
TERRITORIAL PLANNING IN CENTRAL AMERICA IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY: COMMON TRENDS, ORIGINALITIES, AND CHALLENGES

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This paper studies the transformation processes occurred in the field of territorial planning in Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and the Dominican Republic during the XXIst. century. All countries have undertaken major conceptual and political changes in their planning systems in the last 15 years through the approval of national planning legislation, policies, plans, and guidelines. These instruments are concerned with: environmental issues, particularly climate change adaptation and economic development. Moreover, a new Territorial Planning Agenda has emerged within the Central American Integration System (SICA) providing with a new regional framework that fosters change at the national level. Nonetheless, national particularities persist, related with different planning histories, and institutional designs. Some countries maintain predominant urban planning practices whereas others are more oriented by environmental concerns or national development strategies. In this scenario common challenges appear in terms of: institutional design, articulation between national and local levels, and addressing urgent social issues. Future perspectives for territorial planning in Central America will be related to: resolve institutional conflicts, gaps and overlaps; strength professional capabilities; consolidate the social relevance of the discipline and the pursuit of regional agendas without losing the diversity of current pluralistic approaches.

Keywords

Planning, Central America, planning approaches, resilience, economic development

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FIGURE 1 Source: own from official documents

INTRODUCTION

This paper studies the transformation processes occurred in the field of territorial planning in Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and the Dominican Republic during the 21st century. In the last 15 years, all countries in the region have undertaken major conceptual and political changes in their planning systems. Countries have invested important resources to prepare national planning policies, regional and metropolitan plans, and planning guidelines for municipalities. Many of these efforts have gone beyond the scope of traditional physical planning and have assumed more comprehensive, communicative, and strategic approaches. New practices are concerned with: environmental management; economic development; participation, and social inclusion. Simultaneously, a new Territorial Planning Agenda has emerged within the Central American Integration System (SICA) which constitutes a comprehensive framework to promote change at the national level. Nonetheless, national particularities persist. These are related with different planning histories, disciplinary origins, and institutional designs. In countries like El Salvador and Panama, urban planning is still dominant; whereas in Honduras or Nicaragua environmental risk management has been the driving force behind policy change. In Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, territorial planning is strongly connected with national development planning. Institutional settings also differ from country to country. Housing and Urban Development Ministries still play a main role in planning and coexist with new national planning secretaries and boards. Additionally, autonomous and innovative practices have emerged in municipalities, to address issues as: finance, land policy, gender, and public participation. All this has occurred in the context of rapid urban expansion and critical social conditions, particularly violence. This paper intends to review these processes of change through a comparative analysis of policies, legislation, and planning instruments. Article is divided in three main sections.

First, it analyses the historic precedents of planning in the region, emphasizing different points of departure, dominant approaches towards the discipline, and institutional organization. The second part focuses on current processes, underlining regional trends and national originalities. Finally, the third section discusses challenges and perspectives for planning practice in Central America and opens the gate for final conclusions.

TERRITORIAL PLANNING IN CENTRAL AMERICA: A HISTORY OF DIVERSITY (2000-2015)

A cross cutting vision of territorial planning processes in the countries of SICA rapidly confirms the diversity of approaches that have historically prevailed in Central America. This diversity is notorious considering the size of the countries and their apparent homogeneity. Figure 1: Central America: eight countries of the Central American Integration System (SICA)

STRUCTURAL FRAGMENTATION

Structural fragmentation of Central American geography and history is well defined in the literature. Diversity is a dominant attribute of the region in environmental, cultural, institutional, and economic terms, in sharp contrast with the size of a territory which is smaller than most Latin American countries¹. Eight sovereign and highly centralized states share a common space with different landscapes, political organizations, ethnicities, and languages. Diverse planning orientations such as national development planning, traditional urban planning, and an emergent environmental approach coexist within the region.

After structural adjustment reforms in the 1990s, Costa Rica was the only nation in Central America that maintained a national development planning system, led by its Economic Development and Planning Ministry (MIDEPLAN). The rest of the countries eliminated during reform previous planning ministries and boards. National planning ceased to be a matter of central government interest in the last decade of the XX Century.

It was not until the last ten years that other Central American countries started to reconstruct national planning systems at the top level of their executive branches. These new systems have taken the form of Presidential Secretaries in El Salvador and Guatemala, and a Planning Ministry in the Dominican Republic. The advent of these new organizations is one the main regional novelties and has permitted to rediscover the relation between strategic national development and physical planning. Still, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama have not created this sort of institutional apparatus reflecting the persistence of liberal and sectoral approaches.

Since the late 1960s planning in Central America had a dominant urban perspective. This is notorious since the region was the less urbanized within Latin America, though characterized by the existence of “large cities in small countries”². One of the consequences of this approach was that housing and urban development ministries had the main responsibility for planning, following the traditional comprehensive planning paradigm³. Another result of this emphasis was that plans and practices were focused on the metropolitan areas of the capital cities. Sharp distinction between urban and rural planning still persists in countries like Panamá where the Housing and Territorial Planning Ministry (MIVIOT) exclusively concentrates in city planning.

At the end of the 1990s new planning practices emerged connected to environmental issues, particularly risk management. This was the result of large scale disasters such as Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and Nicaragua in 1998, and earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001. Environment ministries were created in all countries and incorporated territorial planning in their agendas. Within this context Honduras approved its Territorial Planning Law in 2003, and El Salvador prepared its National Territorial Plan in 2004. International agendas like Rio Agenda 21 and the Kyoto Protocol, facilitated to incorporate sustainability and climate change adaptation into these exercises. This heterogeneous universe of practices indicates the vitality of planning in Central America country, though each nation has a particular interpretation of the scope and structure of the field.

DIFFERENT AND DYNAMIC INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

In 2015 each country presents different institutional organizations to conduct territorial planning. Traditionally this was the responsibility of housing ministries, which is still the case of Panama, and was until recently in El Salvador and Costa Rica. Other arrangements exist in: the Dominican Republic, where the planning function belongs to the Economy, Planning, and Development Ministry (MEPyD); Guatemala, where it is assumed by the General Planning Secretary of the Presidency (SEGEPLAN); and Nicaragua, where the responsibility falls into the Nicaraguan Institute of Territorial Studies (INETER).

Nonetheless, a growing conscience about the multidimensional and multi stakeholder nature of planning has led to permanent debates on how to design and operate more complex institutional structures. These new organizations are expected to connect physical, economic, environmental, and development planning, as well as land policies and public investment according to new strategic planning paradigms⁴. At the bottom of this discussion is the pursuit of a more efficient and comprehensive model to organize state intervention within the territory⁵. Since 2012, in El Salvador, the National Development and Planning Council (CNODT) integrated by six ministries and three representatives of municipalities, conducts territorial planning. In 2014 Costa Rica established an “Environment, Energy and Territorial Planning sector” in order to coordinate public agencies related with territorial issues. In the Dominican Republic 12 national agencies form the “Territorial Planning System” led by MEPyD⁶. These boards tend to be the result of previous interagency agreements within the executive, which proves that in the case of planning: “institutional form follows practice”.

COUNTRY	NATIONAL POLICIES AND PLANS	YEAR
Panamá	Territorial Planning Law	2006
	Sustainable public investment plan (2015-2019)	2015
Costa Rica	National Development Plan (2010-2014)	2010
	National Territorial Planning Policy (2012-2040)	2012
	National Territorial Plan (2014-2020)	2013
	National Development Plan (2014-2018)	2014
Nicaragua	National Human Development Plan (2012-2016)	2012
Honduras	National Territorial Planning Law	2003
	Country Vision (2038)	2010
	Country Vision Law	2010
	Government Strategic Development Plan (2014-2018)	2014
El Salvador	National Territorial Development Plan	2004
	National Development Plan (2010-2014)	2010
	Territorial Planning Law	2011
	National Development Plan (2014-2019)	2014
Guatemala	Plan K'Atun (2032)	2014
Dominican Republic	Constitution	2010
	National Development Strategy 2030	2010
	National Development Strategy Law 2030	2012
	Territorial Planning and Land Use Law	2015

TABLE 1 National planning policies and plans in Central America (2010-2015)
Source: own from official documents

CURRENT PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

NATIONAL PLANNING PROCESSES

One of the main novelties of planning processes in Central America is the approval of new national planning frameworks. Table 1 synthesizes a list of planning policies, plans, and laws approved in the last decade.

Table illustrates how planning practice at the national scale in Central America has gained momentum in the last five years despite differentiated institutional frameworks. As Healey announces⁷, this provides territorial planning with a strategic vision and apparent strong political support. This may signify that a broad consensus exists on the need for state intervention in the territory.

REGIONAL AND METROPOLITAN PLANNING PRACTICES

In the last 10 years, Central American countries have undertaken consistent efforts to plan at an intermediate level between the nation and municipalities. There is a general interest in the official creation of “planning” or “development” regions in order to favour coordination among central government agencies as in the cases of Honduras and the Dominican Republic. MIDEPLAN in Costa Rica has produced regional development plans for the Chorotega and Huetar Caribe regions. The Vice Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (VMVDU) in El Salvador prepared 14 regional plans from 2004 to 2011⁸. In Guatemala, SEGEPLAN has also produced regional plans for Petén and other regions. These planning exercises have contributed to open the debate on how to incorporate the participation of municipalities, civil society organizations, and regional stakeholders in the planning process⁹.

Simultaneously, a new generation of metropolitan plans, is currently being prepared, as reported in table 2.

COUNTRY	CITY	PLAN	YEAR
Panamá	Panamá	Atlantic and Pacific Metropolitan Area Plan (AMPA)	2015
Costa Rica	San José	Grand Metropolitan Area (GAM) Plan	2013
Nicaragua	Managua	Metropolitan Region Plan	2015
Honduras	Tegucigalpa	Central District Development Plan	2014
El Salvador	San Salvador	Territorial Development Plan (PDT-AMSS)	2015
Belize	Belize	Urban Development Plan (2030)	2014

TABLE 2 Recent metropolitan plans in Central America (2010-2015)
Source: own, from various sources

Some cases are relevant to underline. First, Guatemala and Santo Domingo remain to be the only capital cities lacking valid metropolitan development plans. In Tegucigalpa planning was originated by a civil society initiative “Arriba Capital” coordinated by the Architects Association¹⁰. Finally, the case of San Salvador is notable for being the only city in the region with an autonomous metropolitan planning office (OPAMSS). The persistent expansion of all Central American capital cities permits to suppose that this sort of practice, mainly focused on traditional land use and infrastructure issues, will still be relevant in the future.

TERRITORIAL PLANNING PRACTICES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Planning practice at the local level in Central America can be analysed from two complementary perspectives. On one hand, it is relevant to study how national and local governments interact in the framework of new national planning systems and policies. On the other hand, it is possible to identify multiple, sometimes innovative, local practices.

A regional trend exists towards the creation of new local planning guidelines delivered by national government. Apparently, national agencies do not pretend to produce local development plans but expect to devolve this function to municipalities, however providing standardized orientations. Table 3 indicates national planning guidelines produced in different countries.

These national guidelines have produced relevant results. In El Salvador, at least 90 Strategic Participatory Plans were elaborated from 2012 to 2015¹¹; 100 municipalities have followed national guidelines in Guatemala¹², and 38 others have done it in Costa Rica¹³.

Additionally, there is a rich universe of municipal planning practices, particularly in capital and medium size cities. In 2007, the municipality of Guatemala putted in place an autonomous property tax system integrated to land use regulations that permitted the city to finance a new public transportation system. In 2012, the city begun to capture land value increments to finance highway investments. Special assessment contributions are regularly applied in many cities in Honduras in order to promote the implementation of local development plans. León, in Nicaragua, created municipal land banks to conduct urban expansion and provide space for social housing¹⁴. Livingston in Guatemala has successfully implemented an alternative planning methodology to promote gender equality¹⁵. Santa Tecla in El Salvador created an innovative Strategic Development Plan methodology that resulted in new Participatory Planning Councils¹⁶.

These experiences raise two questions for national planning policy: how to promote innovation at the municipal level without replacing local initiative? How to disseminate innovative local practices at the national scale?

COUNTRY	NAME	AGENCY	YEAR
Panamá	Guidelines to prepare municipal plans and schemes	MIVIOT	2015
Costa Rica	Guidelines for Local Human Development Plans	MIDEPLAN	2010
	Guidelines for Urban Development Plans	MIVAH	2010
Nicaragua	Territorial Planning Methodologies	INETER	2008
Honduras	National norms for territorial planning	SEP-DEPN	2015
El Salvador	Guidelines for Local Strategic Participatory Plans (PEP)	SSDT&D	2011
	Guidelines for Municipal Urban Development Plans	VMVDU	In process
Guatemala	Guidelines for Municipal Development Plans	SEGEPLAN	2011
Dominican Republic	National Municipal Monitoring System (SISMAP)	MEPyD	2015

TABLE 3 National guidelines for local territorial planning in Central America
Source: own, from official documents

COMMON CHALLENGES

Despite the diversity of national experiences, territorial planning in Central America faces common challenges and opportunities: the articulation with other public policies; the relation with strategic infrastructure projects; the emergence of Central American regional planning agendas; and the persistence of common social problems.

PLANNING AND OTHER PUBLIC POLICIES

Territorial planning is to be articulated with other public policies. Nonetheless, many overlaps and contradictions persist in Central America, particularly involving the fields of housing, economic development, and environment. This is the case of El Salvador where the new project of a National Housing and Habitat Law (2015) includes several land use regulation instruments. Frequently, housing projects promoted by the public or private sectors encourage urban sprawl in contradiction with planning orientations, particularly in cities like Panamá, San José, and Guatemala.

Tensions also arise between planning schemes and economic development strategies in two related domains: private investment attraction and tourism. Central American countries share aggressive foreign investment attraction strategies, which provide fiscal benefits and diminish labour and environmental regulations that tend to ignore planning guidelines and reinforce regional inequalities. Countries like Costa Rica, Panamá, and the Dominican Republic have specific touristic planning orientations, independent from regular territorial planning instruments. Historically Tourism Ministries in these countries have been reluctant to participate in multi stakeholder spaces to coordinate planning regulations in sensitive areas like coast lines.

These conflicts also appear between planning and environmental policies. On one hand, all countries have approved environmental policies, laws, and plans. However, many of these instruments have no spatial expression. Environment Ministries in El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, and Dominican Republic have approved “environmental zoning” regulations, independent from other planning considerations. In these cases, territorial planning is still pending to become an integrative policy to provide coherence to social, economic, and environmental demands. Planning in Central America is still to achieve equilibrium between “green, profitable and fair” development¹⁷.

Climate change adaptation offers planning new opportunities for policy articulation. Costa Rica aims to be the first “carbon neutral” country in the World, which includes measures related with forest protection, urban expansion, and transportation systems. Similar situations occur in El Salvador¹⁸, Dominican Republic, and Guatemala where new national climate change adaptation policies and plans have been approved in the last five years.

STRATEGIC INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

After the authorization of the Panama Canal Expansion in 2005, all Central American nations prepared key investments in infrastructure such as ports, highways, railways, and airport expansion, in order to improve connectivity between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. However, most of these investments are disconnected from territorial planning schemes despite their impacts on the organization of the territory at the national scale.

Other large scale urban projects like Santo Domingo’s subway and Bus Rapid Transit systems in several capital cities are not articulated with urban plans and tend to ignore the influence of transportation over the city as a whole. Only Panamá’s subway generated a Special Urban Plan for its influence zone¹⁹.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTEGRATION: REGIONAL AGENDAS

Since 2009, the Central American Integration System (SICA) promoted a new set of regional policies and agendas in key topics associated to Territorial Planning, such as: Integrative Risk Management (2013); Rural Development Strategy (2010); Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (2014); Housing and Habitat Agenda (2015), and the Territorial Planning Agenda (2011). Although these instruments have an indicative nature they promoted debate within national governments and contributed to the approval of planning instruments in the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica. The introduction of these multinational planning guidelines may provide orientation for the future development of planning practice within the region.

COMMON PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the persistent heterogeneity of national planning policies and practices in Central America, countries face four common problematics: environmental vulnerability, insecurity, urban expansion, and institutional organization.

Central America's exposition to multiple environmental hazards has been well studied. The region suffered more than \$10 billion losses related to disasters in the last three decades²⁰. This means that national, sub national, or local plans should incorporate climate change adaptation measures in order to protect lives and infrastructure and foster resiliency. This underlines the call for a stronger articulation between environmental and planning organizations.

Social threats, particularly public security, also represent a fundamental challenge for planning in the region. Four Central American cities: San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, San Salvador, and Guatemala, are among the 25 most violent cities in the world, and in general the subjective perception of insecurity has grown in the region in the last ten years²¹. This calls to explore the linkages between planning and security policies in terms of: liveability conditions in urban neighbourhoods, housing policies, public space provision, and gain a deeper understanding of the spatial expressions of violence.

Central America is still the less urbanized sub region within Latin America, only 54% of its population lives in cities. However, rapid urban expansion persists and poses two challenges for planning: first, social inclusion policies, in terms of access to urban services and social segregation²²; second, urban sprawl and low density growth with its consequences in terms of environmental degradation, cost of infrastructure provision, and pressure over transportation systems.

Finally, all Central American countries face complex challenges in terms of their planning institutional organization. The region still has to resolve the relation between the national and local scales to encompass: "top-bottom" policies through national development strategies and "bottom-up" approaches that acknowledge municipal planning creativity and initiative. Additionally despite the vitality of planning in the region, Central American nations are still to improve their planning capacities, through the provision of financial and human resources to public agencies, including capacity building.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Central American countries represent a valuable laboratory to study planning practices and debates in Latin America. Within a relatively small space, diverse experiences, institutional settings, and approaches towards planning coexist. In the last decade, four main processes have transformed the field of territorial planning in the region: the creation of new national planning policies and instruments; second, the diversity and vitality of local planning practices; third, a permanent debate over the design and implementation of multi-scale, and multi-stakeholders planning systems; finally, the emergence of multinational planning strategies and agendas.

These convergent processes concur with several unresolved issues. All countries still evidence numerous gaps and overlaps between environmental, economic development, housing, and urban planning institutions as well as between national and local governments. Frequently public investments do not respond to planning orientations, while large infrastructures are not planned to achieve larger social and territorial objectives. Similarly, risk management, climate change adaptation, and natural resources management have not necessarily been integrated into planning instruments as environmental agencies tend to have an autonomous agenda in terms of urban and regional planning. Finally, urgent social concerns, such as: rapid urbanization, social inclusion, and violence, remain topics to be addressed by territorial planning. Future work in these areas may contribute to consolidate planning's social relevance in the region.

Which are the future perspectives for territorial planning in Central America? Previous processes and current trends call attention on three fields. First, planning is to consolidate its role in state – market relations, particularly around issues like property rights regulation, urban development finance, and land use law. Second, all countries are called to strength planning capabilities within public, private, and social actors in terms of their political and technical skills and resources. This means creating new academic programs, promoting research, and refining planning methodologies in order to consolidate participation. This may signify supporting a communicative approach to planning²³ that demands new professional capabilities in terms of mediation and conflict resolution. Nonetheless, if planning in Central America is to promote innovation, it should not renounce to diverse conceptual approaches at different scales; nor should it ignore different stages of advance in specific countries. Probably for planning history and future regional agendas in Central America, pluralistic and flexible methodologies, both in terms of plan design and implementation will remain at the basis of upcoming evolution.

Which could be future lines of research for planning in Central America? Three key issues may be relevant: first, analyse the impacts of policies, plans and laws in terms of sustainability, social inclusion, and economic development; second, discuss the coherence of theoretical approaches behind these instruments; and finally, characterize the profile and role of planners in these processes in order to understand the micro politics²⁴ of planning in developing countries.

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