

Regional Integration of Central American Countries and Opportunities for Internetworking

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Central American Integration System
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Abstract

The Central American countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Belize) have recently decided to go into a process of political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological integration through a Central American Integration System. Some of the challenges that the integration faces include the strengthening of the decision making process, and this paper particularly discusses decision follow-up and coordination, national implementation of regional agreements, social communication and participation of civil society, and external and cooperation relations and their respective opportunities for Internetworking.

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Introduction

The Central American sub-region is composed of seven small and developing countries with a population of almost 32 million inhabitants and an area of 522,008 km². There were social and political conflicts in some countries during the past decade that left an estimate of 250,000 people dead or missing as well as millions of dollars in losses or damage to the economy.

CENTRAL AMERICA BASIC FIGURES

COUNTRY	AREA (km ²)	Population (millions)	Literacy Rate (%)	Life Expectancy (Years)	Income per Capita (US\$)
Belize	22,965	.211	93	68	2,450
Costa Rica	51,100	3.011	93	76	2,150
El Salvador	20,749	5.384	78	68	1,320
Guatemala	108,889	10.322	60	65	1,100
Honduras	112,088	5.770	73	68	600
Nicaragua	130,700	4.401	74	66	340
Panama	75,517	2.563	88	73	2,600

The social and political confrontation gave rise to a process of dialogue and negotiation, that ended up in Guatemala last December with a peace agreement between the government and guerrilla groups.

From then on, the challenge to transform Central America into a modern and open sub-region depends on how a democratic culture, a transformation of the productive apparatus, and a modernization of the state are implemented in order to face globalization and to prevent conflict and promote security.

One important aspect in Central America is a process of integration aimed to complement the individual efforts. Such a process is the dream of a "bigger country" for many Central Americans.

The process of integration is not actually new in Central America. A common market was promoted by five out of the seven countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica) that provided several trade benefits. The new integration process, which not only involves trade but is also political, social, cultural, and ecological, was launched at the beginning of this decade.

This paper attempts to examine the possibilities that Internetworking provides to the integration process of small and developing countries and some of the aspects of the political decision making process in which it is useful.

The Central American Integration System

The Central American Integration System (SICA) was created by the Protocol of Tegucigalpa which was signed by the Summit of Central American Presidents (including Panama and Belize as observer) in that city (capital of Honduras) in December, 1991. The Protocol came into force in February, 1993 and has been ratified by all member States.

The SICA as a system approach has the long term objective of transforming Central America in a Region of Peace, Liberty, Democracy, and Development, and is composed of elements such as intergovernmental decision making bodies, community organs, and specialized agencies.

The main intergovernmental decision making bodies are the Summit of Presidents (the Prime Minister of Belize is an observer) and the Council of Ministers. The latter includes Councils of Ministers of many branches (economy and trade, education, housing and human settlements, health, public infrastructure and transportation, etc.) and is coordinated by the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs. Other bodies, include the Forum of Vice-Presidents, the Executive Committee, and a Consultative Committee. The latter is the body that allows participation of civil society in the process and is composed of 20 organizations that represent business, labor, academic, cooperative, peasant, indigenous, and women sectors, totaling approximately 14 million direct affiliates.

Important decisions have been made regarding sustainable integral development, such as the Central American Alliance for Sustainable Development (ALIDES) that not only sees the ecological aspect, but also simultaneously considers economic and social growth. A Treaty on Democratic Security was adopted recently which states that security is an integral part of development and takes the human being as the center, and agreements on freedom of mobilization of people through the borders, and unification of trade barriers, have also been reached.

The regional decision making process has been criticized because of the large number of mandates and the inability of following up and national implementation on the part of the governments, which leads to the second area. The integration process can not go further until the governments implement the sub-regional decisions at an operational level. That means that every sub-regional mandate has six or seven implementations. Currently there is no coordination between the regional and the national level.

The Summit of Masaya, Nicaragua, in 1994, adopted ALIDES as a regional and national strategy for development, and created a regional council as well as national councils for sustainable development, in an attempt to coordinate the regional with the national. The alliance also calls upon the participation of the civil society.

The community organs of the Integration System are the Central American Parliament, the Central American Court of

Justice and the General Secretariat of the Integration System (SG-SICA). Also included are Technical Secretariats for the Economic Integration (Permanent Secretariat of the Treaty of Economic Integration-SIECA), Social Integration (Secretariat for Social Integration-SISCA), Cultural Integration (Coordination for Educational and Cultural Integration-CECC), and Ecological (Commission for Environment and Development-CCAD).

The SICA specialized agencies are close to 15 and most of them were born under the Common Market model of the 1960s. A few of them were created during the 1940s and 1950s. A few ones were more recently created during the 1980s and 1990s. Those agencies specialize in matters such as monetary, development bank, health and nutrition, telecommunications, public administration, air navigation, industrial technology, potable water, zoo sanitation, etc.

The General Secretariat of SICA (SG-SICA) is also a creation of the Protocol of Tegucigalpa, with the Secretary-General the top officer of the integration, appointed for a period of four years by the Summit of Presidents. The main functions of the General Secretariat are among others, the follow-up of the decisions of the Summit of Presidents and the coordination of the secretariats and agencies.

In order to carry out its functions, the General Secretariat has developed mechanisms of coordination such as the Commission of Secretariats and the Executive Meeting, which discuss strategies, make recommendations to the bodies, and report on the execution of mandates.

The General Secretariat has a Division of Information Systems and Networking which has responsibilities such as central strategic planning and coordination of information resources and services. The Division also prepares the agenda and presides over the meeting of information officers and specialists of the secretariats and agencies.

One of the main achievements of the General Secretariat was the planning and deployment of the SICA Information Services Network (SICANet) in 1994. This network started to provide services through ALL-IN-1 and X.25 at a time when there was no full Internet presence in all Central American countries. The ALL-IN-1/X.25 platform provided a centralized groupware environment that was able to provide connectivity to secretariats and agencies spread through all the Central American cities.

TCP/IP has been recently added to the platform of SICANet. Thus, the concept of SICANet is now that of a decentralized and distributed environment, and conversely the General Secretariat has plans for building or helping to build such an environment for the secretariats and agencies as well as the above-mentioned organizations of the civil society.

The challenges of the Central American Integration System and the role of Internetworking

The challenges of the Central American Integration are those of building integration simultaneously with an insertion into a global economy. The Central American countries, after suffering from political and social instability, have to face the challenges of building democracy, participation, modernization of the economy, etc. The integration process, conversely, constitutes a favorable regional space to promote and help the individual country efforts to achieve these goals.

The decision making process at the regional level is the centerpiece of the Integration System. Thus the General Secretariat has identified strategic objectives and work areas, closely related to such a decision making process. Those are as follows:

1. decision follow-up and coordination,
2. implementation of sub-regional decisions at a national level,
3. communication and participation of the civil society in the integration process, and
4. external and cooperation relations

Decision follow-up and coordination

Decision follow-up and coordination are crucial to the existence of the Integration System. The Summit of Presidents actually met for the first time in 1986 and decided to promote peace and an end to internal conflicts. One important decision was to formalize the meetings. From then on, the Summit has met 18 times ordinarily and several times extraordinarily. Three generations of Presidents have continued to meet and make decisions not only in the political, as at the beginning, but also in the economic, social, cultural, and ecological arenas.

The follow-up and coordination suggest the promotion and/or strengthening of human networking. Networking is, very generally speaking, the sharing of resources and/or information related to common goals and objectives. To identify and promote networking by area and decision at the regional and national levels is fundamental to that end.

The follow-up and coordination also bring room for modernization or reengineering of the regional apparatus (secretariats and agencies), and opportunities for Internetworking.

Some characteristics of the SICA secretariats and agencies that constitute clear opportunities for internetworking are as follows:

CHARACTERISTIC	IT OPPORTUNITIES
created before the system (especially during the sixties within the common market)	modernization and reengineering
good links with the governments because they act as technical support in their decision making process	generation of specialized information and knowledge for the decision making
offices geographically spread among the countries	distributed environment for groupware and remote access to specialized databases
set of good technical people with master or doctoral degrees in several specialties and field experience	knowledge working
heterogeneity in size, management styles, and resources	human networking

The technological support for the follow-up and coordination includes the presidential decision database at a regional level, specialized databases from the more than 20 secretariats and agencies, electronic mail, discussion lists, the World Wide Web (WWW), etc.

In order to accomplish this, the General Secretariat has planned and received funding to execute a project aimed to provide Internet connectivity and training for several dozen executives and officers from the secretariats and agencies members of SICA. The project also funds micro-projects for development and/or reengineering of specialized databases.

National implementation of regional agreements

The implementation of the sub-regional decisions in the national levels means an overlap between national and regional agendas. The member States often and easily reach consensus on a set of regional decisions, but are not necessarily aware of the overlap with their national agenda.

All national agencies from the different countries have their own national agenda and budget, and the ones that carry out the implementation of regional compromises do not have additional resources to do so; therefore an overload of their capacities results.

The monitoring of the implementation of regional agreements has to be able to detect the overloads and bottlenecks of the process, and also be able to alert the decision making bodies to allocate adequate resources.

In that regard, the identification of existing human networks and the promotion of new ones that probably are working with no information technology would be crucial to overcome the bottlenecks and make adequate allocation of resources.

The technological support will consist of a database with national follow-up and monitoring along with connectivity resources and training for those regional networks identified as priority. That would create the adequate environment for communication among public officers from both the national and the regional levels responsible for the implementation of the regional agenda.

Social communication and participation of the civil society

The Summit of Central American Presidents has stated the need of spreading the word on the integration process, so that the people can realize business, professional, and other opportunities. Different social sectors, organized or not, are interested in the integration as they perceive either political or economic benefits or both. Some sectors perceive cultural, social, and ecological benefits as well.

The integration process provides at least a scenario of political spaces for different business, labor, academic, women, etc., sectors to extend their demands from the national to the regional level and strengthen their national agenda from the regional one. One fact is the number and multiplicity of umbrella regional organization members of the Consultative Committee.

Another scenario suggests a more active participation of the organizations of civil society in the decision making process. This scenario assumes decision makers are conscious of the fact that all governmental or inter-governmental actions are directed towards civil society and therefore, that the feedback from it would be a more rational approach to decision making. On the other hand, it also assumes a civil society with very high negotiation skills and capable of reaching consensus among a very wide range of interests.

Some of the technological support includes Internet connectivity, with such tools as electronic mail, Listserv, WWW, etc. Such a support allows, first, communication between the regional offices and the national chapters and also between the latter and their grassroots organizations; second, communication among the regional offices, national chapters, and even grassroots organizations from the different sectors; third, communication between the civil society and the decision making structures and agencies.

The General Secretariat has planned and is currently executing a project to build Internet capacity for the regional offices of the civil society. This capacity includes provision of technology, connectivity and training to the leaders. The project is expected to conduct pilot tests of communication with the regional secretariats and institutions and access to the regional agenda.

External relations and cooperation

The external relations and cooperation with developed countries are very important to complement the efforts of the Central American countries. Such importance is highlighted by, among other aspects, the space that cooperation occupies in the agenda of the decision making bodies and the amount of resources mobilized toward the sub-region.

The resources from external cooperation for Central America are continually decreasing as the peace process has been concluding. A much larger flow of resources was received when the Central America political violence of the 1980s was in the international public opinion. Though the ideological source of the conflict is largely over, the social roots of the violence are now even farther from a solution. This means that, as peace is achieved, the flow of external cooperation should at least be maintained if not increased for a reasonable time, in order to help Central Americans to achieve sustainable and integral development.

It is understandable that the international cooperation agenda has moved to Eastern Europe and other regions in conflict. That fact calls upon Central America to rationalize the increasingly scarce resources received from the international cooperation.

In order to rationalize the cooperation resources, it is important to set priorities, identify duplication of efforts, evaluate

the impact of projects, etc., and also, and probably more importantly, to change the model of cooperation. The current model is a one-to-one (donor agency/executing agency) due to the priorities of the donor vs. the priorities of the executor, which makes a project the transforming unit of reality. Another approach should make the problem to solve be the driving unit of reality and a many-to-many model (network of donors/network of executing agencies to solve it).

Hence, the opportunities for Internetworking to share information between the cooperation organizations or development agencies and executing agencies are obvious. Access to databases of resources and projects or profiles also presents opportunities. Currently there is discussion on mechanisms to rationalize cooperation and resources in Central America, and opportunities for identifying and promoting Internetworking.

Summary

CHALLENGE	ASPECT	TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT
Decision Follow-up and Coordination	Decision Making Regional Body/Secretariat/Agency Communication, Secretariat/ Agency Networking, Secretariat/Agency Reengineering	Presidential Decision Database, Specialized Databases, E-mail, Listserv, WWW, Video-conferencing, etc.
National Implementation of Regional Agreements	Regional Secretariat or Agency/National Agency Networking	National Follow-up Database, e-mail, Listserv, WWW, Video-conferencing, etc.
Social Communication and Civil Society Participation	Regional Office/National Chapter/Grassroots Communication and Consensus, Regional Office Networking, Access to Regional Agenda	E-mail, Listserv, WWW, Video- conferencing, etc.
External and Cooperation Relations	Donor/Executing Agency Networking, Access to Resources and Projects	E-mail, Listserv, WWW, Video- conferencing, etc.

Note: The viewpoints expressed in this paper are the entire responsibility of the author and do not necessarily express those of the Central American Integration System.