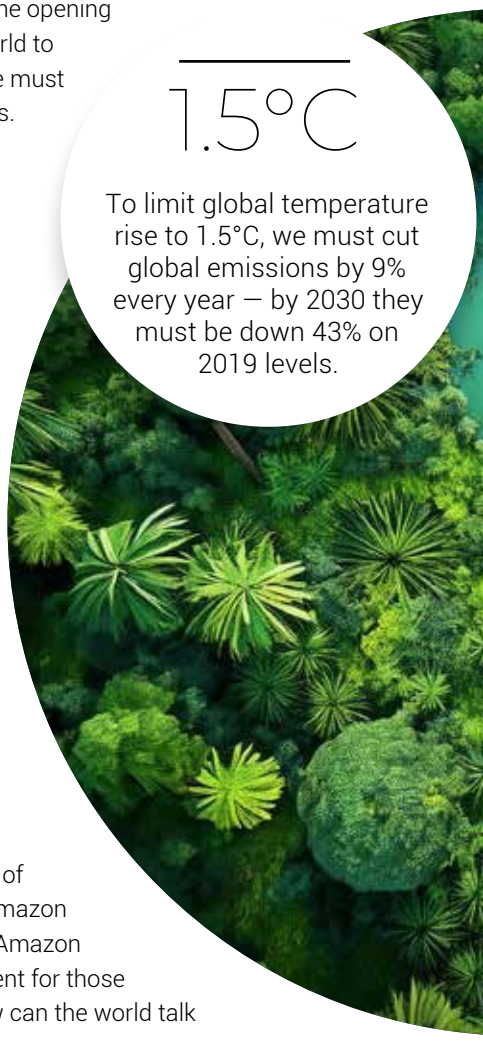
by Viviane Barreto & Juan Pablo Soto Zuluaga

Why a Network of Business Schools for a Sustainable Amazon?

The latest versions of the World Economic Forum Report have identified climate change as one of the five most significant risks to the global economy. In the 2024 edition of this report, climate is ranked as the number one risk. According to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, this issue is one of the top three concerns for the 32,000 respondents across 28 analysed countries. However, United Nations estimates point to a scenario of a 2.8°C increase in temperature compared to the 19th century (pre-industrial levels, from when pollutant emissions began to significantly affect the global climate), well above the 1.5°C target considered a safe limit for the average global temperature increase set for the end of the century. During the opening speech of COP 29, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres urged the world to focus on emergency emissions reductions. To limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C, we must cut global emissions by 9% every year — by 2030 they must be down 43% on 2019 levels. Unfortunately, at the present moment they are still increasing. The clock is ticking.



Climate change and the destruction of nature are considered urgent, but often distinct, environmental crises. However, they are intrinsically linked. Deforestation amplifies climate change effects. By sequestering and storing carbon, nature mitigates climate change, for free. The Amazon's sheer volume of trees makes it one of the world's largest carbon sinks. For example, the carbon equivalent of a decade's worth of human emissions is held within the Amazon rainforest, however the world has witnessed high deforestation levels over the years. Not only does this reduce the Amazon's ability to sequester carbon emissions, but it also alters rainfall patterns, habitats and biodiversity, making the rainforest less resilient to wildfires and other climate-induced changes. We often read recommendations that connections between climate change and nature (and the value to business and society of everything nature provides - clean water, pure air, food, fibres, pollination, healthy living environments, and natural defenses against floods, wildfires, and droughts) should be recognised by companies, investors, and policymakers. Yet, we miss the representation of the Amazonian region in these discussions and debates.

As taught in business schools, the method of analysis and problem-solving involves identifying and analysing the phenomenon, and its causes, and finally proposing an action plan. It is common to hear suggestions for actions for the conservation of the Amazon without the authors understanding the problem and its causes. This is a trap that must be avoided if we genuinely seek to contribute to the sustainable development of the Amazon region. How can we take action without a real understanding of what the Amazon is? When we talk about the Amazon, which Amazon are we referring to? What does the Amazon represent for each of the countries in which it's located? What does the Amazon represent for those from the Amazon region? There is a significant lack of knowledge about the region. How can the world talk about the future of the Amazon without including the Amazonian people?

When discussing the Amazon, the first image that usually comes to mind is that of a giant collective of trees. The Amazon is considered the largest tropical rainforest in the world and spans the Amazon river basin, covering nearly seven million square kilometers, or about the area of Australia, across eight countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Venezuela, and Suriname, as well as the territory of French Guiana. If the Amazon were a country, it would be the 7th largest in the world. The Amazon is home to an enormous number of plants and animals, many of which have yet to be studied by scientists. The wildlife of the Amazon shares space with about 30 million people. This population includes over 220 indigenous groups in the Brazilian Amazon alone, as well as traditional communities that depend on natural resources for their livelihoods. Many local populations continue to live in poverty. The Amazon River is the lifeblood of the Amazon region. It is the second longest river in the world, stretching over 6,400 km. The Amazon is an extremely complex and dynamic environment.

Preserving the Amazon is a topic that garners agreement. However, we need to advance the discussion, such as how to promote social, environmental, and economic prosperity. What are the practical steps we can take to advocate both conservation and prosperity in the Amazon region? Business schools teach that development is connected to business. The guardians of the forest need sources of income. If someone is going to stop them cutting down trees, to preserve the natural resources that were previously their source of income, what will their new source of income be, for example? If we seek a more sustainable use of land, what will the models of productive arrangements be? If we want to foster tourism or increase the production and marketing of typical regional products, we need infrastructure and ways to transport production to the major centres where the product's value will be captured. From a distance, the Amazonian issue is principally perceived as environmental; however, those who are within or near it see the issue as social and economic, with the environmental aspect as a backdrop.

In this context, Fundação Dom Cabral and Universidad de los Andes led the creation of the Business Schools for a Sustainable Amazon Network with the dream of being a 'voice of the Amazon' in global discussions on sustainable development. The first contribution of the Network will be to provide a better understanding of what the Amazon represents in terms of challenges and opportunities for each of the countries covered by the forest. Next, the Network aims to focus on how businesses can contribute to sustainable regional development, considering the specificities of each country, as well as opportunities for benchmarking and joint actions among organisations in the region.

The Business Schools for a Sustainable Amazon Network aims to create, offer, and disseminate educational solutions linked to business models for the sustainable development of the region, tailored to the peculiarities and specific needs of the area, through a shared environment and the mobilisation of faculty and professionals for the generation

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and dissemination of relevant applied knowledge. The Network seeks to contribute to the integral development and strengthening of sustainable production chains in the Amazon region and to reduce social inequalities by linking key companies and organisations to generate business opportunities for all. The goal is for business schools to act as facilitators of change, promoting an environment in which businesses respect and coexist with nature. The network aims to unite the efforts that business schools are advancing in research, education and entrepreneurship, inviting the business world and the global community to envision the future we want to build in the Amazon region.

The Network will have at least one business school representative from each of the countries covered by the Amazon rainforest. Currently, it includes Fundação Dom Cabral in Brazil, Universidad de Los Andes in Colombia, ESAN in Peru, IESA in Venezuela, and Universidad San Francisco de Quito (USFQ) in Ecuador. The launch took place during the 16th COP of Biodiversity in Cali, Colombia in October, in a panel that emphasised that the Business Schools for Sustainable Amazon Network, since its inception, proposes a paradigm shift where businesses can thrive without sacrificing environmental wealth. By promoting sustainable businesses, this network of educational institutions commits to being a reference point in creating a future where the Amazon can continue to provide ecosystem services while allowing for economic growth that respects its inhabitants and biodiversity. The network adopts an international perspective while respecting local realities, integrating international insights with a cross-sectional view of the economy and society, honouring the unique characteristics of each country and the local knowledge accumulated by each school in the Network.

In 2025, Brazil will host COP 30 in Belém, in the Amazon. As part of the discussions on climate and sustainable development in the Amazon, the Network will hold its first seminar, in Brazil, to discuss and present research, case studies, and best practices for sustainable and inclusive development in the Amazon region, bringing together the perspectives and experiences of each of the nine member countries. This is a significant step towards fostering collaboration and sharing knowledge across borders to ensure the sustainable future of the Amazon.

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