



# ATLANTIC PERSPECTIVES INTERVIEWS REPORT

## 02

### Perspectives from Mexico, Colombia and Honduras

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of field interviews with elites in Mexico, Colombia, and Honduras. Interviewees were questioned on their views of the relevance of issues, partners, cooperation and conflict across the Atlantic space. Key topics mentioned repeatedly by interviewees across the three countries were migration, drug trafficking, and the importance of the USA as a global partner. In the area of security, all interviewees see the USA as the principal actor, with terrorism and fragile states as the main threats. In the environment, the thinking of interviewees was more global than regional, but all saw climate change as the main issue. In terms of trade and finance, liberalization and cooperation were the predominant lines of thinking, while in people and institutions, democratization and migration were key topics. Democracy, markets, and cooperation were seen as common values across the Atlantic. Prospects for cooperation would be improved if Northern states and regions paid more attention to the South, according to the interviewees, but there was also a significant current of opinion that Latin America (and more particularly, some of its main actors, like Brazil and Colombia) is emerging in its own right.

Prospects for an Atlantic partnership seem slim, and there does not seem to be an automatic perception of the Atlantic as a relevant geopolitical concept, though there is no consensus on what is the most important obstacle. Some say it is cultural differences and government inconsistency and indifference, while others blame financing problems. Language, distance, transportation, infrastructure, poor management of aid funding, time zones, and culture were all mentioned. However, the regions of the Atlantic are seen as relevant units of study. Cooperation within Latin America was seen as valuable in order to prevent exploitation by the North. Notwithstanding this pessimism, in each of the three countries, two-thirds of elites say that an Atlantic Rim is taking shape. Public sector and academic officials are more likely to say yes, while private sector, media and NGO officials are more mixed. Likewise, opinion about the utility and benefits of Atlantic cooperation in all three states is very favorable, especially so in Honduras.

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# ATLANTIC FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

## 02

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## 1. Introduction

The CIDE team carried out a total of 61 field interviews in Mexico, Colombia, and Honduras between September and November 2014.<sup>1</sup> A similar set of questions (varying only according to the interviewee's profile) was used in the interviews, which were then transcribed. Tables were also constructed to ascertain opinion trends. The profile of interviewees included professionals in all categories – academic, media, civil society, business, and government. We were able to schedule interviews with individuals working in all the thematic areas – economy and finance, people and institutions, security, and resources and environment. We used our network of contacts to find relevant interviewees and arrange interviews. The diaries and agendas of these individuals were complicated and busy, and it was a challenge scheduling all of them. Likewise, their professional profiles varied considerably from fairly well known public figures to those who were less high profile.

## 2. Mexico

Nineteen interviews were carried out in Mexico City. Five people were security experts, six specialized in economic issues, three were environmentalists, and five fell under the category of People and Institutions. Of the total, five were in the public sector, four in the private sector, five were academics, three were NGO workers and two worked in the press. Of these nineteen, twelve felt that an Atlantic Rim was taking shape, while seven did not. The following were some of the interesting results per sector.

### 2.1. Perceptions on regions

Fourteen Mexicans agreed, unsurprisingly, that the most important region for Mexico was North America. The five security experts and six economy experts coincided on this opinion, in addition to one environmentalist and two people and institutions experts. Of the remaining five interviewed, the three remaining specialists in people and institutions considered South America was the most important, and two environmentalists gave this honour to Europe. Regarding the least important region, seventeen experts agreed that Africa was the least important. Only one academic considered this title belonged to North America and one security expert voted that it was South America.

### 2.2. Thematic areas

- **Security**

Of the five Mexican security experts interviewed, when asked about the trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans, three specialists considered it the most important issue, while the other two placed it at a close second. Regarding fragile states, two thought this was the most important issue, while one said it was second place, another said third, and one ranked it last. For terrorism, one said it was a second place priority, while two placed it in third place and the last two in fourth place. Finally, one person said maritime security ranked in second place, while two ranked it third and the last two said it was the least important.

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<sup>1</sup> Field interviews were carried out by Mariana Avendaño and Elsy González. Transcriptions and data compilation were done by Elsy González. We are grateful to both for their excellent work.

Two academics had something to say about forums. The first mentioned think tanks as good forums to address issues (such as the Brooklyn Institute and the CSIS). The second was more sceptical saying that security forums do not have much strength given how delicate the issues are and because they directly affect sovereignty. The countries that could be helped with these rarely have the proper infrastructure to deal with them.

- ***Economy and Finance***

Six economy specialists were interviewed about the growth of trade and investment flows and four considered it was a priority issue, while the other two said it a second place concern. Two interviewees, on the other hand, ranked most important the negotiation of new free trade agreements, while three ranked it second and one said third. The highest rank new transport routes received was second place by one person, while two placed it in third and the remaining three in fourth. Finally, three people placed the construction of new infrastructure in third and the other three in fourth.

When asked about forums one Mexican businessman claimed that there aren't any that work. A Mexican NGO worker said that in the investment field there is NAFTA, DOA, G7, G8, and the World Economic Forum. Finally, a Mexican official said there have been fruitful inter-ministry endeavors like those between SENER, BANCOMEX and NAFIN.

- ***People and Institutions***

Five Mexicans were interviewed with expertise in people and institutions; of these, three said the state of democracy was the most important change; one ranked it second and the other third. When asked specifically about migration trends, two experts deemed it the most important issue, while one placed it second and the other two in third. On the other hand, regarding human rights, three interviewees suggested it belonged as a second place change, while the other two ranked it in third. Finally, all five specialists ranked diplomatic exchanges in fourth place.

Only two of the five experts discussed forums. A Human Rights activist stated that the OAS commissions work, as have important NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. A Mexican radio host identified the TPP as an important global forum that promotes participation.

- ***Resources and Environment***

Three experts were interviewed for environmental and resource issues. Two sustained that the impacts of climate change was the most important change, while the other placed it in second. One person, on the other hand, considered the depletion of resources belonged in first place, while the other two ranked it last. Finally, two people ranked the transformation of the energy sector in second place and one in third.

## **2.3. Norms, values and cooperation**

According to Mexicans, the norms and values linking the Atlantic are primarily free trade, and to a lesser extent democracy and human rights. The most controversial value was human rights and other social issues. All three environmentalists agreed that anything that had to do with climate change was a controversial topic. A Mexican interviewee, a member of Congress, argued that a global consensus regarding values is slowly coming together that includes democracy, freedom and human rights as

leading pillars; their application has had mixed results though. There has been public resistance to the respect for diversity and identity, in addition to issues of gender and age. Given these results, customs and habits take precedence and power remains concentrated in the hands of a few. In Asia it is slightly more complicated because while these values are recognized, their application is practically non-existent, the interviewee argued.

The strongest opinion regarding obstacles for cooperation from interviewees was a sense of indifference from the other regions towards Latin America, as well as inconsistency in how they were treated. Some attribute the obstacles to asymmetries in power – the ability of the stronger to impose demands or restrictions on weaker partners. Others point to internal weakness. According to a Mexican academic, "the biggest obstacle to cooperation is weak and corrupt institutions that generate mistrust amongst regions". Another Mexican researcher laid the blame at the door of Mexico: Mexico's foreign policy is inconsistent and constantly focuses on a single region at a time.

On the other hand, half of the Mexican interviewees agreed that by increasing investment ties and correcting communication flaws, cooperation could flourish between the four regions. There was, however, the caveat that this could only work if the US and the EU were actively willing to encourage said cooperation. A Mexican member of Congress was optimistic about the possibilities of South-South cooperation. In 15 years economic matters will be in the hands of the Southern hemisphere and Asia, leaving only security cooperation to the US and Europe. Conflict will persist as long as issues regarding hydrocarbons, water and the environment remain prevalent.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

### ***Perceptions of the Atlantic Space***

There was an important consensus amongst the Mexicans that the most important actor in the Atlantic was the US, closely followed by the EU. A radio show host stated that the Atlantic cooperation panorama is in the hands of the USA: in ten years, a stable Europe will reclaim much of its lost power. If Africa can improve hygienic conditions and reduce the epidemic death rates along with improved investment, it could be a continent that can finally take off. Latin America has entered into a process of slow growth and lack of innovation. The region that will experience the most change will be North America because the US will lose relative power to China and the Pacific and the strength of NAFTA will fail. With this panorama, it is evident the US is trying to strengthen the Atlantic.

The interviewee went on to say that there will be greater cooperation in five years if Europe recovers from the crisis and the US can overcome China's power. Cooperation trends will be from the US towards Europe. Africa will be less relevant because it "does not have a regional project." There is instability within regions but no other conflict beyond the headache that is Asia.

As for how they perceived the Atlantic space, twelve agreed that relations were deepening. However, the other seven were sceptical. A private consultant felt that it was irrelevant to even consider it because regions should look to strengthen internally instead of expanding. Less than half were convinced that increasing ties could be a positive endeavor.

## **Role of the EU**

The role and relevance of the EU was a split opinion in Mexico since nine considered the EU was remotely relevant and eight said it was relevant. Five out of six economy experts gave it a positive review, with the other barely giving it importance. Of the security experts, three felt it was remotely relevant and just two said relevant. They attributed this near irrelevance to a lack of participation and inactivity in Latin America, and that the best way to improve this would be through more investment.

Interestingly, despite their view mentioned above that Europe is an important region, all three environmental interviewees considered the EU to be only remotely relevant as an actor in Latin America, essentially because it does not care about this region. This suggests that there is a significant gap between prestige and practice – the EU has the reputation and potential to be active and influential, but has failed to live up to that potential.

## **3. Colombia**

Twenty interviews were conducted in Bogotá. Five were with security experts, three with financial and economic specialists, another five were experts in environmental and resources issues, and seven worked on topics related to People and Institutions. Of these, four worked in the public sector, seven were from the private sector, four belonged to academia, six came from NGOs, and one worked in the media industry. Of these twenty, thirteen felt that an Atlantic Rim was taking shape, while seven did not.

### **3.1. Perceptions on regions**

Unlike the Mexican interviewees, fifteen Colombians said that South America was the most important region. Four security experts, two economy specialists, three environmentalists, and six people and institutions professionals held this view. Only three considered North America to be the most important region, two environmentalists and a security scholar. The last two gave importance to Europe, both public officials. Regarding the least important region, eighteen out of twenty interviewees agreed that the relationship with Africa was less relevant. The other two gave this title to North America and South America each.

### **3.2. Thematic areas**

- **Security**

When asked about specific security issues, three Colombian considered terrorism to be a top priority, while the other two considered it belonged in second place. These two agreed that the illicit trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans belonged in first place, while two others considered it second place, and one relegated it to last place. When discussing the fragility of states, one expert deemed it a second place issue, while three others said it was a third place concern and one left it in fourth place. Finally, two interviewees gave a third place ranking to maritime security, while the other three left it in fourth place.

One Colombian interviewee (a former presidential candidate) argued that terrorism and the illicit trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans is in itself the product of the fragility of states. Another Colombian security specialist and academic argued that the order

depends on the region – in Africa, fragile states are the greatest security concern, followed by terrorism and illicit trafficking.

In terms of the forums where security issues are discussed, a Colombian academic mentioned anti-drug trafficking groups of the OAS. Another public official mentioned UN led forums on drug trafficking. An academic mentioned various international organization-sanctioned forums on drug trafficking and terrorism at all levels.

- ***Economy and Finance***

When the three economy experts were asked about issues specific to their profession, there was no consensus between them. One interviewee considered the growth of trade and investment flows to be a top priority; the other considered it was second place, while the third left it as the least important. Regarding the negotiation of new free trade agreements, one ranked it in first place, while the other two left in third and fourth place. The construction of new infrastructure was the most important issue for one expert, the second most important for another, and fourth place for the last one. Finally, one specialist ranked new transport routes in second place, while the other two considered it a third place topic. Regarding forums that discuss these issues, a Colombian public official stated that there are various forums that work in Latin America through the IBD.

- ***People and Institutions***

Of the seven experts in subjects of people and institutions, to the three that belonged to the private and public sector, the state of democracy was the most important issue, while for the NGO worker it ranked second, and to the other three it was third place. The journalist and human rights activist considered that diplomatic exchanged were a top priority, while one ranked it third and the other four left it in last place. For one academic the respect for human rights was a key issue, while for three others it ranked in second place; for two it was a third place concern and for the journalist it ranked in fourth. Finally, one academic considered migration trends to be the most important topic, while for three others it ranked in second; for one it was third place, and for the final two it was deemed the least important.

When asked about forums where these issues are discussed a Colombian academic said that for Human Rights and Migration the forums from Mercosur, Unasur, OAS, Andean Community and Caricom work. A Colombian consultant said that there are many Human Rights and disarmament forums that offer important discussion opportunities.

- ***Resources and Environment***

Of the five environmentalist interviewed, three considered the impacts of climate change to be the most important, while one ranked in second and the other third. Resource depletion was the top priority for two, while two ranked it second and one left it in last place. Finally, regarding the transformation of the energy sector, two considered it a second place issue, while the other three ranked it last.

In terms of discussion forums in this area, there was again a mixed picture. A Colombian private climate expert mentioned the UNFCCC, the Convention for biological diversity and the many climate change summits. An environmental journalist said that governments both create and weaken any attempts at creating discussion forums because they are not priority. An NGO worker mentioned a water tribunal that is working in Costa Rica.

### 3.3. Norms, values and cooperation

For Colombians the most frequently mentioned value is international law, closely followed by free trade. Shared history, democracy, and human rights are tied for third. One Colombian politician mentioned that the common values of free markets, development, and multilateralism, visible in Europe and most of the Americas, is starting to take hold in Africa.

On the other hand and in agreement with the Mexicans, human rights was frequently cited as the most controversial norm. As a former presidential candidate mentioned, “while it should not be controversial, the respect for human rights has proven to be complicated, especially when it comes time to enforce.”

Coincidentally, important obstacles for cooperation have been indifference and inconsistency from wealthier nations, as well as a lack of proper channels for information sharing and communication. It was also interesting to note that four interviewees made explicit mention of visa restrictions from the US and European countries as significant hindrance.

As a solution to these problems, half of the interviewees agreed that improving institutions had to come first, followed by advances in communication techniques. Two other often cited drivers for cooperation were more investment ties and easing visa restrictions. This latter came specifically from private and public officials. A Colombian politician also argued that cooperation depends on how vigorous the multilateral system can be. The crisis in developed economies has impacted other regions. There is relative stagnation. The outlook is also negative for Africa because Chinese investment will decrease with the slowing down of the Chinese economy. The US is trying to reindustrialize but what the world needs is stronger multilateralism.

### 3.4. Conclusion

#### *Perceptions of the Atlantic Space*

Certain countries were cited as significant actors in the Atlantic space, such as the US, Brazil and Mexico. A former corporate executive from Colombia mentioned that “Mexico and Brazil as ‘regional parents’ prove Latin America has a greater capacity than originally thought. In a second tier you see the strength and growth of countries like Chile, Peru and Colombia. The Latin American cultural propaganda has helped the world notice us to the point that we have overshadowed Africa.” Multinational corporations were also seen as fundamental actors to advance cooperation, followed by governments and international organizations.

There is a general consensus that an Atlantic space is coming together, with thirteen people sharing this opinion and eight deeming it a positive outcome. Notwithstanding, there were seven people who not only did not see a closer Atlantic, but that also had mixed feeling regarding this. One journalist said, “The problem is that the space is too large and the players are too different; it is too ambitious.” Another Colombian said that it would only work if there was respect for internal matters, with abuse from countries like the US.

#### *Role of the EU*

Opinions about the role of the EU were more positive in Colombia than in Mexico since thirteen considered it to be a relevant actor. Three security experts, all five environmentalists, four people and institutions specialists, and one economist shared this perspective. One consultant referred to the EU’s work on the Colombian peace



process as an important and relevant issue for Colombia. There was also a consensus that Europe contributed significant development aid to the region.

Two security professionals and two people and institutions experts considered the EU to be a neutral actor in Latin America. Two Colombian public officials said it was remotely relevant, and one private entrepreneur said it was completely irrelevant in this region. Another consultant complained that ‘the EU seems more interested in what is happening in Asia, Africa and in themselves; they don't seem to care about what is happening across the Atlantic.’ In general, the opinion was that they just were not active enough in the region and they could do more, like bring in more investment and aid to Latin America.

## **4. Honduras**

Twenty-two interviews were carried out in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. Five were security specialists, eight had a strong economic and financial background, four worked on the environment and resources, and five were specialists in issues regarding people and institutions. Of these, four were public officials, seven worked in the private sector, four were academics, six were NGO workers, and one was a journalist. Of these twenty-two, fifteen felt that an Atlantic Rim was taking shape, while seven did not.

### **4.1. Perceptions on regions**

Hondurans were split when asked which relationship with a region was more important. Ten said it was with South America, while nine said North America. This could be a result of their geographic location between the two. Only three considered Europe to be important. Four out of five security experts considered the north more important, while one maintained the southern dominance. Of the economists, three voted for the north, three for the south, and two gave priority to Europe. Of the environmentalists, three said South America, while one said Europe. Finally, of the five specialists in the field of people and institutions, three said the south was more important, while the other two awarded this distinction to the north. On the other hand, sixteen Hondurans agreed that the least important region was Africa, while one said North America and five said South America.

While the Hondurans are clearly divided on the importance of North America versus South America, the elites are clearly of the view that other states and regions are eclipsing Central America. According to a Honduran resettlement social worker, ‘Least important [among Atlantic regions] is Central America, especially Honduras and Nicaragua, because they have been left with the brunt of the work against drug trafficking and they have been abandoned by other regions.’

### **4.2. Thematic areas**

- **Security**

When asked about specific security issues, three experts said the illicit trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans, while the other two ranked in second place. These same two ranked fragile states in first place, whereas two said this was a second place priority, and one left it in last place. As opposed to the opinions expressed by the

Colombians, terrorism ranked second place for one person, third for two, fourth for the other two. Finally, maritime security ranked third for three experts and two left in last place.

When asked about discussion forums, a Honduran academic said that government run forums do not work, NGOs work a bit better and are making slow advances. A public official mentioned the UN, OAS, SICA, CELAC, UNASUR, EU and the African Union. A businessman said there are many forums, but none work.

- ***Economy and Finance***

Eight Hondurans were asked about specific changes and four agreed that the most important issue was the negotiation of new free trade agreements, while two ranked it a second place issue and two others relegated it to fourth place. On the other hand, while only two considered the growth of trade and investment flows to be a top priority, five agreed it was a close second place and one left it in third place. Following these two, one expert deemed the construction of new infrastructure to be a priority and one ranked it in second place; of the others, four ranked it in third and two in fourth. Finally, one businessman considered new transport routes to be the priority, while three ranked it in third place and the rest left it in fourth place.

In terms of forums for discussion, there was some scepticism. One Honduran businessman said that they are only for conversation. A journalist also said that multi-lateral forums have not proven to be effective, and the focus needed to be on the development of more bilateral treaties.

- ***People and Institutions***

When asked about specific issues in the field of people and institutions, there was no consensus on priorities. Two interviewees agreed that the state of democracy was a priority, while two others considered it a second place issue and one a third. Migration trends were a priority for one public official, but they were second place for two, third for another and fourth for the last one. The respect for human rights was an important issue for one NGO worker, but it was second place for an academic, third place for two others and fourth for the final interviewee. Finally, one NGO worker considered diplomatic exchanges to be the priority; another deemed it third place, and the remaining three ranked it fourth.

The picture on discussion forums in this area seems more positive. A Honduran Human rights activist said that there are many networks financed by the EU that actually work. Another Honduran human rights activist said that there are many forums that discuss migration issues like the commission on displaced migrants, FONAM, CIDEF. Another Human rights activist said that any attempt is a good one, like those from SICA.

- ***Resources and Environment***

There was more consensus amongst the environmentalists with three agreeing that the impacts of climate change were a top priority, while the other one ranked it in second. This public official gave the top honour to the transformation of the energy sector, while one gave this aspect the second place honour, and the final two left it in third place. Finally, two ranked the depletion of resources in second and two in third.

### 4.3. Norms, values and cooperation

When asked to identify common norms and values, for Hondurans, free trade came first, closely followed by shared history. There were no clear cross-national patterns across sectors or professions. NGOs, academics, media elites, and public sector workers were quite diverse in their responses to this question. Private sector elites tended to say “free trade” slightly more often, but even here there was quite a spread of views. Another interesting observation however was the seven explicitly said there were no common values. On the other hand, human rights and other social issues were identified as controversial by interviewees.

With regards to cooperation, Hondurans were firm in their idea that lack of funding was an important obstacle, along with a lack of communication and information. In that sense, there was an overwhelming response saying increasing investment ties and improving institutions was the solution. It would also help if there was greater communication, more policy exchanges, and respect for local customs.

### 4.4. Conclusion

#### *Perceptions of the Atlantic Space*

When asked about specific actors, there was not a large consensus or a clear result beyond the fact that Mexico and the US are important. On the other hand, governments and international organizations were motors for innovation in the Atlantic. In this sense, there was general consensus that an Atlantic space is coming together and that this is a positive endeavour. One businessman pointed out that this would mean better opportunities to branch out towards Europe and access larger markets”.

#### *Role of the EU*

There was an overwhelming response from Honduran with seventeen saying the EU was a relevant actor, three claiming it a neutral actor and just two considering it remotely relevant. The main reason given for this positive evaluation was their important development aid contributions and the many learning opportunities. Notwithstanding, they felt there was still more the EU could do in Latin America by increasing investment ties and trade and establishing more direct communications with Central and South American countries.

Of the few negative evaluations, one academic noted that they could be more present economically, but it all depends on how interested Europe is in having allies and partnerships outside of the US. A CEO of an important Honduran firm said, “the EU needs to strengthen internally and resolve their most pressing issues before looking outwards.”

## 5. Interviewee positions on the thematic areas

### *Security*

In the area of security, key topics that were present among all interviewees across the three countries were migration, drug trafficking, and the USA. All interviewees see the USA as the principal actor in the security area. NGOs view human rights as a key security issue, and recognize that the European Union can and has helped in this area,

but not sufficiently. For Colombians, the EU was crucial to the peace process; violence has been overcome there and elites feel proud of this achievement.

Security threats include organized crime, drug trafficking, the weapons trade, and human rights violations. Terrorism was not considered as much of a threat as expected, even in Colombia, paradoxically, where the history of guerrilla movements is so marked (and even though it was mentioned more often by Colombians than other issues). Fragile states were also seen as a concern, but this varies according to the country of the interviewee. For Mexicans it was Central America. For Colombians it was Venezuela. For Hondurans it was themselves – they do not see their neighbors as threats. In general, security seems to be defined in local terms.

On balance, Mexican and Honduran interviewees listed trafficking of drugs, humans, and weapons as the most important security threat. One exception was a Mexican campaign consultant and high-level political advisor, who argued that fragile states were the main threat, because their weak infrastructure and poverty lead to social instability. He believed that maritime security was more critical than terrorism, mainly because of the presence of territorial disputes over islands.

### ***Economy and finance***

Mexicans and Hondurans considered growth of trade and investment flows to be the critical economic issue facing the country, though Hondurans also mentioned negotiation of new free trade agreements as key. Colombians were more divided – they mentioned trade and investment flows and construction of new infrastructure in equal measure. A Colombian former chief of a multinational corporation stated that because of Latin America's resources, and also because of rising science and technology skills among Latinos, the region is rising in importance economically.

Interestingly, Hondurans often mentioned the proposed new trans-oceanic canal in Nicaragua. In Honduras, confidence about the prospects for stability, security, and growth appear low and there is much less confidence about the future of the country than in Mexico and (especially) Colombia. As one Honduran businessman explained, "Central America has to improve because it is reaching rock bottom. Entrepreneurial and political near-sightedness is drowning the region." A Honduran economic journalist was broadly of the same view in terms of the importance of trade and investment flows, but lamented that these have not improved much in Honduras. The signing of an Association Agreement between Central America and the EU will lead to new opportunities to export products, according to this interviewee.

A former Minister of the Economy in Honduras was blunt in his assessment, that while trade and investment are key priorities, southern cone countries in Latin America remain protectionist and anti-free trade in large measure, harming Honduras. Likewise, parts of Europe remain "closed off" to Honduran exports, according to a former finance minister. Honduras's economic relations with Africa are very low.

### ***Resources and environment***

In the environment, climate change is clearly and by far the most important issue in this thematic area for interviewees in all three countries. The thinking of interviewees was more global than regional. There was concern that the developed world protects its own natural resources but seeks to exploit those of Latin America. For Hondurans (and also Colombians), there was concern about external interests wanting to exploit water and mineral resources.



Energy sector transformation is more of an issue in the US than in Honduras, according to an entrepreneur and national park founder there. But in Honduras, the main obstacle is the lack of understanding of environmental importance. There has been a lot of environmental neglect in the Americas especially. The only country that has made progress is the US because they have capital and they promote ecotourism along with Europe. Europe is a strong advocate of protection and conservation of the environment.

- *"The misuse of resources and uneven distribution has accelerated its depletion"*  
– Honduran Climate activist.

### **People and institutions**

Interviewees from all three countries considered the state of democracy as the most important issue in this category. Interestingly, in all three countries, democracy is considered more important than human rights or migration trends (though for Colombians, respect for human rights was a close second). Nonetheless, migration is also a key issue in the three countries. It was mentioned by slightly more than half of respondents in Mexico, one-third of respondents in Colombia, and slightly less than half in Honduras. Migration tended to be mentioned more by academics and NGO officials in Mexico, and NGO officials in Honduras. Public and private sector officials across the three states were more silent on migration.

There was concern about the restrictive anti-immigration policies being put in place by receiving countries. A Mexican member of Congress mentioned that 'sending countries cannot do anything to halt migration because they are wrought with civil unrest.' It is one of the most critical issues in the North-South relationship in the Atlantic, and it is affecting every country in the world on a massive scale. Receiving countries are increasing their anti-immigration policies.

'The growth of European xenophobia should not be underestimated. Migration is an issue that poses one of the biggest challenges for European societies,' argued a Colombian diplomat. Migration trends are harming relationships with developed countries and uprooting local communities, said another Colombian, an urban developer. Lack of economic opportunities, disintegration of families, organized crime, xenophobia, are combining to sharpen attitudes on this issue. Considering these comments, and the fact that interviewees dwelled on migration far more than on democracy, it seems odd that democracy ranks higher than migration in terms of issue importance for these elites.

Migration deeply affects Honduran politics given that their thinking is overwhelmingly oriented towards the USA. Hondurans think in dollars, and many elites have gone and returned. The image from the interviews is that all Hondurans want to go to the USA. Mexico is seen as a point of entry to the USA for Hondurans. The EU is present in Honduras as an aid donor – there is much visibility of EU projects. For Colombians the reference point for migration seems to be more toward Spain, where many Colombians have migrated (and vice versa). Colombia also receives migrants from Spain and the USA. For Mexicans the USA is part of the migration trend clearly, but just one part (for elites). They do not mention the USA as much as the Hondurans do. Mexicans receive migrants from Spain and from Central America.

- *"The first priority is the state of democracy. There have been tools put into place to improve this, but the problem is a cancer that invades anything well-intended." – Honduran Social worker for migrant resettlement.*

## 6. Interviewee positions on norms, values, cooperation and regionalism

### *Convergence & divergence in norms and values*

The views about common norms fell into two categories, not related to nationality or profession. One set of views is that norms are indeed universal, even if there may be varying levels of success in attaining them.

- *"There are fundamental values about humanity that transcend borders and cultures and not just as western or eastern values." – Mexican Academic*
- *"Everything is pointing towards the universalization of norms and international rules" – Colombian Consultant*
- *"There are shared norms and values, but commitment levels differ." - Colombian Academic*
- *"There is an aspiration for shared goals, however efforts to reach them have been varied." – Honduran Founder of a national bank*

The other set of views is that cultural differences, or resistance to imperialistic pressures, limit any universalism in norms. The global North has a different set of norms or values. As a Mexican Naval attaché put it, "developed countries pressure other countries to follow certain values that result in the Europeanization of the world." A Honduran consultant expressed a similar point of view when he said, "there are important cultural differences that limit any sharing of norms or values".

In terms of controversial norms and values, there is again virtually no cross-national pattern linking sectors or professions. And there is a spread of opinion here with no overwhelming "winner." Across the 3 countries, though, human rights were mentioned slightly more often (tied with social issues in Honduras). The rationale for why these are controversial is often linked to their application or enforcement. For example, in climate change, a Mexican environmental ministry official stated that environmental standards are sometimes seen as an obstacle to industrial development in developing countries. In human rights, enforcement of standards is complicated, even if the principle is uncontroversial, according to a Colombian former presidential candidate.

For others, the controversial issues extended even more widely – according to a Mexican political advisor, they include gender equality, race, class, western institutions and customs, and growing inequality. Patriarchy is still an important issue in Latin America and in Africa and this can lead to violence. Racism is also an important issue still in the US.

Internally, an interesting point was made about the development of Latin American politics. According to a Colombian partner at an NGO for sustainable development, "Politically, we have moved past left or right wings; developing countries could now either fall into authoritarian populism or bureaucratic clientelism. In this sense, Central America could either be our future or our past." Another Colombian (an academic working on international security) claimed that religious differences between the four

regions of study underlie the continued contestation between values, and that these differences are found in all societies.

In terms of national self-perceptions there was a mixed response among Mexicans, with equal responses on “not a regional leader” and “indifferently”, and almost as many saying it was a regional leader. Again there was a great deal of within-sector variation in responses. Colombian responses were very strong in claiming that Colombia is a regional leader. Its experience in drug trafficking and organized crime gives it a special role. As one high-ranking security official put it, ‘Colombia is reference for many countries when it comes to the fight against drug trafficking and development.’ This optimism spills over to other areas. Colombia has a special relationship with both the EU and the US, according to this official, so is bound to benefit whatever occurs between those two powers. Meanwhile the founder of a social identity NGO claimed that the ‘incredible potential’ of Colombia is drawing foreigners to Colombia to live and work.

Meanwhile, there was a very strong response that Honduras views itself in a negative light, though some also say that it is not a leader, or are indifferent on the question. There is little consistency within thematic area or profession. In terms of outlook on the future, Colombians and Hondurans were the most optimistic, led by their environmentalists. Mexicans were more pessimistic (except for those in the economic area).

- *“Everything depends on who has what resources and how effectively and appropriately they are used. For this reason, Central America will never improve.” – Honduran academic.*

### ***Interests and incentives for cooperation***

In Honduras there is much admiration for Mexico. Honduran elites recognize the relative obscurity of the nation, and the fact that their powerful neighbours (including Mexico) are likely to remain the most relevant actors for them. Honduran views of the Atlantic are limited to the Caribbean – in other words, their view of the geographical importance of the Atlantic is limited to the Caribbean region.

Colombia, on the other hand, sees itself as an emerging leader in Latin America, and elites show far more confidence about its overall prospects. Its principal perceived challenge is Venezuela. Looking toward Mexico, Colombians believe they have experience that would help Mexico solve its drug trafficking problems. Colombians seem to be clearer about the concept of the Atlantic (than Mexico or Honduras), including its purpose and how it can serve Colombian interests. Among Colombians there is a sense of a “rising Latin America” – an academic pointed out that Latin America will continue to project itself politically and economically.

Colombia is clearly oriented toward South America. For Colombians, South America is their most important region. In terms of the Americas, North America was equated with the USA. Canada did not figure in their geopolitical calculations. The USA was a very important relationship for all three countries, even if mention of the North-South divide was not frequent.

Views on the importance of other Atlantic regions and partners were national – there was little or no discernible cross-national sectoral coincidence of views.

Most interviewees across the three countries saw the European Union as the “good guy”, in comparison with the USA, and that its focus and priority on human rights could

be helpful to Latin American interests. However, they also believed that the USA would not permit the EU to intrude on its sphere of influence in Latin America. The EU is in crisis and when it emerges from the crisis it will be more inclined to provide aid to the world (this is an interesting comment given that the EU and its member states are already by far the largest aid contributors in the world). Europe has a history of being powerful. The USA is the “new kid on the block.” Spain is clearly seen as the most important link between Latin America and Europe, for obvious historical reasons. Still, the main “paternal” historical link for Europe is Africa, according to interviewees, while for the USA it is Latin America.

Many view the Atlantic as divided between North and South, reinforced by TTIP. The North does not look to the South, according to this point of view. Between the countries and regions of the North there is equality (i.e., USA-EU) while between North and South there is hierarchy.

Africa was the least important region for these interviewees, and only two mentioned it in their comments, if only to signal the importance of certain African countries such as Nigeria and South Africa. Colombia in particular felt no connection to Africa (strangely, given its history). For Hondurans, Africa means descendants of African slaves. Africa is seen as the most disadvantaged of the Atlantic regions, though with plenty of potential.

Views on Asia were divided, as the quotes below attest.

- *“With Asia we are more alike than we like to think in the way we work and we are wasting opportunities to work with them.” – Mexican founder of an environmental company*
- *“The only thing we share with Asia is blatant corruption.” Mexican consultant.*

Some respondents felt that Asian countries, though less democratic, were better at devising and sticking to long-term strategies. Their discipline is higher. There is also a sense in which Asia has overtaken Europe as a preoccupation for Latin Americans. In fact, some see the rise of Asia, and especially China, as a long-term threat for the US and the Americas more generally.

### ***Regional and interregional cooperation initiatives***

Interviewees generally viewed the idea of greater Atlantic cooperation as a positive thing, though there was some scepticism over the motivation for it, and what it might realistically achieve. The main driver for cooperation is the economy, particularly in terms of trade and investment. But as with the previous variables, there is a wide range of opinion here. Mexicans say the drivers are investment ties followed by improved communication techniques, Colombians claim it is improving institutions (followed by improved communication techniques), and Hondurans say investment ties followed by improving institutions. Again there is little that connects respondents within professions or sectors; except for business actors who believe that investment ties are the key drivers.

NGOs, however, see the Atlantic as a space for political influence in areas such as human rights and the environment. Exchanges (i.e., educational) are also an important driver, as well as the common focus on human rights. The presence of the European Union (as a partner, i.e., Colombia, or in aid, i.e. Honduras) could also contribute to cooperation.



There does not seem to be an automatic perception of the Atlantic as a relevant geopolitical concept. Rather, the regions of the Atlantic are seen as relevant units. Cooperation within Latin America was seen as valuable in order to prevent exploitation by the North.

- *“Latin America is a region of opportunities, unlike the stagnant Europe” – Colombian Director of Research for an environmental NGO*
- *““While each region has its own importance, North America has had greater dynamism and is a staple in economy and security, in addition to its strategic nature and allies.” – Mexican Founder of a consulting firm*

For Mexico, a member of congress argued, the relationship with North America is the most important. Mexico has abandoned Latin America. At a global scale though, Latin America’s economic alliances (such as the BRICS), serve as counterweights to the IMF and the World Bank. Latin America is also important because of the crises in Europe and the US. It might seem easy to say Africa is the least important but there is great disparity in growth between the countries in this region, just like in Latin America.

In terms of obstacles to Atlantic cooperation, there is no consensus on what is the most important obstacle. By a very small margin, Mexicans say it is cultural differences and inconsistency in aid from European governments and indifference, Colombians say it is government inconsistency and indifference from other countries, and Hondurans blame both internal and external financing problems. Respondents also mentioned language, distance, transportation infrastructure, poor management of aid funding, time zones, culture, cost differences, and variations in quality requirements (which are higher in the EU than the USA).

### ***Relevance of the European Union***

In other questioning there were some interesting views on the importance and relevance of the EU and the US. In Mexico, for example, slightly more view the EU as remotely relevant than relevant. Academics overwhelmingly believe that it is remotely relevant, while public and private sector officials, media, and NGOs were more divided. In Colombia and Honduras there was a very strong view that the EU is relevant, and that consensus exists across all sectors and professions.

The rationale for stating that the EU was relevant varied by country. In Mexico the main reasons were trade and investment opportunities. In Colombia it was peace assistance followed by development aid. For Honduras it was development aid followed by learning opportunities. Across all three countries the main reason for saying that the EU was less relevant was its lack of participation in the region. In other words, with greater EU profile and participation, its relevance to regional elites would be higher. More specifically, elites in all three countries say that more investment in Latin America is the key to improving EU involvement in the region. As a Colombian politician put it, ‘the EU needs to offer greater technological assistance. Latin America needs to further develop production and manufacturing and European innovation could be the key.’

But there was plenty of scepticism from the Mexican and Colombian side too. One Mexican academic stated that Latin America is a remote concern for Europeans: ‘Africa is more important to the EU than Latin America, and for good reason.’ The founder of an NGO claimed that Europeans want to have an impact in Latin America, but ‘without any actual effort.’ A Colombian consultant complained that ‘the EU seems more interested in what is happening in Asia, Africa and in themselves; they don’t seem to care about what is happening across the Atlantic.’ Another consultant, however, referred to the EU’s work on the Colombian peace process as an important and

relevant issue for Colombia. Hondurans were more positive in their comments about the relevance of the EU, blaming themselves for not taking advantage of opportunities to connect with Europe, and for being short sighted.

Some respondents in all three countries complained that the EU's sole focus is economic, and it has not (except for Colombia) engaged in long-term efforts to address political crisis, environmental problems, or human rights issues. 'Central America is not a priority for anyone, as was noted by the lack of participation in the [Honduran] political crisis,' said a Honduran academic.

And how to increase the relevance or involvement of the EU in Latin America? As mentioned above, the main answer from the surveys is that the EU should increase investment. But more specific issues emerged from the comments of the interviewees. For example a Mexican academic mentioned that the EU 'would have a stronger impact in the region if they unified their foreign policy and developed greater consensus about assistance in international crises.' This view was echoed in the comments of the Honduran CEO of an important firm, who said that 'the EU needs to strengthen internally and resolve their most pressing issues before looking outwards.' In other words, there is some opinion that the internal structural weaknesses of the EU (and not simply its priorities) are at least partly to blame for its failure to engage fully with Latin America.

A Mexican radio show host argued that the EU would have greater influence if it widened its agreements and investment, because there is the idea in Latin America that the money comes from Europe. The EU's ties are to only a few select countries. However, it is more successful politically because it balances values with material interests. In general, interviewees recognise that while the EU has significant potential to press a normative agenda in favour of development and environmentalism, it is currently constrained by its own internal problems, and so is less effective in doing so than it could be.

In terms of influential actors in the Atlantic, elite respondents in Mexico and Colombia concur that (among countries and regions) the USA is the most influential. For Mexicans, the EU is a close second and Brazil is a close third. For Colombians, Mexico follows the USA in second place, and Brazil and the EU are tied for third. For Hondurans, Mexico is the most influential, followed by the USA and Brazil in second place, and then the EU in third. As in other questions above, it is impossible to identify a pattern which links sectors or professions across borders. In fact there was a remarkable spread of opinion on this question and a virtually randomized set of responses – there is simply no consensus within states, professions, or sectors, in terms of which country was most influential (aside from a slight majority for the US, as mentioned).

However, interestingly, there is a view that certain non-state actors are highly relevant. The Honduran director of a security NGO said "it's next to impossible for anyone other than criminal organizations to have any influence in our region." A Honduran consultant mentioned, "Economic groups and large multinational corporations are most influence because of trade and investment." In Colombia, multinational corporations gained more responses than even the United States when asked which were the most influential actors in the region.

The North-South divide was barely mentioned in Colombia and Honduras, but it was mentioned nearly half the time in Mexico. And among NGOs there was 100% mention of this issue.

- *"The problem with countries like Mexico is that they should be learning from South American countries, but they only look to the North for help, and yet there is increasingly less North-South cooperation" – Mexican Section Director for the Ministry of Environment.*
- *"There is an important North-South inequality. You hear about North-North or South-South relations and at the most you find centre-south relations. Southern countries are spectators and the Northern ones are the controllers." – Mexican Human Rights activist*

We also asked interviewees for their impressions about the possible TTIP treaty. Mexican elites were slightly positive, Colombians were slightly negative, and Hondurans, interestingly, were overwhelmingly positive, with every respondent voicing a positive opinion. Not a single Honduran respondent believes the TTIP would be negative, whereas opinion is more divided in the other two states. For example, a Mexican radio host said in favour of TTIP that it would 'solidify rules and establish a model on which to base other treaties.' But a Mexican academic complained that it 'could end up consolidating protectionism in both the EU and the US, and that would be an impediment for cooperation from other regions.' A Colombian government official mentioned the likelihood of new requirements or standards for products and trade, and the risk these would pose for Latin American partners. Even here it is difficult to identify a cross-national cleavage relating to sector or profession, though it is probably safe to say that private sector elites are somewhat more positive on TTIP across the three countries.

On the question of whether an Atlantic Rim is taking shape two-thirds of elites say yes in each of the three countries. Public sector and academic officials are more likely to say yes, while private sector, media and NGO officials are more mixed. Likewise, opinion in all three states is very positive about this eventuality, especially so in Honduras. Interestingly, however, a Mexican researcher pointed out that a Pan-Atlantic forum is unlikely given the number of integration mechanisms that have been so far rejected by heads of state at various summits.

## 7. Conclusions

Certain issues are viewed in national terms, and divided the interviewees by country of origin. They include security and migration issues, for example. In other issue areas the cleavage was more sectoral, such as in the economy, where there was much optimism that greater flows and higher levels of cooperation could help Latin America. Human rights and the environment were other areas that tended to be viewed in the same way across the three countries.

Regions of the Atlantic, however, are seen through geopolitical lenses, for historical reasons. And the Atlantic per se is not seen as somehow a natural geopolitical unit where cooperation will emerge spontaneously and organically. There was plenty of scepticism over the idea of an Atlantic region as a positive endeavour. A Mexican consultant said that it would be 'just another show.' Regions need to strengthen internally instead of expanding. A Colombian reporter argued that diversity in the Atlantic would undermine any effort to unify it. 'The space is too large and the players are too different.'

On the issue of change, continuity, drivers, convergences, divergences, etc. – one important thing to note is the limitation in terms of drawing conclusions due to the relatively low numbers of interviewees. The quotes above from two Mexicans illustrate

the divided views on Asia, for example. The first three Mexican interviewees identified migration, drug trafficking and organized crime, and trade and investment as the most important issues, respectively. There simply was no meeting of the minds on many of these issues. The fact of there being three countries, four thematic areas, and five professional categories (and only 61 interviewees) means that there is little concentration in any given 'cell' (i.e., profession-thematic area-country). Aside from where we have noted otherwise, the responses were fairly evenly distributed across cells, and so it is hard to draw definitive conclusions based on interviewee profile.

Where we did see some clear tendencies were in terms of geopolitical attitudes across all three countries, as follows: politicians tend to be the most optimistic and positive. They see the Atlantic as important, but not as important as the Pacific. For politicians, the Pacific is the future. They also equate Asia with China. Views on the benefits and effects of China in Latin America tended to be polarized – those with negative views mentioned that they do not bring jobs so much as capital, because they bring their own workers with them. Interviewees from the business world were more sceptical about the idea of an Atlantic space. They do not see how it would function. Few recognize non-state actors as relevant.