



Anáhuac
México

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE ON THE GROUND

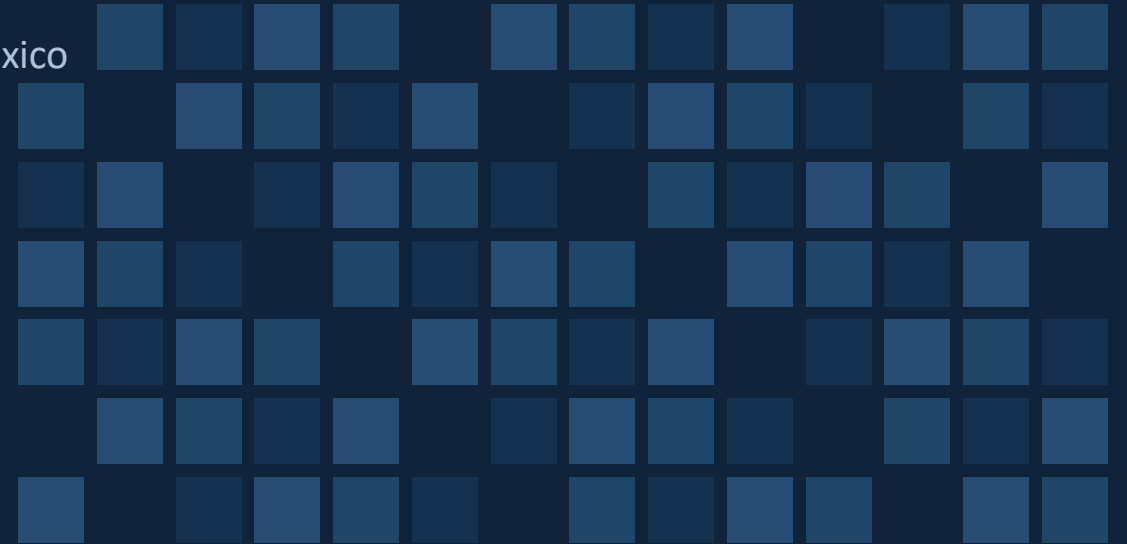
Governing Mexico's Cities

Multilevel and Metropolitan Governance in a Federal System

The challenge of implementing global governance mechanisms from the municipio to the metropolis

Comparative Public Policy | Local & Metropolitan Government in Mexico

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Six Questions, One System

From constitutional design to the daily reality of running a metropolitan area



01

The Three-Tier Structure

Federal, state and municipal government — and the free municipio at its base



02

Cities & Municipios

Why a city and a municipio are not the same thing in Mexico



03

Regional Inefficiencies

Fragmentation, short terms, and fiscal dependency



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Sprawl & Planning

How development outruns planning and maintenance



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Metropolitan Areas

Definitions, growth, governance bodies, and Mexico City's structure



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Services & Synthesis

Who provides what — and what it means for global governance

Global Agendas Are Delivered Locally

The Sustainable Development Goals, the New Urban Agenda and climate commitments are negotiated globally — but water, transit, housing and policing are delivered by municipios and, when it works, by metropolitan coordination.

Mexico is a useful test case: a federal republic where about two-thirds of the population already lives in 92 officially recognized metropolitan areas, yet the Constitution has no chapter on metropolitan government. The gap between where global commitments are made and where they must be implemented runs straight through Mexico's local government system.

Global frameworks

SDGs · New Urban Agenda · Paris Agreement

Federal government

National strategy & sectoral law

32 states

Territorial & fiscal rules

2,478 municipios / alcaldías

Where services are actually delivered

Three Tiers, No Layer In Between



Federal Government

1 republic

President, bicameral Congress and federal judiciary. Sets national law and sectoral policy — water, environment, housing finance, education funding formulas.



32 State Governments

32 entidades federativas

Elected governor (6-year term) plus a state congress and judiciary. Approves municipal budgets and debt; legislates urban-development and metropolitan-coordination frameworks.



Municipios & Alcaldías

2,478 units

The constitutionally “free municipio” since 1917. An elected Ayuntamiento delivers most everyday public services — the tier closest to citizens.



Article 115

“The competence this Constitution grants to municipal government shall be exercised exclusively by the Ayuntamiento, and there shall be no intermediate authority between it and the state government.”

This single clause protects municipal autonomy from state interference — but it is also why building a formal metropolitan government, a true fourth tier, has proven constitutionally awkward.

Inside the Ayuntamiento

Mexico's basic unit of local government is the municipio libre (“free municipality”) — autonomous since the 1917 Constitution abolished the colonial-era jefatura política that once sat between towns and the state.

- 

Presidente Municipal

Directly elected executive head of the municipio; chairs the Ayuntamiento and runs day-to-day administration.
- 

Síndico(s)

Oversees the municipal treasury and represents the municipio in legal matters; watchdog role within the council.
- 

Regidores

Council members elected with a proportional-representation component; approve regulations, plans and the budget.
- 

Three-year term

The length of one mandate. How many times in a row someone can hold it has changed three times since 1933 — see below.

A rule that has changed three times since 1933		
1933 – 2014	2014 – 2030 (transition)	From the 2030 elections
No consecutive reelection for any Ayuntamiento post.	One extra consecutive term allowed — up to 6 years total.	A 2025 reform reinstates the ban on consecutive reelection.



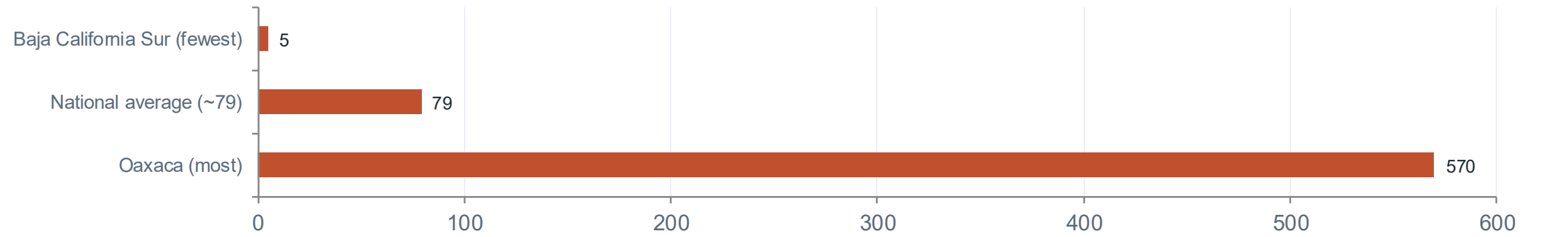
Fiscal reality

Municipios collect the predial (property tax) and service fees, but on average about 71% of municipal revenue still comes from federal and state transfers — and the state legislature, not the Ayuntamiento alone, approves the budget and any debt.

One Framework, Wildly Different Realities



The same constitutional rules — Article 115's list of services, a three-year non-consecutive term, the same budget-approval process — apply equally to a five-municipio state and to a municipio of more than a million people. Administrative capacity does not scale with population.



A City Is Not the Same as a Municipio

Mexican administrative geography separates the legal-political unit from the populated place — a distinction that shapes how every city is actually governed.



Municipio

The legal-administrative and political unit. It can contain one or many populated places (localidades) — cities, towns and villages.



Localidad / Ciudad

A populated place, classified by INEGI by size and function. A “city” is simply a locality that crosses a population threshold.



Cabecera municipal

The locality chosen as the seat of municipal government. Outlying localities elect their own auxiliary councils (juntas auxiliares).



The exception: Mexico City's 16 alcaldías

Mexico City has no municipios. Its 16 boroughs — alcaldías, formerly delegaciones — are “territorial demarcations” (demarcaciones territoriales) with elected mayors and councils that function much like municipios for everyday services, and are typically counted alongside the country's 2,462 municipios to reach the national total of 2,478 units. Legally, though, they remain part of a single capital-city government rather than fully autonomous municipios.

Five Sources of Regional Inefficiency



No intermediate tier

Article 115 bars any authority between a municipio and its state. Coordinating a metropolitan area means relying on voluntary agreements among dozens of separate governments.



Short, discontinuous terms

Three-year, historically non-consecutive terms reset technical teams and priorities just as long-horizon metropolitan projects start to mature.



Fiscal dependency

With roughly 71% of municipal income coming from federal and state transfers, most municipios have little room to invest independently in regional infrastructure.



Political fragmentation

A single metro area can span dozens of municipios, several parties, and more than one state — the Valle de México crosses Mexico City, the State of Mexico and Hidalgo.



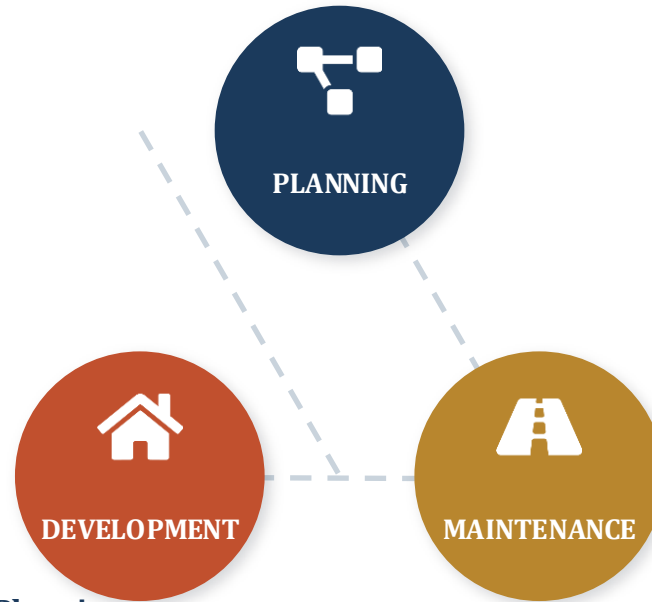
One-size-fits-all rules

The same Article 115 framework, written for a generic “free municipio,” governs a town of 5,000 and a municipio of more than a million with little differentiation in capacity.

QUESTION 4 — A DISCONNECTED TRIANGLE

Planning, Development & Maintenance Pull Apart

In principle, planning should guide development, and development should be matched by the capacity to maintain it. In practice, Mexican cities have grown along a different, looser logic.



Development

Private developers & federal housing finance (INFONAVIT) drive where homes get built.

Planning

Municipal & metropolitan urban-development plans, often left behind.

Maintenance

Stretched municipal budgets struggle to keep sprawling new areas serviced.

The gap: between 1980 and 2017, Mexico's urban built-up area grew at about 5.4% a year — more than twice the 2.4% growth rate of the urban population itself, consistently outpacing both planning capacity and maintenance budgets.

How Mexican Cities Sprawled

272 → 100

inhabitants per hectare, 1980–2017

against an optimal density of roughly 150 inhab/ha — a sustained, decades-long fall in how compactly Mexican cities are built.

Low-density peripheries disconnect housing from jobs and services, raise the cost of every network — water, power, transit — and concentrate disadvantage at the urban edge.



Federal housing finance led the way

From the early 2000s, INFONAVIT — the federal workers' housing fund — financed millions of low-cost, single-family homes, prioritizing cheap peripheral land over location, transit access or local plans.



Sharpening segregation

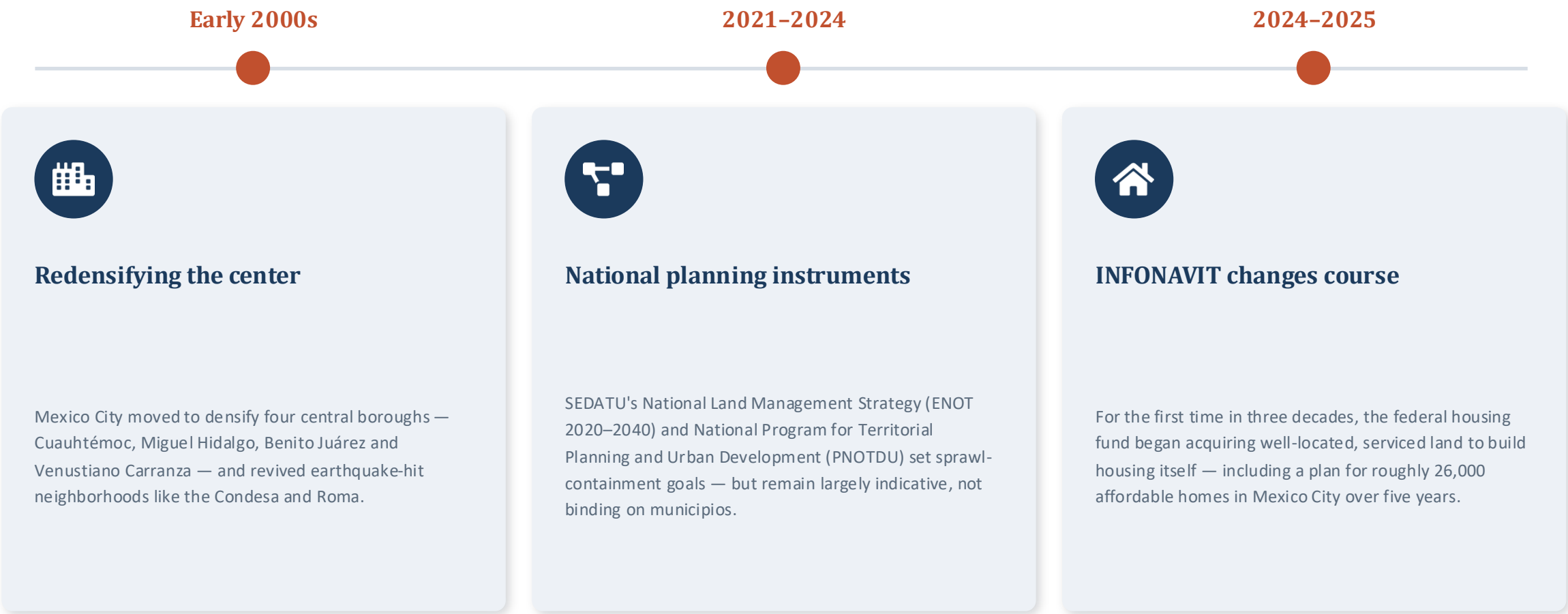
Low- and middle-income households were pushed into disconnected peripheral developments, while higher-income households concentrated in closed urbanizations (urbanizaciones cerradas) nearer the core.



Planning left behind

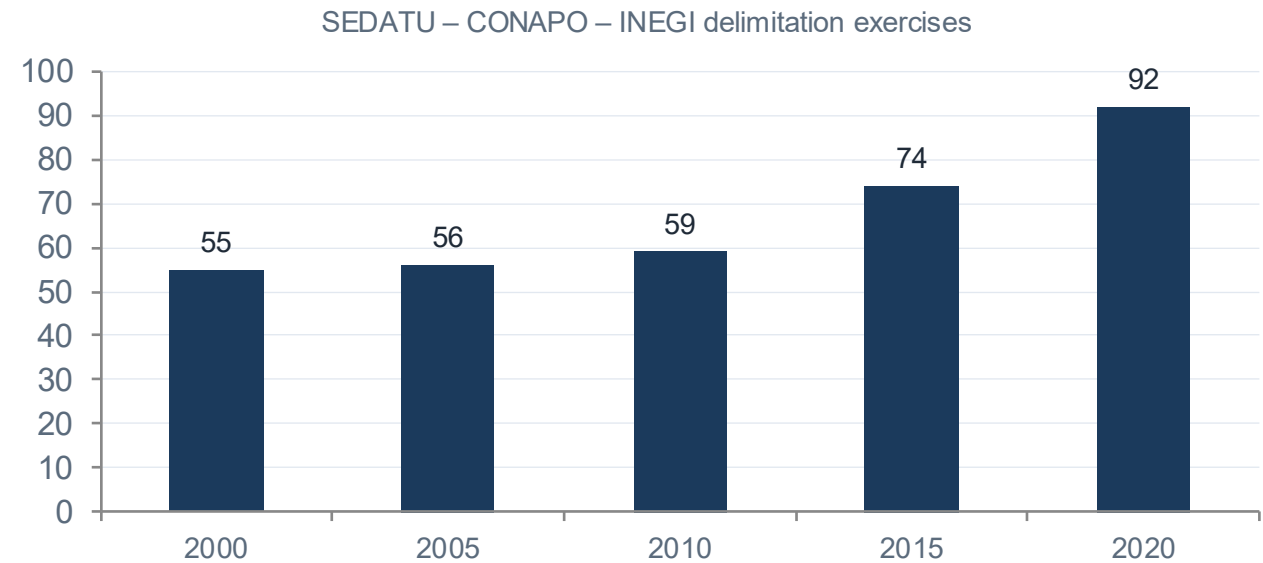
Housing, urban-development and transport policy were rarely coordinated, so peripheral growth routinely outran municipal planning and service capacity.

Three Attempts to Turn the Curve



Each response is real — but small relative to the scale of decades of peripheral, low-density growth.

From 55 to 92 Metropolitan Areas in Two Decades



The 2020 exercise also reclassified the system: the 92 “metrópolis” now span 421 municipios and about 82.5 million people — roughly two-thirds of the national population.

Zona metropolitana (48)

Two or more municipios with strong functional integration; combined population of 200,000+, anchored by a core locality of 100,000+.

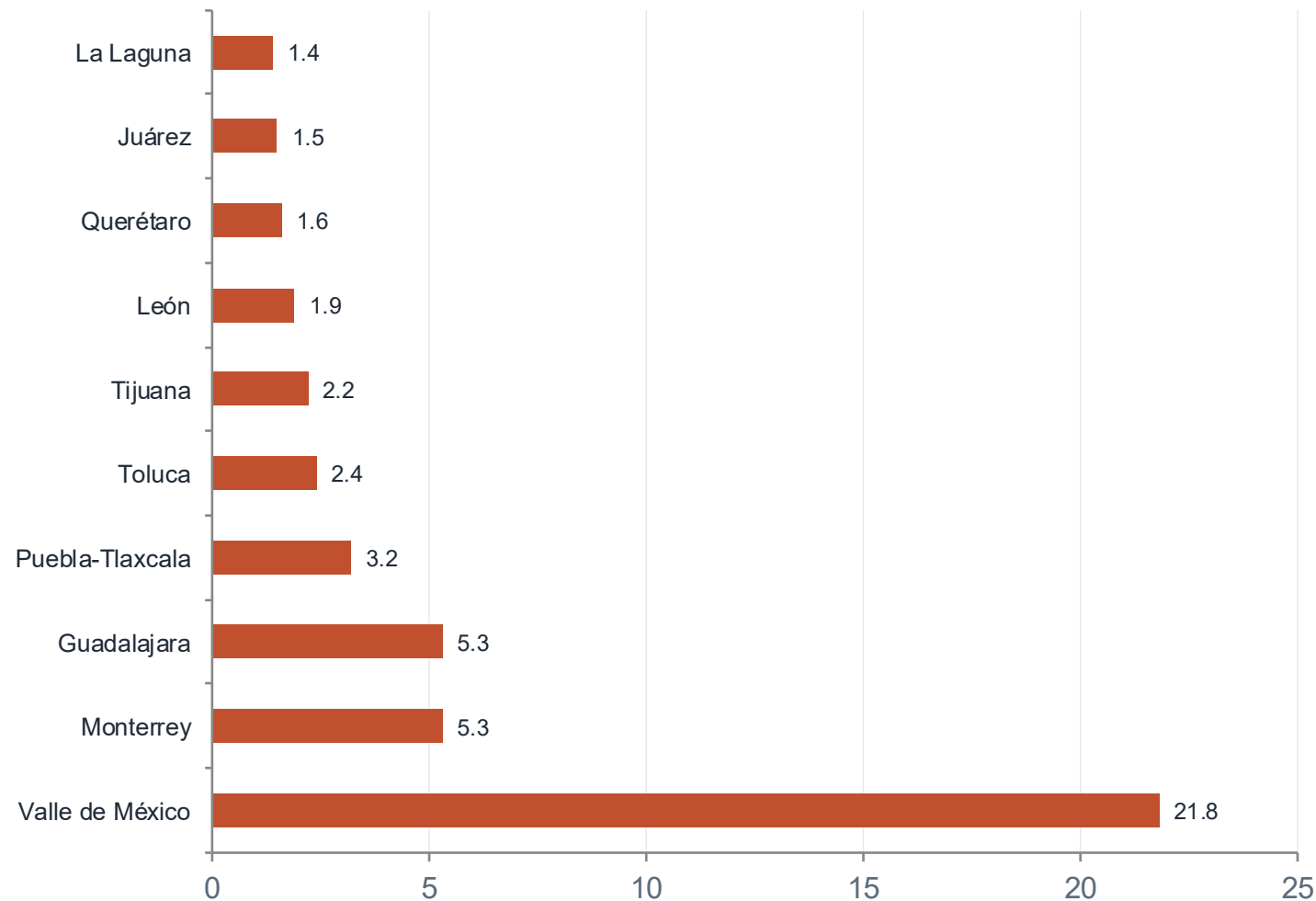
Metrópoli municipal (22)

A single municipio of 300,000+ that is not part of a zona metropolitana, but is economically or politically significant for its state.

Zona conurbada (22)

A smaller, contiguous urban agglomeration that does not yet meet the population thresholds of a full zona metropolitana.

Mexico City Is the Largest — Not the Only — Metropolis



These ten metropolitan areas alone hold about 37% of Mexico's national population.



Monterrey and Guadalajara are each home to roughly 5.3 million people — secondary national poles built on industry, commerce and services.

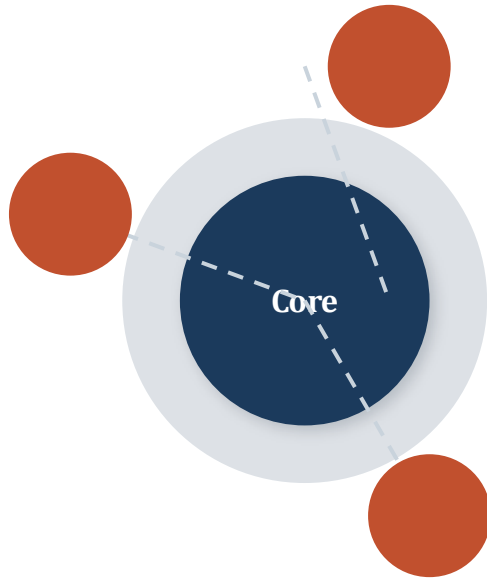


Border metros do not stop at the line: Tijuana and Juárez form deeply integrated, transnational conurbations with San Diego and El Paso.

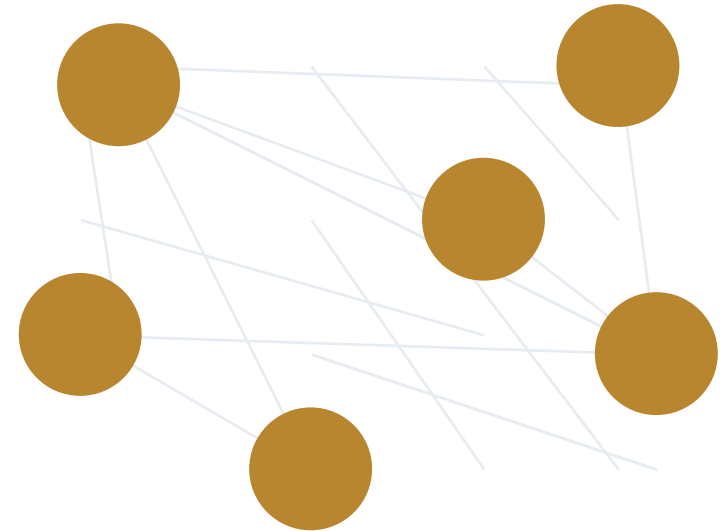
QUESTION 5 — URBAN FORM

Mostly One Center, With a Few Emerging Rivals

Studies of employment and trip patterns consistently describe Mexico City's urban form as hybrid — still predominantly monocentric, with a small set of functional subcenters rather than a fully dispersed, polycentric structure.



Mexico City: predominantly monocentric, with subcenters like Santa Fe



NOT this: a fully dispersed, polycentric model (e.g. Los Angeles)

Coordination Instruments, Not Governments



Consejo de Desarrollo Metropolitano

A state-chaired coordinating council that each metropolitan area must establish to access Fondo Metropolitano resources. Mayors typically sit with voice but not vote.



Fondo Metropolitano

An earmarked federal transfer for metropolitan infrastructure, channeled to states and administered through trust funds (fideicomisos) — in practice, often disconnected from genuine joint planning.



IMEPLAN — Instituto Metropolitano de Planeación

A technical planning body enabled by national law since 2016, but with real institutional weight in only a handful of cases nationally — Guadalajara since 2014 and Puebla since 2017 among 48 zonas metropolitanas.



Comisión Ejecutiva de Coordinación Metropolitana

A bilateral Mexico City–State of Mexico body since 1998 (joined by the federal government in 2016) overseeing sectoral metropolitan commissions for environment, water and drainage, human settlements, transport, public security, civil protection, economic development and health.



Consultative Councils & Observatories

Citizen- and academia-facing bodies enabled by the 2016 General Law of Human Settlements to broaden participation beyond government actors.

No Metropolitan Area Governs Itself

No metropolitan area in Mexico has its own elected government, independent budget, or taxing power. What exists are coordination mechanisms led by the states, not a fourth tier of government.

- Article 115 bars any “intermediate authority” between a municipio and its state — a clause written to protect municipal autonomy that also forecloses a formal metropolitan government.
- Mayors — who hold the constitutional power over urban planning — often have only voice, not vote, in the very councils that decide metropolitan infrastructure spending.
- State legislatures approve municipal budgets and debt, and states typically chair the Consejos de Desarrollo Metropolitano and control the Fondo Metropolitano trust funds.
- Only Guadalajara, and on paper Puebla, have a metropolitan planning institute with real standing; everywhere else, coordination remains ad hoc, voluntary and dependent on political goodwill between governors and mayors.

QUESTION 6 — WHO DOES WHAT

Public Services Across Four Levels

Service	Municipal / Alcaldía	State	Federal	Metropolitan coordination
Water, drainage & wastewater	Operates supply & drainage (often via a municipal utility, Art. 115)	Some state water commissions provide bulk supply / technical support	CONAGUA manages national water resources & basin concessions	Regional bulk water & drainage discussed in metropolitan water commissions (e.g. Valle de México)
Waste collection & disposal	Collection, transport & final disposal (Art. 115)	Regulatory framework; some regional landfills	National framework law (LGPGIR)	—
Public lighting, streets, parks, markets	Direct municipal responsibility (Art. 115)	—	—	—
Preventive police & traffic	Municipal preventive police, under the mayor (Art. 115)	State police; state security coordination	National Guard / federal support, esp. organized crime	Metropolitan public-security commissions (e.g. CDMX–Edomex)
Basic education	Minor role: school-infrastructure upkeep in some states	Operates schools day-to-day	Sets curriculum & national funding formulas (Art. 3, concurrent)	—
Urban planning & land use	Formulates & approves municipal plans and zoning (Art. 115)	Sets state territorial-planning & metropolitan frameworks	SEDATU sets national policy instruments (ENOT, PNOTDU)	IMEPLAN / metropolitan commissions where they exist
Housing finance	Issues building permits & land-use approvals	—	INFONAVIT / CONAVI finance and historically shaped peripheral growth	—
Environment & air quality	Local regulation & inspection	State environmental agencies	SEMARNAT sets the national framework	CAME coordinates air-quality contingencies in the Valle de México

What This Means for Implementing Global Governance

- 01** **Genuinely local, but legally frozen**

Mexico's municipio is real and autonomous — but the Constitution recognizes only two subnational tiers, leaving no room for a formal third, metropolitan layer.
- 02** **A metropolitan reality without metropolitan recognition**

About two-thirds of Mexicans already live inside one of 92 officially delimited metropolitan areas that the Constitution does not formally acknowledge.
- 03** **Coordination, not government**

Funds, councils, commissions and a couple of planning institutes exist — but they are voluntary, state-led, and rarely binding on the municipios that hold the actual planning powers.
- 04** **The implementation gap**

Delivering global commitments — the SDGs, the New Urban Agenda, climate targets — at city scale will require durable, empowered metropolitan institutions that Mexico's current framework does not yet provide.

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