The Politics of Technical Assistance in Regional Integration Processes: Mesoamerican Insights

Política de asistencia técnica en procesos de integración regional: perspectivas mesoamericanas

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Abstract

This paper analyses a regional integration process that includes Belize, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico and Panama. Formally launched in 2001 as the Puebla-Panama Plan (PPP) with a strong commitment to sustainable development and safeguarding the environmental dimension of the regionalisation process, its current version, renamed the Mesoamerican Project (Proyecto Mesoamérica, PM), does not have the same orientation or goals. This paper addresses two questions: *a)* which stakeholders and discourses shaped the regional integration's environmental policy process during its different phases? and *b)* how have the PPP and PM contributed to the environmental governance of the region? The findings suggest that the process has been characterised by strong intervention on the part of supra-national stakeholders that have prioritised liberalisation over the sustainable development agenda for 15 years, weakening regional environmental agencies' ability to produce warrants to reduce the environmental impacts of regionalisation.

Keywords: regional integration, environmental policy process, Mesoamerican Project, South-South Cooperation, sustainable development.

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Resumen

En este trabajo se analiza un proceso de integración regional que incluye a Belice, Colombia, Costa Rica, República Dominicana, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, México y Panamá. Formal-mente puesto en marcha en 2001 como el Plan Puebla-Panamá (PPP) con un fuerte compromiso hacia el desarrollo sostenible y la protección medioambiental dentro de un proceso de regionaliza-ción, posteriormente cambió el nombre a Proyecto Mesoamérica (PM) con una orientación y metas diferentes. Este documento aborda dos cuestiones: *a)* cómo las partes interesadas han dado forma a un discurso de política medioambiental dentro de un entorno regional y cuáles son sus diferentes fases y *b)* cómo PPP y PM han contribuido a la gobernabilidad ambiental de la región. Los resultados sugieren que el proceso se ha caracterizado por una fuerte intervención por parte de los actores supranacionales, quienes han priorizado la liberalización sobre la agenda de desarrollo sostenible durante quince años. Este hecho debilita a la larga la capacidad de los organismos ambientales regionales para producir garantías en orden a reducir el impacto ambiental de la regionalización.

Palabras clave: integración regional, proceso de la política ambiental, Proyecto Mesoamérica, coo-peración Sur-Sur, desarrollo sostenible.

1
The environmental dimension of regional integration

Environmental policy as part of economic integration processes has only become an object of study in recent years. Policy integration is one of the outcomes of what is called «deep» regional integration; that is, government action to reduce differences in national regulatory regimes through the coordination, harmonisation and/or mutual recognition of national laws, regulations and enforcement mechanisms (Kuwayama 1999, p. 32).

According to Carter (2001), attention to environmental policy is necessary because the environment is a part of a transboundary problem that requires action and cooperation not only from the Governments of individual states but also, and increasingly, from other civil-society interest groups at different institutional levels. This is the basis of environmental governance.

Analysis has particularly been documented in the case of European Union (EU) environmental policy integration, with Jordan (2002) addressing the rise of environmental frameworks in the EU. Early integration approaches included organizational, procedural, and contextual factors. For instance, Schiff and Winters (2003) propose three approaches to policy integration: coordination, harmonisation, and the recognition of foreign regulatory regimes. Further analysis has addressed shifts and policy innovation to understand windows of opportunity for and barriers to policy integration (Weber and Driessen 2010), and development costs for businesses integrating environmental protection and energy conservation measures (Hawkins and Wang 2013). However, current research on environmental policy addresses the potential for meso-level institutions to provide leadership and direction in support of alternative global governance practices (Riggirozzi 2015). This paper contributes to the latter literature and previous work addressing change and transformation from policy design to implementation at different levels when analysed as a complex policy process (Almaguer *et al.* 2014).

In theory, sustainability acts as an integrating concept that can attune elements of environmental systems, economic activity and social behaviour in a policy domain across sectors, issues and temporal scales (Robinson 2004, p. 378). Despite the fact that sustainable development as a desirable policy objective is still full of gaps, it remains at the core of the discourse and design of international development policy, as demonstrated by the recently launched Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015). The analysis of policy promoting sustainable development therefore brings to the fore the roles of participation and deliberation in the definition of policy goals and the implementation process, particularly

with its (not necessarily evident) relationship with regional and local environmental governance. Although there are cases of environmental governance that include this perspective, particularly in Europe, other studies have looked at policy integration as a manifestation of sustainable development in a number of different subnational and transnational regions. Kern (2011) focuses on the Baltic Sea Region and Kimani (2010) considers Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Numerous examples of cross-border environmental regionalism have been under way for some time, especially in Europe, but little scholarly work has addressed its implications for progress towards sustainable development in the sense of integration of environmental, economic and social challenges and opportunities (Balsiger 2011).

For Scoones and Keeley (2003), environmental policy is also the space in which the public and private domains of natural resources and environmental issues are negotiated, environmental problems are framed, solutions are defined and strategies shaped through political action. Keeley and Scoones (1999, p. 5) propose that in seeing policy as a process, «analytical attention is given to the discursive and non-discursive practices of different actors in the policy process where policy is negotiated and contested». This is the deliberative turn in the policy analysis which has contributed to emphasize the increased relevance of argumentation, language and deliberation in policy-making (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). I approach the policy process as a complex system due to the multiple interrelations between its interdefined elements such as discourses, stakeholders and deliberation arenas (Almaguer *et al.* 2014).

In policy integration literature, a core rationale is that cooperation has the potential to create gains to the involved countries (Schiff and Winters 2003, p. 151). But what creates the difficulties in this process, and who shapes the outcomes? Wilding (1997, p. 425) suggests that the difficulties can be due to fear of losing national sovereignty or of not reaching an agreement between member states on types and levels of policy provision. This paper employs the concepts of deliberative practice to examine the policy process at different levels by analysing weaknesses in the creation, design and implementation of policy as warrant. In this case warrant is defined as a safeguard that gives reliable or formal assurance, guarantee or security concerning a policy decision that has been taken (Blaikie and Muldavin 2004). The question is whether the premised regional policy framework can act as a warrant to ensure that sustainability goals are carried through the policy design to implementation at the local level, particularly in areas where regional integration projects may imply significant deterioration of local environments.

2
Case study of a regional integration process: Mesoamerican insights

This policy process analysis has a mainly qualitative research design. The case-study approach was selected from the various data-gathering methods due to its suitability for reaching a deep level of understanding of contemporary social processes (Yin 1993; 2003) and its ability to incorporate a variety of research techniques and sources of evidence. Following a deliberative approach, I propose a unit of analysis that focuses on relations between policy action, stakeholder interactions and discourse production (for a detailed description of the methodological design see Almaguer *et al.* 2014). I combine this with discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992; Dryzek 1997) to track the highlights and milestones of discursive practices within the policy process and stakeholder analysis in order to identify common and/or conflicting interests.

The empirical research included intensive fieldwork within policy communities and their deliberative arenas in Panama, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Nicaragua in Central America and in the Mexican states of Tabasco, Oaxaca and Guerrero and the capital, Mexico City. This enabled more than 80 stakeholder interviews at different policy and project implementation levels to cover the first part of the regional integration process (Almaguer 2008). I applied discourse analysis to a corpus of secondary data comprising more than 140 documents related to the process up to 2015. Qualitative data analysis used NVivo and Mendeley software.

Mesoamerica stands for the cultural regionalization of the pre-Columbian societies that flourished in some of the southern states of Mexico and Central America from the 15th century until the Spanish colonization of the Americas (see distribution in Figure 1). The ethnologist Paul Kirchhoff (1943; 1960) coined the word based on ethnic and similar agricultural practices, trade and politico-religious systems, complex socio-political systems, long-distance interaction networks and advanced technological systems (Boone and Mignolo 1994; Florescano 1994). The concept has been used as a geographical label for a new regional space to promote the idea of cultural similarity, cooperation and integration.

Among the vast amount of literature on regionalism there is a branch that defines its perspective as the conscious construction of an identity representing one specific region, where language and political discourse are key in shaping a specific social space through the use of concepts, metaphors and analogies to define the region at a cognitive level (Jayasuriya 1994; Hveem 2000; Spindler 2002). Consistent with this perspective, Bull (1999) highlights the internationalization of the state as part of a process in which national political practices become increasingly accountable to the demands

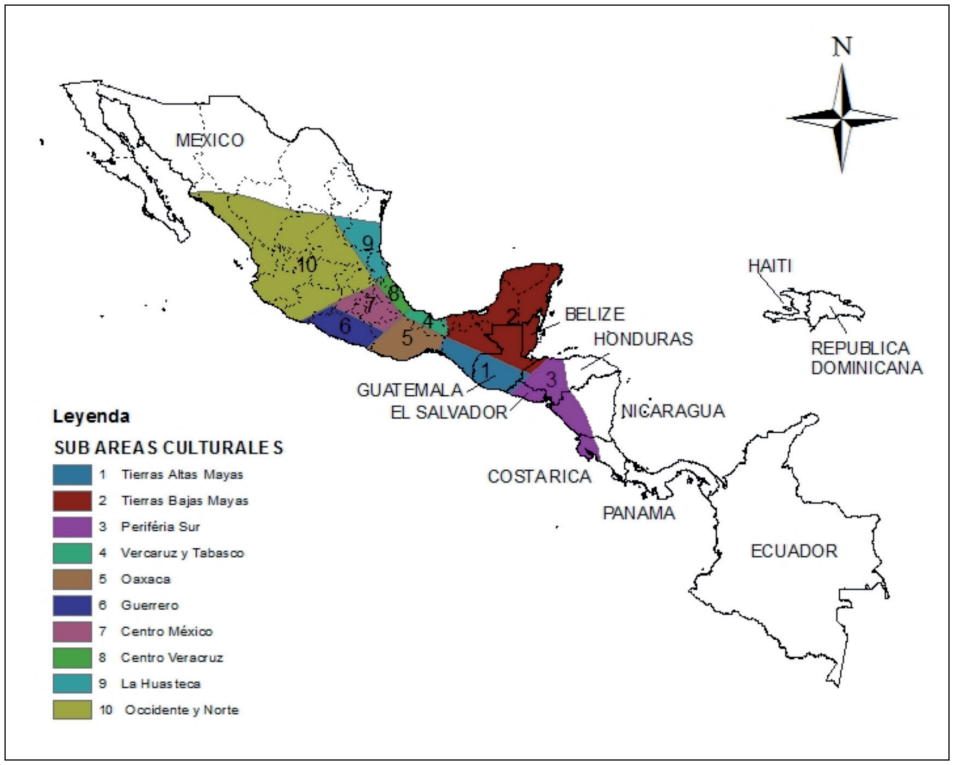

Figure 1
The Mesoamerican area following Gordon Willey's classification. The countries in white show the whole area of Mesoamerica by the Mesoamerican Project at 2016
(Comparison of the historical Mesoamerica region with the delimitation of Proyecto Mesoamérica)
Based on Attolini and Brambila (2008).

of the global economy, and external actors and institutions become «the main source of legitimacy» (Bull 1999, p. 958). Hveem (2000) emphasizes that the regional project is «usually associated with a policy program (goals to be achieved) and strategy (means and mechanisms by which goals should be reached), and institution building» (p. 72). However not all of the countries involved have the same vantage point. With a critical perspective, Brülhart and Torstensson (1998) distinguish the unequal positions of central and peripheral countries within this process:

> Regional integration has two relevant effects on the peripheral country […]: first the periphery gains location attractiveness *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world due to its improved access to the combined market; but, second, it simultaneously loses competitiveness *vis-à-vis* the central country, since lower trade costs exacerbate the location advantage of the country with a larger home market (p. 6).

Since the launch of the PPP in 2001 the term Mesoamerica has been used in international policy arenas to refer the countries of the Central American region (Belize, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) and seven federal states of South-Southeast Mexico (Campeche, Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz and Yucatan). Furthermore, with the transformation of the PPP into the Mesoamerican Project,

Colombia was included in 2007 and the Dominican Republic in 2009 (see Figure 1).

The PPP policy program was the main instrument promoting the construction of the new region. However, the process struggled with different political and economic agendas, power relations and discourses. As Bull (2002) mentions, in the early stages of this process the new Mesoamerica was situated not only geographically between North and South America but also at the crossroads between various political projects and geopolitical imageries, and «part of the extension of a hegemonic project as well as an arena for regionalized resistance against it» (Bull 2002, p. 4).

The territory of the countries of the Mesoamerican region have wide geological, geographic, climatic and biotic diversity characterised by complex ecological systems with a fragile equilibrium that provide the material elements of the region's subsistence livelihoods. For this reason there were high expectations that the Mesoamerican Sustainable Development Initiative (MSDI) would comply with its commitment to environmental protection in the context of regional integration projects.

Originally the PPP proposed to contribute to sustainable economic growth, preserving the environment and the natural and cultural resources of the region. However the policy discourse, mainly portrayed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), framed the problem with a classic developmentalist approach: as the region holds a large number of indigenous groups, seeking the necessary measures for its «full development» is a strong priority (IDB 2002). In this narrative administrative bureaucracies become relevant players; with them, international institutions are portrayed as the experts that can resolve these imbalances through a new regional policy design.

2.1. Merging political agendas for a new region

Although popular belief and even some scholars consider the PPP the work of the former Mexican president Vicente Fox, the policy process analysis shows that it was rather the result of a highly-crafted intervention by policy communities of regional and international stakeholders (Almaguer 2008).

Marsh and Rhodes' (1992) concept of the policy community helps to identify the actors or stakeholders who engage in policymaking despite the fact that they may belong to different governmental structures and sectors. In the case of the PPP, the policy community consisted of government officials of Mexican and Central American countries, officers of multilateral organizations, political elites and consultants involved in PPP policy design and its different project portfolios. As Sutton (1999) conceptually suggests, these policy communities are characterised by a network of agents

and organizations that participate in a policy debate with shared or similar belief systems and codes of conduct to influence policy over time. They generally work in semi-exclusive settings through governmental meetings.

If analyzed as a policy process, the PPP has a genealogy based in a variety of programs, studies and policy documents created by different ministries, think tanks and international institutions, all of which contributed to its crafting by creating a policy window for the launch of this regional development plan (Barreda 2001). However, at this stage it is important to highlight the merging of the Central American and the Mexican agendas via a report requested by IDB to its consultants (Torres 2001). This report legitimized an the support of international and domestic policymakers towards an integrated agenda based in infrastructure and economic development. The following sections explain which stakeholders and discourses have shaped the environmental policy process in this context.

With the effects of Hurricane Mitch in Central America on 23-26 October 1998 one of the most intense in the Caribbean in the last 200 years (ECLAC 1999), and the earthquake in El Salvador in 2001, a strong notion of disaster set the context for a cooperation agenda.

A series of meetings were held in Washington and Stockholm in 1998, organized by the IDB and co-hosted by the Swedish Government (IDB 1999a; 1999b), to discuss financial help for the region with the creation of a Consultative Group for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America. As a result of these meetings the participants outlined agreements on reconstruction that also included other agendas: to reduce the social and ecological vulnerability of the region, coordinate donor's efforts towards a regional perspective, reduce the external debt burden of the region's countries and provide better market access for the region's exports (IDB 1999b, p. 5).

One of the products of these meetings was the Stockholm Declaration, a document that claimed a new understanding between country donors and the Central American region regarding sharing the responsibility for the reconstruction and the transformation of the countries concerned (IDB 1999c). The follow-up to the meeting in Stockholm included a series of meetings (in Honduras in February 2000 and Nicaragua in May 2000) to monitor projects implemented in specific countries. Most of these projects reached a plan to orientate the reconstruction of the region under the umbrella of the Transformation and Modernization of Central America in the 21st Century (SICA 2001). This plan presented a regional development agenda for the countries of Central America consistent with the post-Mitch discourse on vulnerability reduction and the need for rational management of natural resources as key components of sustainable development in the region.

The deliberative arenas for the reconstruction strategies started by being inclusive and involved a wide range of regional and international actors. However, as the process advanced, the variety of stakeholders diminished and the agenda discourse changed. At the next meeting between Central American countries and donors, in Madrid in 2001, the reconstruction agenda took a remarkable turn towards market access, ignoring most of the elements already established on the environmental protection agenda. The main reconstruction claims shifted towards the need for greater commitment to integration and regional cooperation on the part of the countries of Central America. This was the emphasis in the discussion of technical working groups on trade organized by the IDB (1999c). Documents from the meetings express the change of focus to the need for better market access conditions for the region's exports (IDB 1999b, p. 1).

In Mexico, the PPP had as background diverse attempts at modernization policies with the objective of incorporating the south of the region into the path of growth of the north of the country (Hiernaux-Nicolas 2002; Villafuente and Leyva 2006). These attempts became a key element of the political agenda of president Vicente Fox Quezada. It is important to bear in mind that the Fox administration (2000-2006) ended the 71-year rule of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI).

In contrast to the Central American reconstruction agenda, with the direct intervention of international stakeholders, the Mexican proposal was articulated by a selective national policy elite called the Transition Group, a policy community that was a mix of new policy entrepreneurs and bureaucrats from the old regime, established to advise on the political transition to President Fox's administration. The Transition Group was part of the international development policy community with information about the Central American Modernisation and Transformation Agenda and other consultants' studies related to business prospects (Booz *et al.* 2000; Fleishman-Hillard 2003). Other traceable documents with similar ideas were authored by members of this group during the period of the PPP design. They argued that economic development was needed to ensure that the social instability of the south of Mexico would not expand across the rest of the region, particularly with the growing influence of the Zapatist Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) since 1996 (Levi *et al.* 2000). These inputs were influential in the PPP's Mexican chapter. Almost all of the frameworks and projects presented by this series of policy proposals can be found in the official PPP proposal launched only a few months later. At this time the Governments of the region and a cluster of international development institutions presented the PPP as a regional integration and development strategy to implement a series of projects that claimed to have as their objective «the promotion of the ecological and

human wealth of the Mesoamerican region, within a sustainable framework, respectful of the ethnic, cultural and environmental diversity» (IDB 2002, p. 5).

On 15 June 2001, eight Mesoamerican Initiatives were approved in the context of the XIII Tuxtla Summit «Mechanism of Dialogue and Concentration», an early initiative that began in 1991 among the Central American countries and Mexico to discuss development issues in the Central American post-war period in the region and a diplomatic mechanism that constituted the basis for the regional integration process. It was agreed that each of the countries involved would take charge of coordinating one of the initiatives, which comprised road connections, commercial links, electrification, telecommunications, human development, the prevention and mitigation of disasters, tourism, and sustainable development.

The main decision-making body of the PPP's original institutional structure was the PPP Executive Commission, composed of a presidential commissioner from each country. The Inter-institutional Technical Group advised on PPP procedures and provided technical assistance for all of the initiatives. It was composed of the IDB, the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL) and the Central American Institute of Business and Management (INCAE). Although the financial commission was composed of each country's Ministry for the Economy, the IDB, the CABEI, ECLAC and INCAE had a leading voice in proposing strategies for bringing resources into the PPP scheme.

Remarkably, the PPP policy community did not acknowledge critical claims regarding the PPP and its components. No explicit mention of critical opinions of the PPP was included in any of the institutional reports during the first six years of PPP implementation. However, the PPP was highly contested from the beginning. Parallel to its launch in 2001, social organizations in the region raised a range of claims about the potential environmental damage that it would cause in the region in a discursive coalition as a result of sharing information, distributing materials and organizing collectively to make public statements about their position.

This was due to the fact that general information on the main PPP projects was released in a fragmented and discretionary way, with the public mainly informed via media coverage rather than official channels. Most of the infrastructure projects on the agenda was already in the process of implementation, and little information on institutional procedures and mechanisms was available for public scrutiny. Although an information system was created on the IDB website, most of the original information available in official was constantly moved, changed, or with broken links.

Criticism of the PPP from NGOs, specialists and the general public has identified the lack of transparency in its decision making,

its unbalanced approved budget, which favours transport, energy, market facilities and telecommunications over projects representing the PPP's social agenda and support for a neoliberal agenda committed to free trade but not to the needs of the local communities in the region (Bartra 2001; McElhinny and Nickinson 2005). In the context of the PPP's heavy infrastructure projects, issues of environmental deterioration and resource protection required particular attention. Its detractors claim that the PPP exhibited the influence of the international financial institutions over the rest of the actors involved in the policy process (Barreda 2001). It also demonstrated the influence of institutions accommodating their own interests through alliances with or subordination of powerful stakeholders, and rather than integral sustainability, a priority of this Mesoamerican project was the liberalization of its regional economy and its logistical corridors.

In the context of the PPP and regional cooperation, the MSDI was innovative in its attempts to address the environmental dimension of the process of the integration of eight countries that share a great diversity of natural resources, as also in its commitment to ensuring that all PPP projects incorporated appropriate environmental management and promoted the sustainable management of natural resources within a participatory framework (MSDI 2003). The country selected to coordinate this initiative was Nicaragua.

2.2. Framing the Mesoamerican sustainable development initiative

The MSDI was based on regional institutional cooperation which has been consolidated during the last ten years (see Table 1 for details of the environmental Governance framework in Mesoamerica). During this time the notion of sustainable development has slowly been incorporated into political commitment to regional integration promoted through *a)* the Central American Integration System (Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana, SICA); *b)* the Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD) in 1989; *c)* the framework of the Central American Alliance for Sustainable Development (Alianza para el Desarrollo Sostenible de Centroamérica, ALIDES) in 1994; *d)* the Environmental Plan for the Central American Region (Plan Ambiental para la Región de Centroamérica, PARCA), and *e)* the promotion of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (MBC) and its business plan, launched in 2000. In this context the MSDI sought to strengthen the conceptual basis of the regional integration process, defining sustainable development as

> […] a process that pursues progressive change in the quality of human life and that places human beings as the central and primary target of development. This is achieved through economic growth with social equity and changes in production and consumption patterns, based on ecological equilibrium and the support of the region (MSDI 2003, p. 2).

Year	Regional integration process	Steps towards environmental governance
1989	Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD) created	Commitment towards regional environment surveillance
1991	I Summit 1991, Mexico. The Mechanisms of Tuxtla are created among Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Mexico to deliberate on topics related to the development of Central America (CA) and Mexico	Environmental pollution mentioned as one of several topics of regional interest
1994	Central American Alliance for Sustainable Development (ALIDES)	Adoption of the sustainable development environmental framework
1996	II Summit 1996 Costa Rica. Panama and Belize join the mechanism. Among the objectives are promotion of a free trade area, promotion of regional cooperation and support for sustainable development	Sustainable development mentioned as overall objective but no specific means to achieve it
1998	III Summit 1998, El Salvador. It seeks to consolidate the mechanism and strengthen economic and commercial relations	Intensify collaboration over protection of the environment and sustainable use of natural resources
2000	IV Summit 2000, Guatemala. Strengthen efforts to consolidate and accelerate the process of integration and reach a model of sustainable development	To adopt the Mesoamerican Program of Cooperation 2001-2002, which addresses the environment among other topics
2001	Extraordinary summit 2001, El Salvador. Presentation of the PPP, Mexican strategy highlighted	MSDI mentioned «to promote the conservation and management of sustainable resources, participatory mechanism especially of local communities in environmental management»
2002	V Summit 2002, Mexico. Addresses full aspects of the PPP. Supports the advancement in the Mesoamerican Initiatives	«We will ensure that the designing of infrastructure projects the incorporation of the criteria of environmental sustainability and social participation stands»
2004	VI Summit 2004, Nicaragua. Institutionalization of the PPP	It announces the PPP with a vision of long term sustainability
2005	VII Tegucigalpa Honduras, 2005. It reiterates its willingness and commitment to promote the integral and sustainable development of the region through the PPP	No specific reference to MSDI
2006	VIII Summit 2006, Panama. Commitments to the PPP	No specific reference to MSDI
2007	IX Summit 2007, Belize. Included an extraordinary meeting to strengthen the PPP. Colombia joins the initiative	No specific reference to MSDI
2008	X Summit Mexico. Change of name from PPP to Mesoamerican Project	No specific reference to MSDI
2009	XI Summit 2009 Costa Rica. Institutionalization of Mesoamerican Project. Dominican Republic joins the program	No specific reference to MSDI
2010	XII Summit 2010 Colombia. Institutionalization of Mesoamerican Project	Addresses environmental action for climate change
2011	XII Summit 2011 Mexico. Institutionalization of Mesoamerican Project	Addresses some environmental actions but less broadly than MSDI

Table 1
Evolution of environmental governance in this context of regional integration in Mesoamerica

However, records show that since the launch of the MSDI in 2003, several meetings held at the CCAD addressed the MSDI and the overall PPP with rather contrasting views. In interviews carried out during my Central American fieldwork, CCAD technical agents referred to internal debates in which PPP concerns such as the principal role of Central American institutions in the policy process,

and the overall contribution of the PPP to the CCAD's agenda were raised. The main scepticism was about the risk that the MBC, an earlier independent regional project, would be absorbed by the PPP agenda, as suggested by the IDB. According to a United Nations Development Program advisor engaged in the MBC, the «PPP was an unnecessary umbrella that compromised the MBC», which had its own financial and institutional framework. There was also a perceived inconsistency between the MBC's conservationist agenda and the PPP's development goals (MBC 2002). At meetings, CCAD technical advisors voiced concerns about the underutilisation of resources and lack of clarity in the way the two programs were being integrated (CCAD 2002). CCAD meeting minutes also reflected stakeholders' indignation about unequal investment in PPP infrastructure projects and environmental projects, and the risk of public rejection of the PPP overall as its projects were not related to its supposed aim of sustainable development (CCAD 2003).[1] Whatever the disagreement at the technical level, the CCAD Directorate supported the MSDI coordinator and agreed to merge the CCAD agenda into the MSDI framework. The CCAD developed the MSDI's green agenda, including the MBC, an ongoing program to modernize environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and other ongoing projects financed by foreign donors.

According to interviews with policymakers engaged in the MSDI process, the Nicaraguan commissioner was active in the policymaking community, which provided an opportunity to attract attention and resources to Nicaragua (Leal 2002). However Nicaragua had only just approved its own environmental policy strategy in 2001 (Gobierno de Nicaragua 2001) and thus had no technical expertise with which to lead the regional policy design and action plan for the initiative on environmental sustainability. Its lack of economic and human resources to support the MSDI was manifest in the fact that the MSDI was coordinated not from the Nicaraguan environmental governmental agency but at its Foreign Affairs office.

Another important aspect to consider is the fact that the Mexican Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat, by its Spanish acronym) and the CCAD are peer environmental institutions. The latter is the result of the integration of the environmental ministries of the six Central American countries. Semarnat and the CCAD had a background of mutual technical assistance and cooperation and the exchange of experience and engagement in specific projects, and could be framed as a South-South Cooperation scheme prior to the MSDI process. There is evidence that this cooperation did not flow in the MSDI process as it had previously.

In contrast, from 2001 to 2005 virtually no institutional statement about the MSDI or reference to Semarnat's intervention in the policy process could be found in any institutional discourse. Interviews with Semarnat technical officers such as the director of

1 Intervention by the Nicaraguan minister at a CCAD meeting, 2003 Acta XIX de Reunión Extraordinaria, March 13, 2003.

analysis, planning and evaluation; planning officers; and even the policymaking division suggested scepticism about the relevance and even the existence of the PPP and its implementation, even when the action plan was in the process of being defined. At the same time Central American environmental officers saw Semarnat as lacking the political will to engage in the design and implementation of the MSDI, as early policy statements suggested.

Semarnat's disengagement from the policy process can be explained by the internal institutional discontinuity produced by the change of bureaucracy in most of government offices under the Fox administration. This may be related to the withdrawal of the active policy towards Central America that characterized the last PRI Governments and the introduction of new bureaucracy by the National Action Party (PAN, Fox party). In the view of some Semarnat officials most new projects did not have a consolidated institutional niche and fell into a vacuum after a few months of novelty. This was the case with the PPP, a presidential initiative lacking coordination with key ministries. The relationship between Central American and Mexican environmental institutions changed with the Fox administration. As mentioned by the executive director of the CCAD, the institutional link shrank dramatically with evident differences from previous years: no observer was appointed to participate in the Central American environmental institution through CCAD activities, and thus no close interchange and communication were able to develop. From his perspective there had been more communication and longer-lasting relationships in previous years, despite the non-existence of the regional integration program. With the Nicaraguan Government lacking the institutional capacity to lead the MSDI action plan, Semarnat absent and the CCAD limited due to its budget and position, other actors such as the IDB and its consultants assumed a more dominant role in the policy process.

3
Influence through technical assistance

In this case study we can observe that involving technical assistance and the cooperation is a useful device by which the institutional intervention mechanisms of external actors can be depoliticized. It is also an example of influence exercised in the techno-bureaucratic arena. At this technical level the IDB has been one of the most influential stakeholders, basing its positionality on the MSDI policy process with economic support presented as technical assistance and on strategic access to policy implementation, due to its close relationship with the agencies in charge of the policy definition, which were principally consultancies contracted by the IDB. As described by an MSDI policymaker, the IDB's support was

not only financial but also technical. Its role, like that of the CABEI, its subsidiary, has been very important to the plan.

The IDB, a strong supporter of regional integration and open liberalization, exercises its influence through lending to public and private institutions. In addition it has an institutional structure that ensures its effective presence in the different areas of the region. For example it has offices in most of its borrower countries, a department monitoring the bank's regional operations in the Latin American region and, during the policy process, had a specific division supporting the PPP. Furthermore, the IDB plays an important role in attracting the attention of other stakeholders, for example financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and donor countries and development agencies, to the region. In the process these organizations assume the position of expert advisors and are important players in the definition of technical commissions and financial support.

The IDB moved the process forward by supporting the definition of the action plan with technical cooperation. With this, it ensured that its own agenda would be engaged and would achieve validity and donor support for the proposals presented, and that it would gain majority control of the policy process. Its technical cooperation was approved in March 2003 (CCAD 2003). This support contributed to defining the baselines for environmental sustainability and the MSDI Action Plan. The IDB thus assumed the role of setting conditions for the definition of the action plan. In 2003 it engaged in technical cooperation with Nicaragua to help with the MSDI policy process by providing a consultant to develop the whole MSDI policy documents.

CCAD officers' perspectives on this stage of the policy process are critical of their counterparts but mention that there were few other options. For CCAD officers interested in securing direct resources with which to consolidate their organization's leading position in the process, the support given by IDB was compromised. This is, by selecting a group of specialist consultants to be in charge of the policy design, the IDB exercised its stronger influence while the CCAD held a secondary position. The latter's role was reduced to providing information required by consultants to evaluate the state of potential programs and projects to be included in the MSDI. In reference to its limited role in the definition of the action plan, a CCAD officer commented:

> We did not make [the MSDI action plan] [...] because we do not have the human resources; neither the IDB nor the CABEI would give us the money to do it because they only pay for consultancy work. Their aid is good, but tied. The IDB says «I'm going to help you […], but I want you to subcontract X»; «I am going to pay […], but I hire and micro-manage the contract». They do not give money for institutional administration. This has implications for the implementation and acceptance of the projects. Otherwise nobody feels that the project is their own (Fieldwork interview I54 CCAD 2005).

At the Central American level INCAE, a private organization dedicated to business and administration consultancy in the region, played an important role in the definition of the PPP's environmental agenda. Founded by the business communities and governments of the Central American countries in 1964 in association with US scholars, it has strongly promoted an agenda of regional liberalization. Thus it is a good example of a stakeholder exerting a strong influence in the policy community by sharing values, environmental perspectives and discourses with key stakeholders in the policy community, particularly the IDB.

INCAE played a key role in the technical group and, in parallel, as a consultant developing the guidelines of the policy. Both INCAE and the IDB shared an interest in advancing the business agenda and the inclusion of the region in the global economy. This was a determining factor in the design of the MSDI action plan. In the opinion of the policymakers involved INCAE was not an exclusively academic institution, as it played a very clear role in Central American politics through the formation of technical and political profiles. As stated by one of the CCAD directorate,

> INCAE appears to outsiders as a partner, an «associate», but has really just been a contractor paid to prepare the proposals [...]. The contractors are only interested in the diagnosis and follow-up because they believe that it can obtain a contract for a following phase (Fieldwork interview I55 CCAD 2005).

As evidence of its relevant position, *a)* it was part of the PPP decision-making structure; *b)* its specialists engaged in most of the different initiatives' technical commissions, claiming expertise in economic integration, competitivity and sustainable development; and *c)* networking with international community stakeholders and central American elites, in the role of «expert advisor».

4
Stepping back from sustainability commitments in the Mesoamerican region

The outcome of the venture between IDB specialists and INCAE consultants was an action plan, released in January 2004. The policy papers included a document titled Mainstreaming the Environment in the PPP,[2] which contained an analysis of and recommendations for the overall evaluation of PPP sustainability.

The document begins by recognizing the failure to secure a more equal distribution of financial resources between the Mesoamerican initiatives. It also acknowledges the lack of clear coordination mechanisms for engaging sustainable development as a policy issue (INCAE 2004, p. 12). The strategy proposed advances three

2 In Spanish, Transversalidad Ambiental del Plan Puebla Panamá.

arguments that contradict the initial MSDI policy statements: first, a change to the name of the Initiative, which suggests a withdrawal from the sustainability concept under a technical claim, arguing that «[the] name of the Initiative reflects a wrong identification of sustainability with environmental management» (INCAE 2004, p. 1).

Second, the policy discourse is framed as market discourse: the environmental management of PPP projects becomes «the client» which is subject to the loan and the technical team of «the bank». The discursive withdrawal from sustainability to mainstreaming the environment was a first step in the disengagement from political commitments towards more technical solutions. Although the framework moves forward in the definition of environmental impact management in the context of PPP projects, it states that EIAs would be undertaken for projects only where required by national law and the standards of financial institutions in order to assure the environmental integrity of the project (INCAE 2004, p. 31). This implies a turn towards the reinforcement of national legislation in EIAs, but it diminishes the regional character of the MSDI.

Third, no reference is made to connection with the local dimension in which these projects would be implemented. The target «region» portrayed in these documents is still framed as rural and natural protected areas, without consideration, for example, of local peri-urban scenarios for PPP implementation, projects in areas of already high environmental vulnerability due to industrial and urban activity.

Further meetings between stakeholders (IDB and CCAD officers, the MSDI PPP commissioner, INCAE and consultancy representatives) took place to deliberate over the situation of the MSDI and review the action plan (April 2004) at the IDB headquarters in Washington DC. However, the main issues discussed at these meetings were INCAE's work as a contractor to the IDB and the inclusion of the MBC and the Program for the Modernization of Environmental Management Systems (PROSIGA), already an IDB-financed program, in the MSDI. Further meetings were mainly oriented towards clarifying the procedures proposed in the action plan and defining which projects would be included in a PPP road show organized by the IDB for international donors as part of the IDB's agenda (IDB 2004b, p. 1).

On May 25 2004 the final version of the action plan was presented by a member of the INCAE consultancy group at a MSDI technical commission held in El Salvador, along with a list of projects to be included in the road show (IDB 2004, p. 2) on the instructions of the IDB policymakers. The distribution of projects across the other Mesoamerican initiatives was asymmetric, with only six projects in the MSDI, at difference with the infrastructure initiative that held more than twenty. This imbalance in the number of projects was an issue raised by the CCAD policymakers:

> And who decides how many projects go to the energy initiative and how many go to the MSDI? The Bank? The consultants? The budget? If we are truly talking of *mainstreaming the environment* then we should begin by being given complete information on what this road show is all about (Fieldwork interview, CCAD policymaker, 2006).

For CCAD officers, the overall MSDI policy process added very little to the existing regional environmental agenda and put existing conservation projects such as the MBC at risk. For CCAD policymakers, the IDB-INCAE intervention was an attempt to give a different appearance to the environmental policy process, despite the fact that the main focus still was on preparing the projects for the roadshows with donors rather than actually monitoring them.

Although the stated objective of the IDB intervention was to contribute to the integration of all the PPP initiatives in a framework of sustainable development, they financed only *(a)* specialized consultancy services, *(b)* workshops for coordination and consensus-building for the cross-insertion of the environmental dimension into the PPP's initiatives, and *(c)* diffusion about the MSDI. In words of the CCAD's counterparts, «they could not be sure that the projects presented will be executed at all». From the perspective of these sceptical policymakers the MSDI should have been delimited from the beginning to design instruments of environmental policy; in other words, environmental warrants rather than projects:

> Sustainability is a dimension that is much more extensive than the concept of evaluation and management or environmental impact on projects. I do not know who gave it the name «Mesoamerican Sustainable Development Initiative». I think that the [IDB], and this type of institution is keen to include the environmental theme, but only in terms that match their agenda [...]. Projects to strengthen institutionality, to create the capacity to formulate guidelines; these are the projects that should have entered the MSDI and should have been at its heart. We don't want projects; what we want is the capacity to technically evaluate them in their environmental context and the ability to say whether they are viable or not, leaving aside «road shows» – putting projects at the centre of the MSDI (CCAD policymaker, quoted in Almaguer 2008, p 153).

Environmental safeguards continued to be discussed at various meetings of key stakeholders in Washington and Managua in 2005 and in Panama in 2006. Finally in 2006 a document defined as a Voluntary Agreement to Sustainable Environmental Conduct for Regional Development Initiatives under the PPP (SICA and CCAD 2006) was published. While for INCAE the most important issue was persuading the ministries to accept MSDI agreement and the IDB to pay for technical cooperation to maintain the monitoring of the action plan, for CCAD officers the policy process failed to promote sustainability through the operationalization of the MSDI.

The voluntary agreement was a step forward on the environmental governance of the region. However, its non-binding principles and terminology suggested a weak warrant for the environmental

safeguarding of PPP projects in the Mesoamerican region, principally because it did not reinforce the environmental legal framework: its voluntary character implied a non-binding mechanism and it did not modify or strengthen the institutional countries' capacities or existing regulations. The agreement did not specify the role of project investors, developers or funding agencies as parties in the environmental agreement, or responsibilities in the implementation of PPP projects that could harm the environment of the region. The only reference in relation to such stakeholders states that «beneficiary countries will encourage the funding agencies to consider applying standards that are equivalent to those contained in the agreement» (PPP and CCAD 2006, Principle 4).

The agreement does not reinforce access to documents and information in relation to the availability of environmental information in specific controversies. It leaves the corresponding environmental authorities to apply their own citizen's participation mechanisms and «[utilize] the most appropriate methods to facilitate access to environmental information by the citizens of the region» (PPP and CCAD 2006, p. 13).

Analysis of its genesis and particularly its process explains the rise and fall of the MSDI as the environmental framework for regional integration. No explicit statement is included in the agreement about PPP projects already in the process of implementation, *i.e.* all those in process during 2001-2006, which included most of the transport (roads, airports, ports, multi-modal networks) and telecommunications infrastructure and energy initiatives.

5
New label, same policy

In 2009, the PPP was relaunched as the Mesoamerican Project and redefined as a platform for integration and development. The discourse portrayed in institutional reports emphasizes regional coordination and cooperation contributing to the region's inclusive socioeconomic development.[3] Toussaint (2014) explains the shift in the institutional process in which the PM is located has a stronger emphasis on its supranational vocation than before. It must be remembered that during this period Felipe Calderón[4] and George W. Bush visited the region and launched the Mérida Initiative, a paradigm of international cooperation on security, in Mexico, which in the view of some authors was a new model of intervention related to the increased violence that prevailed in Mexico at the time (Covarrubias 2013; Dell 2015).

In terms of the environmental dimension of the regional integration in June 2008, at the ministerial meeting the environment ministers approved the Mesoamerican Strategy for Environmental

3 Proyecto Mesoamérica (2015), http://www.proyectomesoamerica.org/, accessed 20 January 2016.

4 Mexican president following Vicente Fox, also from the National Action Party.

Sustainability, an instrument framed along three strategic lines: *a)* biodiversity and forests, *b)* climate change and *c)* sustainable competitiveness, attempting to articulate the environmental chapter of the PPP-PM and establish clearer cooperation frameworks for acting on the environmental aspects of regional integration. An action plan was again outlined, but as the process was similar to that of the previous PPP model there was no follow-up until 2003. Although there are a considerable number of projects in the green agenda of the PPP and Proyecto Mesoamérica they are fragmented projects responding to specific environmental needs, mainly with a conservation perspective.

The withdrawal from the sustainable development discourse is consistent with the weakening of the MSDI as an environmental warrant of regional integration, as described in the last phase of the PPP. No mention is made to this framework to the previous policy process. Thus is to be noted that sustainable development and environmental sustainability were still excluded from this new public image of the regional plan. Capdpont (2011) indicates that communications and transport infrastructure have improved in the area, as the previous infrastructure agenda was the same as that of the PPP, but the high social and economic marginalization of the people continues whereas the new agreement's strategies does not address the environmental governance of the region in a clear manner.

6
Conclusions

This paper has analyzed Central America and Mexico's regional integration process, launched in 2001 and known as the Puebla-Panamá Plan (PPP) and renamed the Mesoamerican Project in 2008. The focus on the policymaking process has enabled identification of the ways in which stakeholders have discursively shaped its environmental policy process during its different phases. The paper contributes to the analysis of the environmental dimension of the regional integration process. It also contributes to the sustainable development implementation debate by analyzing interventions in the policy design at the macro and meso levels. More scholarly work is needed to analyze local connection to this process in the different countries that form part of this regional movement.

Although one of its key distinctions was originally its strong commitment to sustainable development and safeguarding the environmental dimension of the regionalization process, discourse and deliberative analysis show that the PPP and Mesoamerican Project has been rather the result of a highly-crafted intervention by policy communities of regional and international stakeholders. This case study has shown that offering technical assistance was a

useful device by which to depoliticize external actors' institutional intervention mechanisms. It is also an example of influence exercised by international organizations through their contribution as techno-bureaucratic experts who frame the problems and solutions to be tackled by the policy strategy.

The paper also enquires into the contribution of the overall process to the environmental governance of the region. The findings suggest that, as the policy process developed in a context of exclusive deliberative practices, the strong intervention of supranational stakeholders may have weakened the regional environmental agencies which could have been more effective in meeting meso/regional or micro/local needs.

The Voluntary Agreement to Sustainable Environmental Conduct, released by the MSDI in 2006 and largely shaped by the IDB and its consultants, represented a weak warrant of environmental sustainability in the region in the context of project implementation. Its relevance faded in the transition from the PPP to PM. Managerial and liberalization discourse prevailed over the environmental claims originally proposed in the policy process.

The institutional arrangements in the context of this regional integration process have not contributed to reinforcing institutional arrangements to observe and scrutinize the environmental effects of the regional integration process. In consequence, the characteristics of the infrastructure projects have been implemented with a fragmented rather than a holistic view of the sustainability of the region.

Policy innovation still offers a window of opportunity for strength institutional arrangements, but barriers to policy integration in the Mesoamerican experience —the over-intervention of supra-national stakeholders in the definition of policy and action plans, and the lack of finance to strengthen meso-level institutions engaged with the environmental governance in Mesoamerica, which still as fragile and vulnerable as its own environment— require careful consideration.

7
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