



Sustainable Colombia: Politics, Planet and Democratic Security
A Conversation with President Alvaro Uribe Vélez
John Brademas Center of New York University
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Remarks by
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Good afternoon, I would like to recognize the presence of His Excellency President Alvaro Uribe Velez and thank the Director of External Affairs of NYU DC and the John Brademas Center of New York University as well as Geovany Vicente Romero for hosting this event. I am pleased to have been invited to this conversation on sustainability in Colombia and issues that more than ever are of relevance to the region and to each one of you in the audience: Politics, Planet and Democratic Security.

The pandemic is having a deep, unparalleled, social and economic impact in our region. Pre-pandemic, the region was already affected by the greatest inequality on the planet. Unemployment across the region surged last year to 15% from 8% in 2019, with 21 million people losing their jobs. The GDP had the sharpest contraction ever seen, since the beginning of having reliable statistics.

Many households live in the informal sector and the controversial quarantine policies have proved to be impossible to enforce. This is mostly affecting the poor, women, children, workers, indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees. It is affecting lives. According to the World Bank, while the region only counts for 8 percent of the global population, it has seen **19.1 percent of infections worldwide and 28.8 percent of global deaths**. Last week, on Thursday, Argentina, Paraguay and Colombia all registered their highest daily death tolls. The mayor of Bogotá, urged residents to stay at home, warning that they faced “the most difficult two weeks – not of the pandemic, but of their lives”.

What’s happening is a catastrophe and this agony is partly the result of longstanding structural problems, including underfunded health systems, lack of prioritization of environmental issues, and poverty.

The pandemic is adding pressure to the underlying existing vulnerabilities and threats to our economic, social and environmental wellbeing.



Climate Change and threatened biodiversity has effects on nature's contributions to people from land use change. It was expected that new risks—such as the pandemic—would arise for both natural and human systems. Risks are unevenly distributed and are generally greater for countries of increased vulnerability such as is the case for many in the region. The risks are also greater for disadvantaged people and communities in countries at all levels of development. Resulting climate migration, loss and diminished livelihoods add pressure and create further vulnerability.

In this sense, we are truly facing a disaster. A “serious disruption of the functioning of society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope.”

These all make the nexus of security threats and environmental change more relevant.

Our security is threatened by new pressing issues that are straining our democracies.

We face a world full of risk in very polarized societies. Even the truth is at a risk. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights how climate change and human interaction with the environment demands a holistic commitment to sustainability and nature conservation. It demands rule of law and a true commitment not only from our leaders but also from society. We want our leaders to hear our voices. This is not about being loud, but about how to use our voices effectively and through the proper channels.

This is a critical time in history, a time in which we are living through multiple crises at once. An ecological one (including biodiversity and climate), a sanitary and health crisis (which is interrelated) and an economic one. Furthermore, we are facing a crisis of values in our society.

A colleague recently wrote an article that he titled "the secret revolution of judges," concluding that judges are overreaching their powers and interfering with the responsibilities of other branches of government. This is wrong. It is not criticism that counts. In addressing claims and conflict regarding economic investment, infrastructure, extractives, and the environment, the diversity of voices, not preaching to the converted and roles that judges are playing, is critical to ensure that our democracies thrive.

The reality is that democracy is hard work and is a system of checks and balances, that requires accountable institutions. This includes spending in worthy causes and daring greatly to tackle social and environmental claims. Claims that are beyond valid in these times of crisis what is happening to the rights of environmental defenders and to the truth.

Division and conflict take tolls and have casualties that affect people and the planet's sustainability.



We need to assume short-term costs, including political costs, otherwise we will have long term loss.

If I can add a few cents in speaking to those of you who perhaps are not convinced on sustainability, it is all about balance and answering the right questions. Do we prefer oil and minerals at the expense of the environment? Or can we achieve economic benefits sustainably? If we can't look at our children straight in the eyes with the answer, it is clear what the path should be.

And that path is not division nor conflict. It is one that supports peace, democracy, livelihoods and the environment. It is possible. Justice, Sustainability and Prosperity are possible.

We have seen it with ASOCAIMAN in the bay of Cispatá in Colombia, as well as in many other corners of our hemisphere. **Democracy promotes good stewardship of the environment.** One does not exist without the other. Just as the economy does not exist without the environment.

Let us not become another casualty of war. Peaceful and inclusive societies with access to justice for sustainable development is the goal. How we get there is not just a matter of good or bad leaders, rather a matter of each of us showing solidarity and putting in the hard work required by our democracies to support the planet.

Thank you.-