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A Latin American regional dynamic oblivious of periods of crisis

Explaining change in Central America

In my chapter, I claim that institutional change occurs incrementally and informally as a result of exogenous conditions but not necessarily exogenous crisis. The complex relations between States, regional institutions and international actors explain the institutional dynamics of Central American integration. Since the revival of regional integration in 1991, and the Tegucigalpa Protocol, informal processes and a counter-intuitive supranational logic that challenge the pervasive thesis of state predominance have guided the institutional dynamic. The product of such a singular process of institutional change is the “hybridization” of the Central American Integration System, that is to say an institutional transformation dynamics that emerges from two antagonistic realities, intergovernmentalism versus supranationalism.

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Since the mid 20th century, the Central American region¹ has been confronted to violent natural, political and social crisis. In 1969, a political breakdown between El Salvador and Honduras ended the integration process. In 1997, a natural disaster (Hurricane Mitch) strengthened the resources dedicated to regional integration and contributed to a massive institutional reform. The 2008 crisis and its impact on the remittances testified of the financial vulnerability of Central America. In 2010, a border conflict between Costa Rica and Nicaragua jeopardized once again a positive sequence of regional integration. As a consequence, Central American integration's history is intimately linked with contexts of crisis.

Table 1: Crisis in Central America

Date	Crisis	Main characteristics
1969	Football war	Conflict between Honduras and El Salvador in reaction to the massive deportation of Salvadoran workers out from Honduras.
1979-1990	Central American conflict	After the Sandinista revolution in July 1979, an armed civil conflict spread all over the region.
1998	Mitch hurricane	Regional state of emergency in consequence of the hurricane Mitch that passed through the region and ravaged it.
2008-2009	Economic international crisis	Central America is fully impacted by the economic and financial crisis coming from the United States of America. People are directly affected by the remittances falling and the weakened banking system.
2009	Honduran coup d'Etat	The elected President, Manuel Zelaya, is expelled from the country to Costa Rica and replaced by an interim President, Roberto Michelleti Bain.
2010-...	Calero island crisis	A territorial dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua about river use and dredging, and environmental degradation.
2011	Salvadoran institutional crisis	Institutional crisis over the election of magistrates and separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers.
2012	E-12 Tropical depression	Regional state of emergency in front of a natural disaster that affected two million Central Americans.

Source: Author.

¹ « Central America region ». We refer in that chapter to the six following countries: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama.

Taking into account the hypothesis elaborated in the authors' introduction, we can say that this chapter will be an illustration of the third hypothesis that was formulated as follow: "the less integrated institutional structures are, the easier it is to address collective problems arising during the crisis in an informal way. This informality allows for keeping the pressure on states and citizens low and opens venues for new collective integration dynamics".

The institutional structure of SICA is still very weak despite its rapid organizational growth. Since its creation the 13rd of December 1991 with the Tegucigalpa Protocol, SICA has always been the target of many critics in terms of effectiveness and legitimacy. Close to and institutional ending in 1996, SICA was confronted to another crisis in 2004 when Honduran President, Ricardo Maduro, decided to opt out from the Central American Parliament and the regional Court of Justice. Up to now, many Central Americans do not know the existence of SICA, neither they do know about its mission. We face a "paradox of in-success" to amend the expression coined by Gary Wynia that characterized Central American integration as a "paradox of success" (Wynia 1970). It was without anticipating the crisis that was about to come.

This chapter claims that crisis has not only had a breakdown effect but also a creative one. We focus on the crisis generated by a natural disaster in 1998 with the hurricane Mitch. We argue that crisis may foster institutional change while opening new venues, enabling the use of new strategic tools and empowering new actors. Our chapter will be organized as follows:

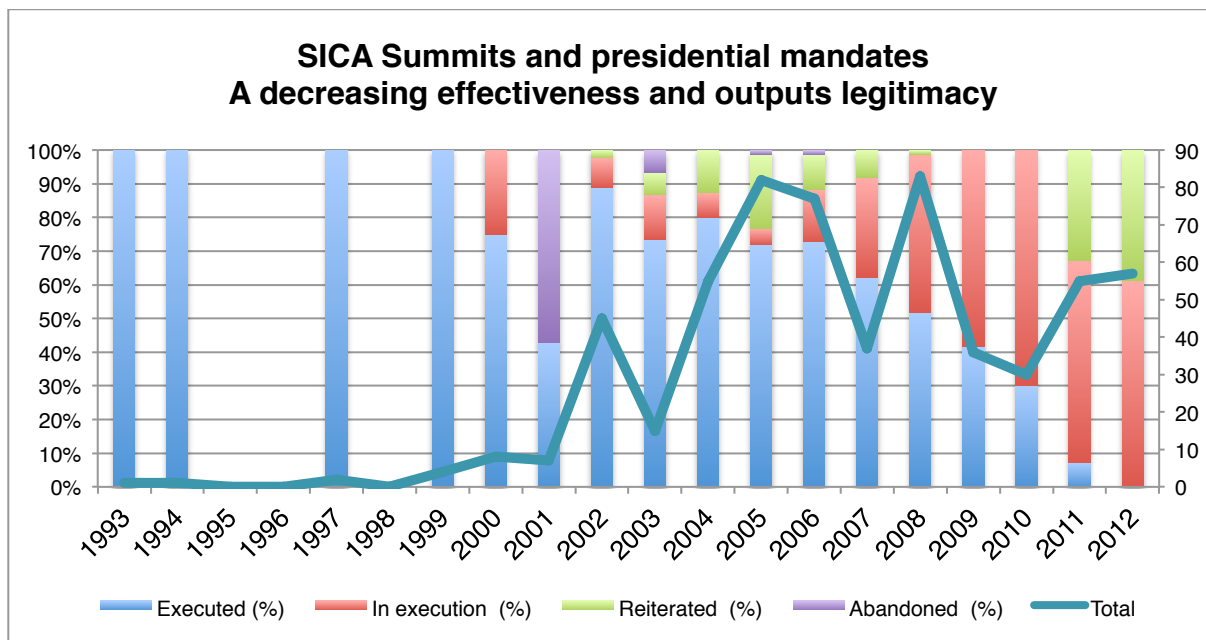
- Presentation of SICA institutional structure
- Presentation of the 1998 crisis
- Presentation of the institutional change variables
- Closing remarks

1) SICA institutional structure

SICA institutionalism has been built around different dynamics: collective presidentialism, intergovernmentalism and external dependence.

Collective presidentialism

Presidential Summits have a central place in the Central American regional institutionalism. The Tegucigalpa Protocol (PT), signed on the 13rd of December 1991, defines the whole set of inner rules and actors' relationships within the Central American Integration System (SICA, Spanish acronym). The Protocol thus provides a central position to presidential meetings as the system's "supreme organ" (PT art. 13). Its main functions are "to define and direct Central American policy by establishing guidelines for the integration of the region as well as the provision necessary to ensure the coordination and harmonization of the activities of the bodies and institutions of the region, and the verification, monitoring and follow-up of its mandates and decisions" (PT art. 15a). As a consequence, presidential summits hold a "power of chair" (Talleberg 2003) by combining two formal skills: access to privileged information and procedures control. Another fundamental skill is to decide who has access to the field. It exceeds a simple control capacity as it enables the Presidents to set the limits and create a Central American field of power. SICA founders have then conferred to the Central American Presidents the ability to control its dynamics of change. Moreover, Presidential Summits are fundamentals to understand the dynamics of Central American integration as they helped to foster the pacification in the Isthmus and became a very legitimate organ. However, this legitimacy has gradually curbed down in the following years due to a great ineffectiveness and peculiarly the lack of Presidential mandates implementation (Figure 1). Collective presidentialism, as Andres Malamud conceptualized it (2003), has failed in Central America.



Source: Author.

Intergovernmental dynamics

Decision-making also increases the ability to promote or limit change. At a regional level, the decision-making lies on mutual adjustment and the consensus negotiated between actors mostly correspond to the lowest common denominators. Indeed, as stated in article 14 of the Protocol of Tegucigalpa, "its decisions shall be adopted by consensus". On the one hand, SICA institutional strategic decisions must receive the consent of all members, and that is an important limitation given the lack of internal cohesion during the Summits. On the other hand, the practice of intergovernmental negotiations is another obstacle for change. Any theme that creates discrepancies is discarded from the negotiating table. That intergovernmental dynamics is ascendant. Within SICA, the decision making process always implies previous technical talks. For example, when an environmental issue is about to be on the bargaining table, all the national official of Environmental Ministries gathers to elaborate a preliminary agreement and decide on the topics that are to be discussed at the following level. The country that holds the SICA Pro Tempore Presidency (PTP) receives the Central American delegation and prepares all the preparatory documents. This process goes from the technical dimension to the political one. The political momentum begins when Foreign affairs Ministers gathers the day before the Presidential Summit to agree on the final "guiding document". During all this process, when erases a controversial point, it is

systematically withdrawn from the negotiation table. In that sense, SICA institutional logic seems to be very close from the intergovernmental theory giving priority to States and bargaining among national preferences and interests (Moravcsik, 1993, 1998). In the Central American Integration System, unanimity does prevail. More generally, unanimity and consensus leads to more abstract principles and weak state commitments. It also contributes to step down agreements' political content. This decision-making process favours mostly status quo and institutional inertia. The inertia defines the period that gaps the creation of SICA (1991) and the first reform initiative (1997) (Santos, 2008).

External dependence

Institutional weakness results directly from the Central American conflict as well as the brutal opening to the international scene (Robinson 2003), in the perspective of the "open regionalism" CEPAL's doctrine (CEPAL 1994). At first, we can say that this institutional weakness is path dependent. In 1960, Gary Wynia claimed that there was a causal relation between the administrative development and the economic development that made the former dependent to external resources. During the regional conflict of the 1980's, many public administrations disappear due either to the political conflict or the lack of financial resources. In the light of the next decade, we observe a renewal of administrative development. However, the youth of many governmental institutions created after the conflict is one the major institutional weakness (Estado de la Region, 2008). A limited experience in public regulation and a high turn over of civil servants as well as political figures make of many official organs empty shells or inefficient bodies. Moreover, we note that these public administrations receive a tiny part of national budgets and have to rely on external support, like in the 60's. An illustrative case is Costa Rica that dedicates 36% of national incomes to 276 administrations. In the opposite, El Salvador dedicates 77% of national incomes to 162 administrations. The State of the Region 2008 Report (Estado de la Region 2008) looks at the Central American public administration and presents another aspect of its weakness. Despite the identification of 968 public institutions, it concludes in a manifest weakness. The low tax burden is also a hindrance to strengthen states' capacity (Schneider 2012). We present this observation in the Figure 1.1. We notice that for a majority of countries, the tax burden even decreased in the 90's while States were engaged in process of

institutional reconstruction. It may appear as a paradox but can finally be explained regarding the huge amount of financial external support in this period. In 1980, the percentage of external financial support to regional GDP was 3.5% and reached in 1990 15.8%. It falls down on the amount of 1980 only in 2007. In accordance with Gary Wynia that made this observation in 1960, Central American still appear economically and technically dependent from external actors and resources (Wynia 1972). As an illustration, in 1996, the IADB, World Bank and USAID gave for the education sector three times the Costa Rican Education Ministry's budget amount (\$384 billion) (Alvarez et al. 1999). To conclude here on that aspect, we can assert that institutional weakness in Central American is still characterized by three phenomena: numerous inexperienced administrations; weakness of financial resources; low professionalization of civil servants as we will see below. Central America is caught in a vicious circle. States' lack of bureaucratic capabilities and the weakness of political powers create the conditions for the dependence to external actors and resources that strengthen the two precedent factors and finally define a new frame of interaction between actors in Central American regarding the implementation of public action. This weak regulation capacity enables the intervention of other actors, particularly international agencies of cooperation. International aid crucially matters. In Guatemala, it constitutes the only mechanisms of the State to initiate a governmental regulation of the social sector (Affre 2001). As a consequence, we identify a governance configuration marginalizes States in favour of international actors.

2) A crisis: hurricane Mitch

As Jean Monnet said in his memories (Monnet 1959), some dramatic circumstances are necessary to foster a closer and more sincere cooperation between actors. The hurricane Mitch creates the conditions for a renewed commitment of international donors in the region. This new frame started with the post-Mitch conferences and particularly the Madrid Conference (2001) that promoted a regional agenda for reconstruction. Let's first consider the facts of the crisis.

Disruptive event

In November 1998, Mitch caused uncountable material and human damages in the region and particularly in Honduras and Nicaragua. More than 3.5 million people were directly or indirectly affected by the disaster. The material damages reached about 14% of the regional GDP.

Table 2: Hurricanes in Central America

	Duration (days)	Intensity (Saffir-Simpson)	Damages (Billion)	Deaths/ disappearances
Andrew	13	4	25,8	40
Georges	16	4	3,4	412
Mitch	15	5	5,2	19000

Source: Barahona et al., 1999.

Table 3: Damages caused by Hurricane Mitch

	Death	Missing	Homeless	Damage
Costa Rica	7	0	16,500	US\$92 million
El Salvador	240	19	59,000	US\$400 million
Guatemala	268	121	108,594	US\$748 million
Honduras	5,657	8,058	285,000	US\$3.8 billion
Nicaragua	3,000	1,000	368,300	US\$1 billion
Panama	3	0	-	-

Source: BID, 2000.

Crisis interpretation

This natural disaster for the region has not just represented a material tragedy; it has also epitomized States' incapacity to intervene in a state of emergency, to protect people and manage the reconstruction phase. First of all, in Honduras, national authorities needed a month to intervene in some region of the country. Till the end of November, some people kept isolated and without rescue from the government. This situation highlighted another very harsh reality for Central America: unprofessionalism of public ministries and public officials. Indeed, in a report of the Inter American Bank of Development (IDB) and AECID (Spanish aid agency), Central America is characterized by its very low degree of efficiency, effectiveness and professionalism of its public officials (BID 2004, AECID 2008). This structural problem is explained either by the weaknesses of the educational sector, fast bureaucratization, and clientelism. As a consequence, the

hurricane Mitch unravelled one of the main structural problems in Central America: the weakness of States and the public institutions. The weakness has been stressed either financially or technically. In fact, many institutions had been unable not intervene because of a lack of “know-how” and not necessarily a lack of financial resources. This is precisely the reason why international aid massively intervenes in the region through financial aid as well as expertise in humanitarian emergency matters. United States supplied \$70 million in aid for the region, Spain \$105 million, and Sweden announced around 100 and 200 million over a three years period (NOAA 1998). International actors helped for the creation of informatics systems to share and disseminate meteorological information as well as educational programs on environmental risks and climate change mitigation (SGSICA 2001)

A regional consciousness

The hurricane and its consequences shed light on the environmental vulnerability of the region, the risk of being affected simultaneously in more than one country. Natural events have no borders and, then, regional regulation has become compulsory. Indeed, no environmental ministries have been able to face the natural disaster and structure a reconstruction process. Such an environmental constituted an ideal dramatic unanticipated type of change (Pierson 2004). It initiated a transformation in the public action paradigm and laid progressively a focus on the necessity of regional regulation. At that time, the region becomes increasingly tied with the feeling of a “common destiny”. It initiated a transformation in the public action paradigm and laid progressively a focus on the necessity of regional regulation. This is the principal diagnostic of the “Central American agenda of transformation and modernization for the 21st century” elaborated by the SICA General Secretary Oscar Santamaria (2000-2004) (SGSICA 2001). From that diagnostic, Central American networks and regulation tools unfold with a “Central American vision” for the future. This feeling is the same that infused the region in the post-war context of the early 1990’s. Furthermore, regional organizations such as CEPREDENAC (Coordination Centre for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America), or even the General Secretary, with the help of international community showed a real technical capacity to intervene and bearing gaps of national administrations. As a consequence, regional “regulators” appeared to be not only necessary but also

competent to manage a wide range of issues. This paradigmatic change of public action is supported by international cooperation as we will see further.

3) Incremental institutional change

We offer here different explanatory variables: renewed cooperation, institutional ambiguity, and supranational leadership. In order to be more precise to explain each variable, we present it separately even if we are facing here embedded and correlated phenomena.

Renewed international cooperation

The relative power of States within regional institutions of Central America creates opportunities for a reconfiguration of power (Lequesne 1996, Cini 1996, 2007, Trondal 2007). Despite a greater autonomy from States and renewed influence opportunities, regional officials still need financial resources in order to work, produce technical expertise and reports that sustain regional public action. Indeed, the relative commitment of States may be evaluated financially. In that perspective, we observe for some States what could be qualified as a “withdrawal” rather than a “relative commitment”. Dominican Republic, Honduras and Nicaragua are deadbeats within the regional institutional settings. As a consequence, regional officials had to seek for alternative supports in order to exercise an influence. As usual in Central America, external resources, and especially international cooperation, helped overcome state breaches. Regional officials have early counted on the support of international aid resources what gave birth to a new configuration of power.

Since its creation, international cooperation has taken part to the institutional consolidation dynamics of Central American integration. Among the major donators, the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the United Nations and Taiwan financed since the beginning a large spectrum of regional activities. Many organizations have become used to dealing with international funds, such as the environmental secretariat. In 1993, the initial 300 000\$ managed by the General Secretariat were coming from Taiwan. Even the more basic logistic aspects were functioning thanks to international credits. Several factors explain why the supranational organs build closer relationships with international donators. A formal explanation must be presented. In

fact, it is one of the General Secretary's formal prerogatives to deal with international cooperation. Article 26 of the Tegucigalpa Protocol indicates "the General Secretary deals for States, groups of States or organisms and other international units, financial and technical cooperation for a proper functioning of the Central American Integration System". On that basis, the General Secretaries have developed instruments through the creation of "forums", "dialogues" and "memorandum of understanding".

The hurricane Mitch creates the conditions for a renewed commitment of international donors in the region. Among them, the European Union and Spain tried to settle a very close frame of cooperation. This new frame started with the post-Mitch conferences and particularly the Madrid Conference (2001) that promoted a regional agenda for reconstruction. It went with drastic changes in the realm of international cooperation at that time. The European Union and Spain, as many others will do later, changed at the edge of the decade their paradigm of action betting on "regional cooperation". In 2001; CAIS signed "memorandum of understanding" with AECID (Spanish cooperation agency) and the European Union. Those formal instruments came along with five-year strategies of cooperation for Central America. The implementation of those strategies required the institutionalization of dialogue. In 2006, Spain created a Joint Commission between AECID and CAIS and an Executive Fund Committee for the Spanish-SICA Fund (Fondo España-SICA). In a similar way, the European Union created a Joint Commission resulting from the memorandum of understanding of 2001. Moreover, in the frame of a mega-project oriented to CAIS's institutional consolidation (PAIRCA), a Technical Coordination Unit was created in order to manage agendas and funds. Since then, the economic crisis has strengthened the regionalization dynamic of international cooperation in order to rationalize financial contributions. Those privileged spaces for close collaboration constitute opportunities for technocrats to impose their ideas and seek for alternative way of funding their initiatives. We observe that some regional officials or external experts promote institutional change in order to consolidate regional institutions despite state withdrawal or lack of agreement on proper reforms to be adopted. This assumption implies a more qualitative and sociological analysis of regional integration. From that basis, our perspective is to analyse how some non-state actors may have informally promoted institutional change within regional integration in a rather incremental dynamic (*petits pas*).

We present in a concrete way how institutional change is characterized and analyse how some actors have been able to promote reforms. First of all, we observed that donators participated in, at least, three ways to institutional reforms: specialization, normalization and rationalization. Regarding “specialization”, the financial and technical help of donators enabled to establish sectorial organs belonging to regional integration sub-systems. The Executive Secretariat of the Central American Health Minister Council (SE-COMISCA, Spanish acronyms) and the Technical Secretariat of the Women Minister Council (ST-COMMCA) are the most emblematic cases. As the smaller “Democratic Security Unit”, all these organs have mainly taking advantage of European and Spanish funds. It enabled to finance human resources, logistic and current activities like reports publications. Secondly, international cooperation and the massive funding forced regional organization to professionalize and internationalize the management of financial and human resources. In the final report of the European program PAIRCA, we can read “the promotion of administrative and management modalities indicate that PAIRCA launched an interesting process in administration and management with donators that has to be carried on. The cooperation with European Union and UNPD eased the proper use of funds (...) it has been observed a gradual learning process and knowledge about recruitment, repayment, etc., that obviously provoked initial gaps that were fulfilled with the program implementation” (Calcoprieto et al. 2009). The proceedings transformation came sometimes from a direct initiative of the donator. Indeed, Spanish cooperation helped writing an administrative and financial manual oriented to the use of funds. Moreover, we notice that the implementations of some programs were delegated to regional institutional, such as the General Secretariat. In that perspective, the ownership of financial funds forced to adapt international norms of financial information and international norms of bookkeeper information. In 2008, Administration and Finance Direction launched a specific reform in order to implement these international norms. Today, mastering these norms is a prerequisite for any technical and administrative recruitment. We observe a similar effect for the management of human resources that were not codified. Only recently a process of human resources recording has been undertaken. Thirdly, international cooperation had an impact on institutional change by its participation to the system’s normalization and rationalization. In terms of normalization, the Spain-SICA Fund financed the activation of the Executive Committee. It had been created in 1991 by the Protocol of Tegucigalpa

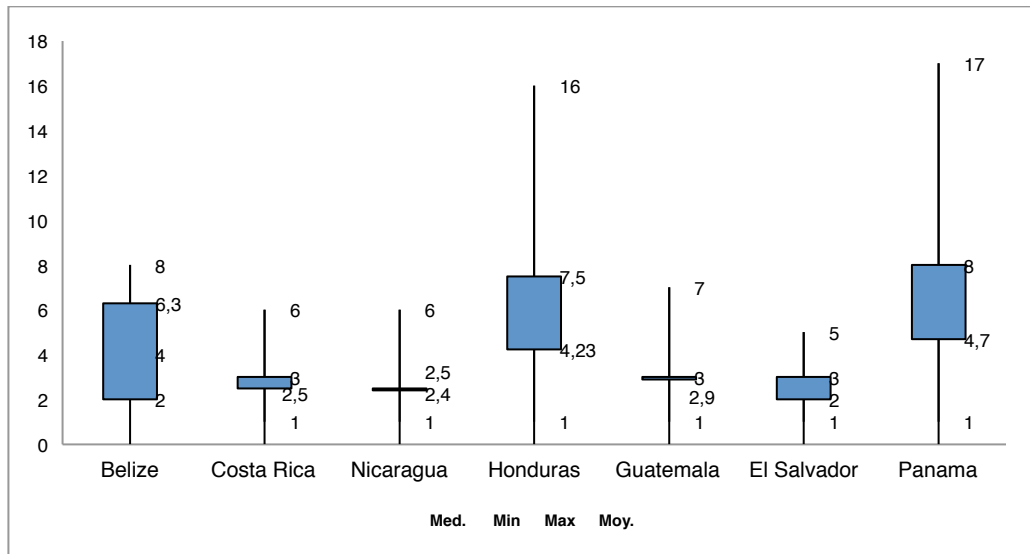
(PT) but had never been activated. Nevertheless, it is an important organ that epitomizes the intergovernmental dimension of the Central American regional integration. The same observation could be made with the creation of the Regional Control Committee that was created by article 33 of PT. This activation is mainly due to European cooperation as well as the strengthening of the Consultative Committee of CAIS. This organ dedicated to civil society participation had never been solid enough to foster civil society participation in the regional decision-making since 1995. Finally, international donors financed or deliver technical support to settle organs that foster rationalization of CAIS. For example, SICOR is an instrument of evaluation and quantification of international cooperation in order to make more coherent the regional aid strategy. In terms of agenda, the Analysis and Planning Direction, created in 2007, has to promote coordination, foster an accountability culture and work at the definition of a strategic regional agenda. Those organs strengthen thus the bureaucratization dynamic and norms of what is called “new public management”. By bureaucratization, we understand the seeking of rationalization by computability, predictability and the transfer from a logic of means to a logic of results”.

Institutional ambiguity

All Latin-American integration systems are facing difficulties of norm compliance (Gomez Mera 2007). SICA does not escape from this reality and suffers from a serious non-compliance dynamics. In Central America, compliance is at stake for States as well as regional actors. Compliance may be defined as the actions taken “to translate international accords into domestic law and policy” and “the extent to which they adhere to the provisions of these agreements” (Underdal 1998). Even if at a certain period of time Central American States have found an interest to cooperate regionally, it progressively decreased as we saw above and unfolded non-compliance. We claim that one of the main consequences of non-compliance is institutional ambiguity that we observe through political decisions and divergent and/or conflictual interpretation of norms. Indeed, political decisions may imply an institutional ambiguity if we observe the ratification delay. We fully comply with an international commitment when all the respective legal instruments and ratification are submitted. In that perspective, the delays of ratification become indicator of institutional ambiguity as it creates uncertainty in the institutional and legal order. They also are indicator of the States’

commitment to regional integration. In terms of ratification, we observe that Central American States are mostly responsible for that ambiguity.

Figure 1: Ratification of regional legal instruments

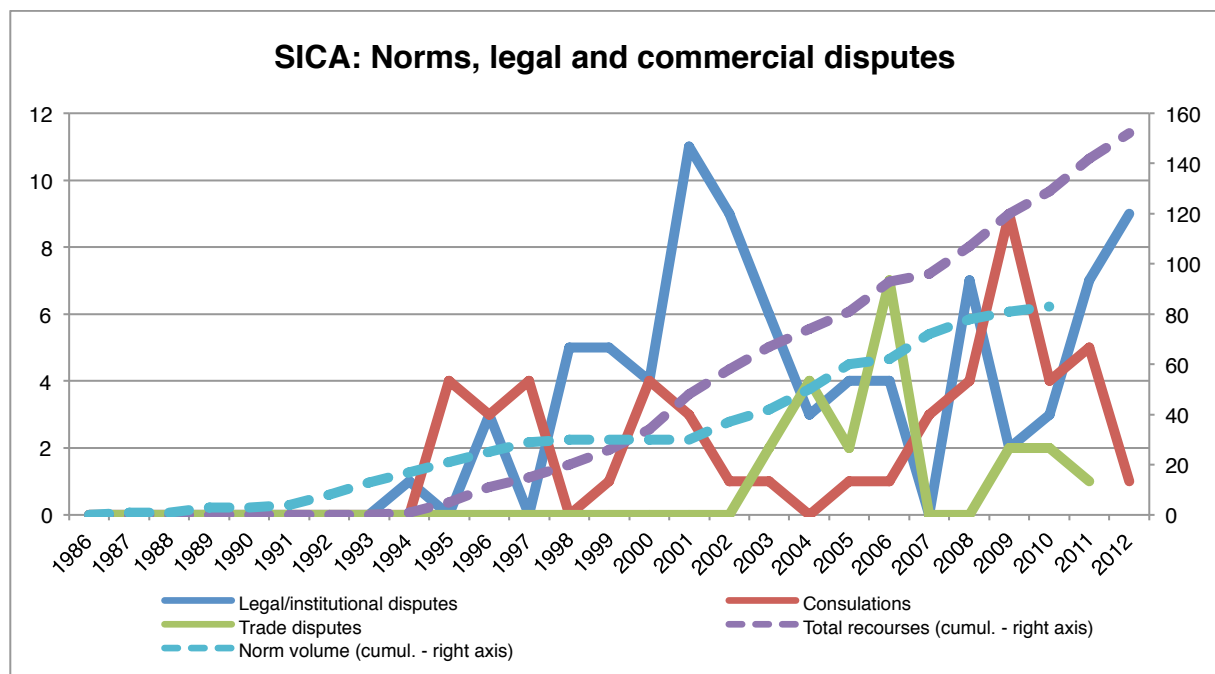


Source: Author.

Ratification delays matter a lot. In fact, without the ratification of all the members, treaties cannot be legally binding. As a consequence, it impacts negatively the stability and efficiency of norms productivity of the whole system. It also generates uncertainty about the institutional order. In that perspective, as indicated by the figure above, Honduras, Panama and Belize contributes to institutional ambiguity with long ratification delays. Apart from Honduras, the behaviour of Panama and Belize in that respect is not so surprising as they are more engaged on a minimal intergovernmental cooperation scheme. Conversely, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua are fully committed to regional integration and respect its institutional and legal stability with short ratification delays. Its echoes their “integration vision” characterized by a promotion of supranationalism. Costa Rica and Honduras have a counter-intuitive position. Contrary to a general opinion, Costa Rica does not impede regional integration. “Less, but better” could be the Costa Rican stand towards legal instruments of regional integration. Honduras is a major piece in the SICA institutional ambiguity. Its may be explained by a very unstable and irregular national judicial security and a very slow pace of parliamentary activities in the country.

Institutional ambiguity can be explained by two main factors: norm imprecision and norm inflation. We analyse both phenomena in the Central American regional integration realm. A good indicator of norm vagueness is the existence of divergent interpretation of conflictuality. Then, we take into account the disputes that emerged within SICA linked to the legal instruments.

The legal/institutional disputes and consultations are addressed to the Central American Court of Justice (CCJ). The trade disputes are addressed to the “Trade Dispute Resolution Mechanism” of the Central American Integration Economic System (SIECA, Spanish acronyms). Consultations epitomize the organizational uncertainty that exists within SICA institutionalism. These demands regard organization skills, mandates implementation, legal instruments (use, effectiveness), and regional integration system enlargement.



Source: Author.

Another explanation of institutional ambiguity lies in SICA legal instability. We inventory a dozen of legal categories within the regional legal order (agreements, acts, conventions, declarations, protocols, etc.). In front of that dozen, only four are framed by the “Agreement on SICA normative acts” (2005). As a consequence, we observe an important scattering of regional norms. On that unstable legal-institutional order, another phenomenon contributes directly to the institutional ambiguity: normative

inflation. Added to their vagueness (see above), SICA “normative life” can be characterized by its fastness, which destabilizes even more a yet precarious institutional equilibrium. Normative inflation and differentiated integration (Leuffen, Rittberger, Schimmelfennig 2012) explain further institutional development of SICA. As far as norms are concerned, we can identify three periods: institutional development (1990-1996), institutional inertia (1997-2001) and bureaucratization (2002-2010). The normative inflation rhythm (NIR) multiplies by two between 1989-1997 (NIR = 3,5 norms/year) and 2002-2010 (NIR = 6,62 norms/year). To understand why it fosters institutional ambiguity, we need to add to that statistical scrutiny a qualitative observation that consists in the stagnation of human, administrative and financial resources of SICA. Thus, it highlights normative inflation fosters more non-compliance and institutional ambiguity than legal and institutional stability. Finally, we can stress another factor of institutional ambiguity: differentiated integration. As a conflict vector between organizations, in particular according to an equal distribution of competences, differentiated integration has generated unbalanced institutional relations and uncertainty regarding intervention areas and hierarchical relations. We count 49 legal instruments for the political sector and 67 for the economic one (40 and 15 respectively for the social and environmental sectors). It exists an equal distribution in terms of norms (political: 1010; economic: 2372; social: 1111; environmental: 336). As a conclusion, we notice that the SICA complex institutionalism is mostly dysfunctional and contributes to open opportunities of new venues, empowerment and leadership of regional actors.

Supranational leadership

Recent works have explained that the leadership is a shared exercise (Endo 1999, Wozniak Boyle 2006). At first, we observe that progressively regional officials became technocrats. Saying that and in front of states’ weakness, regional officials reached a greater influence with the support of external actors. The capacity of regional officials to forge their own preferences, to promote interests and become political entrepreneurs is also a result of an inner process. Individual characteristics tell sometimes more about an institutional function than the function itself. The choice made by the institution on the individual that will embody a function reveals the real nature of its role within the institution. Indeed the role may be distinct from the formal function, which is a

fundamental claim of organizational sociology. To understand this emergent “reign of technocrats” within SICA, we first have to explain what precisely the functions of regional officials are and how this technocracy is characterized. As defined by regional norms, the secretary function is mainly administrative and technical. A General or Executive Secretary represents judicially the institution and control the implementation of ministerial (or presidential) resolutions. These norms are defined in the Tegucigalpa Protocol (1991) for the General Secretary and the sectorial agreements (1993, 1995) for the sectorial secretaries. (Table 3: Categories of professional activities).

The General Secretary is the only one to be qualified as the highest administrative function of the CAIS. Thus, we observe that the regulation power and the capacity to promote public policies remain ministerial prerogatives. Here lays the inflexion point. Indeed, considering a former observation of the weak national administration capacities and the individual profiles chosen of regional institutions’ headmasters, we can easily explain why a technocratic power has emerged. Here we will not come back on national weaknesses but stress the technocratic figures of the Central American Integration System.

The demonstration lies on a small-n study (n=16) of regional secretaries since 1991. The conclusions are built upon a prosopographic treatment. The comparison of socio-biographic profiles and professional careers comes from a database elaborated from the information collected during semi-structured interviews and curricula vitae. With a preliminary treatment, we observe that the regional secretaries (we will also call for commodity “regional officials”) are highly specialized academically in their respective sector of intervention. In terms of academic level, we notice that grades’ levels are diversely distributed. Among our sample, 31.4% have a Bachelor, 22% a Master and 11.1% a PhD. Second observation, the General Secretaries have the highest number of PhDs in the sample, and they are all graduated in Law. They are expert of international norms. Differently, their sectorial colleagues are specialized through the multiplication of professional or semi-professional formations. They appear to be more highly specialized practitioners. Considering the whole sample, we notice that environmental secretaries and General Secretaries are more specialized than in the social and economic sectors. That conclusion lies on an “Academic Specialization Index” that takes into account the number, type and level of grades obtained by the individual under scrutiny. (Table 4: Formal position of SICA’s secretaries).

Another aspect is the preliminary international socialization of these individuals. The socialization occurred either through academic or professional experience. The academic socialization is a common factor to nearly all secretaries; only one did not obtain an academic grade away from the native country (SIECA, Rafael Rodriguez). We can also remark that the secretaries of economy are mostly socialized in North American universities what rings the Chicago boys' bell of neoliberal paradigm circulation, as described by Garth and Dezalay (Dezalay, Garth 2001). Finally, one peculiar aspect is the predominant European socialization of General Secretaries. The first secretary, Roberto Herrera Caceres, has maybe the most solid European socialization with a PhD completed in La Sorbonne (Paris, France) and a professional experiment within European Economic Community (EEC) as Honduran ambassador. The "Academic Specialization Index" is not sufficient to explain how socializations matter. It has to be correlated to a whole career to understand how they are elected. Is their profile limited to "internationally socialized technicians"? While considering entire professional careers, we observe that our actors are multi-positioned. Among eleven professional categories, an average of 4.1 different types of positions characterizes our sample when they are elected.

The main feature of a specialist is "to be limited to the point that bears his knowledge". Indeed, more subtle characteristics that lie behind multiple professional positioning are required to assume the function. A majority (34%) are coming from the public administration and 20.6% from the private sector. Among the officials, many have been high officials within the national administration. With the exception of Juan Daniel Aleman (current SGSICA), all General Secretaries have occupied the highest position of the external service (Minister of Foreign Affairs). During the career, all the Secretaries have assumed functions of Director within national Ministers, Director or President of public institutions or the highest function of minister (SIECA, Yolanda Mayora 2000-2004) or vice-minister (SIECA, Rodas 1995-2008). In the perspective of an international socialization, many had an experience in international cooperation either as consultant (SGSICA, Herdocia 2000) or high international official (CCAD, Marco Antonio Gonzales 2004-2008). More than technicians, regional officials must be expert in management, be at ease with international and intergovernmental negotiations, and be familiar with traditional know-how of diplomatic activities. Besides, these individual are also characterized by a large sociability and benefiting from large solidarity networks built

during long career. Time matters once again regarding the definition of the role. In fact, we found heuristic indicators with the age of office and the number of professional experience preceding the election as regional official. An average of eleven positions is observed before being elected (between 9 and 15). Moreover, the average age of entry into position is 51 years old. Compared to national sphere, we notice that this average age is similar to the one that applies to the highest state positions (Presidency – 52.6; Minister of Foreign Affairs – 52.4). As a consequence, the likelihood to assume official positions at the regional level is higher at the end of a rather busy career. At a symbolic level and on the basis of all these indicators, we claim that the prestige of the individual elected does not necessarily correspond to the one of an administrative and technical function. Here the role appears to be distinct from the function.

How do we become a technocrat? According to the Canadian politician, Jean Meynaud, we become a technocrat when the technician acquires the capacity to decide and influence choices of the formal ruler (Meynaud 1964). Indeed, it is a long-lasting process in order to become a technocrat. Meynaud defines this process as a “competences drift”. This drift has been emblematic for the Social Secretary. At the very beginning and during its first years of existence, predominated a functional and managerial mission. Yet, we observe a slight gap with its formal administrative assistance nature, the Secretary is included in the regional public action. Since 2000, we observe that the Secretary is more committed to the decisional process. In a Ministerial Declaration, the Council asked the SISCA to include new initiatives in the existing regional agenda. Here, social Ministers clearly proceed to a competence shift by delegating an agenda-setting capacity. In 2000, SISCA is asked to complete an already existing agenda. A year later, the Secretary is asked to elaborate a whole agenda according to a previous diagnostic realized by the regional officials. In 2004, the logic of decision-making has been changed, despite not formally. In fact, the validation of our assumption lays in the institutional practice. Official ministerial declarations since that date tell us that the Ministerial Council is rather focused on a simple approbation of the regional officials’ proposals. The “primacy of the pen” effect enables the regional organization to set the course of regional social action. Council of Ministers has progressively become a mere room of ratification when the technical proposals, agenda and decisions elaboration are the result of the regional officials’ work, as confirmed by an inside official: “we can deliver a technical support for a first proposal, it goes to the Council that observes the proposal. It may come back to

SISCA with comments and observations. If not, the Council approves the proposal that goes to the Presidential Summit². This process has gone with a professionalization of those officials. Between 1995 and 2011, we clearly observed a technocratization process in the social system of Central American integration. Similar dynamics also occurred in CCAD, SIECA and with some specific issues with SGSICA. Minister Councils are frequently discarded in front of international technicians that manage an increasing part of the decision-making process. However, such an influence might not be possible without an external support.

Conclusion

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² Interview with Ondina Castillo, Project Management Director, Central American Social Secretariat, 12 May 2011.

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