



THE CENTRAL AMERICAN INTEGRATION SYSTEM (SICA): A REVIEW OF MAJOR PROBLEMS AND PROSPETCS

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Abstract:

The paper intends to discuss the Central American Integration System (SICA) and its activities among its member states. The major issues covered include its formation, objectives, organs, membership, achievements, problems and recommendations. The findings show that the system has recorded some levels of achievements in areas such as tourism, migration, education etc., but there are still some teething problems militating against the full realization of the system's goals. Prominent among these are border disputes, insecurity and lack of commitment by member states. The paper therefore recommends concert efforts by member states in order to reposition SICA to meet its goals of making Central America region of peace, freedom, democracy and development.

Introduction:

The desire to have a formidable regional organization that will cater for the needs of its over 50 million populations (Meyer, 2014:4) propelled the leaders of the seven (7) central American States to come together through the summit of the presidents in 13th December, 1991 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras and signed the "Tegucigalpa protocol" which set up the Central American Integration System.

This organization which finally became operational in February, 1993, is shouldered with the responsibility of transforming Central America into a region of "peace, freedom, democracy and development". Its main objectives include: consolidation of democracy, respect for human right, building of a new regional security model, creation of regional system for economic bloc and protection off the environment. These and many more we shall discuss in details as we progress.

Formation of SICA:

The journey to what later became Central American Integrated System (Sistema de la Integracion Centroamericana abbreviated as SICA) actually started on 14th October, 1951 when the foreign Secretaries of Central American states met in the city of San-salvador and signed a document known as "the charter of San Salvador" which gave rise to the Organization of Central American States (ODECA) with its first Secretary General as Dr J. Giullermo Trabanino of Salvador and its headquarters was at the city of San Savaldor (Meyer, 2014:4).

ODECA played significant role in the process of integrating Central American, achieving success in the unification of traffic signal standards, educational programmes, custom procedures, cultural policies, a regime for Central American integration industries and a Central American free trade and economic integration treaty. However, the complete unity of ODECA was limited by conflicts between several member states. The quest for a more and better process of integration compelled the Central American Governments to sign the second charter of the ODECA in 1962 named after the first one in 1951. And by December 13, 1991 under the xi summit meeting of the Central American presidents held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, the "Tegucigalpa protocol" which gave birth to Central American Integrated System was signed as a "new juridical-political framework for all levels and areas of Central American integration" Covering economic, social, cultural, political and ecological areas, allowing for a comprehensive

development approach for the region. SICA is listed among other intergovernmental organizations that have been granted permanent observer status by the UN (Meyer, 2014:4). SICA is to realize the integration of Central America in order for the “Isthmus” to become a “region of peace, freedom, democracy and development”. To that end the following objectives were outlined:

1. To consolidate democracy and strengthen its institutions based on elected government by universal free and secret suffrage and unrestricted respect for human right.
2. To set up a new model of regional security based on the reasonable balance of forces, strengthening of civilian authority, the overcoming of extreme poverty, the promotion of sustainable development, the protection of environment and the eradication of violence, corruption, terrorism and drugs and armed.
3. To promote broad regime of freedom to ensure full harmonious developments of the human person and society as a whole.
4. To achieve a new regional system of welfare and economic and social justice for the people of Central America.
5. To attain economic union and strengthen the Central American financial system.
6. To strengthen the system as economic bloc in order to insert it successfully into the world economy.
7. To constitute the Central American integration system based on a legal and institutional order and mutual respect among member states.
8. Establish joint action toward the preservation of the environment in the exploitation of natural resources.
9. Promote in a balanced and harmonious manner, the sustained economic, social, cultural and political development of member states and the region as a whole.

Membership of SICA:

The member states of SICA include Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Nicaragua. Dominican Republic is an associate member while Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, the US, Ecuador, Uruguay and Colombia are part of SICA as regional observers; Spain, South Korea, France, the UK, the EU, the Holy See, New Zealand, Morocco, Turkey and Qatar are its extra regional observers (Meyer, 2014:4).

Organs of Central American Integration System (SICA):

Papageorgiou (2011:14-16) and O’Keefe (2001) have highlighted the main organs of Central American Integration System to include: Meeting of the Presidents, Council of Ministers, The Executive Committee, General Secretariat, vice presidents meeting, the Court of Justice, the Parliament and other Specialized Agencies.

1. The **Meeting of the Presidents:** This is the supreme organ of the SICA consisting of the constitutional presidents of member states. Its meeting is held every 6 months in ordinary time and they take decision based on consensus. Its functions include consideration of admission of new members and ensuring the realization of SICA objectives. It also defines the broad policy objectives and goals of Central American Integration System (O’Keefe, 2001).
2. **Council of Ministers:** This is composed of the relevant ministers holding the relevant portfolios. They help to provide the necessary follow-up to ensure the effective implementation of the decision adopted by the meeting of presidents in the sector in which it is competent. It is chaired by competent minister from the member states for the period of 6months (papageorgiou 2011:16).

3. **The executive committee:** The third most important institution in SICA is the Executive Committee made up of one representative from each member states, who is chosen by the country's president (O'Keefe 2001). According to the above author, the committee meets one in a week and oversees the day-to-day implementation of the decisions of the first and second organs, regulations and agreements emanating from the technical secretariats. (O'Keefe 2001).
4. **General Secretariat:** The secretariat is headed by the secretary General who is an appointee of the meeting of the president for the period of 4 years. As a chief "administrative and legal officers" of the system his functions include-representation, execution of policy, preparation of regulations and other legal text, monitoring of implementation of the provision of the protocol. He also possesses the budgetary power (papageorgiou 2011:17).
While the **Central American Parliament** acts as an organ for exposition, analysis and recommendation **the Court of Justice** aims to guarantee respect for law in the interpretation and implementation of the SICA protocol and its supplementary instruments and acts pursuant to it (Papageorgiou 2011:16).

Achievements of SICA:

1. Right from inception till date a lot of successes have been achieved by SICA, Some of which include the following (Papageorgiou 2011:40):
2. Consolidation of international Commerce of goods and services.
3. Capacity to represent the region of central America as a negotiating bloc on the most important international political forums as well as better capacity to negotiate extra-regional free trade agreement.
4. On migration, the most significant achievement of SICA in this area is the free movement by its peoples through the "C4- Agreement" between Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, which allowed for the reduction of customs and migration controls facilitating transit for Citizens.
5. Coordination among member states to address the issues of security and establishment of a regional perspective, complementing at the same time national level policies.
6. Institutionalization of SICA'S Consultative Committee which groups business, labor, academic sectors and civil society groups, organized at a regional level. This committee offers advice to general secretariat and services as a mutual exchange platform among different sectors.
7. Through the Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination (CECC) important achievements have be recorded for the harmonization of the educational system, which strengthens the productive capacity of members states as well allows the Citizens enjoy fully the benefit of integration process.
8. SICA has been able to establish in Spain what is called Central American Tourism Agency (CATA), an initiative that allows the promotion of Central American and the Dominican Republic as an attractive tourist destination. Today multi-destination tourists are trooping to the region because of its effectiveness.
9. It also achieved common external tariff and almost complete customs union with substantial advances in the area of free movement of persons, capitals and services.
10. In the area of Environmental Protection and Management, some results have been accomplished in the coordination and regionalization of project led by the Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD).

For instance initiatives such as “the control of lobster fishing have contributed to the protection of Central American biological corridor”.

The health sector has equally witnessed some notable achievements. These include:

- (a) The introduction of a mutual recognition procedure-a situation where medical products manufactured in one member state receives a marketing authorization in another member country of SICA (Renters 2014:4). Others are good manufacturing practices (GMP) adopted through the resolution 339-2014 as internationally recognized standard in all SICA member countries.(Reuters 2014:5)
- (b) Through the General Secretariat SICA has also been able to plan and deploy successfully information services Network (SICA Net) in 1994, which also provided services through “all- in -1 and x.25 at a time when there was no full internet presence in all Central American Countries”. The above source also reveals that the network provided a Centralized groupware environment that was able to provide connectivity to secretariats and agencies spread through all the Central cities.

Problems of Central American Integration System:

Despite the advances in some areas as highlighted above, the Central American Society continues to present strong economic, social and political disparities among others. It is in line with the above that Papageorgiou (2011:21) argues:

Their political system is still quite weak. Political intermediation is haphazard: political parties are discredited and civil society plays marginal role. Even formal democratic institutions face major challenges. The constitutional dispute and the military coup that brought down president Zelaya of Honduras in 2009 is an example of such institutional conflict. Between 2002 and 2005 Nicaragua remained locked in an institutional power struggle between then president Balanos and the Sandinista-dominated league assembly which Guatemala faces continuous institutional crises between the president and the congress.

Another problem affecting the goal of achieving integration within the region is boarder disputes, typical of which is between Honduras and El-Salvador over Conejo Island (Wade 2014).The problem of insecurity is also playing out in the region as reported by Meyer (2014:6):

The security situation in Central America has deteriorated in recent years as gangs, drugs traffickers and other criminal groups have expanded their activities in the region, contributing to escalating level of crimes and violence that have alarmed the citizens and threaten to overwhelm governments.

There is lack of total commitment on the side of some member countries in the affairs of the System. This according to Papageorgiou (2011:40) has manifested in a way that the decisions of the system is becoming difficult to be implemented. Closely related to this is the fact that member states especially Nicaragua and Honduras have never for once taken the resolutions of the Central American court of justice seriously. This is evident following the issue that accompanied Honduras’ ratification of a treaty with Colombia recognizing the latter’s sovereignty over the territory long claimed by Nicaragua (O’Keefe 2001).

Nicaragua in response did not only revoke the existing duty-free access to its market for Honduras export but also took the case to court in 1999. The court resolved that Honduras should suspend the ratification. In year 2000, Honduras on the other hand, filed a petition to the same court "claiming that Nicaragua's implementation of a 35% duty on Honduras goods was in violation of SICA obligation". The Court issued a preliminary order calling on Nicaragua to suspend the law pending when "a definitive ruling could be issued". But as reveals by (O'Keefe 2001) neither of these countries heeds the court directives.

Conclusion:

This paper discussed Central American Integration System with particular focus on its objectives, formation, organs, membership, achievements and problems. It found that some levels of achievements have been attained though not without challenges as the issues of insecurity; border disputes and lack of total commitment of member states among others are still prevalent in SICA. These challenges must be surmounted for SICA to meet its set goals. To do this, concerted effort from member states is crucial.

Recommendations:

1. For SICA to achieve its set objectives all hands must be on desk in terms of total commitment by member states.
2. The system should pay more attention to the economic aspect of the integration in order to benefit member nations.
3. Integration is a process that takes some times to achieve. So the Central America needs leaders with long vision to support this initiative.

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