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# Mercosur and Environment: progress in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda

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## Abstract

This article aims to reveal how the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially the environmental ones, are being incorporated into Mercosur. Firstly, the paper presents a brief evolution of the environmental agenda in the history of Mercosur. Then, to subsidise the analysis, using quantitative data, we discussed the gradual incorporation of the SDGs in the different Mercosur bodies. In order to understand the evolution of the environmental SDGs, the research required the collection and analysis of qualitative data within the framework of the Environment Working Subgroup (SGT-6), which revealed the main environmental issues and their interrelationship with the 2030 Agenda. Finally, Brazil's role and the prospects for the environmental agenda in Mercosur are discussed.

**Keywords:** Agenda 2030; Mercosur; Environment; SDGs; Regional Integration.

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## Introduction

The debate on the environment in international relations emerged from the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. Despite the differences between developed and developing countries, this Conference was a milestone for the international environmental regime, instigating a commitment by countries to create environmental standards and policies in their territories. However, it was a period marked by totalitarian governments and political, ideological and economic disputes between countries in the capitalist and socialist zones of influence, conditions that delayed concrete actions for global environmental protection. Subsequently, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World

Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) were created (Garcia and Zacareli 2021; Garcia and Jesus 2023).

At that time, European countries approved the First Environmental Programme, which called for a harmonious combination of economic and environmental activities, arguing that economic growth did not guarantee quality of life and environmental protection. Meanwhile, in Latin America, the majority of political and economic elites believed that environmental policies were obstacles to the development of Third World countries, and the priority of public and private investment was aimed at economic growth, but at the expense of natural resources and biodiversity and disrespect for the lands of native peoples and indigenous populations.

From the 1980s onwards, the environmental agenda took on a new global perspective, not least because of the three major environmental catastrophes: the pesticide spill in Bhopal, India (1984), the radiation disaster in Chernobyl, Ukraine (1986) and the Exxon Valdez oil spill in the United States (1989). As a result, environmental issues gained international visibility and the realisation gradually spread that development must be linked to economic growth with social justice and a balanced environment.

In 1983, the Secretary General of the United Nations invited the former Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, to chair the World Commission on Environment and Development, made up of experts from various fields, who undertook studies, public hearings and dialogue sessions with political and business leaders and representatives of civil society in developed and developing countries, and produced the report entitled “Our Common Future”, published in 1987, which brought the concept of sustainable development into public discourse.

The new international framework for environmental policies was consolidated at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, known as the Earth Summit or ECO-92. Marked by the presence of numerous heads of state and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the dilemma concerned the balance between the environmental, social and economic spheres, through the promotion of sustainable development, which aims to satisfy the human needs of present and future generations, and promote economic development in conjunction with better management and protection of natural resources. As a result, the term “ecology” was widely disseminated and gained relevance, attracting the attention of the media, researchers, academics, politicians and civil society (“Relatório da Delegação Brasileira.” 1993).

The international climate was favourable for the success of ECO-92, as the Cold War was coming to an end, the processes of re-democratisation in Latin American countries, the independence movements in Eastern Europe and Africa, the phenomena related to globalisation, with technological advances in the media, science and transport, environmental and social issues gained visibility in the media and in public opinion. And among the immediate results can be listed in the official documents: the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; Agenda 21; the Convention on Biological Diversity; the Framework Convention on Climate

Change; the Declaration on the Use of Forests; the Earth Charter (Garcia and Zacareli 2021; Garcia and Jesus 2023).

In parallel, the creation of Mercosur is the result of overcoming rivalries in the La Plata Basin, when Brazil and Argentina, the subcontinent's regional powers, decided to converge around bilateral cooperation projects during the period of re-democratisation. They recognised that their neighbours - Paraguay and Uruguay - had historically been in unfavourable conditions, and could work together to overcome common and cross-border challenges, including solving environmental issues (Garcia 2019).

After Twenty Years of ECO-92, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in 2012 in Brazil, succeeded in revitalising multilateralism and environmental governance, and pointed to the need to establish a new global agenda with emerging challenges and imbued with the dimensions of sustainable development (Garcia and Zacareli 2021).

Thus, in 2015, the United Nations General Assembly approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. The SDGs and the 2030 Agenda represent an update of the "Millennium Development Goals" and reinforce the urgency of transforming the dominant development paradigm, with unsustainable production and consumption patterns, in order to face global challenges based on the precepts of sustainable development. Based on this principle, the Political Declaration of the 2030 Agenda addressed the 193 Signatory States, subnational governments (provinces, districts or municipalities) and economic and social actors (companies, institutions, civil society, families and individuals), to jointly implement the SDGs at national, regional and local levels (United Nations 2023).

Given the consensus on the importance of engagement for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, in the years that followed, initiatives emerged that sought to involve the construction of a local-national-global agenda based on the dimensions of sustainability and with the participation of different actors, which could be enhanced by regional projects, such as in Mercosur.

From this perspective, we sought to analyse the extent to which the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have been addressed and incorporated into Mercosur. Despite the novelties brought about by the new agendas, demands and regulations, regional institutions find limits in their activities, when they could carry out assertive actions for the effective implementation of the SDGs at regional level. As a common feature of South American regionalism, we recognise institutional limitations due to a lack of autonomy in decision-making and dependence on the prerogatives of nation states (Luciano et al. 2023). Even so, the study argues for the importance of regional bodies in helping to achieve the SDGs-Agenda 2030, whether domestically or internationally.

With the main aim of understanding how the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are being discussed and incorporated into Mercosur, the research methodology used was a literature review, document

collection and analysis, a survey of institutional data and an interview with the Brazilian technical representative on SGT-06.

The article is divided into four parts. The first summarises the evolution of the environmental agenda in Mercosur's more than thirty-year history. Next, the Sub-Working Group on the Environment - SGT-6 and its main contributions to the environmental agenda in Mercosur are presented. Added to this analysis is an understanding of the importance of the Meeting of Environment Ministers of Mercosur countries in this area. By analysing quantitative data, the research reveals how the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda are being dealt with in some Mercosur institutions. By selecting the SDGs focused on environmental issues, the qualitative analysis, based on the agendas and minutes published by SGT-6 and the semi-structured interview, shows how this body is directly contributing to the advancement of certain topics in the 2030 Agenda. In the final discussions, the paper is engaged in discussing perspectives for political agendas to consolidate the 2030 Agenda within Mercosur.

## Mercosur and the Environment

The Mercosur countries have important natural resources, with diverse and endemic biodiversity of fauna and flora, an abundance of surface and underground water, minerals and energy sources present in specific places in the region. The natural landscapes include tropical and temperate forests, coastal areas, the pampa, the chaco, the pantanal, part of the Amazon, Patagonia, semi-desert areas and part of the Andes. For this reason, regional initiatives are fundamental given the recognition that natural wealth does not measure borders, but is an issue of interdependence between nation states. Adopting a common regional policy and providing the conditions for the development of environmental governance in Mercosur is fundamental for the effective protection and security of these resources (Bressan 2023).

Given this panorama, the debate on sustainable development and the environment in the legal systems of each Mercosur member state was also brought onto the integration agenda. The Treaty of Asunción (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela 1991) mentions the efficient use of available resources and environmental preservation. In this sense, the Common Market Council established the need for Sectoral Agreements that contemplate the preservation of the environment (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela 1991).

At that time, Brazil was already a pioneer in building a broad legal-institutional framework to deal with specific environmental issues, such as water, conservation units etc. Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay also have constitutional texts that deal with environmental protection, but complementary legislation was practically non-existent before they joined Mercosur. Despite the fact that the constitutional texts come from a common origin and declare a certain concern about environmental issues, it took efforts on the part of the States Parties to achieve environmental legislative harmonisation. The gaps and differences in the policies, legislation, technical and

administrative capacities of the domestic institutions dedicated to environmental issues in each member state of the bloc is still one of the major challenges that limits the progress and effectiveness of the Mercosur Environmental Agenda and the establishment and implementation of regional environmental standards (Garcia 2019).

The first Mercosur document to deal with environmental issues was the Canela Declaration in 1992, signed by the founding members and Chile, an associate member. The document dates back to ECO-92, confirming the importance of regional policies. The member states committed themselves to promoting environmental conservation through education, funding for research and clean technologies, and the codification of international environmental law (Mercosur Secretariat 2006). Although this Declaration did not establish guiding principles or targets for joint environmental policies, the document reinforced the importance of the issue in the bloc.

In the same year, the 2nd Meeting of Mercosur Presidents created the Specialised Meeting on the Environment (REMA) through Resolution 22/92, with the aim of establishing a body responsible for analysing the legislation of the member states and proposing environmental protection measures through recommendations to the Common Market Group (GMC), and advising the technical subgroups on Agricultural, Energy and Industrial and Technological Policy on aspects related to the environment and sustainability (Garcia 2019).

REMA produced the “Basic Environmental Policy Guidelines” that guide Mercosur’s environmental policies. In short, these guidelines highlight the need to harmonise the environmental policies and legislation of the member states, taking into account the particularities of each country, without the commitment to equalise them. In addition, it was necessary to promote the adoption of standards that would guarantee equal competitive conditions (Freitas Junior 2003).

A few years later, the first Meeting of Environment Ministers (RMMA) was held, the final document of which was the Taranco Declaration (1995), which recommended that environmental costs be taken into account as a way of guaranteeing a level playing field in terms of environmental protection and competitiveness for the Mercosur members (Bressan 2023). The declaration signed in Montevideo proposed environmental quality standards, ISO 14000, as a differentiating factor in the international market. The document also recommended assessing the environmental impacts of the Paraná-Paraguay Waterway project and coordinating the countries’ positions on biological diversity, climate change and the implementation of Agenda 21 in international forums. Finally, the Taranco Declaration indicated that the REMA should become an Environmental Sub-Working Group - SGT-6, subordinate to the Common Market Group – GMC (Irachande et al. 2010). This moment reinforced the need to create bodies dedicated to environmental issues in the bloc and the environmental agenda should be aligned with trade-production issues (Garcia 2019).

## Subgroup on the Environment - SGT-6 and the Meeting of Environment Ministers

In 1995, the GMC extinguished REMA and created SGT-6 (Sub-Working Group No. 6 Environment) in its organisational structure, whose body aims to formulate and propose strategies and guidelines for environmental issues that are important for the integration process, with a view to promoting sustainable development, through the protection and integrity of the environment of the member states, considering free trade and the search for the consolidation of the customs union, under fair conditions of competitiveness. To this end, SGT-6 carries out specific studies and produces reports and documents that support members in negotiations in Mercosur's higher bodies, and contributes technically with other sectors when dealing with environmental issues, as well as helping to define export and import quotas for certain products, such as wood, fertilisers, phytosanitary measures, packaging regulations, and is responsible for the Environmental Information System (Garcia 2019).

The technical representatives of the member states taking part in the SGT-6 negotiations are: Argentina's Ministerio de Desarrollo Social - Secretaria de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sustentable; Brazil's Ministerio do Meio Ambiente; Paraguay's Secretaría Del Ambiente; and Uruguay's Ministerio de Vivienda, Ordenamiento Territorial y Medio Ambiente (Garcia 2019).

When there are demands for specific studies to subsidise negotiations, SGT-6 creates Ad Hoc Groups that produce reports, which are sent to the Common Market Group (GMC), the bloc's executive-decisional body. Among the study groups that have already been created and incorporated into the internal structure of SGT-6 are: 1) Competitiveness and the Environment; 2) Mercosur's Environmental Information System; 3) Environmental Goods and Services; 4) Biodiversity; 5) Proper Management of Hunting of Migratory and Common Species in Transboundary Areas; 6) Environmental Management of Chemical Substances and Products; 7) Ballast Water; 8) Environmental Emergencies; 9) Combating Desertification and Drought; 10) Air Quality; 11) Working Group on Environmental Waste Management and Post-Consumer Responsibility (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2008; Garcia 2019).

At the same time, the Meeting of Environment Ministers (RMMA) became the body responsible for politically analysing sensitive environmental issues that could not always be discussed within SGT-6. The RMMA liaises with the Common Market Council - CMC, the highest decision-making body in the bloc's organisational structure. The following Ad Hoc Groups were created within the RMMA: 1) Waste and Post-Consumer Responsibility; 2) Water Resources; 3) Air Quality; 4) Desertification (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2008; Garcia 2019).

The RMMA and SGT-6 work together to identify priority issues for the Mercosur Environmental Agenda, seek to strengthen environmental issues with the bloc's other bodies, monitor the implementation and development of various cooperation projects, and forward recommendations to higher bodies to technically subsidise the decision-making process, in accordance with their competences (Garcia 2019).

Other bodies linked to the bloc are also concerned with environmental issues, such as the Mercosur Parliament (Parlasur) and the Mercosur International Cities Network (Mercocidades). These bodies are advisory and issue recommendations, and are not directly linked to the bloc's decision-making structures, so they do not have deliberative powers (Garcia 2019).

The Framework Agreement on the Environment in Mercosur was established in 2001 at the IV Extraordinary Meeting of SGT-6, reaffirming the commitments of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of ECO-92. The Mercosur countries are focussing on the protection of environmental resources and sustainable development with the help of the articulation of the economic, social and environmental dimensions, contributing to a better quality of the environment and people's lives (Bressan 2023). In 2004, the Additional Protocol to the Framework Agreement on the Environment was signed, regulating co-operation and assistance in the event of environmental emergencies. However, a number of instruments have been adopted that have contributed to progress on some environmental issues. These provisions are distributed and can be found in the form of GMC and CMC Resolutions and Guidelines (Luciano et al. 2023).

SGT-6 has established itself as a key forum for member countries to cooperate and discuss the environmental issues they face, and its work includes discussing common environmental challenges, potential joint solutions, training, capacity building, and recommendations for harmonising domestic regulations and policies. In this sense, SGT-6 has also collaborated with the environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda on multiple fronts. Although SGT-6 is only an advisory body to Mercosur, this working group facilitates discussions and negotiations between countries aimed at establishing international environmental agreements and co-operation. These negotiations cover issues such as tackling climate change (SDG 13), conserving biodiversity (SDG 15), and promoting sustainable development with the private sector and environmental impact assessments.

During the years 2015-2020, SGT-6 held twelve meetings, and the topics of SDGs 12, 13, 14 and 15 were on the agendas of ten meetings, with a greater emphasis on SDG 15, notably on targets relating to the control and mitigation of invasive alien species and combating desertification, restoration of land and degraded soils. In the same period, the RMMA held six meetings, and topics linked to the 2030 Agenda were included in three agendas, with emphasis on the exchange of information on forests, biodiversity, climate change and soils. At the meeting on 26 June 2015, the minutes stated that the outcome of the SDG Working Group would not be reopened and supported ECLAC's work on following up this agenda at regional level. In the two meetings held in 2019, issues related to sustainable cities and urban mobility (SDG 11) were also presented. In the 2020 meetings, there was no mention of the SDGs/Agenda 2030, because the political dialogue was dedicated to environmental impacts during the covid-19 pandemic.

In order to facilitate the implementation of the different SDGs, SGT-06 has been constantly working on the development of technical training for environmental inspectors and agents. The

exchange of technical environmental knowledge is led by Brazil and has helped all the countries in the bloc to improve their capacity to address environmental issues effectively<sup>1</sup>.

Another of SGT-06's work fronts consists of environmental data collection, monitoring and information sharing, which is handled by this body. Access to accurate and up-to-date environmental data is essential for political decision-making, which is why the Mercosur Environmental Information System (SIAM) was set up as a relevant mechanism for implementing the Environmental Agenda within the framework of the 2030 Agenda. In this case, SIAM generates support for different SGDs, both environmental and others, such as those dealing with water and clean energy (SGDs 06 and 07). The aim is to implement an automated system that makes it easier to compile and update information. The mechanism of individual and manual input has hindered the best use of SIAM<sup>1</sup>.

Collaboration with other Sub-Working Groups is also a constant in SGT-6's activities and functions. Environmental issues often intersect with other areas of Mercosur's work, such as trade, cross-border issues and agriculture. It is therefore essential that SGT-6 collaborates with other subgroups and working groups to ensure that environmental considerations are integrated into broader political discussions. In fact, cross-border environmental problems are a constant theme of SGT-6, shared with the different groups that deal with cross-border issues<sup>1</sup>. Discussions and agreements in this area seek to promote cooperation and prevent conflicts related to these issues. Although the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda are a permanent part of SGT-06's work, more recently, Uruguay's initiative has reinforced the importance of this agenda for Mercosur.

## Meeting of High Authorities Responsible for the Sustainable Development Goals

The incorporation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda into Mercosur's structure was an initiative of Uruguay's Pro Tempore Presidency (PPTU) in 2018. On that occasion, the country presented a Diplomatic Note to the GMC and the Mercosur Secretariat, with the proposal to create a new body within the institutional structure that would be related to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The new body was called the "Meeting of High Authorities Responsible for the Sustainable Development Goals (RARODS)", which was celebrated at the 2018 CX Meeting of the Common Market Group (GMC) in the city of Montevideo (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2019). From this moment on, the Mercosur Administrative Secretariat (SAM) began to encourage and map issues related to the SDGs in the social, economic and environmental spheres in the different Mercosur forums (GMC, 2018). Underpinned by the 17 SDGs, the work of RARODS has been important in driving the different instances of integration to articulate and advance the 2030 Agenda (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2019; Luciano et al. 2023).

<sup>1</sup> Sampaio, C H. S. Entrevista concedida a Regiane Nitsch Bressan sobre a representação brasileira no SGT-06 do Mercosul. 2023

Conceived as an auxiliary body of the CMC, RARODS proposes policies and actions for the incorporation of the 2030 Agenda. The body also encourages the exchange of good practices and experiences between Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2019). In addition, RARODS has drawn up a Work Plan with proposals for community policies and initiatives within Mercosur, with a view to actions and implementation plans. To this end, the body worked in coordination with the other Mercosur organisations, always with the support of the bloc's Secretariat, facilitating the participation of members in its activities (Luciano et al. 2023).

Following the work of the Sectoral Technical Advisory (DT SM/SAT No. 34/2018), the first advances in incorporating the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals into Mercosur's Institutional Structure were presented (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2019). The results revealed that 16 forums include the SDGs on their agendas and 9 of the 17 Goals are being consolidated on their agendas. In addition, 11 new initiatives were identified that include the SDGs. Lastly, the Mercosur countries have also started to work on four themes for harmonising public policies (DT SM/SAT No. 34/2018 - Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals in Mercosur's Institutional Structure). The methodologies for systematising and compiling institutional experiences are reinforced by the technical profile of the Technical Advisory Sector (SAT/SM) in the RARODS proposal. The role of the SAT/SM reinforced the general argument of the importance of a technical and permanent character of the Mercosur Secretariat for the regional integration process on this agenda (Luciano et al. 2023).

In 2019, when the Mercosur Secretariat presented the final RARODS consultation, the work was reorientated by the Argentine Pro Tempore Presidency (PPTA) under Mauricio Macri. The Argentinian president ordered a reduction in Mercosur's institutionality, which is why the project presented by Uruguay was not finalised, nor was the return of the RARODS meetings, which involved Mercosur's Institutional Decision-Making Bodies (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2019). The decision to paralyse the work of RARODS was endorsed by the Brazilian government of Jair Bolsonaro. Even though RARODS has been discontinued, the research carried out by the Mercosur Secretariat until 2019 was an important product of the process (Luciano et al. 2023).

## Mercosur and the Sustainable Development Goals

Two types of data will be used to analyse the incorporation of the 2030 Agenda into Mercosur and its SDGs. The first refers to the consultation of data issued by the Mercosur Secretariat on the treatment of the SDGs by Mercosur bodies, be they decision-making bodies or consultative bodies during the period 2015-2020 (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2020). The second piece of data comes from a qualitative interview with the alternate national coordinator for SGT-6

(Environment), Carlos Hugo Suarez Sampaio - International Affairs Advisor at the Ministry of the Environment.

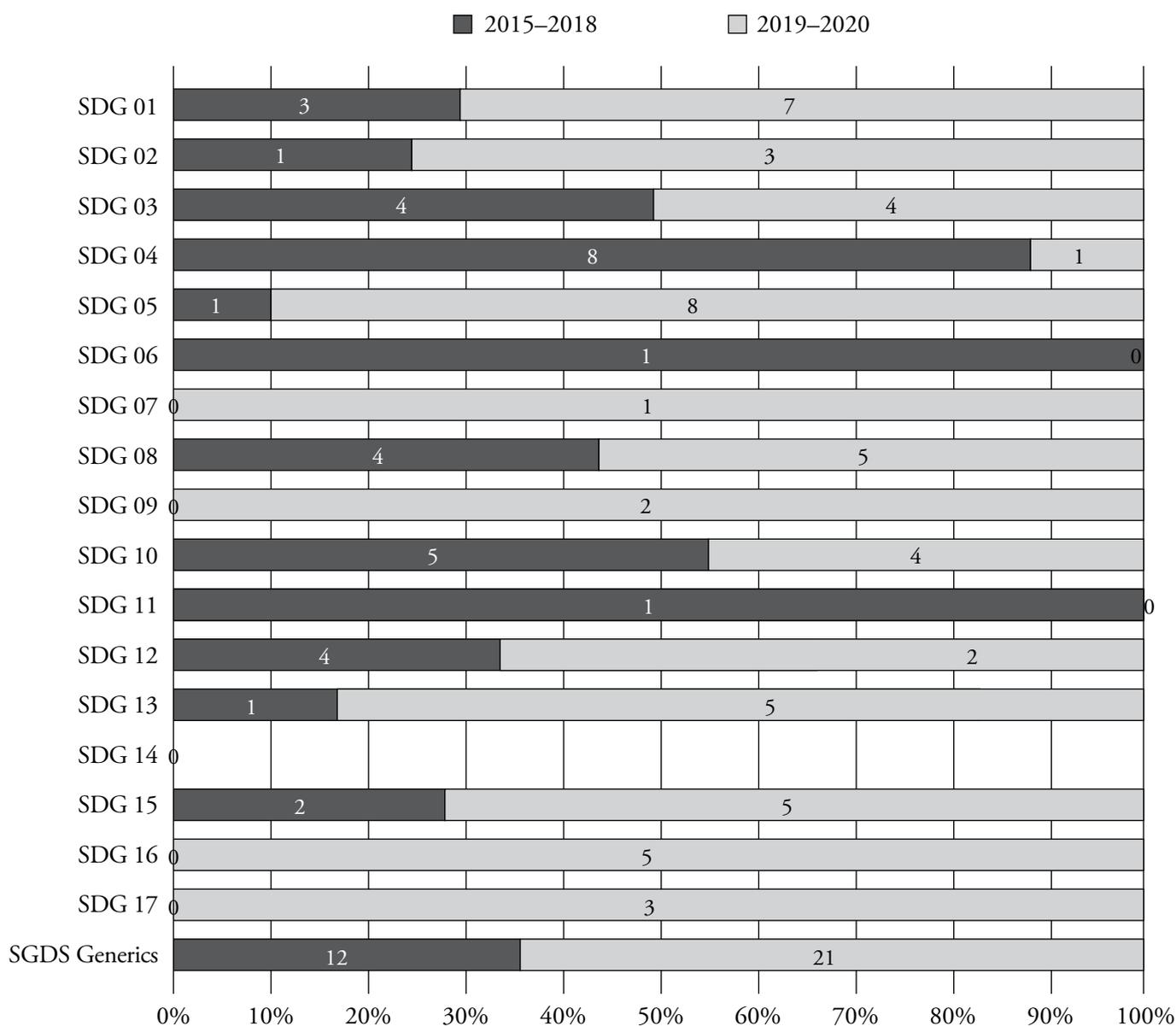
The quantitative data analysis totalled two periods: 2015-2018, data from the Mercosur Secretariat report (2019) and the document “Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Mercosur Countries” (2020), which revealed how official Mercosur documents refer to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda (Mercosur Secretariat, 2019) and how countries have potentially been incorporating the SDGs. In the second period, which covers 2019 and 2020, official data on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda was compiled following the methodology of the Mercosur Secretariat report (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2019; Luciano et al. 2023).

The Decision-Making Bodies of Mercosur - CMC and GMC - mentioned the SDGs in a balanced and increasing manner between the two periods. In the first period (2015-2018), these bodies made 30 and 22 mentions respectively. In the second period (2019-2020), the CMC mentioned ODS 33 times and the GMC 24 times, totalling 109 mentions (Luciano et al. 2023).

Our first analysis reveals that all the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda, except SDG 14 (life underwater), were mentioned at some point by the institutions analysed in Mercosur. In turn, the most frequently mentioned SDGs were SDG 1 (poverty eradication), SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 10 (reducing inequalities), which is associated with social and economic issues. Generic mentions of the SDGs totalled 33. However, when analysing the SDGs linked to the environment, we found the following SDGs and mentions respectively: 06 (01), 13 (06), 14 (0) and 15 (07) – totalling 14 mentions in the two periods.

If we compare the two periods 2015-2018 and 2019-2020, there is a tendency for mentions of the SDGs to increase, but there was no growth among all the SDGs. Only five SDGs (01, 02, 05, 08 and 15) were referenced more frequently by Mercosur bodies between 2019-2020. While other SDGs (04, 10, 11, 12, 13) have seen a reduction in the number of mentions in recent years, notably SDG 4 (from eight to one mention) and SDG 13 (from five to one mention), which raises questions about the concern regarding climate change, which is increasingly relevant in the debate on the international system. However, some SDGs were mentioned for the first time in 2019-2020, namely SDGs 07, 09, 16 and 17, which shows that the last period was more specific in terms of SDG coverage. With regard to the SDGs on the environment, SDG 15 “life and terrestrial ecosystems” was doubled with increases compared to both periods. Even so, it is worth mentioning that the generic mention of the SDGs has increased dramatically, but we reinforce the argument that the SDGs have not really been incorporated into the Mercosur agenda. Graph 1 illustrates the number of mentions of each SDG in the periods analysed.

**Graph 1. Mentions of the SDGs in the GMC and CMC bodies between 2015-2018 and 2019-2020.**



Source: based on Mercosur Secretariat (2019) and survey by Luciano et al. (2023).

Mercosur bodies recognise the importance of promoting the SDGs by making mentions and declarations, even though these remain free of material costs. It is a practice of state leaders to incorporate them into institutional discourses, as this generates expectations in the institutional sphere. These expectations are endogenous and exogenous to Mercosur, conditioning future actions that can guide the success of the organisation’s actions on this agenda (Jenne et al. 2017; Luciano et al. 2023).

On the other hand, by generating generic references to the 2030 Agenda, a certain specific expectation about the implementation of concrete regional public policies is avoided, configuring a “rhetorical regionalism”. This concept explains the participation of representatives in different symbolic and discursive activities of the organisation, extolling the objectives of regionalism,

reinforcing treaties and cooperation agreements. However, these representatives do not always make progress in implementing the policies mentioned in these speeches (Luciano et al. 2023).

From the quantitative analysis, it was possible to infer what the environmental concerns are in relation to the SDGs. To a greater extent, SDG 15 (Life and Terrestrial Ecosystems) took centre stage compared to the others. On the other hand, SDG 13 (Climate Action) was mentioned throughout the period analysed. Analysing qualitative data from the aforementioned interview with Suarez Sampaio, alternate Brazilian coordinator of SGT-6 and International Affairs Advisor at the Ministry of the Environment, helps us understand the main environmental issues in Mercosur.

Biodiversity conservation is a very frequent theme in the work of SGT-06 (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2021; 2022; 2023). There is ongoing concern about the control of exotic (invasive) species, the protection of endangered species and wildlife trafficking, all of which stem from concern about biodiversity (SDG 15). We should also emphasise that Mercosur member countries are home to various ecosystems, biomes and habitats for species that cross borders, consolidating the importance of this regional body.

Care for Biodiversity among Mercosur countries was already presented at the 8th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP-8) in Curitiba, even before the 2030 Agenda was set up. The document signed by the four member states, called the “Mercosur Biodiversity Strategy”, established the main guidelines and lines of action for the integration of environmental policies and legislation, focussing on the broad concept of biodiversity (Redação 2006).

From that moment on, it was reinforced that conservation actions and the sustainable use of natural resources require international cooperation, including the various sectors of society, in favour of building environmental governance in the region. In fact, the strategy signed by the partners guaranteed that biodiversity inventories would be carried out jointly, as well as the conservation and recovery of biodiversity in continental, marine and coastal ecosystems, covering SDG 13, 14 and 15, as well as others indirectly. The actions stipulated from that joint strategy also included the protection and recovery of biomes and ecosystems with a high degree of integrality - in other words, those that cross borders, such as the Pantanal and the Amazon. Therefore, one of the priorities raised was the consolidation of the Greater American Chaco Subregional Programme. For Marina Silva (Brazil’s current Environment Minister), the document aimed to facilitate a series of actions - from the creation of new mechanisms for obtaining resources, staff and technical qualifications, sustainable management of shared resources and common policies.

Currently, SGT-06’s efforts in the field of Biodiversity focus on regulatory frameworks, plans, programmes and instruments for wildlife control and conservation. There are efforts to combat animal trafficking between Mercosur countries, as stated in the meeting minutes (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2021; 2022; 2023). Furthermore, the countries are working to implement the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, Wild Fauna and Flora, Seized Animals and the Rehabilitation of Seized Wildlife (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2023)<sup>1</sup>. The delegations of the founding member countries agreed in 2023 to draw up a document to align

the repatriation of seized wildlife with its origin. According to Sampaio<sup>1</sup>, concern about invasive exotic species is imminent. SGT-06 has compiled a list of the main exotic species. The wild boar, for example, is a species that worries all countries, especially Brazil, as it has already arrived in the Amazon, jeopardising the natural balance there. The proposal is to consolidate well-structured policies to combat exotic species with the help of joint training and common control policies (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2023).

Another issue that is in line with SGT-06's efforts is combating wildlife trafficking (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2021; 2022; 2023). Within the framework of the Mercosur discussions, there is a focus on certain species, such as the jaguar. Some of the Mercosur countries are part of the smuggling route, usually to China. In Asia, they remove some parts for medicines and other medicinal purposes. This is a case to be combated, especially when it is added to the case of endangered species<sup>1</sup>.

With regard to SDG 13, under Brazil's pro tempore presidency, SGT-06 resumed its efforts within the framework of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction 2015 - 2030, scheduling new meetings and redoubling its efforts on the climate change agenda. This issue was incorporated into the CMC at REAGIR (Meeting of Ministers and High Authorities for Comprehensive Disaster Risk Management). For the 2018-2022 period, a Regional Plan for disaster risk reduction was proposed, with the aim of proposing sub-regional cross-border policies based on the exchange of information, research, technical and scientific advice (Bressan 2023). In addition, ministers and government authorities continue to exchange information on progress related to climate change (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2020). The Mercosur Ministers and Environmental Authorities undertake to report on the activities carried out to fulfil the Nationally Determined Contributions to Mitigate Climate Change (NDCs) within the framework of the Paris Agreement.

Climate change is treated as a political dialogue at the SGT-6 and RMMA meetings, when the representatives of the member states share their positions and decide whether or not to negotiate as a bloc at the Conferences of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Garcia 2023).

Incidentally, in 2017, Mercosur published the "Declaration of the States Parties and Associated States of Mercosur on the Commitment to the Paris Agreement" and the "Mercosur Declaration on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", which are in line with the rhetoric of implementing the 2030 Agenda and other international commitments that, a posteriori, place them as a prerequisite, such as the Mercosur and European Union Association Agreement (2019).

In addition, the Mercosur countries set up the Mercosur Environmental Information System (SIAM) between 2015-2022 as a relevant mechanism for implementing the environmental SDGs. SIAM centralises information on the actions, products and results of SGT-6 and RMMA activities, contributing to the transparency of negotiations and their dissemination. It also facilitates access to environmental information in the member states in an integrated manner for its dissemination to the general public (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2019). Even so, the mechanism deserves the use of more contemporary technologies, because manual updating does not contribute to the

efficiency of this System (Argentina, Brasil, Paraguay, Uruguay 2021). Brazil's 2023 Pro Tempore Presidency intends to leverage this system with the use of more modern technological tools<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the data analysed in this research endorses the importance of Brazilian leadership - with greater experience in environmental issues - and it is hoped that efforts to improve environmental indicators in Mercosur countries will intensify, as will be discussed below.

## Mercosur's perspectives on the environmental SDGs: Brazilian leadership and the Pro Tempore Presidency

In order to understand Mercosur's adherence to the environmental SDGs, it is important to understand how domestic interests have affected Mercosur's environmental agenda in recent years. Brazil faced a period of major setbacks in relation to environmental governance during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), which consequently negatively influenced the agenda within SGT-06 and other Mercosur bodies, as it is the main member of the integration process<sup>1</sup>.

Since his presidential campaign, Bolsonaro has had a negative stance on environmental issues. During his administration, he criticised and deconstructed the institutional structures for national environmental negotiations, with the exclusion of social actors in environmental governance, changes to current environmental laws, new bills presented in Congress, the extinction or reduction of investments in environmental programmes, and the extinction of democratic arenas such as commissions and advisory bodies, changes in the institutional arrangements of environmental agencies, dismissals and changes of officials ideologically aligned with the president, dismantling of government environmental institutions such as the Ministry of the Environment, and official speeches in favour of ruralists and illegal miners, among others actions that have destroyed the institutional apparatus and management capacity of the federal environmental area, with strong repercussions at international level. The advances Brazil has made in recent decades towards environmental governance have been disrupted and set back, due to the inaction and conflict generation that characterise this government and the disrespect for international environmental treaties signed by Brazil (Garcia 2019; Adams et. al. 2020; Bressan 2021).

In relation to Mercosur, Bolsonaro expressed positions contrary to the bloc's objectives. In August 2017, the president argued on social media: "[...] we need to get rid of Mercosur's ties and move towards bilateralism. Brazil has the autonomy to trade with the whole world!" (Bressan et al. 2021).

At this juncture, SGT-6 had a discreet participation through its Brazilian representation, leaving it up to the governments of Argentina and Uruguay to lead this agenda in Mercosur<sup>1</sup>. In fact, when Uruguay took over the coordination of the group, it showed an active and interested role in the environmental agenda, providing the discussion of specific issues that have guided the work of SGT-6 in recent years, to the detriment of Brazil, which throughout the Bolsonaro administration, has had no support for proposing new agendas.

In 2022, with Lula da Silva's victory as president of Brazil, environmental issues and regional integration once again became part of Brazil's national and international agenda. Before taking office, Lula was invited by the President of Egypt to represent Brazil at COP 27 on Climate Change, held in Egypt in November 2022, along with more than 90 heads of state. His participation inspired the resumption of Brazil's commitment to environmental and climate governance.

After taking office, Lula visited Argentina and Uruguay to reaffirm his commitment to re-establishing Mercosur's activities, emphasising the importance of the bloc's unity, given Uruguay's threats to make bilateral agreements with China. In this way, Brazil is gradually regaining some of its regional leadership, once again betting on Mercosur. In fact, the presence of eleven leaders at the South American Summit in May 2023, at the invitation of President Lula, represented a new phase in Brazilian foreign policy, with evidence of the possible recovery of Brazil's leading role in the region, not just in Mercosur (Bressan 2023).

It is expected that during Brazil's pro tempore presidency of Mercosur during the Lula administration (2023 and 2025) new activities and initiatives will be incorporated into SGT-6<sup>1</sup>. Brazil expects to take up important issues dating back to the 2030 Agenda, and new themes integrated into Mercosur's work under Brazilian leadership, especially climate change.

Brazil has many interests in relation to climate change (SDG 13), sometimes contradictory, but which place the country at the centre of regional and international discussion. On the one hand, the country is a significant global emitter of greenhouse gases, due to logging, land use change and extensive livestock farming; on the other, its biomes and low carbon emission and capture production systems and the increase in the share of renewable energies in its energy matrix, which is one of the cleanest in the world, place the country as a major ally in mitigating climate change, even if it conflicts with its economic priorities.

What's more, as Brazil is home to a large part of the Amazon, it has a further responsibility, since its balance has been threatened. Deforestation and intensive land use in this biome have significant implications for climate change, since the rainforest acts as a carbon sink and plays a crucial role in regulating the Earth's climate. On the other hand, the country has been involved in several international agreements related to climate change, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement. The country's position on these agreements has evolved over time, with periods of strong commitment, followed by periods of scepticism or resistance, as has happened under Bolsonaro. Climate change has therefore been an issue heavily influenced by domestic political conjunctures. Nevertheless, Brazilian citizens, environmental organisations and indigenous groups are deeply concerned about the impacts of climate change and deforestation in Brazil. These are organised civil society groups that make up domestic governance, which is beginning to re-establish itself after the change of government. These groups are advocating stricter environmental protection measures, from protecting biodiversity to defending sustainable development practices. In addition, the country has been criticised by the international community during the disastrous gestation of the Bolsonaro government, from the vertiginous increase in deforestation rates, to the policy changes impacting on the protection of

Brazil's different biomes, including its indigenous communities. There is currently a shift away from Brazil, with Lula concerned about climate change and biodiversity conservation. The promise is that environmental issues will be given due importance in the third Lula administration.

## Final considerations

The research showed that the environmental issues negotiated in SGT-6 and RMMA contribute to the fulfilment of specific SDGs, because they reinforce the environmental commitments of Mercosur member states, which have been established at international and domestic levels. However, an analysis of mentions in Mercosur documents in the period analysed (2015-2018 and 2019-2020) shows that generic mentions of the SDGs prevail over those of specific SDGs, which demonstrates more rhetoric and low adherence to the creation of effective actions. In addition, mentions of the SDGs are scattered throughout Mercosur's decision-making bodies and technical instances, which makes it difficult to concentrate resources for the adoption of regional policies and mechanisms aimed at implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Although the member states engage in dialogue on climate change in the SGT-6 and RMMA and align their positions before and after international conferences, there is still no regional climate change policy in Mercosur (Garcia 2023). In this sense, by focusing the analysis on SDGs 13 and 15 through qualitative data, it was possible to infer that Mercosur has adopted measures that are still incipient for the achievement of environmental policies on a regional scale. The adoption of these policies is highly susceptible to the different realities and circumstances of its member states. It is hoped that Brazil's current presidency will spearhead the progress needed to promote co-operative policies and actions aimed at promoting sustainable development.

The agendas of tackling climate change and conserving biodiversity are on the agenda of Mercosur's current work and should be stimulated by the evolution and intensification of these debates in the international system. In addition to the pressure exerted by new trade agreements that demand environmental conservation as an economic counterpart, such as the agreement with the European Union. Despite the institutional limitations and challenges, the Brazilian leadership certainly has a decisive role to play in leading Mercosur to become an important player in international environmental governance.

We believe that Mercosur is an important locus of regional environmental governance, and could advance the harmonisation of environmental rules and regulations between member countries. This would help ensure that all members adhere to similar environmental practices, reducing the risk of environmental degradation due to disparities in regulations that are quite asymmetrical. In fact, the harmonisation of rules on the transboundary transport of waste in Mercosur is essential for environmental security.

With a view to environmental security, Mercosur member countries could collaborate on cross-border environmental issues more emphatically, such as water management, air quality and

biodiversity conservation. Joint efforts can help resolve environmental issues that affect several countries, especially at the borders.

According to the analysis of SGT-06's work, Mercosur could work together to protect and conserve shared biodiversity hotspots more assertively. Collaborative conservation efforts and the application of measures to monitor and combat deforestation are essential. The study showed that there are important policies for controlling invasive alien species and combating wildlife trafficking, which predate the 2030 Agenda. However, there are other biodiversity issues, such as the extinction of certain species and policies to combat environmental degradation, which could be addressed with greater frequency and commitment.

Still on the subject of environmental security, Mercosur countries could put more effort into disaster preparedness and response mechanisms, especially in regions prone to high-intensity natural phenomena such as floods and forest fires. Sharing resources and expertise can help mitigate the environmental, social and economic impacts of such disasters. To this end, the establishment of an integrated and more efficient monitoring system, as well as periodic reporting on environmental indicators, can help member countries identify areas of concern, follow up on processes and the responsibilities of country bodies and their respective actions.

Reinforcing its commitment to the 2030 Agenda and other cooperation projects that have been developed with the European Union and the United Nations Environment Programme, Mercosur could promote policies to encourage sustainable production and trade, incentivising the productive sectors in its territories with production systems that use fewer natural resources and reverse logistics with appropriate waste treatment. In addition, Mercosur countries could facilitate the sharing of technologies and knowledge related to sustainable practices between member countries in order to promote sustainable development and reduce socio-environmental damage.

While still difficult, the exchange of data and research would be possible with the computerisation and application of new technologies. Member countries should collaborate in collecting and sharing environmental data, carrying out research and developing joint strategies to tackle environmental challenges. SIAM could be updated and updated through integrated technological mechanisms shared between countries.

Discussions on climate change and its impacts on the region's ecosystems, economies and societies will increasingly form part of the SGT-6 and RMMA agenda, according to the study in this article. This could involve co-operation on climate adaptation, mitigation strategies and regional approaches to tackling climate-related challenges.

The article highlights the importance of Mercosur as a locus of environmental governance, proposing the harmonisation of environmental rules and regulations between member countries. This harmonisation would be key to ensuring similar environmental practices and reducing the risk of environmental degradation due to disparities in regulations. In addition, the research suggests more intense collaboration between member countries on transboundary environmental issues such as water management, biodiversity conservation and anti-deforestation measures. It also proposes the establishment of mechanisms to prevent and respond to natural disasters, as

well as the sharing of sustainable technologies and knowledge to promote responsible economic and social practices. In addition, it emphasises the importance of exchanging data and research, as well as effective cooperation on climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies, which should become a central part of the Mercosur agenda. The research highlights the need for a collaborative and technologically advanced approach to tackling environmental challenges in the region.

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