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Taxonomy of international cooperation for development through the process of Central America integration

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Background: The Central American Integration System (SICA) faces significant financial and institutional challenges despite its crucial role in regional integration. International cooperation has been instrumental in supporting SICA through the provision of essential financial resources and technical assistance.

Aim: This study aimed to analyze the nature and operational dynamics of international cooperation within SICA. Specifically, it sought to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of cooperation actors and establish a Cooperation Quality Index (CQI) to assess the relevance and efficacy of their contributions to regional integration.

Methods: International cooperation flows to SICA from 2000–2018 were analyzed through the examination of variables such as volume, thematic focus, modality, and dialogue mechanisms. These variables were refined using the Delphi method with domain experts. A cluster analysis, complemented by the CQI, was then employed to group cooperation actors and construct a contributions-based taxonomy.

Results: The analysis identified six distinct cooperation clusters, three of which met high-quality standards and account for a substantial proportion of cooperation resources received by SICA. These findings illuminate the critical characteristics international development cooperation must encompass to significantly impact SICA's functioning and advance regional integration.

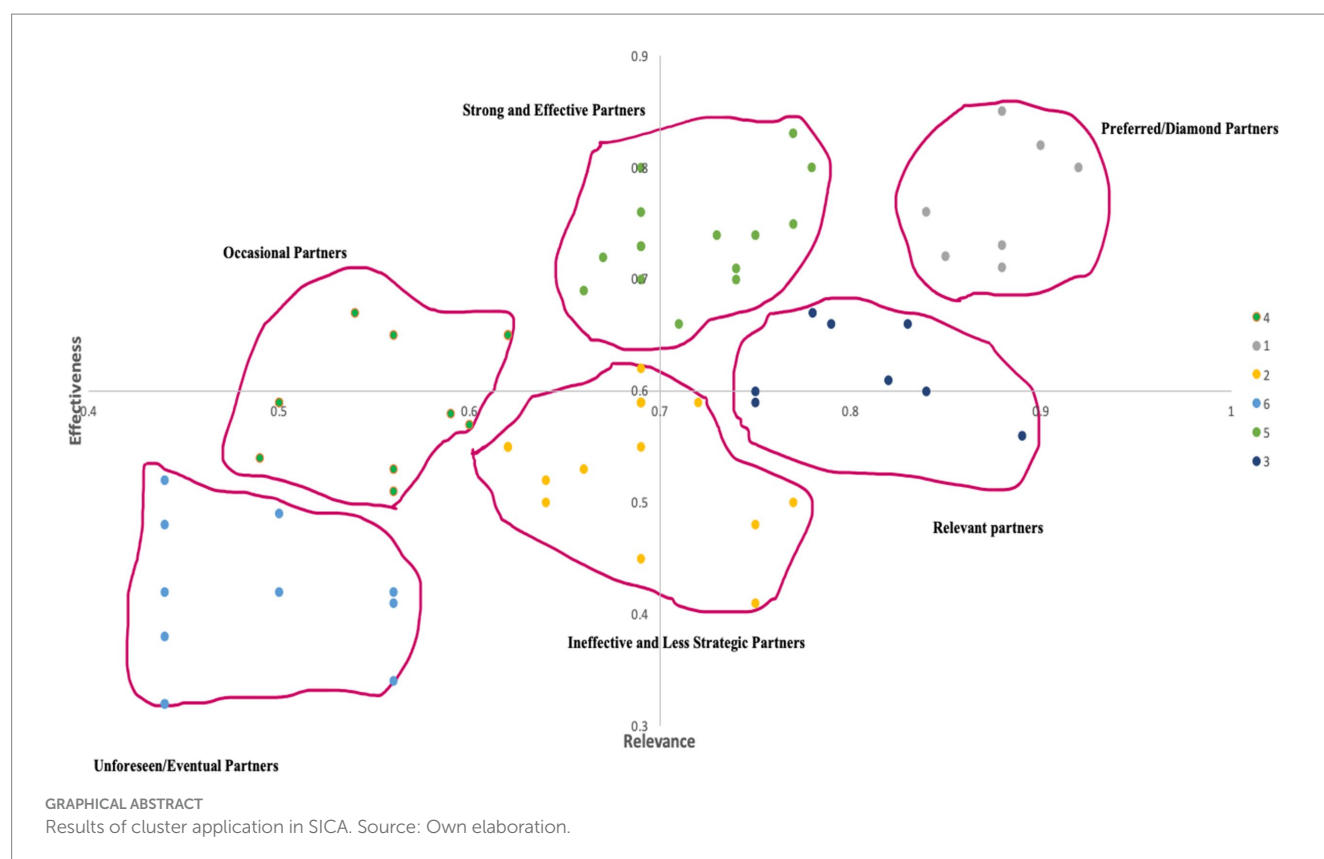
Conclusion: International cooperation plays a crucial role in SICA by helping to compensate for its financial and resource limitations. The findings indicate that high-quality cooperation is indispensable for fostering regional integration and achieving sustainable, inclusive development in Central America. This research provides a robust framework for optimizing cooperation strategies and maximizing its transformative potential.

KEYWORDS

taxonomy, integration, international cooperation, regionalism, efficacy

1 Introduction

The Central American Integration System (SICA) emerged from a political regional integration process formalized by the Tegucigalpa Protocol of 1991 of the Charter of the Organization of Central American States of 1951. This initiative was part of the first wave of regional integration in the 1950s. The process seeks harmonious and sustained economic,



social, cultural, environmental, and political development of Central American and the Dominican Republic states through joint action of SICA member countries.

Within the framework of SICA, operational plans, regional strategies, and policies have been developed based on technical discussions and with political approval by the System's governing bodies.

Regional integration is a prominent subject in Latin American discussions on development policies and strategies. All Latin American countries, except for Mexico and Chile, participate in some integration process such as SICA, the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Andean Community (CAN), or the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), to name just a few. Mexico and Chile participate solely in free trade or cooperation agreements.

In recent decades, the contribution of regional integration to development has been uneven. With the exception of those periods when it emerged as a promising foundation of development policy, Latin American integration has been criticized for not achieving its objectives and for inconsistent implementation (Naciones Unidas, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 1994) due presumably to the lack of political will among Latin American countries needed to support effective integration processes.

The case of SICA represents an integration process among small and homogeneous countries in terms of the size of their economies and the magnitude and nature of their problems. Since its evolution, SICA has created a complex institutional framework, developed an incomplete customs union that approaches intraregional trade levels of 30% of total exports, and built a set of policies, strategies, and other instruments linked to the objectives of its development agenda.

The development of these instruments and SICA initiatives have also been criticized for the lack of effectiveness. This criticism points

to weaknesses in SICA institutions and significant differences in political will among member states.

Furthermore, within the framework of institutional weaknesses, SICA faces a problem of both human and financial resources. The budgets for SICA institutions and policy instruments are very limited, and contributions from member countries quite irregular. The allocation of human resources is also highly insufficient, both in units dedicated to integration within national government systems and in regional institutions. Additionally, monitoring and evaluation instruments in these institutions are weak and there is a limited culture of accountability in System countries.

In spite of this, SICA partners' financial contributions and technical and administrative assistance have appreciably advanced the integration process and construction of regional identity. Several significant international cooperation actors, ranging from national cooperation agencies to international and regional organizations, work with regional institutions and support SICA's policies.

As a result of this close collaboration and given that System country contributions are insufficient to maintain SICA operations, international institutions have come to play a strategic role within SICA. In practice, SICA's budget is highly dependent on international cooperation in all areas except those focused on creating a regional regulatory framework.

The research conducted for this article examines the impact of international cooperation on the effectiveness of Central American integration. Specifically, it seeks to address whether international cooperation contributes positively to regional integration processes, facilitates the resolution of challenges related to effectiveness and improves overall efficiency.

To tackle these questions, this article applies atheoretical framework grounded in international agreements on the effectiveness of aid and in Latin American regionalism. The research examines the behavior of development cooperation actors in Central American integration and evaluates country and cooperation organizations' level of alignment with SICA's strategic agenda.

This document presents a taxonomy of international cooperation actors based on the nature of their interventions and the instruments they employ to support SICA's strategic objectives. It analyzes cooperation flows to SICA between 2000 and 2018,¹ and considers variables including volume, integration pillar, modality of cooperation, and dialogue mechanism among others. Additionally, it introduces a Cooperation Quality Index (CQI) to quantify the relevance and effectiveness of SICA's development partners' cooperation. Using cluster analysis, informed by the formulation and calculation of the CQI, the study classifies sources of development cooperation, providing a basis for discussion on the effectiveness and relevance of international cooperation.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 The Central American integration process and the role of international cooperation

This section outlines the theoretical framework that informs the analysis for this article and proposes a taxonomy of international cooperation actors in relation to SICA. It presents regionalism as a development strategy, analyzes the Central American integration process, and finally, introduces SICA's development partners, situating them within the context of the broader debate on the effectiveness of international cooperation.

2.1.1 Regionalism as a strategy for the development of Latin America

The definition of regionalism is complex and has been the subject of significant academic debate. According to Serbin et al. (2018), regionalism is understood as a process primarily led by states and their governments, aimed at the creation and maintenance of formal regional institutions and organizations that promote cooperation and integration in the region. However, other authors argue that the term is broader and encompasses integration spaces, trade relationships, and cooperation, including various trends, concepts, and political and economic dynamics related to any type of association, whether formal or informal, among countries (Santos, 2013). Similarly, Álvarez Orellana (2012) notes that regionalism involves the creation of a homogeneous and profound regional area, characterized by association, cooperation, and interdependence among countries, with the ultimate goal of achieving higher levels of autonomy and development. Thus, regionalism appears as a complex and integral concept that incorporates formal integration processes, both formal and informal cooperation schemes, and the agreements and commitments associated with trade treaties. Regionalism has

constituted an essential component of the development agenda in the Latin American context, being especially suitable for middle-income countries (Sanahuja, 2007). The concept has evolved in different approaches, from the purely economic to those that incorporate sustainable development (Devlin and Esteveordal, 2001).

Regionalism allows for the analysis and explanation of the reality of Latin America as an instrument and strategy involving multiple countries and territories, in addition to being closely linked to ideological dimensions. In this sense, Hettne and Söderbaum (1998) state that "regionalism refers to the general phenomenon as well as the ideology of regionalism, i.e., the urge for a regionalist order, either in a particular geographical area or as a type of world order" (p. 7). In the Latin American context, regionalism has constituted an essential component of the development agenda, proving particularly suitable for middle-income countries (Sanahuja, 2007).

It is important to differentiate between regionalism and regionalization, as the latter refers to processes that increase economic, political, social, and cultural interactions among states and societies that are geographically or culturally close (Serbin et al., 2018). Similarly, Hettne and Söderbaum (1998) distinguish regionalism from regionalization, noting that "Regionalization generally denotes the (empirical) process, and furthermore, implies an activist element, a strategy of regionalization" (p. 7).

Therefore, regionalism is a scheme or model that seeks development, executed by various actors through technical, operational, and strategic-political instruments (trade agreements, formal and informal cooperation). It emanates and is led from above, that is, from the political-economic superstructure, with states and their governments being the key actors, to have a long-term impact. In contrast, regionalization is motivated or developed more by private actors and organized civil society, meaning it is executed from the bottom up and driven by short- and medium-term interests. Thus, it is understood why some states are motivated to identify common areas with the potential for improvement at the regional level to impact their national development, as regionalism has become an operational political instrument or strategy to achieve development in member states.

The origin of regional initiatives and integration processes at the global level tends to be situated in Europe, as the European integration process—which began in the 1950s—is often identified as a reference model for integration processes aimed at promoting productive transformation and international competitiveness. However, the study and discussion of regionalism in Latin America dates back to the early years of the 19th century. Notable integration efforts include "confederated entities such as Gran Colombia (1819/23–1830), the Central American Confederation (1824–1839), and the Peruvian-Bolivian Confederation (1836–1839). In his Jamaica Letter, liberator Simón Bolívar highlighted the need for close cooperation among Hispanic American states" (Serbin et al., 2018).

As indicated by Sanahuja (2007, 2008), Santos (2013), and del Caldentey Pozo (2014, 2019, 2022), Latin American integration processes are studied in waves that align with broader phases of global regionalism (Deciancio, 2016; Söderbaum and Brolin, 2016). Each wave represents a step forward in the transformation of regionalism and reconceptualization of the term.

Contemporary Latin American regionalism focused originally in its first wave on efforts to reduce trade barriers among the countries in the region and on imposing high external barriers to prioritize the development and competitiveness of Latin American industries. The

¹ The period selected ends in 2018 because in that year, resources for development cooperation to the SICA region began to decrease.

Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), under the leadership of Raúl Prebisch from 1950–1963, promoted a development strategy based on a combination of industrialization through import substitution and regional integration (Fernández-shaw, 1950). The Treaty of Montevideo was signed during this wave and led to the creation of the Latin American Free Trade Association (ALALC), signed in February 1960 by all South American countries and Mexico. ALALC later, in 1980, was transformed into the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI). The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Andean Community were also established in this period. In November 1960, the Central American General Economic Integration Treaty was signed in Managua, giving rise to the Central American Common Market (CACM), composed of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Earlier, in 1951, the same countries, together with Panama, had formed the Organization of Central American States (ODECA, 1951, 1962).

This first wave of regionalism was characterized by: strong political will, demonstrated by a genuine commitment and sense of responsibility on behalf of participating governments to advance development; emphasis on the economy, with continued and permanent economic growth as the primary objective; industrialization, through the promotion of interdependent industrial sectors targeted for their potential to sustain economic growth; protectionism by way of protective tariffs intended to support the creation of an industrial sector favoring new regional or indigenous industries; and state interventionism in the economy as required to implement these measures (Santos, 2013).

The second wave of regionalism emerged in the 1990s and lasted until the early years of the new century² (Santos, 2013). It encompassed all of Latin America except for Mexico and Chile, which remained within ALADI. This wave was directly linked to structural reforms and adjustments, positioning regionalism primarily as a tool for liberalization and trade openness.

The results of the neoliberal reforms implemented during the 1980s and 1990s impacted macroeconomic stability and growth in many Latin American countries; however, they fell short of expectations with respect to equitable growth. The subsequent dissatisfaction of broad sectors of Latin American society led, in the early 21st century, to a shift toward more left-leaning, though not necessarily homogeneous, governments. According to Serbin et al. (2018), “the common denominator of leftist governments was the rejection of neoliberal dogmas, the desire for greater autonomy, especially in relation to the longstanding hegemonic power of the United States, as well as the pursuit of greater Latin American protagonism in the international system” (p. 23).

In response to the crisis of regional integration and the open regionalism model, there was a shift in focus toward post-liberal regionalism or the third wave, in South America in the 21st century. This resulted in a new perspective on South American regionalism referred to as “post-liberal regionalism” (Motta Veiga and Rios, 2007; Sanahuja, 2009, 2010, 2012); “post-hegemonic” (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012), and even “post-neoliberal” (Serbin et al., 2012).

The main characteristics of this third wave include: a political approach that prioritizes political agendas over economic and commercial issues; a return to development strategies based on “Washington Consensus” economic policies; increased leadership and ownership by state actors; emphasis on positive integration and cooperation through the creation of common institutions and policies, as well as the expansion of cooperation in non-commercial areas; a comprehensive approach that highlights social dimensions and addresses asymmetries in development levels, aiming to link regional integration with poverty reduction and inequality; and efforts to promote greater participation and social legitimacy in integration processes, among other aspects (Sanahuja, 2008).

In this context, and by way of evaluating the various waves, the first factor indicating the exhaustion and crisis of open regionalism is the breakdown of the integration strategy itself. An assessment of progress made by different Latin American integration processes reveals that, in practice, the guiding principles have been implemented only partially and selectively. Emphasis has been placed on “negative integration” -that is, intraregional trade liberalization-rather than on “positive integration,” which focuses on common policies and institution building (Sanahuja, 2008).

This phenomenon coexists with a variety of agreements and international treaties that generate multiple commitments and simultaneous actions, known as the “spaghetti bowl” effect. This effect describes the proliferation of free trade agreements (FTAs), which have progressively displaced multilateral negotiations within the World Trade Organization (WTO) and emerged as an alternative pathway to globalization. However, this network of agreements also complicates traditional regional integration schemes. As Bhagwati and Krueger (1995) points out, “such spaghetti bowl proliferation of preferential trading arrangements clutters up trade with discrimination depending on the ‘nationality’ of a good, with inevitable costs that trade experts have long noted” (p. 19).

The exhaustion of regionalism also has an institutional dimension which has eroded the effectiveness and credibility of integration processes. As Sanahuja (2008) indicates, “the region has been characterized by the rejection of the attribution of sovereign powers to common bodies, the decision-making by majority, or the existence of a right to integration of an imperative nature” (p. 14).

2.1.2 The integration of Central America and the Dominican Republic as a particular case of Latin American regionalism

The Central American integration process is a political undertaking by the member states of SICA, which serves as the institutional framework for regional integration in Central America. Its fundamental objective is the “realización de la integración de Centroamérica para constituirla como Región de Paz, Libertad, Democracia y Desarrollo” (SICA, 2011). This effort formally began in October 1951 with the signing of the ODECA Charter (A HISTORIA Del Consenso De, n.d.).

Following the experience of ODECA and CACM as well as the regional conflicts of the 1980s in Central America, the region’s aspiration for peace led to a reactivation of Central American regionalism in 1991 with the signing of the Tegucigalpa Protocol to the ODECA Charter. A revision and updating of the legal framework governing the integration process was considered essential to align it with the realities and needs of the member states. Indeed, “dicha readecuación debe orientarse al establecimiento y consolidación del SISTEMA DE LA INTEGRACION CENTROAMERICANA que dará seguimiento a todas las decisiones

² Sanahuja considers that the second wave spans the period from 1990 to 2005. See Sanahuja (2008).

adoptadas en las Reuniones de Presidentes y coordinará su ejecución” (*Presidentes de Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras y Nicaragua*, 1991).

Regionalism is a complex and diverse global phenomenon with manifestations that vary significantly depending on the geographical context and integration objectives (Hurrel, 2007). While this article focuses on the Latin American experience, exemplified by the Central American Integration System (SICA), it is crucial to recognize the richness of existing models and trajectories worldwide. Organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) offer valuable comparative perspectives, highlighting the diversity in integration approaches, from security to economic and social harmonization (Acharya, 2001; Gamble and Payne, 1996).

SICA proposes a multidimensional model of integration in which each sector of the process—defined in the Tegucigalpa Protocol as economic, political, social, cultural-educational, and environmental—holds equal importance. Each sector in the process has seen significant progress, while also facing major challenges and opportunities.

This model of multidimensional integration—encompassing economic, political, social, cultural-educational, and environmental dimensions—aligns with the concept of a comprehensive approach observed in other regional blocs. For instance, ASEAN pursues multi-pillar integration (economic, political-security, and socio-cultural), demonstrating that the pursuit of holistic development is a shared feature of new-generation regionalism (Acharya, 2001). This holds true even when accounting for each region’s realities and distinctive dialogue mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Way, which is based on consensus and non-interference (Narine, 2002).

Among its objectives, SICA seeks to “Promover, en forma armónica y equilibrada, el desarrollo sostenido económico, social, cultural y político de los Estados miembros y de la región en su conjunto” (SICA, 2011). It also aims to ensure its organs and institutions function effectively and efficiently, to guarantee the coherence and coordination of its actions toward third states, groups of states, and international organizations.

While this article does not provide an exhaustive analysis of the functioning of Central American integration, some inferences can be drawn in this regard. Poverty and inequality persist in the region, and initiatives that once generated expectations of significant reductions have experienced setbacks. Moreover, the productive model continues to exhibit exclusionary and unsustainable characteristics, fostering international insertion based on low value-added activities and revealing limited results in the implementation of existing trade agreements.

Therefore, it is necessary to highlight those elements that contribute to a broad assessment of the functioning of Central American integration and the scope and impact it may have had on the region.

The first decade of the process had a positive impact on the development of the regional industrial base, physical infrastructure, and communications, as well as on the growth of urban centers—contributing to an increase in trade of goods originating within the region. Additionally, this new economic dynamic fostered significant effects, including “la urbanización, el surgimiento de un estrato de obreros capacitados, la incorporación de tecnologías modernas al aparato productivo y las altas tasas de formación de capital” (Martínez Piva, 2019, p. 365).

In the 1990’s, SICA emerged as a significant case within Latin American regionalism, consolidating itself as a process, and achieving several significant advances, including³: the development of the Customs Union with deep integration among Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras; the approval, implementation, and institutionalization of various regional policy instruments—such as the Central American Strategy for Rural and Territorial Development (ECADERT), the Regional Policy on Gender Equality and Equity (PRIEG/SICA), the institutionalization and certification of the process for the joint negotiation and procurement of medicine, medical devices, and other health-related goods; as well as the operation of the Central American Social Development Observatory (OCADES).

Despite its consolidation, the Central American integration process continues to face a range of limitations and obstacles. These include: non-compliance with agreements; a lack of political will for integration among some member states or in specific areas of the process; public disinterest or lack of awareness; inadequate legal frameworks; weak or non-existent coordination between regional instruments and national policies; (Salvador et al., 2011) insufficient financing and implementation instruments; the absence of genuine intraregional interdependence; and the influence of ideological factors, among other challenges.

The limitations and obstacles faced by SICA, such as non-compliance with agreements, the absence of political will, and limited effectiveness in resource management, are not unique to the Central American experience. Other regional blocs, such as ECOWAS, have also grappled with similar challenges in implementing their agendas, particularly in regard to policy harmonization and integration barriers, albeit with varying degrees of success (Bach, 2011). The persistent lack of consensus within SICA, which impacts the *achievement of results* and the alignment of its partners, underscores the relevance of the effectiveness variables identified in Mattli’s conceptual model, whose manifestation and resolution vary significantly across different global regionalism processes (Mattli, 1999).

Within SICA, there is a noticeable lack of consensus among member states regarding the integration model, the scope of the process, and the rationale for allocating available resources. This is reflected in the limited effectiveness and efficiency of the process and its resources, and it underscores political tensions that hinder decision-making and the appointment of authorities—as evidenced by the prolonged absence of a Secretary General (Vásquez, 2023; Telesur, 2023). Consequently, it is essential to promote open dialogue, build consensus, and establish agreements that translate into concrete, viable, and sustainable actions over time (Caldentey, 2021). In light of this situation, it is relevant to question the role played by SICA’s international partners, whose consultative and institutional support has been fundamental in sustaining the integration agenda, despite ongoing challenges related to alignment and coordination.

2.1.3 The effectiveness of development aid and SICA partners

Throughout SICA’s evolution over the past few decades, collaboration with its primary development partners has played a

³ Consulted in April 2025 at [Algunos logros del SICA - Portal del SICA](#).

crucial, in financial and technical terms, as well as in fostering political dialogue. SICA's current situation cannot be understood without examining the role and positioning of international cooperation. This article analyzes the years during which international participation was particularly strong.

To frame the role of international cooperation, it is worth noting that a review of SICA's various legal instruments revealed no specific concept or firm stance on *development* among the member states. Strictly speaking, the Tegucigalpa Protocol refers to development in Article 3, and in particular states in its purpose: “promover, en forma armónica y equilibrada, el desarrollo sostenido económico, social, cultural y político de los Estados miembros y de la región en su conjunto” (SICA, 2011).

International development cooperation has multiple interpretations and is often understood as a “forma de ayuda a los países pobres, con la cual se busca el incremento de la capacidad productiva y el crecimiento económico, sin prestar atención especial a factores como las condiciones de vida de los pueblos (salud, educación, vivienda, etc.) y a la equidad social” (Marina et al., 2012, p. 31). It is essential to recognize that international organizations promoting this form of cooperation play a key role as strategic actors in the process. In this regard, Malamud (2013a,b) points out that these organizations “can serve as arenas for dialogue and cooperation, they can be used as instruments by other actors (especially their member states), and they can assume an independent identity as actors in pursuit of their own objectives. A property called actorness” (p. 7).

International development cooperation is a key factor in the financing and functioning of SICA, significantly influencing the progress of integration and the sustainable and inclusive development of Central America. This cooperation is provided by regional and extra-regional member states, development cooperation agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

Throughout the process, several partners have been involved since the initial stages and have remained consistently engaged. Notable among these are: the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation; the United States Agency for International Development; the Japan International Cooperation Agency; the Inter-American Development Bank; the World Bank; the Central American Bank for Economic Integration; German Cooperation; the European Union; the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; and the United Nations Development Programme.

It is important to note that, although there is no comprehensive cooperation model, SICA has established a mechanism for managing, coordinating, and exchanging information on regional cooperation. This mechanism provides procedures and guidelines for its organs, secretariats, and institutions to strengthen their processes of management, negotiation, coordination, approval, execution, monitoring, evaluation, and information in the area of regional cooperation (SICA, 2013b).

Furthermore, SICA has established various political dialogue and cooperation forums as well as joint commissions with countries, organizations, and cooperation mechanisms that address issues of regional and international significance. These initiatives are generally developed with the participation of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of member states. These mechanisms include: SICA-Germany consultations and negotiations; the Joint Commission of the European Union-Central America; the Joint Commission of Spain-SICA; the Joint Commission of the Republic of China (Taiwan)-Belize,

Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua; Italy-SICA Forum; Japan-SICA Forum; Korea-SICA Forum; the Tuxtla Dialogue and Concertation Mechanism; SICA-CARICOM meetings; SICA-India Forum; SICA-Morocco Forum; SICA-Chile Forum; SICA-Brazil ministerial meetings; and SICA-Turkey Forum.

As of December 2024, 15 extra-regional countries are considered SICA development partners (see Table 1). Each of these partners has specific characteristics including differences in their admission dates and type of support for the system, the regional cooperation mechanisms they employ, the fundamental pillars of their assistance, among other relevant aspects within the realm of development cooperation.

Regarding development cooperation agencies, 33 have been identified as development partners, each exhibiting significant variations in years of engagement with SICA institutions, priority pillars, established cooperation mechanisms, funding levels, and types of cooperation—among other key aspects of their operational dynamics.

In this context, the Agenda for the Effectiveness of Development Aid—in effect since the Paris Declaration in 2005—is particularly relevant for evaluating the role of international cooperation in SICA. This agenda sets out principles and commitments to enhance the effectiveness of cooperation, aiming to align its objectives and instruments with priorities of recipient countries. The approach has proven essential for ensuring that cooperation is both effective and efficient, generates concrete results, advances the integration process, and promotes sustainable and inclusive development in the Central American region.

It is therefore vital to analyze the interventions of SICA partners in relation to the Development Aid Effectiveness Agenda and assess their alignment with SICA's regional instruments,⁴ ensuring they complement the Prioritized Strategic Agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the Regional Cooperation Management, Coordination, and Information Mechanism.

The highest authorities of multilateral and bilateral development institutions have promoted international agreements to establish an agenda for cooperation that fosters sustainable and inclusive growth and development. Several relevant forums include:

- The Monterrey Consensus (2002).
- The First High-Level Forum in Rome (2003).
- The Marrakech Roundtable on Result-Oriented Development Management (2004).
- The Second International High-Level Forum entitled “Jointly Increasing the Effectiveness of Development Aid: Harmonization, Alignment, and Results” (Paris 2005).⁵

4 At the I Meeting of Heads of State of the SICA member countries held in December 2017, the Action Plan for the Effectiveness of Regional Cooperation 2017–2019 was approved, which outlines the main results, actors, indicators, activities, and products related to the principles of the Development Cooperation Effectiveness Agenda.

5 It was agreed upon in 2005 and, in general terms, sets out global commitments for donor countries and partner countries to advance towards more effective development aid and, in this sense, to have a greater impact on development.

TABLE 1 Partners for SICA development.

| Country | Date of admission | Regional cooperation mechanism |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Republic of (Taiwan) | February 1, 2000 | Joint Cooperation Commission between the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the Central American Isthmus Countries |
| Kingdom of Spain | November 20, 2004 | Joint Commission between SICA and AECID |
| United Mexican States | March 25, 2004 | Tuxtla Dialogue and Concertation Mechanism |
| Federal Republic of Germany | December 12, 2007 | Consultations and negotiations |
| Republic of Chile | December 12, 2007 | Forum for Political Dialogue and Cooperation between SICA and the Republic of Chile |
| Italian Republic | December 5, 2008 | Forum for Political Dialogue and Cooperation between SICA and the Italian Republic |
| State of Japan | June 29, 2009 | Forum for Political Dialogue and Cooperation Japan—Central America |
| Republic of Korea | July 22, 2011 | Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation between Central America and the Republic of Korea |
| United States of America | December 16, 2011 | Understanding between the United States of America and the Central American Integration System regarding the entry of the U.S. as a Regional Observer of SICA |
| European Union | June 27, 2013 | Joint Commission between the European Union and Central America, under the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA) |
| Kingdom of Morocco | June 26, 2014 | Forum for Political Dialogue and Cooperation between the Central American Integration System (SICA) and the Kingdom of Morocco |
| Republic of Turkey | December 17, 2014 | Forum for Political Dialogue and Cooperation between SICA and Turkey |
| Republic of India. | February 2, 2004 | Political Dialogue and Cooperation Mechanism between India and the States of the Central American Integration System |
| Swiss Confederation | * | * |
| Grand Duchy of Luxembourg | * | * |

Source: Own elaboration. *Without records.

- The Third High-Level Forum in Accra (2008).⁶
- The Busan Forum (2011).
- The Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2011); and,
- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development a, adopted in 2015, sets forth a plan to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, aiming to end poverty, protect the environment, and improve the quality of life worldwide.

The Central American region has been developing a set of policies,⁷ strategies, and instruments directly linked to the development agenda. Accordingly, it is essential that regional cooperation aligns with the five pillars prioritized in the relaunch of the regional integration process on July 20, 2010—social integration, economic integration, democratic security, disaster risk prevention and mitigation, and climate change adaptation, and institutional strengthening—as well as with the priorities defined by the Meeting of Presidents within the framework of the integration process and in accordance with the Tegucigalpa Protocol and its complementary and derivative instruments.

To date, regional projects have served as the operational mechanism for implementing each of SICA's regional policies,

strategies, and instruments. This raises a question as to the role of international cooperation within SICA, and whether its effect on the functioning of the System is positive. To address this question, an analysis is conducted on SICA legal instruments related to development cooperation. During the period from 2002 to 2019, 81 mandates were identified that are directly or indirectly linked to international development cooperation. However, these mandates differ in scope, as the degree of connection, specificity, and partnership varies among them—highlighting the need for their classification.⁸

The analysis of SICA's commitment to aligning with international frameworks on international development cooperation revealed variations over time. Between 2002 and 2004, there are no recorded mandates directly associated with commitments made at international forums such as Monterrey, the Rome Forum, and the Marrakech Roundtable. However, in 2005, at least one specific mandate was issued to address commitments arising from the Second High-Level Forum in Paris (during the XXVI Ordinary Meeting of Heads of State and Government of SICA countries). In 2012 and 2013, other important mandates were issued in relation to aid effectiveness (SICA, 2013a,b,c). While no commitments from SICA were recorded in 2015

⁶ The Forum defined the Accra Action Agenda, with the aim of assessing the progress of the Paris Declaration and establishing a roadmap to swiftly advance toward the goals of the Paris Declaration.

⁷ See details of regional instruments in [Supplementary material](#).

⁸ The analysis classifies them as follows: 28 mandates correspond to political integration issues; 16 mandates are associated with cooperation in the field of political integration; 15 mandates correspond to economic integration; 14 mandates are associated with social integration; eight mandates address environmental integration concerning climate change and comprehensive disaster risk management.

regarding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, commitments directly linked to this agenda were issued in the 2018 and 2019.

The study also revealed that SICA member states issued a series of mandatory instructions on international development cooperation, demonstrating their interest in advancing regional integration. However, it remains difficult to identify the achievement of sustainable and inclusive development goals and objectives resulting from the international development cooperation.

2.2 Analysis methodology: towards a taxonomy of cooperation in SICA

The construction of the taxonomy involved the development of an integrated analytical methodology composed of two components. The first was technical-operational in nature and focused on the classification of variables using the cluster method, which was grounded in a theoretical-conceptual framework. This approach enabled the establishment of a defined scheme, for data capture, the consolidation of objective results, and the formulation of a roadmap. It was complemented by the application of the Delphi⁹ technique, which provided a structured method and theoretical support. The second component was of a strategic-qualitative nature and involved reducing the dimensions of the variables through principal component analysis, which facilitated a more effective and coherent presentation of results, analysis, and recommendations and conclusions.

For the above reasons, the development of the taxonomy was carried out in five key stages: (i) collection of information for the characterization of cooperating partners; (ii) review, discrimination, and normalization of the collected data; (iii) consultation with experts in the field of development cooperation for the validation of variables (Delphi); (iv) processing of variables and clustering of cooperating partners; and (v) analysis of results. Each of these stages is detailed below:

2.2.1 Information collection for the characterization of cooperating partners

The construction of a database for the taxonomy was vital, as the SICA International Cooperation Management System (SICOR) contained outdated and incomplete information in categories critical for this analysis. Therefore, direct and formal contact was made with the cooperation managers in SICA's strategic institutions. To ensure data reliability, an official note (DSG-0251/2018, dated June 12, 2018) was issued by the SICA General Secretariat detailing the purpose and precise information requirements. This process involved obtaining data directly from primary sources, an exhaustive review of online documents, telephone calls, and interviews with key stakeholders. These interactions

were essential for validating, clarifying, and resolving inconsistencies in the initial data to ensure the quality and coherence of the data collected.

Data on SICA's economic, political, social, educational-cultural, and environmental sectors was compiled from 2000 to December 2018. The institutions which provided information for the database include: Executive Secretariat of the Council of Ministers of Finance and Economy of Central America and the Dominican Republic; Central American Coordination Center for the Prevention of Disasters; SICA Advisory Committee; Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination; General Secretariat of SICA; Central American Tourism Integration Secretariat; Central American Economic Integration Secretariat; Regional Center for the Promotion of SMEs; Central American Social Integration Secretariat; Executive Secretariat of the Central American Environment and Development Coordination; Organization of the Fishing and Aquaculture Sector of the Central American Isthmus; Regional Committee of Hydraulic Resources CCRH-SICA; Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama; and Executive Secretariat of the Council of Ministers of Agriculture of Central America.

The specialized database was constructed between October 2018 and June 2019 and consists of 326 records. A total of 16 variables were identified including: Institution; Source of International Cooperation; Integration Pillar; Type of Cooperation (Technical-Financial-Administrative-Strategic, South-South); Execution Period; Names of Projects Implemented and Completed since the year 2000; Categorization of Cooperating Partners by Amounts; Project amount in US\$; Main Results of projects executed and completed since 2000; Appropriation and Results of Development Cooperation; Technical-Administrative Alignment; General-Strategic Alignment of the Partner; Main Impacts/Results on Central American Integration; Dialogue Mechanism; Transparency and Accountability; and Approach.

2.2.2 Review, discrimination, and normalization of the collected data

A systematic discrimination process was carried out to prioritize, from the initial set of 16 variables, those that best captured the behavior of cooperating partners with respect to the criteria of effectiveness and relevance—both central pillars of the research. Nine variables were selected and grouped into two categories: effectiveness variables (transparency and accountability, achievement of results, general-strategic alignment of the partner, technical-administrative alignment, and type of cooperation) and relevance variables [volume (US\$), pillar of integration, comprehensive approach, and dialogue mechanisms]. The remaining variables, although integral to the original database, were excluded from the cluster analysis.

To ensure comparability among variables with different units of measurement, the nine variables selected underwent a Min-Max re-scaling process, transforming their values to a range between 0 and 1. This normalization was essential to eliminate bias introduced by different scales and allow for equitable weighting. Subsequently, a qualitative categorization (low, medium, high) was performed based on data distribution, using quartiles as reference points for establishing thresholds.

It is important to note that for cooperating partners who funded multiple projects, variables were calculated as the average of the values across all projects they supported, thereby ensuring a homogeneous and consistent representation of their cooperation profile. Throughout this

⁹ Fundamentally, a Delphi exercise involves selecting a group of experts on a particular topic and asking for their opinions on issues related to that topic, as well as their proposed vision, approach, and perspective on future events. Thirty-one experts responded to a questionnaire. For a good description of the Delphi method, see Landeta, Jon. (1999) *El método Delphi. Una Técnica de previsión para la incertidumbre*. Ariel. Barcelona and Godet, Michel. (1996). *Manual de Prospective Strategique*. Dunod. Paris.

process, quality control and cross-verification were employed to ensure data integrity and consistency. The variables were defined as follows:

- a) *General-strategic alignment* corresponds to the actions of the cooperation partner in accordance with the established General Strategy, particularly regarding its articulation and complementarity with the Strategic Agenda of the Central American Integration System (SICA). That is, as it relates to the priorities or approaches of the specific Sectoral Council of Ministers with involved. To assess this, the respective instruments of the institutions analyzed were reviewed based on the Sectoral Council of Ministers of SICA to which they report and apply technical assistance. The normalized data series for this variable was divided into three categories: Low; Medium; High with the following weights: (0.33), (0.67), (1.0), respectively.
 - b) The *technical-administrative alignment* variable refers to the administrative-financial model of the recipient institution in relation to the partner's regulatory framework and standards, with particular emphasis on the responsiveness and cooperation capacity of the receiving entity. The data were categorized as follows with corresponding weightings: Low (0.33); Medium (0.67); High (1.0), based on a homogeneous division of the data.
 - c) The *project amount* indicates the amount in U.S. dollars allocated by the source of cooperation. The value was coded based on the quartile position of each project. Accordingly, the series was weighted and divided as follows: Quartile 1 (0.25), Quartile 2 (0.50), and Quartile 3 (0.75). Due to the quantitative nature of the variable and the interest in later analyzing the relative weight of the cooperating partner, it was not assigned a qualitative category of low, medium, and high.
 - d) The variable defined as *appropriation and results of development cooperation* refers to the program and project alignment with the systems, priorities, and policies of developing countries. Accordingly, this variable evaluates the following question: To what extent does the recipient of cooperation take ownership and responsibility to ensure that the development agenda achieves results aligned its own priorities? The data series was categorized as low (0.33), medium (0.67), and high (1.0).
 - e) The *dialogue mechanism* corresponds to the method used for analyzing and identifying the need or potential to develop a regional project. It encompasses the study and strategic insight (added value of the initiative), project profiling, proposal adjustments, and other necessary steps throughout the project cycle management process until approval is obtained. Two categories were considered:
 - o Formal-participatory (1.0): Applied when a working dynamic based on dialogue, teamwork, and baseline research is present—i.e., actions are based on a defined model or methodology that includes the incorporation of feedback from other key institutional actors, organized civil society, academia, think tanks, among others.
 - o Formal-excluding (0.5): In contrast, this category applies when there is no fluid or participatory process throughout the stages of project cycle management. As a result, the margin for adjusting initiatives is limited and/or nonexistent at technical, administrative, and financial levels.
 - f) The *approach* variable corresponds to the analysis of the sectoral agenda prioritized by the source of cooperation. Two categories were considered: (a) Comprehensive approach (1.00): When a source's cooperation agenda and resources address three or more SICA sectors, and (b) Sectoral approach (0.5); when the cooperation agenda and resources are limited to only one or two SICA sectors.
 - g) The *type of cooperation* variable is based on an analysis of the nature, form, or pattern of cooperation provided. It is characterized as: technical cooperation (0.25); financial cooperation (0.75); technical and financial cooperation (1.00); financial cooperation with a direct payment modality from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (0.5).
 - h) The *integration pillar* variable was constructed based on the understanding that the Central American integration process is a political initiative for each SICA member state. It is a multidimensional framework through which each sector—defined by the Tegucigalpa Protocol—holds equal importance, with notable progress as well as persistent challenges and opportunities, in each area. Accordingly, the variable refers to the integration pillar with which the source of cooperation is aligned. For weighting purposes, it was deemed necessary to reference the mandate of the Extraordinary Summit of Presidents of SICA, held on July 20, 2010, during which the presidents declared, “Relanzar el proceso de integración regional, basado en el compromiso histórico que hoy ratificamos, a través del desarrollo de acciones en cinco grandes pilares: seguridad democrática; prevención y mitigación de los desastres naturales y de los efectos del cambio climático; integración social; integración económica; y el fortalecimiento de la institucionalidad” (SICA, 2010).
- Thus, a weight of one (1) was assigned if the project corresponded to: Regional Integration-Risk Management; Political Integration; Economic Integration; Social Integration; Environmental Integration-Climate Change. A weight of zero point five (0.5) was assigned if the project was situated in non-prioritized sectors such as: Regional Integration-Education and Culture Sector; Economic Integration-Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) Sector; and Economic Integration-Fishing-Aquaculture Sector.
- i) The *transparency and accountability* variable was constructed based on information recorded in the OECD's official Development Cooperation Reports on development cooperation. It also evaluates whether partners make publicly available relevant information and whether they have responded to the accountability exercises carried out by SICA since 2013, in accordance with the mandate of the XXXVII Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Central American Integration System.

2.2.3 Consultation with experts in the field of development cooperation for the validation of variables

To validate the key variables of the study, the Delphi technique was applied as a structured and rigorous method for achieving expert consensus. The objective was to consolidate the definitions and

weightings of the variables based on collective knowledge, while minimizing the biases inherent in direct group interaction. The process was developed as follows:

- A) *Expert selection*: A panel of 80 experts in development cooperation was formed. The selection was based on demonstrated experience, professional background, and knowledge of the topic. Unlike other methods that prioritize quantity, we placed particular emphasis on the quality and expertise of the panel to ensure participants would provide high-level assessments.
- B) *Instrument and first round*: A structured questionnaire was designed, which included the variables, their definitions, and a rating scale to determine relevance and weighting. The questionnaire was sent to 80 experts to provide their assessments anonymously, ensuring the independence of their responses.
- C) *Analysis and results*: Thirty-nine percent of the panel (31 experts) completed the questionnaire. This response rate was considered both significant and sufficient, given the high profile and specialization of the participants. The results demonstrated strong consensus and low variability in the validation of the variables, their definitions, and the proposed weightings.
- D) *Decision on a second round*: The evidence of consensus was sufficiently robust to determine that an additional round was unnecessary. This allowed for direct progression to the next stage of analysis, optimizing research time and resources without compromising methodological validity.

2.2.4 Processing of variables and clustering of cooperating partners

Cluster analysis (Rodríguez Jaume, 2001) is an analytical technique that focuses on the units of analysis rather than solely on variables. Its fundamental purpose is to uncover the implicit grouping underlying the units of analysis in relation to a given set of variables. Therefore, it seeks to form homogeneous groups based on their similarities, allowing the division of elements into a specific number of clusters that meet the following characteristics: (a) each element belongs to one and only one group, (b) all elements are assigned to a group, and (c) each group exhibits relatively homogeneous behavior.

Regardless of the selected algorithm, all clustering methods are based on the principle of being able to define and quantify similarities between observations. This gives rise to the term distance, which is used to quantify the similarity or difference between each observation; that is, the more similar two observations are, the closer they will be. In this sense, the method relies on studying the distances between observations, allowing for the quantification of the degree of similarity (in terms of proximity) and the degree of difference (in terms of distance). The result is the formation of homogeneous groupings or clusters (Vilà-Baños et al., 2014).

Within the framework of this research and with the specialized database available, a non-hierarchical taxonomic analysis was developed using the K-means algorithm to group observations into k distinct clusters. The purpose of this technique is to classify statistical units into groups that are as internally homogeneous as possible and as heterogeneous as possible from each other (Rodríguez Jaume, 2001; Vilà-Baños et al., 2014).

The K-means algorithm follows an iterative process: (i) specify the number of clusters (k) to create; (ii) randomly select k observations as initial centroids; (iii) assign each observation to the closest centroid; (iv) recalculate the centroids; and (v) repeat steps (iii) and (iv) until assignments no longer change. To determine the optimal number of clusters (k), various scenarios were explored, employing internal validation methods such as the Elbow Method and the Silhouette Score. After evaluating scenarios with “ $k = 10$,” “ $k = 8$,” and “ $k = 6$,” it was determined that $k = 6$ was the most appropriate choice. This decision was justified on achieving the best combination of intra-cluster cohesion and inter-cluster separation, as well as producing conceptually meaningful and interpretable clusters aligned with the research objectives of characterizing the profiles of SICA’s cooperating partners.

To carry out the exercise, the PYTHON programming language was used, employing the libraries NumPy, Pandas, Matplotlib, and Scikit-learn. These libraries facilitated the required analysis for the proposed task. (See [Supplementary material](#) for the code developed for cluster estimation.)

3 Presentation of results: cluster analysis

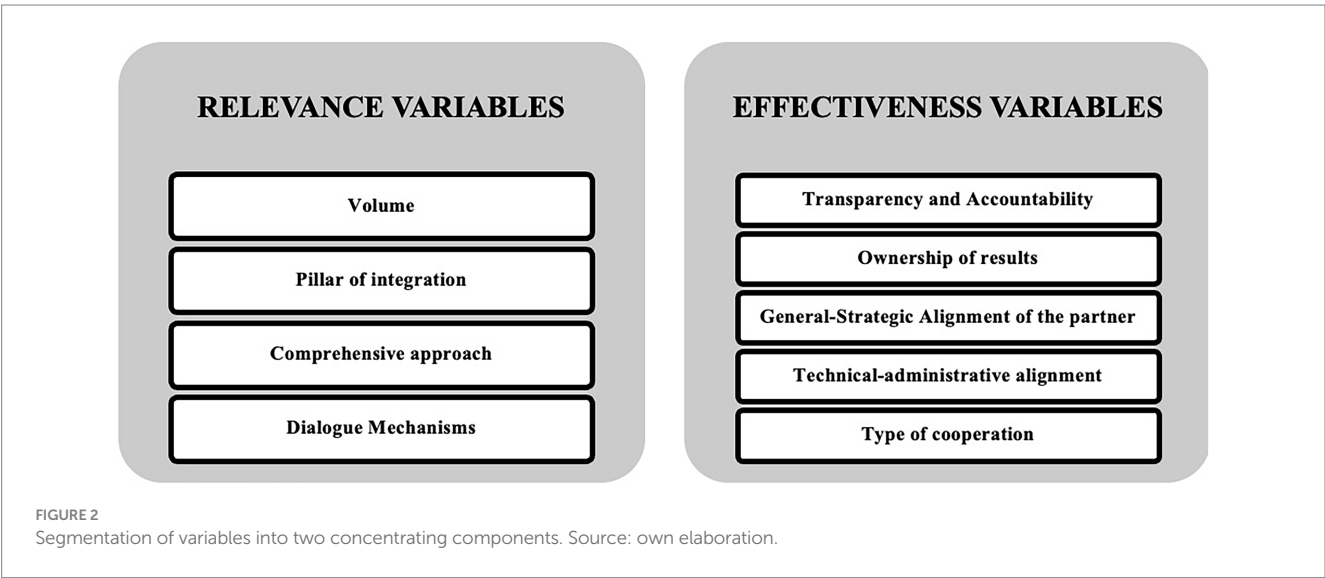
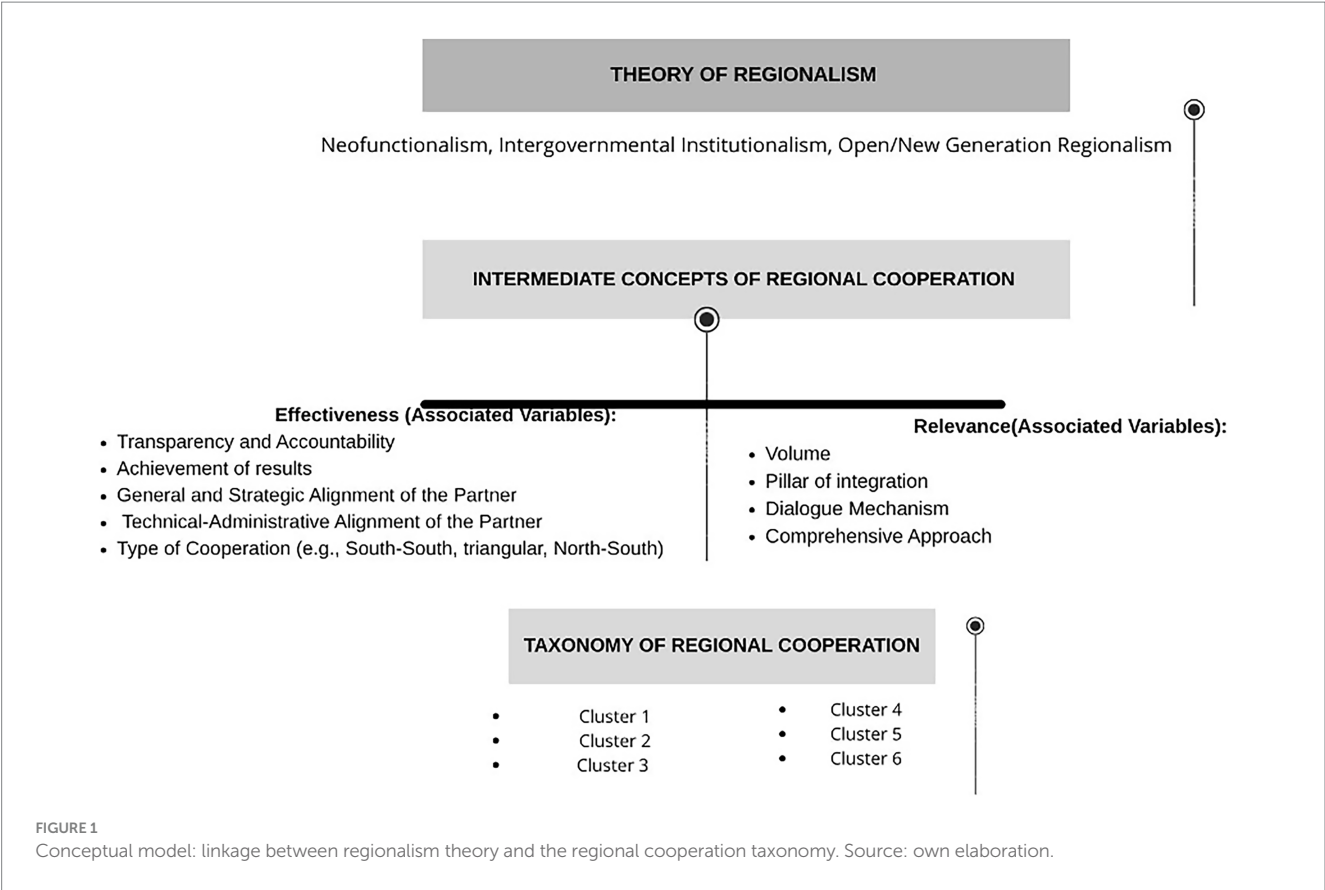
This research presents a conceptual model (Figure 1) that rigorously links regionalism theory with a developed cooperation taxonomy. Intermediate concepts bridge theoretical frameworks and measurable categories. Specifically, the integration pillar aligns with neofunctionalism, while the dialogue mechanism reflects intergovernmental institutionalism. The comprehensive approach resonates with new generation regionalism, emphasizing multidimensional cooperation. Relevance variables indicate material commitment. Lastly, effectiveness variables (e.g., transparency, results, alignment) are derived from governance and policy effectiveness literature, crucial for assessing regional integration success. This theoretically grounded taxonomy systematically guides the classification and evaluation of cooperation mechanisms.

For the cluster analysis, only the most relevant variables that describe the behavior of cooperating partners were selected, resulting in the identification of nine variables. These were grouped into two components: relevance and effectiveness (see Figure 2 and Graphic 1).

This segmentation facilitates the classification of sources of cooperation using statistical tools. The K-Means methodology was used to identify relatively homogeneous groups of cooperation actors, based on variables of effectiveness and relevance, which allowed for grouping of cooperation sources into six clusters with specific characteristics (see Chart 1).

3.1 Cluster ranking

The Cooperation Quality Index (CQI) was calculated as an indicator ranging from 0 to 1, designed to quantify the level of relevance and effectiveness of each source of cooperation. Values closer to 1 indicate higher quality and integrity. The ranking of the six



clusters was established based on the average CQI for each group, as shown in [Table 1](#).

3.2 Types of clusters: SICA partners

The main characteristics of each of the six cluster types identified within the SICA framework are presented below, in order established by the previously defined ranking. Detailed tables

listing the partners by cluster are provided in the [Supplementary material](#).

3.2.1 Characterization

3.2.1.1 Cluster 1—diamond/preferred partners

This cluster comprises the seven most relevant and effective sources of cooperation: the Spain-SICA Fund; the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation; the Global Fund to Fight

| Cluster | N° Partners | % Partners | % Amount | Total amount of the cluster in \$ | Average amount of projects in \$ | Average RELEVANCE Index | Average EFFECTIVE NESS Index | CQI |
|--------------|-------------|------------|------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|------|
| 1 | 7 | 10 | 49.36 | 341,855,922.06 | 3,524,287.86 | 0.88 | 0.77 | 0.82 |
| 5 | 15 | 22 | 0.51 | 3,521,805.90 | 140,872.24 | 0.72 | 0.74 | 0.73 |
| 3 | 8 | 12 | 35.16 | 243,503,602.35 | 3,865,136.55 | 0.81 | 0.62 | 0.70 |
| 2 | 15 | 22 | 11.25 | 77,884,158.89 | 916,284.22 | 0.69 | 0.53 | 0.60 |
| 4 | 11 | 16 | 3.66 | 25,373,365.31 | 563,852.56 | 0.56 | 0.59 | 0.58 |
| 6 | 11 | 16 | 0.06 | 437,262.94 | 39,751.18 | 0.48 | 0.41 | 0.44 |
| TOTAL | 67 | 100 | 100 | 692,576,117.45 | | | | |

CHART 1

Cluster ranking. Source: Own elaboration.

AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; the Government of Austria; the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation; the European Union; and the Danish International Development Agency. Together, they represent 10% of SICA's total cooperation sources.

Cluster 1 has an average Cooperation Quality Index of 0.82, comprising an average relevance index of 0.88 and an average effectiveness index of 0.77. The Spain-SICA Fund records the highest relevance index—not only among Cluster 1 partners but across all cooperation sources within the SICA framework at 0.92. Meanwhile, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria holds the highest effectiveness index of the “diamond partners” and all SICA cooperation sources, with a score of 0.85.

With regard to the relevance variables, Cluster 1 of the “diamond/preferential partners” allocates a total of \$341,855,922.06 to SICA, representing 49.36% of the total resources assigned to SICA projects. These cooperation sources have an average project volume of \$3,524,287.86, placing them above the third quartile. They are characterized by their use of a formal-participatory dialogue mechanism and focus primarily on the priority pillars of the Central American integration process. These partners engage through projects and initiatives that apply a specialized approach and predominantly adopt a comprehensive mode of cooperation.

In terms of effectiveness variables, Cluster 1, the “diamond/preferential partners,” employs a medium level of transparency and accountability. Additionally, these partners demonstrate a high degree of ownership over development results (0.75 on average). They also display high levels of both general-strategic alignment and technical-administrative alignment, which can be considered exemplary.

The partners in Cluster 1—characterized by their formal-participatory dialogue mechanisms, specialized and comprehensive approach to cooperation, and their alignment to SICA pillars—serve as a clear example of how contemporary cooperation reflects the “post-liberal regionalism wave.” Unlike earlier stages of regionalism, which focused on intergovernmental commercial or political

agreements, this cluster applies a form of cooperation that transcends purely economic concerns, incorporating social, health, and sustainable development dimensions. The specific characteristics of post-liberal regionalism that strongly align with the attributes of Cluster 1 include:

- *Multidimensionality and expanded agenda:* This cluster works on the Central American integration priority pillars (social development, environment, security, etc.), overcoming the exclusive emphasis on commerce or state security that characterized previous waves of regionalism.
- *Participation of multiple actors:* The promotion of a formal-participatory dialogue mechanism by these partners involves the inclusion of a wide range of actors—beyond just state actors—in integration processes, which is a distinctive feature of post-liberal regionalism.
- *Emphasis on results and governance:* The strong degree of ownership of development results, combined with strategic and technical-administrative alignment, reflects partners' concern for the effectiveness and governance of cooperation—key elements of post-liberal regionalism, which aims to consolidate integration processes beyond the scope of formal agreements.
- *Institutionalization and shared norms:* The characterization of these partners as disciplined and exemplary in promoting a work dynamic based on dialogue, teamwork, data research, and baseline research, that is, basing their actions on a specific model or methodology indicates an adherence to institutional norms and procedures. This is characteristic of post-liberal regionalism, which aims to ensure the sustainability and predictability of integration processes.
- *Diamond/preferential partners:* Diamond/preferential partners are characterized and differentiated by their disciplined and exemplary promotion of a work dynamic grounded in dialogue, teamwork, data, and baseline research. Their actions are guided

by specific models or methodology that incorporate feedback from other key institutional actors. Additionally, these partners employ planning instruments, administrative processes, and emphasize transparency and accountability. They possess a long-term vision and perspective, focus on achieving objectives, and demonstrate strong commitment to their partners and the priorities of the Central American integration process.

3.2.1.2 Cluster 5—effective and dynamic partners, but not relevant to SICA

Cluster 5 consists of 15 members, representing 22% of all SICA cooperation actors. These include: the World Bank; the Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation; the United States Agency for International Development; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland; the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; German Cooperation; the Inter-American Development Bank; the Aljarafe-Doñana Rural Development Group; the Xunta de Galicia; International Development Research Centre; the Andalusian Agency for International Development Cooperation; the Republic of Norway; the United States Department of the Interior; the United Nations Office for Project Services; and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development.

Cluster 5, composed of effective and dynamic partners that are not relevant to SICA, has an average Cooperation Quality Index of 0.73. The cluster's average relevance index is 0.72, while its average effectiveness index is 0.74.

With regard to relevance variables, Cluster 5 allocated \$77,884,158.89 to SICA projects, representing 11.25% of the total resources assigned. The average project volume for these international cooperation sources is \$916,284.22. Their efforts focus primarily on areas aligned with the priority pillars of the Central American integration process. Cluster 5 members employ a formal-participatory dialogue mechanism, meaning their efforts are based on a specific model or methodology that incorporates feedback from other key institutional actors. These partners generally employ a sectoral approach, with their support typically limited to only one or two sectors within SICA.

In terms of effectiveness variables, the members of Cluster 5 exhibit a medium level of ownership of development results, with an average score of 0.76. Their level of transparency and accountability is low, averaging 0.57. They are characterized by their provision of financial cooperation. Additionally, they exhibit a medium level of general-strategic alignment and a high level of technical-administrative alignment, in which they particularly stand out.

Despite exhibiting high levels of project execution effectiveness and dynamism, Cluster 5 reflects a dimension of contemporary regionalism in which cooperation actors—while supportive of regional frameworks like SICA—tend to operate based on more segmented or globally oriented priorities. As a result, their overall relevance to the broader Central American integration agenda is limited compared to the actors in Cluster 1.

Within the framework of the “waves” of regionalism, and particularly in the context of post-liberal regionalism, this cluster exhibits a pattern of cooperation that, while embracing the multidimensional of regional integration, often does so through sector-specific approaches. Although post-liberal regionalism ideally aspires to deep and comprehensive integration across multiple dimensions (social, environmental, etc.), the actors in this cluster tend

to concentrate their efforts on more narrowly defined or targeted areas of intervention.

It is important to note, that while “effective and dynamic, but not relevant for SICA” partners constitute a dynamic cluster with diverse approaches and high levels of effectiveness—SICA likely does not represent a strategic priority for them, especially when compared to other strategic allies at the Latin American and international levels. Therefore, efforts should be made to enhance their relevance in order to increase their contribution to the progress and impact of the Central American integration process.

3.2.1.3 Cluster 3—relevant partners

This cluster is comprised of eight members, representing 12% of SICA cooperation partners. These include the Republic of China-Taiwan; the United Nations Development Programme; the Global Environment Facility; the United Nations Environment Programme; the Central American Bank for Economic Integration; the Government of the Netherlands; the Government of Finland; and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

Cluster 3—comprising relevant partners—has an average Cooperation Quality Index of 0.70 corresponding to an average relevance index of 0.81, and an average effectiveness index of 0.62.

Regarding relevance variables, Cluster 3 allocates \$243,503,602.35 to SICA projects, representing 35.16% of the total resources assigned. The average volume per project for this cluster is \$3,865,136.55. Their work is focused on areas aligned with the priority pillars of the Central American integration process. Cluster 3 members employ a formal-participatory dialogue mechanism, grounding their actions in a specific model or methodology that incorporates feedback from other key institutional actors. These partners primarily take a comprehensive approach to cooperation.

Regarding effectiveness variables, Cluster 3 differs in that the members exhibit a medium level of ownership of development results, with an average score of 0.58. Their level of transparency and accountability is low, averaging 0.45. Cluster 3 partners are notable for the extend of their level of financial cooperation. They demonstrate a medium level of general-strategic alignment and a high level of technical-administrative alignment.

Within the historical framework of the “waves, of regionalism,” this cluster is clearly situated within realm of post-liberal regionalism. The elements that align it with this phase include:

- *Strategic commitment and multidimensionality:* The Cluster's level of resource allocation (35.16% of the total), their focus on SICA's priority pillars, and comprehensive approach to cooperation demonstrates a significant investment in a regional development and cohesion agenda. They go beyond purely economic or security-focused regionalism to embrace the multiple social, environmental, and developmental dimensions that characterize the post-liberal wave.
- *Dialogue and structured methodology:* The application of a formal-participatory dialogue mechanism along with the grounding of actions in specific methodologies—including the incorporation of feedback from other institutional actors—demonstrate commitment to regionalism that values joint construction and institutionalism. These are distinctive features of post-liberal regionalism, which seeks to ensure legitimacy and sustainability.

Thus, these partners constitute a cluster that allocates substantial resources to SICA's priority sectors, demonstrates strong technical-administrative efficiency, and with whom efforts should be made to achieve a higher level of overall effectiveness.

3.2.1.4 Cluster 2—non-aligned and less strategic partners for SICA

Cluster 2 is composed of 15 members, representing 22% of SICA's cooperation partners. These include: the United Nations Children's Fund; the AVINA Foundation; the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean; the Japan International Cooperation Agency; the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction; the Government of Belgium; the Regional Office of Italian Cooperation for Central America and the Caribbean; the United Nations Population Fund; the Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center; ClientEarth; the Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture; the Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation; the Republic of Korea; the National Institute for Health Promotion; the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Cluster 2—comprising non-aligned and less strategic partners for SICA—has an average Cooperation Quality Index of 0.60. Their average relevance index is 0.69, and their average effectiveness index is 0.53.

Regarding relevance variables, Cluster 2 allocates \$25,373,365.31 to SICA projects, representing 3.66% of the total resources assigned. Their average volume per project for the cluster is \$563,852.56. Their efforts align with the priority pillars of the Central American integration process. Cluster 2 members employ a formal-participatory dialogue mechanism, grounding their work in a specific model or methodology that incorporates feedback from other key institutional actors. These non-aligned and less strategic partners primarily adopt a sector-based approach to cooperation.

In terms of effectiveness, Cluster 2 presents a low degree of ownership of development results, averaging 0.48. Their level of transparency and accountability is also low, averaging 0.38, as is their level of general-strategic alignment. They demonstrate a medium level of technical-administrative alignment. Their primary form of support is technical cooperation, although some members of the cluster offer financial cooperation.

Thus, the non-aligned and less strategic partners for SICA comprise a group of multilateral and regional partners, as well as bilateral partners such as Japan, Korea, and Belgium. They provide limited resources, directed only toward specific sectors of SICA. This represents significant potential, which remains largely underutilized due to shortcomings in planning, administrative processes and deficiencies in transparency and accountability.

3.2.1.5 Cluster 4—occasional partners

Cluster 4 is composed of 11 members, representing 16% of SICA cooperation partners. They include the United States Environmental Protection Agency; The PEW Charitable Trusts; the Center for Information and Communication Technology Foundation; the World Organization for Conservation of Nature; the University of Texas at San Antonio—United States Agency for Development—Higher Education; the Ibero-American Foundation for Quality Management; the World Wildlife Fund; the United States

Department of State; the United States Department of Agriculture; the W.K. Kellogg Foundation; and the Organization of American States.

These occasional partners have an average Cooperation Quality Index of 0.58. Their average relevance index is 0.56, and their average effectiveness index is 0.59.

In terms of relevance variables, Cluster 4 allocates \$3,521,805.9 to SICA projects, 0.51% of the total resources assigned. The average per project volume for the cluster is \$140,872.24. Their efforts primarily target sectors outside the priority pillars of the Central American integration process pillars. They employ a formal-excluding dialogue mechanism and tend to adopt a sector-based approach to cooperation.

Regarding effectiveness variables, Cluster 4 exhibits a medium level of ownership of development results, averaging 0.56. Their level of transparency and accountability is low, averaging 0.52. They primarily provide financial cooperation, demonstrate a low level of general-strategic alignment and register a medium level of technical-administrative alignment.

Thus, occasional partners are characterized as periodic partners, poorly aligned with the SICA's priority pillars, consisting primarily of U.S. institutions and specialized sectoral funds.

3.2.1.6 Cluster 6—unforeseen and occasional partners

Cluster 6 is composed of 11 members, representing 16% of SICA's cooperation partners. The members are: the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs; the World Food Programme; the Republic of France; Drexel University; the University of Michigan; the European Commission—DG Education Erasmus Plus; the International Initiative for the Treatment of Chronic Diseases in Developing Countries; Westat; the Association for the Prevention and Study of HIV/AIDS; the United Health Center; and the National Institute of Public Health of Mexico.

This cluster—comprising unforeseen and occasional partners—has an average Cooperation Quality Index of 0.44. Their average relevance index is 0.48, and their average effectiveness index is 0.41.

Regarding relevance variables, Cluster 6 allocates of \$437,262.94 to SICA projects, 0.06% of the total resources assigned. The average volume per project for this cluster is \$39,751.18. Their efforts are primarily focused on areas outside of the priority pillars for the Central American integration process. They employ a formal-excluding dialogue mechanism and adopt a sector-based approach to cooperation.

In terms of effectiveness variables, Cluster 6 exhibits a low level of ownership of development results, averaging 0.36. Their level of transparency and accountability is also low, averaging 0.36. They demonstrate a low level of general-strategic alignment and a medium level of technical-administrative alignment. Their primary focus is on the provision of technical cooperation.

In summary, Cluster 6 members—a group of unforeseen and occasional partners—support SICA during specific moments or circumstances and provide minimal resources primarily in the form of technical assistance.

4 Discussion results

This section the main findings from the comparative analysis of the clusters based on relevance and effectiveness. Accordingly, the results are drawn from the analysis of partner groups in Cluster 1

TABLE 2 Top 10 cooperation sources by relevance.

| Source of cooperation | Relevance | Cluster |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Spain SICA Fund | 0.92 | 1 |
| Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation | 0.90 | 1 |
| Republic of China-Taiwan | 0.89 | 3 |
| Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria | 0.88 | 1 |
| Government of Austria | 0.88 | 1 |
| Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation | 0.88 | 1 |
| European Union | 0.85 | 1 |
| United Nations Development Programme | 0.84 | 1 |
| Danish International Development Agency | 0.84 | 3 |
| Global Environment Facility | 0.83 | 3 |

Source: Own elaboration.

(“Diamond/Preferred Partners”), 3 (“Relevant Partners”), and 5 (“Effective and Dynamic Partners, but Not Relevant to SICA”), thus excluding Clusters 2 (“Non-Aligned and Less Strategic Partners”), 4 (“Occasional Partners”), and 6 (“Unforeseen and Occasional Partners”). In this context, the positions of the 10 most relevant partners (see Table 2) indicate that:

4.1 Most relevant partners

- Participation in priority pillars: The 10 most influential partners—including the Spain SICA Fund, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation, and the Republic of China-Taiwan—are active in priority pillars of the Central American integration process, such as risk management, political and economic integration, and climate change.
- Contribution of significant resources: These partners contribute the largest volume of financial resources to SICA, both in absolute terms and relative importance.
- Comprehensive cooperation approach: Their cooperation spans multiple sectors of SICA, including economic, social, and environmental integration; culture and education; and disaster risk management—demonstrating a broad and multifaceted vision.
- Participatory dialogue: They establish a formal and collaborative dialogue mechanism, grounded in a specific methodology that incorporates feedback from key institutional actors, civil society, academia, and think tanks.

4.2 Most effective partners

As previously indicated, effectiveness is measured using variables such as transparency and accountability, ownership of results, general-strategic alignment, technical-administrative alignment, and type of cooperation. Based on these criteria, the positions of the 10 most effective partners (see Table 3) indicate the following:

- High-level strategic alignment: The most effective partners—such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS/SICA and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency—are closely

aligned strategically with SICA’s established strategy and complement SICA’s Strategic Agenda.

- Technical-administrative coherence: Their technical-administrative processes and standards are highly consistent with SICA’s administrative-financial models.
- Highly favorable results: Their cooperation is closely aligned with the policies and systems of SICA member states, leading to strong ownership and positive development outcomes.
- Transparency and accountability: Their transparency is notable, ensuring public availability of information on cooperation and since 2013, proactively responding to accountability exercises in accordance with the mandates of the XXXVII Summit of Heads of State and Government of SICA.

4.3 General guidelines for each cluster

The Central American Integration System (SICA) and its General Secretariat should consolidate and strengthen its relationship with the *diamond/preferred partners* of Cluster 1. It is recommended that high-impact regional projects originate from dialogue forums and negotiations with this key group of partners.

Partners in Cluster 5, although *effective and dynamic*, currently do not achieve a desired level of relevance for SICA. This group should work on strengthening one of the key relevance variables by pursuing a more comprehensive approach to engagement with SICA. In terms of the effectiveness variables, while these partners generally score medium to high across most dimensions, it is particularly important to increase their level of transparency and accountability, which remains relatively low.

The *relevant partners* in Cluster 3 should continue to maintain their strong performance in terms of relevance while strengthening two effectiveness-related variables: transparency and accountability, and ownership of development results. Doing so would further consolidate their effectiveness and enhance their positive impact in the region.

With the *non-aligned and less strategic partners* for SICA—those comprising Cluster 2—a dialogue and work stream mechanism should be established to increase the volume of resources allocated and, more importantly, to strengthen the variables associated with effectiveness. Towards this end, it is essential to establish planning tools, promote

TABLE 3 Top 10 cooperation sources by effectiveness.

| Source of cooperation | Effectiveness | Cluster |
|--|---------------|---------|
| Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria | 0.85 | 1 |
| Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency | 0.83 | 5 |
| Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation | 0.82 | 1 |
| Spain SICA Fund | 0.80 | 1 |
| World Bank | 0.80 | 5 |
| Galician Government | 0.80 | 5 |
| Danish International Development Agency | 0.76 | 1 |
| International Development Research Centre | 0.76 | 5 |
| United States Agency for International Development | 0.75 | 5 |
| Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland | 0.74 | 5 |

Source: Own elaboration.

the harmonization and standardization of administrative processes, and enhance transparency and accountability.

With *the occasional partners*—members of Cluster 4—efforts should be directed towards strengthening the variables associated with both relevance and effectiveness. This includes encouraging an increase in the volume of resources allocated to SICA; raising awareness of the importance of working on integration process priority pillars, adopting a formal and participatory dialogue mechanism, and fostering a comprehensive approach to cooperation across all of SICA. Additionally, it is essential to develop technical and operational instruments aimed at improving ownership of development results, enhancing transparency and accountability, and strengthening both general-strategic and technical-administrative alignment.

With *the unforeseen and occasional partners*—members of Cluster 6—significant challenges arise. Until considerable improvements are demonstrated in their relevance and effectiveness, SICA should evaluate its relationships with this group and consider redirecting efforts toward partners with greater potential for positive impact.

4.4 Policy guidelines within the SICA framework

The need for a strategic and systemic framework for managing international cooperation in the Central American region is fundamental to ensuring the effectiveness and impact of resources allocated to the Central American integration process. Towards this end, the conceptualization of a SICA Cooperation Policy (SICACP) emerges as a vital instrument for the General Secretariat of SICA (GS-SICA). Such a policy would not only provide a structure for the coordination and harmonization of cooperation partner efforts but would also allow for rigorous monitoring of progress towards sustainable development goals and regional cohesion.

The central objective of SICACP would be to establish a general action framework that guides the coordination, harmonization, and prioritization of technical and financial resources to ensure and maximize their contribution to the sustainable and inclusive growth and development of the SICA region. To achieve this, the policy should focus on four key pillars: strengthening institutional capacities, promoting regional synergies through joint projects, social inclusion and gender equity as a cross-cutting principle, and sustainability as an integral criterion in all actions.

Additionally, the implementation of this policy would be enhanced through the application of a monitoring and evaluation instrument. The GS-SICA's Directorate of Cooperation could be responsible for monitoring the Cooperation Quality Index (CQI) for each partner, enabling the preparation of semi-annual reports that would serve as a critical tool for decision-making by the Sectoral Councils of Ministers. These provisions carry direct and significant implications for policymakers and development agencies. The proposed framework goes beyond mere resource management, by providing an empirical and strategic foundation that empowers authorities to make informed decisions, and be proactive, while strengthening accountability and optimizing the effectiveness of cooperation in Central America.

4.5 Qualitative reflection on cooperation trends

Although this study is based on a quantitative analysis of cooperation up to 2018, it is essential to supplement the findings with a qualitative reflection on trends that emerged in the 2019–2023 period.

Starting in 2019, the SICA cooperation agenda was profoundly influenced by high-impact global and regional events. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant reorientation of priorities, with an urgent focus on public health and socioeconomic resilience. International cooperation was channeled toward the acquisition of medical equipment, the training of healthcare personnel, and support for affected value chains. Concurrently, the intensification of climate events in the region, such as hurricanes and droughts, has driven a more robust environmental and adaptation agenda. This directed cooperation increasingly toward risk management, food security, and the construction of resilient infrastructure, integrating sustainability as a central pillar.

Furthermore, the growing influence of China as a global cooperation partner emerged as a significant trend in this period. China's engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean, often characterized by large-scale infrastructure projects, trade agreements, and direct investments, has begun to reshape the regional cooperation landscape. While not always directly integrated into traditional multilateral frameworks like SICA, China's increasing presence offers both new opportunities for development financing and potential shifts in the geopolitical dynamics of cooperation, influencing the strategic choices of SICA member states and traditional partners.

These trends demonstrate that, beyond the figures, SICA cooperation is a dynamic and adaptable process, capable of responding to complex and evolving challenges. Therefore, the data gap from 2018 onwards presents an important opportunity for future research. It is worth considering the development of a continuous monitoring system that integrates real-time cooperation data or exploring the impact of new cooperation modalities—such as triangular and South–South cooperation—on strengthening regional integration and the region's resilience to external shocks.

4.6 Final considerations

In conclusion, international development cooperation constitutes a crucial feature for SICA's financing and operations. This support plays a significant role in advancing sustainable integration and inclusive development in Central America, serving as a catalyst for progress in the region as a whole as well as in SICA member states.

The analysis, conducted through the application of the taxonomy and cluster analysis, provides a nuanced understanding of the diverse profiles of SICA's cooperating partners. This detailed insight underscores the need to implement differentiated engagement strategies, that move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to maximize the effectiveness and relevance of international support. As the global cooperation landscape continues to evolve, marked by new actors and complex challenges, we believe a data-driven framework like ours is indispensable for SICA to strategically navigate its alliances and strengthen regional resilience.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in the article/[Supplementary material](#).

Ethics statement

The Ethics Committee of Loyola University has evaluated the research entitled “The Contribution of International Cooperation to Strengthening Regional Integration for Inclusive and Sustainable Development in Central America: Beyond a Taxonomy of Cooperation in the Central American Integration Process,” led by doctoral candidate Laura Michelle Godoy Tobar. After a thorough analysis, the committee has unanimously determined that this research, in its current phase, is exempt from the need for informed consent and has met the criteria established by our ethical guidelines.

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Author contributions

LT: Conceptualization, Resources, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis. PP: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision. VC: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision.

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Supplementary material

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