

# CAF Podcast

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### Paola Pabón

Today in the Common Action Forum podcast, we discuss the dynamics between grassroots dynamics and multilateral relations, drawing on issues such as democratic transparency, good governance and the fight against insecurity.

**Paola Pabón** is the twice-elected Prefect of the Ecuadorian province of Pichincha, the region surrounding the capital, Quito.

**TT:** Since its foundation, CAF has always emphasised the need to transcend contemporary governance models, where nation-state interests prevail, and work to engage citizens more directly in addressing the most important challenges of our time, all of which are global in nature. As Prefect of Pichincha and President of the Consortium of Provincial Governments of Ecuador (CONGOPE), you have already taken part in several of the annual conferences of the United Cities and Local Governments Organisation (UCLG). These meetings are sponsored by the UN and as part of the preparatory meetings for next year's Summit of the Future, which aims to forge a new global consensus on the fate of the peoples and to revitalise multilateral cooperation. **What can you tell us about the work of UCLG and your expectations for re-founding the United Nations at a time when its effectiveness and legitimacy seem to be in crisis? Is there a genuine commitment to bridge the gap between multilateralism and the citizenry?**

**PP:** I would begin with an observation: we are drawing ever closer to 2030. One of the greatest commitments of UN multilateralism has been the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is growing awareness that meeting these objectives is still a long way off. This has led multilateralists to reflect on the role of nation-states in achieving them. The disconnect between nation-states and their development models in relation to the SDGs is a discussion led not only by civil society but also by subnational governments.

We are now facing a pressing scenario, because 2030 is approaching us with high rates of poverty, unemployment, exclusion, armed conflicts, drug trafficking conflicts... In other words, a series of violent conditions indicate that we are progressively drifting away from these Goals in this questioning. UCLG has been debating for several years now about considering subnational governments as powerful tools, in practical terms, so that nation-states can have strategic allies in the pursuit of these goals.

This is the first time that the UN Secretary General has convened an advisory group of 15 subnational government authorities worldwide. This was never achieved before, and it is essentially because we can't get to the Summit of the Future without strategies to accelerate the final five years of the process.

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**TT:** In previous episodes of the podcast, former minister Diego Borja linked the security crisis in Ecuador to the collusion that the hegemonic powers have with illicit economies and criminal organisations in the use of tax evasion mechanisms. Paradoxically, these are often the same powers that try to exploit insecurity politically. The political economy of drug trafficking and other illegal networks around the world revolves around tax havens. Still, the case of Ecuador is particularly striking, having gone from the second safest country in the region to the most insecure in little more than five years. In a small country with a dollarised economy and a GDP of 120 billion USD, today, around 4% of the domestic product is being laundered, feeding back into the finances of these very networks. **What is the particular situation in Pichincha? How can this crisis be understood and tackled from a local perspective?**

**PP:** We always insist that subnational governments play a key role, being closer to a citizenry that is not often reached by multilateralism. We emphasise that there has to be an overarching axis between nation-states and their citizens and territories. Our role is decisive regardless of the various models of autonomy and decentralisation that nations may have. Beyond the dispute over resources between nation-states and subnational governments around the world, you need governments that are close to citizens and pay attention to them.

The COVID pandemic was a dramatic episode for humankind, but it illustrated how we are the ones who take the closest care of our citizens. We—the local governments, municipalities, departmental governments, and provincial governments—are the ones who look after our citizens. And that is what we have now reinvigorated. We have revitalised this discussion within UCLG, which has more than 240,000 members and involves 140 states.

The point of your question was how does a country like Ecuador deteriorate in such a short period of time. By now, life's loss of value in Ecuador is all over the international news. Diego Borja addressed one of the central elements by pointing to the financial system, particularly the speculative one. This is where the emphasis should be placed. Speculative financial capital is the one that does not generate employment or investment, that is not taxed, the one that is not concerned with improving the economy's conditions and ends up in tax havens. Capital with growth interests that sidestep the law and constitutional mandates. Networks that obtain capital from shady activities, from shady industries such as drug trafficking, and that settle in our territories. From a structural perspective, drug trafficking penetrates Ecuador through the logic of financial capital but also with the complicity of the state. It does so through the state's disregard for the most basic democratic guarantees, such as legal certainty. We have a co-opted, corrupt judicial system. There are also the interests of those in power who are linked to the financial system, who are both judge and plaintiff in the same dispute. There is a drug trafficking industry that uses the country's ports and border provinces and cartels that operate by exploiting cheap labour, essentially the country's most impoverished young people—our youth.

These criminal capitals have taken over the economy and the financial system, and this same financial logic is also combined with the absence of health, services and labour conditions for the poorest people, with the inability of the administration to provide schooling in the most remote territories (especially in the provinces most affected by drug trafficking). All of this nurtures the same breeding ground. There isn't a single level or layer of the state's fabric that isn't permeated by this scourge. This is why we believe that Pichincha needs to complement security policies with social policies. Security is necessary, but we cannot build it only with securitisation policies. Creating provincial plans is part of what we are doing. However, it goes beyond Pichincha.

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At the moment, as CONGOPE, as a consortium of provincial governments, we are making a significant effort in the development of 13 provincial security plans. And I will venture to say, before they are completed, that they will be born with an element of weakness, namely that they will be disconnected from the national policy because here in Ecuador, security policy is an exclusive competence of the national government. There can be no truly functional provincial or municipal security policies if they are not anchored to a national security policy and a national leadership that can face organised crime. In any case, we must work on the social approach in addition to this security approach. For example, here in Pichincha, our commitment to strengthening sports schools for children and young people is a must. We are managing to reach the remotest areas with the firm conviction that we can't allow the state to withdraw from them, leaving space for organised crime, hitmen, drug dealing... as I was saying, its absence creates a breeding ground.

The State's presence is vital, from the national government to the parish level, to promote activities outside the classroom that, like sports schools, fill our youth's free time in a positive way while accompanying them. We are also committed to our WARMI Pichincha centres for the protection of women because, as in every war, we are the ones who end up paying the price. Just to give you an idea, in the last national femicide map, an independent one carried out by Ecuadorian civil society, it was determined that of the 321 femicides last year, 172 were committed under the logic of the criminal system. It is our women who continue to pay for this war. That is why we support our health systems and our women's protection systems, because we understand that we cannot walk away from the territory that the state does walk away from.

**TT:** In the same vein, perhaps one of the most characteristic lines of your political action is to involve local efforts in the fight against discrimination and the most invisible forms of violence, particularly gender-based and sexual violence. Your intervention at the annual CAF2020 forum, in fact, emphasised the need for special approaches to domestic violence during COVID confinements, and one of your flagship projects for Pichincha is the WARMI centres, which, as you mentioned, work to contain the serious rise in femicides at the national level. We live in times when social polarisation also takes its toll on the struggle for equality worldwide, with important advances and serious setbacks occurring simultaneously. **What is your assessment of the state of this issue?**

**PP:** Last week, in the context of the 4th Science and Technology Summit convened by ECLAC in Bogotá, I was reflecting on the thankless role of nation-states. Regardless of political and ideological positions, it is essential that we recognise the neglect of national development models regarding social policies, as we are also facing processes of right-wing expansion throughout the world.

Against this, I believe that we can't detach ourselves from politics. We are talking about development models that seek to shrink the state, under the logic of trimming "unnecessary spending" and the irrelevance of social rights. This is also where the role of sub-national governments really comes into its own. While the nation-states become more and more distant from the real needs of the people, increasingly aloof, acting with a tone-deaf public policy towards social issues, it is up to us to step up our efforts. And that is exactly what happened to us with gender violence in Pichincha. Seven out of ten women in our province in 2019, when we took office, reported suffering violence. That is why we adopted a gender policy. Not because there is a woman in office, in charge of the local government, but because it is a problem that affects more than 50% of our population and deserves a public policy with adequate resources and a budget.



Paola Pabón is the current Prefect of Pichincha, Ecuador. She served as Minister of Political Management between 2016 and 2017. A lawyer by training, she was also a National Assembly representative for two legislative terms and worked as a community development manager in the Prefecture of Pichincha before becoming the first woman to lead the province.

After several years of tackling the problem, bringing together different actors... because we have not done it alone, we have worked with civil society, with feminist organisations, private businesses... we have managed to curb the number of femicides in the province, and this is something that, as I keep repeating, I do not attribute only to the WARMI Pichincha Centres, not only to our actions but to putting these issues on the public agenda and in the public policy debate, bringing together more sectors and more voices. Despite the increase in femicides in Ecuador, we kept a downward trend: in 2020, we suffered 20 femicides; in 2021, 18; in 2022, 14. With this national upturn in 2023, given the expansion of the logic of organised crime, last year we lost 16 women; that is to say, we have managed to stabilise the statistics. These 16 deaths hurt us deeply. They are lives lost. They are stories of lives cut short. However, we know that we can obtain results through public policy and the right investment. We can make a difference in this seemingly losing battle.

Our task as subnational governments is to protect life and the most defenceless in our territories. We also constantly discuss this within the CGR framework and the Forum of World Regions, which I preside over, because there is no point in local governments that do not place life and care at the forefront, beyond any competence they may have under the autonomy and decentralisation models being discussed worldwide.