

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Plastic Laws Overview in Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) also face the global crisis stemming from the toxic lifecycle of plastics, manifesting in per capita consumption that has escalated dramatically from 7 kg/inhabitant/year in the 1980s to 35 kg/inhabitant/year currently, with projections indicating that the region will reach levels similar to developed countries (60–80 kg/inhabitant/year) within the next two decades. This trend has resulted in the region currently generating more than 20 million metric tons annually of plastic waste, with Brazil (7.4 million), Mexico (6.7 million), and Argentina (1.9 million) being the largest producers of this pollutant.

In response to this reality, comprehensive mapping of plastic legislation in LAC reveals significant, though heterogeneous, progress: 23 countries (68%) have specific national legislation, while 4 countries (12%) have developed significant departmental or state-level frameworks, and 7 countries (20%) still lack comprehensive regulation. Notably, the Caribbean leads the region with 100% national legislative coverage, contrasting with Central America and Mexico, which show the least progress (38%), while South America registers 50% national coverage complemented by significant subnational legislation. Temporal analysis identifies three legislative waves that have marked regional progress: a pioneering phase (2012–2018), followed by massive expansion (2019–2022) during which 15 countries enacted specific legislation, culminating in a refinement phase (2023–2025).

Nevertheless, three structural problems significantly compromise the effectiveness of legal frameworks: lack of consistent enforcement, persistent resistance from the private sector backed by oligopolistic corporations with considerable influence, and limitations in the scalability of viable alternatives. Furthermore, corporate strategies based on circular economy and recycling principles frequently delay the adoption of structural prevention measures, generating regulatory ambiguity that obstructs the necessary systemic transformation.

In conclusion, although LAC shows notable progress with 74% of countries regulating plastics in some form, considerable heterogeneity persists in approaches, scopes, and implementation capacities. The next decade will be decisive for consolidating existing regulatory frameworks, improving effective implementation through robust enforcement, and advancing toward greater regional harmonization that enables economies of scale and shared learning. Only through systemic and participatory approaches that coherently articulate industrial, environmental, and socioeconomic dimensions will it be possible to fundamentally transform production and consumption patterns, thus advancing toward effective prevention of plastic waste and the protection of vulnerable ecosystems and communities throughout the region.

Prepared by: Felipe Rodríguez Torres, PhD in Waste Prevention (NOSS/USP)

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