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University Students' Perceptions of Environmental Management and Citizen Participation in Public Policies in Mexico City

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Abstract: This research investigates university students' perceptions of environmental management and citizen participation in Mexico City, emphasising the interplay between these elements. By analysing students' views, the study offers insights into how informed citizens can influence environmental decision-making. The study employed semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data from university students. Inductive analysis and categorisation, along with word clouds, were used to process the information, enabling a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and identifying key themes. The research found that students possess knowledge about environmental management and citizen participation, but this knowledge is fragmented. Students noted that the current economic model limits the efficiency and development of environmental initiatives. They advocated for more integrated approaches that actively engage citizens in decision-making processes. Future research could incorporate quantitative metrics, such as surveys measuring student engagement and satisfaction with environmental initiatives. Tracking the number of student-led projects and their policy impacts could also provide valuable insights. Conclusion: The study highlights the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation of environmental management practices and citizen participation initiatives. By promoting citizen-centric approaches, meaningful environmental changes can be achieved, fostering a more engaged and informed citizenry in Mexico City. This is one of the first qualitative studies focusing on the intersection of environmental management and citizen participation among university students in Mexico City, contributing to the scarce literature on youth perspectives in urban sustainability governance.

Keywords: environmental agency, students, citizenship and environment, socio-environmental issues, political participation.

Introduction

Environmental management and citizen participation have become key elements in achieving sustainability. Contemporary societies have adopted positions aimed at minimising the environmental impact caused by human activity through political processes, public policies, and participatory strategies that harmonise citizen sentiment with the interests of the territory, the city, or the community (Zhang, 2019). Sometimes, this successfully intertwines people's needs with government agendas and the various policies that constitute the line of command in public policy within a neoliberal context. However, on other occasions, it encounters resistance from a social base that demands public policies with social and environmental justice, without disregarding intercultural considerations. Based on the above, according to Ugalde (2024), management processes at the public policy level are considered structural, an important element within environmental management, because they define the actions of the government and society.

This vision is opposed to the proposal by Zaharudin et al. (2023), but complements it by providing an innovative approach focused on building a theoretical framework that can be integrated with political participation. Therefore, the perception of a citizen base is fundamental to the critical conception and analysis of social sectors, according to Ai et al. (2021). In other words, as Allen (2023) proposes, citizen participation should substantially influence the construction of public policies in the field of environmental management. This is also evident in the research by Adanma and Ogunbiyi (2024), which suggests that environmental management is aligned with sustainability, a key factor in understanding the mechanisms of participation. Environmental management and citizen participation have become key contributions to achieving sustainability, suggesting that environmental management is aligned with sustainability, a factor in understanding participation mechanisms.

Research Problem

Examining this issue is relevant due to the urgency of addressing environmental challenges in Mexico City, including climate change and ecosystem loss, which have led to a water crisis (Alfie-Cohen & García-Becerra, 2022). This research analyses how young people perceive public policies and their perspective on environmental issues, offering new perspectives that contribute to dialogue for understanding environmental problems in Mexico City. This is an underdeveloped area of research in school contexts and youth participation.

Therefore, the phenomenon studied in this research revolves around university students' perceptions of public policy leaders, who criticise the complexity of environmental management and citizen participation to generate timely changes in the city, without politicised and divisive discourses. This topic is relevant because it contributes to debate, grounding, and reflection on the categories of citizen participation and management within the public policy cycle. This contributes to society and provides inductive evidence for addressing socio-environmental problems within the political system.

Research Focus

The focus of this research is centred on the analysis of students' perceptions of specific public policies in Mexico City, including the Government Program 2019-2024, the Strategic Plan CDMX 2030, and other programs related to mobility, human rights, urban development, and waste management. The analytical categories included Knowledge of Environmental Management in Public Policy among University Students, Student Narratives on Environmental Management in Public Policy, Environmental Management and its Nexus with Citizen Participation, and Limitations of Environmental Management in Public Policy. The approach was inductive, examining how these policies are perceived and understood by young people, revealing new perspectives on their relevance and alignment with community knowledge. This part provides a detailed explanation of how each policy is evaluated in terms of its environmental and social impact, providing an overall understanding of the research approach.

Research Aim and Research Questions

Regarding this research, we posed the following main question: Why is it important to analyse university students' perceptions of the approach to environmental management and citizen participation from the perspective of public policy leaders? What would be the theoretical contribution? This question is justified because students' perceptions represent a generation of new knowledge, empowered and active citizens, capable of exercising leadership and influencing environmental and participatory issues, potentially contributing to the development of innovative public policies. Furthermore, students' opinions are the raw material for understanding approaches to environmental management and citizen participation, a substantial contribution to a sustainable Mexico City. Thus, the research process aimed to analyse university students' perceptions of public policy leaders in order to theorise about the approach to environmental management and citizen participation.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation

This study focuses on collective action as a response, in which processes of citizen and collective participation establish power, configure it, and, as such, are configured at the social level (Melucci & Massolo, 1991). This is not unrelated to the social and environmental problems experienced in cities such as Mexico City. Power interactions regarding how public agenda-setting processes should be carried out open a door for analysis focused on collective action as a citizen response to build bridges and governance processes (Guzmán Fernández et al., 2020). Governance is examined from the perspective of citizen

participation in public policies and environmental management in the face of social and environmental problems arising from the growth and development of cities. This perspective focuses on how politically engaged actors work and how communities organise themselves about their territorial needs (Furlong & Vignoles, 2021).

Global context: Young people, emphasising marginalised and poor settings, rural areas, and local affinity groups, have enabled the creation of movements, organisations, and collective action for environmental justice. This vision is associated with the gaps that can be identified between university-educated youth and the economic development model (Cobo-Rendón et al., 2024). This perspective shapes and helps define how public policies generally adapt to a neoliberal model of resource extraction. Today, young people and students are once again on the front lines of resistance to defend ecosystems and resist biodiversity degradation and loss. This is fertile ground for theoretical research on how young people are redefining the ideas that govern the management of public problems: what we call public policy. From the perspective of power structures, it becomes feasible to identify solutions to the socio-environmental problems of societies, particularly those in developing countries (Malona et al., 2023). Young people are key stakeholders in defining public management strategies, as their knowledge influences the understanding of the environmental status of their communities. They are agents of change. University students who learn to resist and community youth who challenge environmental conditions are significant spaces for change and social mobilisation. Students' views and attitudes are fundamental in this context (Pokharel & Poudel, 2025).

Student perception

This research aimed to study the perceptions of university students, seeking to provide a position and approach that strengthens the theoretical framework of public policies. According to Legrand and Stone (2021), theory in the public policy arena has not been sufficiently developed. This research is theoretically based on the epistemological framework of political participation by Burns et al. (2009) and Pansera et al. (2023), which is alienated from collective and community action in the construction of public policies. This phenomenon is a consequence of the political system, the government, and corruption, which in turn distances and discourages citizens from participating in the creation and recognition of public policies that could contribute to environmental management and sustainability.

Relationship of the individual with public policies

This theory allows us to explore the factors that influence citizen perception and the development of local initiatives, promoting decision-making in the face of socio-environmental problems. Consequently, the theory of political participation lays the groundwork for the development of participatory mechanisms. It grants autonomy in institutional decision-making, focusing on community and citizen dimensions related to the environment and the human impacts caused by economic activity (Vasiliades et al., 2021; Baxter et al., 2023).

The political isolation of individuals and localities in policy matters constitutes a form of resistance to the dogmas established by the discourse of dominant institutions and policies over the past decades. This separation, according to Desheng et al. (2021) and Ai et al. (2021), has been evidenced by the lack of innovation in political praxis and the absence of guarantees to change social realities. This includes the current environmental crisis affecting the planet, a challenge that institutions have not effectively addressed.

According to Sollis et al. (2021), this has to do with the distancing between individualities and the sociopolitical dimension of societies, which must create participatory mechanisms for the formation of public policies that contribute to improving the quality of life. For Lee (2021), these societies have had to

adapt to environmental thinking in order to have a positive impact; he points out that this is driven by the environmental crisis derived from modernity and technology. However, the perspective on political participation has been overshadowed in the attempt to generate actions for environmental change.

Public policy and economic factors

This phenomenon is explained by the emergence of economic and political interests in the privatisation of natural resources and by discourses of progress and development, factors that drive political agendas. However, social actors and movements promote social convictions in favour of change and the goal of environmental conservation, creating a centre of gravity and resistance against the machinery of neoliberalism. They have ensured that policies are built organically, with citizens as the central axis of any social project.

Likewise, they have sought ways to mitigate socio-environmental problems. This reflection has allowed for the implementation of public policies that channel social discontent, diagnose citizen shortcomings, and expose the weaknesses of the state. This effort seeks to unite collective sentiments, the exercise of power, and public agendas, highlighting the need for political actions to improve environmental conditions (Dibattista, 2022).

Sustainability, environment and citizen participation

Based on the above, the development of policies serving people suggests a transformation of structures, emphatically addressing public environmental problems. This must be based on interculturality and the construction of avenues for dialogue aimed at sustainability (Bergthaller, 2020). This sustainability has changed, evolving from a theoretical and almost utopian concept to developing practical applications. However, it has not completely broken the status quo regarding human behaviour and society's relationship with the environment. From Galán Castro's perspective (2021), this suggests that the condition of the individual and the need for governments to protect the environment represent a form of biopolitics that emerges as an applicable idea within government strategies to promote sustainable states, with policies that contribute to a better quality of life.

Thus, the interrelationship between public policies, sustainability, and environmental management, as operational mechanisms that support citizen participation, gives rise to processes for addressing socio-environmental problems (Rojas-Casarrubias et al., 2023). This vision integrates collective and citizen perspectives, uniting political action and forms of governance through power and institutions, which have consequences for individuals and collectives, as well as for territorial and urban dynamics (Melgar et al., 2023).

Some research has explored university students' perspectives on environmental issues, participation, and integration into public policy. These studies revealed key findings. First, students displayed a critical awareness of political and environmental issues. This indicated a possible trend toward greater environmental sensitivity (Menardo et al., 2024). Second, the stances adopted by young people through university student movements suggest novel public policies aimed at changing the production and economic model (Guo et al., 2024). Third, economic development is perceived as contradictory to young people's environmental interests, raising questions about the future sustainability of natural resources (Mohammadi et al., 2023).

Materials and Methods

The study was qualitative, analysing the various perceptions of university students regarding public policies, seeking relationships between patterns and meanings.

Case Study

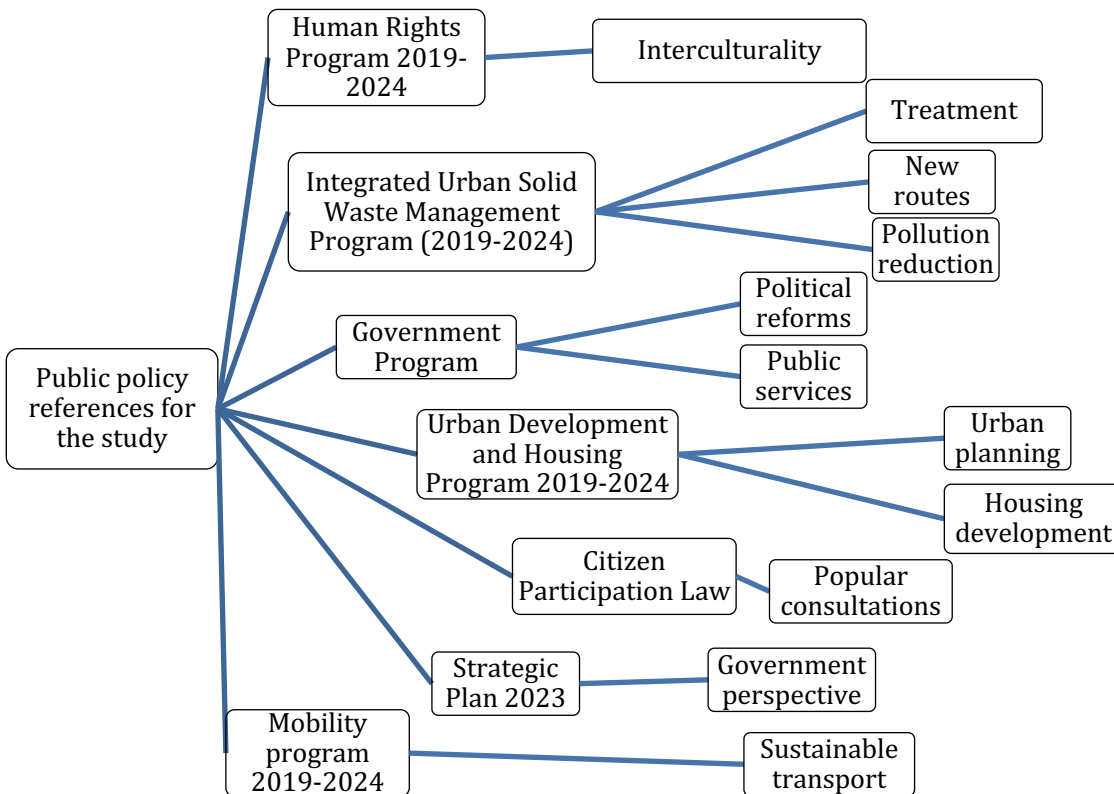
Eighteen students from the Universidad Rosario Castellanos were interviewed, reflecting on referents in public policies. This is due to the importance of recognising, understanding, and complexifying the political, public, and democratic processes taking place in Mexico City (CDMX). The complexity increases when considering that young university students reflect on political action through strategic frameworks and the exercise of power. The students' perceptions provided a critical view based on their knowledge of public policies and the concept of sustainability, not just as a theoretical approach, but as a way to integrate politics with global agendas promoting environmental sustainability.

Public Policy Referents

As shown in Figure 1, eight public policy referents were selected according to the Mexico City Evaluation (Ai et al., 2021), which demonstrated significant progress. These referents achieved a consistent level of application in sustainability, according to the Mexico City Evaluation (2022). They have impacted societies, communities, and the environment in CDMX, promoting citizen participation and new forms of community environmental management as a foundation for the construction of public policies. The public policy referents provided a complex view of how environmental management and community participation are handled. They have been a strategic driver in the discourse of the "Fourth Transformation" (T4), integrating citizen participation mechanisms and government agendas as a guiding axis.

Figure 1

Public policy references within the development of research.



Source: Prepared by the authors. This image shows how public policy leaders and their key aspects were included in the research.

Sampling, validation, and plausibility of information

The sampling was intentional, as the topic was tailored to the students of the mentioned master's programs. The validation of the information was achieved through data saturation, i.e., when redundancy was detected in the information collected from the participants. This ensured the reliability of the information, as the response pattern was similar, and even common criteria were identified among the participants. This type of sampling is justified, according to the study Campbell et al. (2020), because it seeks detailed information regarding the phenomenon under investigation; furthermore, the heterogeneous cases included allowed for an increased variation in the knowledge and perception of the student group.

Population

The population consisted of students aged 18 to 50, belonging to the master's programs in Climate Change and Food Security (Table 1). These programs were selected for convenience, given that the public policy topics in question are part of the study object and curriculum of the master's programs. This allowed for a profound reflection on the knowledge and perceptions of the participants.

Table 1

Sociodemographic aspects

Gender	Male: 50 %
	Female: 50 %
Ages	18-25: 6 %
	26-33: 36 %
	24-41: 17 %
	42-49: 33 %
	50-57: 6 %
	58 onwards: 0 %
Academic programs	Master's Degree in Climate Change: 50 %
	Master's Degree in Food Sovereignty and Security: 50 %

Source: prepared by the authors using data obtained from the interview using Microsoft Forms.

Interviews

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted through the Microsoft Forms platform, facilitating quick capture of responses. Five trigger questions about public policy referents were included. The interviews were carried out over a week at the Universidad Rosario Castellanos, with support from the coordinators of the master's programs in Climate Change, Food Security, and Public and Intercultural Policies. Five guiding research questions were formulated and subsequently validated by a panel of experts, comprising three academics in the fields of social sciences and public policy. This validation process, employing the statistical test Sánchez Sánchez (2021), yielded a content analysis reliability coefficient of 0.89.

Information analysis

An inductive category analysis was performed, without starting from a specific theoretical referent. The categorical induction involved an exploration using word clouds; four criteria guided the selection of word cloud analysis for this study. First, frequency—referring to the recurrence of words within the

transcribed interviews. Second, word presence—examining the relevance of specific terms to the research object. Third, grouping—whereby visual analysis identified the co-occurrence of the most frequent terms, allowing for the observation of converging concepts. These criteria collectively established the word cloud as a key analytical tool. Four criteria were used to detect the intensity of participants' responses. Based on this, we constructed analysis categories, where each question was transformed into a category to examine the study object:

- a. Knowledge of environmental management in public policies among university students.
- b. Students' narratives about environmental management in public policies.
- c. Critiques of environmental management.
- d. Relationship between environmental management and citizen participation.
- e. Limitations of environmental management in public policies.

This categorical analysis allowed for a deep theoretical approach to the perception and conception of environmental management and citizen participation.

Results

The results examine students' perceptions of public policy benchmarks: Government Program, Mexico City Government Program 2019-2024, CDMX Strategic Plan 2030, Comprehensive Mobility Program 2019-2024, Mexico City Human Rights Program 2019-2024, Urban Development and Housing Program 2019-2024, Comprehensive Solid Waste Management Program 2019-2024, and the Citizen Participation Law.

Knowledge of Environmental Management in Public Policies Among University Students

Students' perceptions of public policies related to environmental issues and citizen participation became a fundamental aspect in evaluating government strategies in response to perceived problems, such as environmental impact (Figure 2) and understanding these opinions allowed for theorising about the political leeway of local governments, as well as the perception and representativeness of public management in Mexico City through its policy mechanisms.

Based on the participants' knowledge of the public policy benchmarks examined, they reflected a considerable level of criticism regarding environmental management. This is close; public policies have an effective level of dissemination, including environmental management. This achievement is attributed to several factors: the actions implemented in Mexico City in recent years have been largely guided by the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, the continuity of the "Fourth Transformation" political model, which generated and governed a vision linking economic and environmental aspects, proposed a strategy that could contribute to sustainability. This strategy links these initiatives with government approaches and public agendas.

The importance of environmental management in public policy was highlighted among the young participants when an open-ended question addressed their opinions on public policy benchmarks in environmental management. Their responses focused on the protection of ecosystem services, adaptation to climate change, and the well-being of Mexico City residents and their quality of life.

Figure 2

Environmental management knowledge



Source: prepared by the authors using data obtained from the interview using <https://www.wordclouds.com/>

Participant number 14 explained the importance of environmental management in public policy:

"Environmental management is fundamental to the well-being of society, the environment, and even the planet as a whole, as it addresses a series of key objectives. Firstly, it is crucial for the conservation of natural resources. Through proper management, resources such as water, soil, and biodiversity can be preserved for future generations. However, public policies must address this conservation more specifically and at all levels of government.

The protection of human health also largely depends on environmental care, as adequate environmental management reduces the risk of pollution-related diseases and improves people's quality of life. In this regard, water is a vital resource that must be protected with special attention. Furthermore, environmental management plays a crucial role in mitigating climate change. It helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to their impacts, although some policies are not aligned with this mission. Various institutions still allow the use of agrochemicals that should be more regulated.

The preservation of biodiversity is another important pillar, as it contributes to maintaining the balance of ecosystems and protects the variety of species. Despite existing regulations, such as those established by SEMARNAT, it would be advisable to rethink these norms to ensure more effective protection. Moreover, environmental management seeks to reduce waste generation and pollution, protecting the environment more broadly. This includes the need to improve strategies for reducing excessive plastic use, an aspect that should be a priority in public policies."

From another perspective, participants identified common ground in public policies; in some cases, they did not perceive their operational and executive orders. In other words, there is a lack of understanding about the operationalisation of public policies, particularly in the area of environmental management, where implementation mechanisms depend largely on citizen and local participation. This perspective, in participants' perceptions, revealed significant questions about the scope of environmental management, as there is no clear conceptualisation of this subject and the instruments of public policy.

The results suggest that state modernisation has been driven by industrialisation processes, through development policies that favour the city's economic system. In this research, participants' initial view reflected that the political system and the functioning of public administration respond to a global agenda framed within a neoliberal system. However, these results demonstrate that environmental and social problems cannot always be resolved exclusively through public policies, as these tend to reduce the influence of external factors that affect institutional performance. This line of thinking, based on the results, broadens the scope and obstacles to public policies in Mexico City, raising crucial questions: Does the use of natural resources truly benefit the common good? Or are public policies and the economic system weakening institutions to the detriment of the common good?

environmental guarantees to the business sector to reduce negative impacts on the economy, which adds complexity to the dynamics of environmental management in the city.

These findings revealed important implications; they clarified the possibility of spaces for convergence, as participants explained that the General Law on Citizen Participation, the Government Agenda, and laws in general should allow for a democratic and critical exercise of the application of laws and public policies and the right to the environment. This perception is not far removed from environmental management framed within the 4Ts; rather, it seeks to redefine the space and foster community democratic exercise of environmental governance. However, management remains rooted in an extractive and capitalist model.

Critiques of Environmental Management

Young people expressed criticism about the disconnect between the economic development model and the environmental impacts generated by industries. For them, government environmental management became a key element in understanding how they perceive the Mexico City government's strategies as insufficient in terms of environmental regulation enforcement. This includes issues such as air pollution, water scarcity, and land-use changes for urban development. However, they recognise that some actions have been implemented to address certain responsibilities, particularly regarding environmental commitments in solid waste management policies, the urban mobility program, and the city's environmental agenda (Figure 4).

The main criticisms focused on the fact that, despite the outgoing government's efforts to manage spaces and control urbanisation processes, public policies failed to address changes in land use or curb atmospheric emissions from a vehicle fleet dependent on hydrocarbons, much less those of companies. Now, water management has fallen far behind in terms of operational effectiveness and commitment to citizens. The findings showed the level of complexity of socio-environmental problems, which is not limited to practical issues or even human behaviour; it extends to issues of power and political factors that promote decision-making regarding socio-environmental problems through government strategies and/or policies that supposedly favour the environmental dimension. This view is compounded by participants' perception of the limited capacity to execute public policies, due to a lack of funding, which is crucial for achieving control, regulation, and implementation of strategic political guidelines.

Participant 15 explained it as follows:

“In the environmental management of Mexico City, several aspects can be observed that limit its effectiveness. Firstly, environmental norms and regulations are often insufficient or difficult to apply, as the lack of resources and trained personnel for supervision significantly restricts their scope. Similarly, sustainable urban development plans, although they exist, are often unrealistic and frequently do not progress beyond the design phase, as the lack of follow-up and evaluation hinders their effective implementation.

Conservation and ecological restoration programs face a similar situation: despite their existence, they often lack the necessary participation of local communities, diminishing their impact. On the other hand, citizen participation initiatives tend to be superficial, giving the impression that citizens are consulted without being truly heard, which limits their influence on decisions.

Regarding environmental impact assessments, they are sometimes treated as a mere formality without considering the community's recommendations, which can generate mistrust in the process. Climate change policies also have limitations, as they are often reactive rather than proactive, focusing on mitigating effects rather than preventing their causes, which affects their long-term effectiveness. Moreover, sustainable mobility strategies are frequently incomplete and do not adequately integrate public transportation, thereby perpetuating congestion and pollution problems”.

Participants discussed a crucial funding issue that, along with implementation challenges, affects comprehensive solid waste management programs, the urban development plan, and the mobility program. Furthermore, it was observed that local and community work operates as an independent governance element, to some extent mitigating socio-environmental problems that the institutional apparatus fails to address effectively.

Figure 4

Cloud over criticism of environmental management



Source: prepared by the authors using data obtained from the interview using <https://wordart.com/dashboard>

Environmental management and its nexus with civic engagement

The structure of environmental management, according to the participants' view, is intrinsically linked to community action (Figure 5). Contemporary community dynamics have fostered what is known as "collective action," based on the generation of decentralised actions tailored to the specific opportunities of each individual in their local contexts. From this perspective, community action represents a distinctive and multifaceted approach to integrating solutions that, to date, have eluded both institutional frameworks and spheres of political influence.

Figure 5

Cloud of the relationship between environmental management and citizen participation



Source: prepared by the authors using data obtained from the interview using <https://wordart.com/dashboard>

The participants affirmed that, in Mexico City, citizen participation is the driving force behind local actions to mitigate environmental impacts. Without this factor, public policies would be mere good intentions. Therefore, in the arguments presented, the participants speak of affirming collective rights to an environment where sustainability is guaranteed. However, the framework for these rights must be built collectively, not institutionally.

The above demonstrates a separation from political praxis: environmental management, viewed from a local perspective, acquires the power to resist traditional politics. Unlike strategies and programs designed in offices, these present a vision that does not represent public practice from a local perspective; rather, they limit themselves to supporting economic and political interests that often politicise and influence institutional decisions.

Participant 15 demonstrated the following:

"Environmental management and citizen participation in Mexico City are closely linked to public policy frameworks, as they allow the community to influence decisions that affect their environment directly. Environmental regulations, development plans, conservation programs, and environmental impact assessments require the active collaboration of citizens to ensure that their needs and concerns are considered in the formulation and implementation of these policies. This interaction not only strengthens the effectiveness of public policies but also fosters a shared sense of responsibility, promoting more sustainable and equitable urban development for all."

Participant 5:

"Management has an impact on citizens. This evaluation is linked to the development of sustainability. People are the ones who make it possible, not the government. The government directs, promotes, and manages, but it is the citizens who implement it."

Based on the above information, participants indirectly questioned how political participation regarding natural resources is important. This questioning relates to the actions that people, at the local level, develop in a self-managed manner to seek solutions to problems of collective interest. Furthermore, these results show that participants' perceptions of public policies are limited in their approach, as they do not propose mechanisms to integrate the city with environmental management.

From the perspective of Participant 7, "in an ideal world," there would be a close relationship between environmental management and community participation, grouped into public policy mechanisms, while Participant 8 added that "citizen participation is restrictive and non-binding; environmental justice should be proposed." This suggests that the public policies analysed present a practical and operational gap that responds more to the political and economic interests of Mexico City. According to Participant 10, "we are facing a purely symbolic relationship," where civic and community sentiment is displaced by partisan rhetoric and political ideals, without achieving a real connection with the needs of the community.

"Environmental management cannot exist without society-government coercion. The environmental dimension surrounds everyone in a symbiotic relationship. Therefore, environmental management without considering citizens would be meaningless and would merely remain an empty phrase."

The participants suggest that, based on their knowledge, the legitimacy of public policies is directly related to the empirical issues of society. In this sense, legitimacy becomes a *sine qua non* of the current political system. This perspective seems reflected in the opinions of the participants, who advocate for an ideal public policy that, however, lacks effective community action. This deficit in community participation could lead to the delegitimisation of the conception of public policy sought to be implemented in Mexico City to address socio-environmental problems.

From the participants' perspective, public policies must offer guarantees for fundamental rights, which implies that the political and institutional system must be strengthened to address the problems facing society. In this context, citizen and community participation emerges as an empowerment mechanism that seeks to break with the status quo in the construction of public policies, thus guaranteeing environmental conservation in Mexico City. A need has emerged for the "right to transparency," a concept that underscores the importance of clarity and openness in policymaking, ensuring that community voices are heard and taken into account.

Limitations of Environmental Management in Public Policies

Among the limitations identified by participants, it is suggested that citizen participation and environmental management have been insufficient to meet the needs of the city and its population (Figure 6). This is due to the loss of the natural environment, the disconnection of individuals from their surroundings, and the lack of community ownership of natural resources. This conception highlights complex elements, such as how environmental management has been developed through public policies and the limited scope of these policies to promote an individual and collective relationship with the environment.

Another limitation of public policy is that it fails to address the growing demand for basic services for the population. These policies, in this sense, are insufficient in both environmental management mechanisms and citizen participation, as they should also emphasise urban production models that both affect and harm the environment. Participant 2 stated this:

"The motivation to participate is affected, as the dynamics of the city require a large amount of time to meet immediate needs, relegating attention to the environment to a future that never arrives. In many cases, individuals do not feel a close connection or affinity with the natural environment. To be more precise, I believe the limitations identified are: the lack of identity with the environment, the limited time that can be dedicated to its care, and the negative impact of production geared toward meeting higher levels of consumption."

On the other hand, a limitation derived from the exercise of power is observed. Government strategies have relied on environmental management mechanisms and citizen participation to attempt to reduce socio-environmental problems through public policies. However, this has generated polarisation among citizens and increased inequality, as power is concentrated in certain areas, where socio-environmental problems are addressed more effectively. In contrast, other areas of Mexico City remain neglected. This constitutes a socio-environmental inequality, where some sectors of the population enjoy effective solutions for a healthy environment and good living, while others are excluded from such benefits. This was pointed out by Participant 10.

"The limitations are enormous since power and decision-making are vested in only a few. We are sold the so-called "citizen participation," but we live in a political system of oligarchs. Added to this is the polarisation of social classes, which leads to the exclusion of many sectors of society."

exploitation and use of natural resources; something that also seems to be evident in the research of Helleve et al. (2023) and Kamada (2024), who mention in their arguments the limitations of environmental management from an operational and knowledge perspective, and how its concept has implications for citizens. Other studies, such as De St Croix et al. (2020), argue that environmental management is the result of an economic model, from Peterson and the knowledge of people, especially young people, knowing that they must develop environmental management strategies only favors greater consumption of natural resources that allows validating the role of companies and policies that reflect the sustainability of environmental management.

Other aspects are worth highlighting, such as the limitations of environmental management in public policies. The concept of environmental management in Mexico City, from a public policy perspective, is not adequately addressed. For Chatziioannou et al. (2020), although environmental management mechanisms are written and established—that is, the strategies through which they operate—there is no guarantee of more effective environmental management, that is, of more operational processes by the community and citizens of Mexico City. However, other studies report that current policies have transformed environmental management into a cross-cutting concept for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusions

It was concluded that the research achieved its objective of analysing university students' perceptions of public policies. However, it is necessary to debate the evaluation of these policies as an obstacle to development mechanisms and institutional management in environmental matters and citizen participation, as well as to understand their role in environmental improvement processes in Mexico City. We contribute to the debate and reflection on how participants experience and perceive public policies developed for social transformation, quality of life, and the environment. These are factors that must be examined from an epistemological perspective regarding the actions and purposes of public policies.

This knowledge among young people about environmental management within the framework of public policies was crucial in demonstrating that these policies also contain mechanisms of politicisation. It is also evident that young people view public policies as concessions within governmental and institutional action that generate agendas and commitments under certain negotiations and concessions generated for the public interest.

The stories told by the participants showed us that public policies coexist between a type of economic policy and a type of policy supported by an argument from the Fourth Transformation (4T). While it has played a role in reducing socio-environmental problems in Mexico City, it still has a significant gap in terms of grassroots responses and collectivised welfare policies. Participants expressed that this type of public policy has not changed the status quo, affecting the environmental problems facing Mexico City, but achieving sustainability is an almost unattainable ambition. Likewise, participants expressed harsh criticism of their understanding of environmental management, which they view more as a discourse or a symbolic mechanism than as something measurable in the construction of social and environmental improvements and in the indicators analysed. They emphasised that the link between environmental management and the approach to citizen participation is marked by the collective, hegemonic, and power-driven interests that have overturned local management. They distanced it from collective interests, which must be genuine, equitable, and pro-environmental. This is especially important for curbing certain development mechanisms that jeopardise environmental sustainability and citizen participation itself.

Research limitations

Participants identified limitations in the relationship between environmental management and public policy. It is recognised that the same efforts made in the relationship between environmental

management and public policy remain insufficient for other protected areas and for strengthening environmental groups, which could provide a framework for new ways of understanding the development of Mexico City. The limitations, in the participants' view, are so evident that they acknowledge that spaces for citizen participation are an insufficient mechanism, despite the progress Mexico City has made in consolidating its position to advance the mitigation of environmental impacts and address urban well-being issues.

The scientific novelty presented by the research is explained through three fundamental aspects: a) Operational Limitations: Students identify public policy referents, although they do not identify an operational plan that allows them to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies proposed by the establishment and the mechanisms of power. b) Comprehensive Need for Communities: Participants identify the need to continually examine structural problems from a community, organisational, and social justice perspective. They constantly emphasise this limitation. c) Critique of the Political Model: From the participants' perspective, they will critique how the "fourth transformation" (4T) is a continuation of the political model that still defines and constitutes the core of public policies and the governmental agenda in Mexico City. Although this model is not widely disseminated, it is explained through how the government operates in favour of policies based on partisan and institutional compromises, which is contrary to the social reality experienced by the participating students.

Suggestions for Future Research

This research leads to the development of a series of quantitative studies to study young people's perceptions of satisfaction and the importance of the public policies analysed among the population. We also suggest beginning research on the use and appropriation of public policies applied to the environment, such as waste collection and treatment, human rights, citizen participation, and mobility in Mexico City, with neighbourhood and local perspectives. At the same time, we propose beginning studies on the impact of public policies on the young population, given that the results obtained indicate that young people view current public policies as a shift from a simple framework of suspicion of the neoliberal model, which is solely concerned with the differences between the economy and the market. This analysis must be validated through further interdisciplinary research.

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Conflict of Interest

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