

Not everything that gleams is green

Elena Gonzalez; April 11, 2019

Last month, Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado Quesada toured the United Statesⁱ promoting our country's new Decarbonization Plan, a commitment to become a decarbonized economy by 2050. The plan consists of four core topics, first and foremost stands improving and modernizing transportation and mobility, with goals such as sustainable electric public transportation independent of fossil fuels, high percentage of electric vehicle ownership, and zero emission freight transportation. This has caught the world's attention and praiseⁱⁱ. Indeed, it is an ambitious plan. A huge commitment from a tiny country.

But is it a realistic plan?

Sadly, we are already realizing it is not, as we see the plan beginning to crumble. Their first planned action has already been rejected by the population, and forced to be postponed for the time being. Last week the government announced a proposal to develop a 'joint venture' between RECOPE (Costa Rican Oil Refinery which has never refined oil) and CNP (National Production Council that doesn't produce) with the purpose of combining natural gas with fossil fuels. The population, offended, has voiced its opinion. The proposition would require all vehicle owners to spend on adjustments to their vehicle's motors. Another expense for an already expensive and binding need for most working class individuals. Furthermore, there has not been enough evidence shared with the population that this mixture will not damage the engines.

The plan is not focusing on what really needs to change to allow the economy become more sustainable and decarbonized.

Instead, the government should be working on achieving a basic level of governance before pretending to add new levels of complexity. Maybe in the process of optimizing services and institutions carbon emissions are successfully reduced. Working on simpler tasks like successfully implementing old policies which have been forgotten such as a simple bus route sectorization, could dramatically reduce vehicle emissions.

Sectorization is part of a 20 year old public policy to modernize public transportation in the country. Its main objective is to reorganize the public bus lines into a service network, where users can travel from downtown to several hubs around the city, and from there, to anywhere in the sector.

This change would decongest the presently collapsed city center. Instead of having the existing 248ⁱⁱⁱ lines travelling from their furthest point, all the way into the city, there would be only nine routes travelling from the center to several hubs, and as many as necessary outbound from the hubs.

Emissions would decrease by reducing the number of buses travelling downtown, where traffic is the worst, and also by having buses travel shorter trips. Emissions from idle motors in congestion would be reduced as well, not only from buses, but from cars enjoying less time stuck in traffic.

Even long term, sectorization is a better option for decarbonization. Reducing traffic downtown could improve the attractiveness of living there, helping revitalize the city. This, in turn, would make it denser, which is important for making mass public transit more efficient. It would also make it possible for people living in the city to walk around while running errands.

But not even something as simple as reorganizing bus services will ever be possible, if the government doesn't address the root problem. They must address the bureaucratic gridlock and incompetence between the Public Transport Council and the Public Services Regulating Authority. Concession contracts have not been properly revised by the Council in more than 10 years. Fares are being calculated by the Regulating Authority with obsolete methods and outdated information. Neither institution can agree on who has jurisdiction over whom. More importantly, how is the country's infrastructure going to improve, when the Ministry gets less than 4% of the national budget?

President Alvarado's Decarbonization Plan is not realistic. It depends on Costa Ricans assuming the high cost of new technologies.

This is the moment to start talking about sectorization. Concession contracts are set to expire in 2021. The government must be ready to get it running without skipping a beat.

Finally, I would like to leave you with my favorite phrase. "A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It's where the rich use public transportation".

ⁱ (Cafasso, 2019)

ⁱⁱ (Rodriguez, 2019)

ⁱⁱⁱ (EPYPSA-SIGMA GP, 2015)

Cafasso, S. (2019, March 14). Carlos Alvarado Quesada, president of Costa Rica, visited Stanford to present his plan for national decarbonization. *Stanford News*, pp. <https://news.stanford.edu/2019/03/14/costa-rican-president-speaks-stanford/>.

EPYPSA-SIGMA GP. (2015). *Apoyo al modelo general de sectorizacion del transporte publico de San Jose de Costa Rica*. Washington, DC: EPYPSA-SIGMA GP.

Rodriguez, S. (2019, February 25). Costa Rica launches 'unprecedented' push for zero emissions by 2050. *Reuters*, pp. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-costa-rica-climatechange-transportati/costa-rica-launches-unprecedented-push-for-zero-emissions-by-2050-idUSKCN1QE253>.