

A region with many opportunities

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HUGO MARTÍNEZ has been the Secretary General of SICA since September 2013. An engineering graduate of the University of El Salvador, he also attended the University of Toulouse, the Centro-American University in San Salvador, and the Universidad Latina de Costa Rica. Following a period as Youth Coordinator of the FMLN, he was elected as a Deputy in the Legislative Assembly in 2003. He was appointed Foreign Minister of El Salvador in 2009, resigning last year to take up this appointment.

Since the independence movements first began, the concept of Central America as one region has been envisioned by many. It was a goal that Francisco Morazán, a Honduran military man and politician who governed the Federal Republic of Central America in early nineteenth century, sought to fulfill, but despite his attempts to maintain the unity of the country, he finished by dividing it into five states: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.

From then until the modern era, the best alternative for integration was made possible thanks to the creation of the Organization of Central American States (ODECA), through the signing of the Charter of San Salvador on October 14, 1951. The entity became operational between September and October 1955, with its main headquarters in El Salvador.

The attempts to integrate Central America were deliberate and manifested by internal conflicts and civil wars in some of the Central American nations. After a period of social upheaval, the isthmus could finally enjoy peace due to the ending of the armed clashes and the signing of agreements between the dis

Given this scenario, the desire of a regional union surfaced again, and on December 13, 1991, culminated in the signing of the Protocol of Tegucigalpa, which led to the General Secretariat of the Central American Integration System (SG-SICA), which came into operation on February 1, 1993 and had as headquarters city in San Salvador.

Throughout its history, maintaining as a reference other similar processes such as the regional integration in Europe or other parts of America, the Central American unification process has been characterised by its own model. Despite being a theoretical construction policy slope, it has fully consolidated and its development has been marked by the peculiarities of the idiosyncrasies of their population and the various approaches implemented over time by the different governments of the nations that it is composed of.

Even with their difficulties and limitations, I can say that this model has made the Central American integration process one of the most advanced, after the European Union.

One of its most obvious qualities is that it is multi-dimensional even though the institutional strengthening and the construction of regional

policies are moving simultaneously. It also occurs in a heterogeneous manner within a wide variety of policy areas, sectorial and institutional, unique to each country. Even, on occasions it has begun with bilateral treaties, with the exception of a single treaty as in the case of Mexico.

This multi-dimensional feature is probably the result of the historical and legal roots of the process. The institutional structure was born in the 90s with a coordinating General Secretariat System and a number of Secretaries created at different times for each one of the “Subsystems” identified, among them: the economic, the social, educational and environmental.

The creation was due to this reality, for example the Secretariat of Central American Economic Integration (SIECA), the Secretariat of Central American Social Integration (SICA), the General Secretariat of Educational and Cultural Central America (SG-CECC), and the Central America Coordination Committee on Environment and Development (CCAD), whose existence reflects the decision to generate policies, public goods, and regional performances in a wide variety of areas.

A challenge for this multidisciplinary vision has been the extent of promoted initiatives and the diversity of the issues addressed; this is caused by the wide range of mandates that have emanated as a product of the Summits of Presidents and Heads of State, the supreme body of the SICA. Not having a clear thematic focus or orderly management of these mandates, guidelines set for the system have varied from one issue to another, not always with equal intensity and sometimes generating contradictions.

With full awareness of the situation, the Presidents of the isthmus Nations made an effort in 2010 to relaunch the integration, establishing five main pillars of action to that end: democratic security; Prevention and mitigation of natural disasters and the effects of climate change; Social integration; Economic integration and strengthening Regional institutions.

Nowadays, it also applies to a deep institutional reform that tries to rationalize and make the structure of the System more efficient as such, with this it seeks to systematise the operation of the Committee of Secretaries that gives coherence to the entire system, as well as the definition of a mechanism of rotation per country for the principal Secretaries and establishing a

clear and active role for the observer countries of which, within the region and outside, are more than twenty.

Our purpose is to advance the systemic functioning of SICA; to strengthen and build relations bloc by bloc, to seek alliances with UNASUR, CAN, MERCOSUR, CARICOM, ASEAN and other Nations on the other side of the Atlantic. This without forgetting the participation of civil society and considering academia, trade unions, youth, among others, to thereby generate a debate on integration between all stakeholders in the process.

In the realm of international cooperation, we have also made great steps at the Panama Summit celebrated in December 2013. A management mechanism was established to strengthen the capabilities of the system and ensure alignment of international cooperation with the priorities of the organization, so that makes the appropriation of the results possible on the part of the Member states and the mutual accountability between aid workers and SICA.

Now, when we are defining a framework for cooperation with Spain and the EU, it seems essential to emphasize that these should be aligned with the priorities of the region, and we should make sure that such cooperation reaches the populations that need it most. We must work to strengthen integration from below and consider institutions as a means to achieve and not as the ultimate goal.

But this does not require us to forget that the process of integration, as it happens in any part of the world, are not linear and therefore there must be some margin of flexibility to make a turn in the road when facing unforeseen transcendental situations.

In spite of the changes in direction that we have incorporated as a system, we still face significant challenges in the immediate future. One of the most obvious is economic and financial sustainability. In order to deal with that, at the recent Summit of Panama, member countries approved an increase of quotas aimed at covering it with the operation of their own system of resources. No doubt this strategic step in this field will be the creation of a single funding mechanism.

At this point, a challenge even more relevant than before is the approach and the generation of concrete results for citizens of the region. The institutions of SICA have achieved substantial strengthening in recent years, which has given it a high capacity to design and develop policies and relevant regional strategies such as the Regional Program for food security and nutrition (PRESANCA), the Central American strategy of Territorial Rural Development (ECADERT) or the mainstreaming of gender, among others.

All results that are sought with these initiatives should be more clearly designed to generate public good and direct benefit to Central American citizens,

these efforts should be communicated more intensely, so that the system consolidates its social legitimacy as a basis for its sustainability as a public entity.

Some concrete cases which the System is demonstrating now in its ability to generate these type of benefits for the citizenship are: the joint negotiation of medicines by health ministries in the region to acquire quality products and lower the price from the international laboratories; the promotion of the tourism brand together “Central America”, the seasonal ban on fishing for species such as lobster and the main plan of regional formation in the training in security for judges, prosecutors, and police officers.

Navigating the paths of integration has not always been easy and it has occurred at different rates. It is always necessary to combine the characteristics of the various actors, a clear lesson learned by the countries that today form the Central America Integration System (SICA). It is together that we will create many more opportunities and play a leading role on the international stage, rather than alone. It is clear that this effort that began several decades ago and continues with the current generation, has finally achieved leadership in the region with greater peace, security, development, and democracy.

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Central America: SICA members shown in blue

