, regulations, policies and projects, in order to make them accessible to the non-specialized audience. Easily adaptable formats should be explored for social media, which is where most electronic dialogue takes place today.

(e) Tools that facilitate participation, commenting and valuing the documentation within the site.

(f) Civic science projects<sup>7</sup>. The platform can serve as a catalyst for the design of this type of projects, generating capacities for their development and contributing to the recruitment of collaborators<sup>8</sup>.

(g) Alternatives for accessing financing through crowdfunding. Collective microfinance campaigns have been successful for technological development in different areas of knowledge. There is little global background on climate change and none in the region<sup>9</sup>.

(h) Incorporation of scientific review and validation services for news<sup>10</sup>. Articles published in the mass media can have a significant influence on the creation of policies. Therefore, it is very important that scientists participate and find inaccuracies or false logical reasoning that if not corrected, could eventually lead to the design and implementation of inappropriate policies.

<sup>6</sup> The Project *Strengthening links between science and governments for the development of climate-related policies in Latin America* aims at strengthening the capacities of national governments in Latin America to make decisions and implement climate policies based on scientific evidence. <sup>7</sup> The aim is to encourage research projects that bring together scientists and ordinary citizens as main actors, for the collaborative construction of knowledge. <sup>8</sup> Following models such as those of the *Citizenscience.gov* (18) and *Climate CoLab Works* (19). <sup>9</sup> Such as the *Plan A* initiative (20). <sup>10</sup> Following models such as the *Climate Feedback* initiative (21).

(i) Tools based on scientific evidence that value the performance of countries in terms of public policies on the subject<sup>11</sup>. Comparisons between countries, in terms of public policy performance, tend to generate discomfort, especially in the politicians who are responsible for implementation. Nevertheless, they are a very efficient trigger for changing inadequate courses of action in time.

The new platform should involve active participation from climate change offices in the region, and be coordinated by a United Nations body to ensure its continuity, regardless of the political changes in the member countries. Its implementation could be carried out in four stages:

1. Political agreement between the countries of the region to take the initiative forward. This could be achieved through the RIOCC and its interaction with the Ibero-American Forum of Environment Ministers.
2. Fund management to carry out the initiative. It could possibly fit into several of the lines of work of the EUROCLIMA+ Programme<sup>12</sup>.
3. Design and implement collective functioning schemes by enhancing connectivity and interoperability between the current elements of different sites and the new platform.
4. Develop new functions, spaces and elements that encourage collective intelligence and strengthen the interaction between science and politics.

Finally, if a platform such as the one described above includes specific operating schemes designed to enhance and register the assessment of the articles published, it can serve as a laboratory to generate new evaluation metrics of scientific production, and be able to consider impacts, beyond academia, on public policies and people's quality of life.

Establishing these new metrics can be challenging, but it is essential to analyze the influence of scientific evidence on the decisions that take place daily in the real world (23).

The increasing use of online communication offers new monitoring opportunities. Social media is changing not only the way in which scientific research results are communicated, but also the way in which audiences interact during the process. They are no longer passive listeners, but are having a more active role in the construction of knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> As the Climate Transparency initiative (22). <sup>12</sup> That among others, already supports the COP in Monitoring and Evaluation of Climate Policies of LEDES LAC. The Spanish Cooperation Agency, which participates in various platforms in the region, is another key actor to consider.

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