

ECLAC – Mesoamerica Project cooperation: Support for the facilitation of trade and transport in Mesoamerica

This edition of the FAL Bulletin analyses the activities performed by ECLAC and the Mesoamerica Project related to issues linked to infrastructure services, particularly with regards to the physical integration, facilitation and operation of multimodal services in Central America. The authors of the document are Carlos Trinidad from Executive Management, and Vinicio Martínez, Infrastructure and Competitiveness Coordinator, both of the Mesoamerica Project. For further information, please contact c.trinidad@proyectomesoamerica.org

Background

The Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project is an integration and development mechanism promoted by Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia and the recently adhered Dominican Republic, within the framework of the Tuxtla Dialogue and Coordination Mechanism, a political, economic and cooperation forum coordinated by the region's governments.

Better known as the Mesoamerica Project (MP), it was officially launched during the 10th Summit Meeting of the Tuxtla Mechanism held in Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico, on 28 June 2008, although it has been working to benefit the region since 2001.

Its objective is to promote integration between south-southeast Mexico and Central America by undertaking infrastructure-related and social projects aimed at fostering development, making the region more competitive, and thus have a positive impact on

the population. With a long-term perspective, the governments involved in the MP are effectively facing regional challenges, making use of the Tuxtla Mechanism of Dialogue and Cooperation and articulating its components with the Central American Integration System (SICA) and its different Councils of Ministers in order to promote cooperation between the member States.

It is governed by the Summit of Heads of State and Government and the Executive Commission (EC), comprising the Presidential Commissioners appointed by the different governments, who are responsible for coordinating the project's agenda. Executive Management is housed in a regional office in San Salvador, El Salvador.

In sum, the MP is involved in cooperation, development and integration and its agenda contemplates different issues such as transport, energy, telecommunications, facilitation of trade and competitiveness, health, the environment, natural disasters and housing.

The following international agencies form part of the Institutional Technical Group, which handles the necessary funding and is actively involved in the project: Inter-American Development Bank (IABD), Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), *Corporación Andina de Fomento* (CAF), General Secretariat of the Central American Integration System (SICA), Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration (SIECA) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), among others.

Following are some of the main subjects contemplated by the MP.

Transport and facilitation of trade

The development of transport infrastructures and the facilitation of regional trade have always been focal points in the history of this integration mechanism.

From the transport perspective, the major challenge has been, and continues to be, to create a road and multimodal transport infrastructure capable of providing efficient connectivity and first-class logistic services between the states of south-southeast Mexico, Central America and Colombia, benefiting the population in terms of mobility, trade, economic impact and generation of opportunities and employment, among others. By promoting road system integration, the objective is to facilitate the region's trade and competitiveness, ensuring that Mesoamerica is not left behind in international trade and bringing social development to the people.

From the perspective of facilitation of trade, the MP focuses its efforts on helping to encourage trade between countries by means of activities aimed at reducing the cost of inter-regional trade, especially in relation to logistics and financing. In the Mexican States of Yucatan, Quintana Roo, Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, Oaxaca and Puebla, for instance, it identifies the Central American market's potential for exporting goods and services, while in Central America it also sees an opportunity to

access the market in south-southeast Mexico in logistically favourable conditions. The underdeveloped road network, contradictory legislation and regulations and the delays affecting customs formalities have hindered trade between the two regions for decades.

International Mesoamerican road network

One of the highlights of the MP is the International Mesoamerican Road Network, one of the emblematic programmes that the governments have been promoting since 2001, in order to increase the domestic and foreign connectivity of the region's economies by improving road transport infrastructures.

The plan contemplates the construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of 13,132 kilometres of roads in 5 regional corridors crossing the different countries:

- Pacific Corridor
- Atlantic Corridor
- Caribbean Tourist Corridor
- Transoceanic logistic corridors
- A series of supplementary roads and connections.

The Pacific Corridor starts in Puebla, Mexico, and follows the Pacific coast from Mexico to Panama. Although there has been significant progress in the corridor's rehabilitation, the objective in 2009 with a view to 2015 is to accelerate this process to create a 5-star Pacific Corridor, compliant with international traffic and road safety standards and creating the shortest route between Mexico and Panama, equivalent to 3,160 kilometres of road across 6 borders and through 7 countries. It will be capable of transporting 95% of the products traded in the region. This is an integral project, as it not only contemplates road infrastructures but also agile customs procedures and controls (customs, migration, quarantine, etc.) to facilitate trade.

The Atlantic Corridor is 2,906 kilometres long, from the port of Coatzacoalcas, Veracruz, Mexico, to Panama, along the Atlantic coast of south-southeast Mexico, Belize and Honduras. The Caribbean Tourist Corridor is a road network designed to provide excellent communications between the major Maya World tourist centres to Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico. These 1,446 kilometres of road start in Cancun, Mexico and cross Belize and the Tikal region of Guatemala.

The Transoceanic Logistic Corridors, or "dry canals", that also form part of the International Mesoamerican Road Network aim to connect the Pacific with the Atlantic ocean in different parts of the Mesoamerican region. The El Salvador-Honduras dry canal is currently under construction. It aims to provide a first-class road between the port of Cutuco, El Salvador (Océano Pacífico) and Puerto Cortés, Honduras (Atlantic ocean). Important progress has also been reported in the El Salvador-Guatemala

logistic corridor, from the port of Acajutla, in the Pacific, to the Caribbean ports of Guatemala, Puerto Barrios and Santo Tomás de Castilla.

In general terms, the estimated investment totalled US\$ 7,19 million up to June, 2009. At that time, approximately 50% of the construction and modernisation work had been completed, equivalent to 6,629 kilometres of roads. Of this, 14%, or 1,811 kilometres, were under construction and the necessary financing was being sought for the remaining 36%, representing 4,692 kilometres.

As an example of recent work, the El Ceibo-Lagunitas road between El Petén, Guatemala, and the State of Tabasco, Mexico was opened in October 2009, and the border post between the two countries was modernised on occasion of the official visit of the Mexican President, Felipe Calderón, to Guatemala. This road is part of the Mesoamerican Tourist Corridor, designed to create tourist development opportunities.

Other important projects were also completed in 2009, including the Río Hondo international bridge (Mexico-Belize) and the La Amistad transborder bridge (El Salvador-Honduras). A source of financing was identified for the construction of an international bridge over the Sixaola river (Costa Rica-Panama) and there was some progress in the studies for the rehabilitation and construction of a new international bridge on the “Anguiatu” border between El Salvador and Guatemala. Furthermore, in March 2009, within the framework of the MP, the region’s countries agreed to standardise weights and dimensions in the design of transport infrastructures (roads and ports) in Mesoamerica.

Other forms of transport

The Mesoamerica Project’s transport agenda also included different initiatives such as maritime transport, cabotage (short distance shipping) and rail transport. Following the mandates of the 10th Tuxtla Summit, the countries involved, coordinated by Panama, have established a plan of action for the development of cabotage, based on four major areas: customs procedures, port facilities, legislation and shipping standards. In 2009, the IABD approved a technical cooperation project in the amount of one million dollars for a feasibility study, which should be ready in 2010. This project is expected to foster the development and modernisation of shipping in the region.

On the other hand, the possibility of promoting a project to establish a railway system in Central America is also being explored. A feasibility study costing around one million dollars was also presented to the IABD in 2009. It has now been approved and is pending completion of the technical consultation process.

Promotion of investment to modernise road infrastructures, cabotage and rail transport in the region has given rise to the development of intermodal transport infrastructure and system planning. In this respect, ECLAC has organised two regional workshops to date:

- Integral Transport Service and Infrastructure Planning in Mesoamerica (Antigua, Guatemala, September 2008)
- Intermodal Transport System Planning for an Efficient Supply Chain in Mesoamerica (Antigua, Guatemala, 27 to 30 July 2009)

As a result of these workshops, the regional transport agenda has grown, and now includes the harmonisation of vehicle weight and size standards and specifications and the subject of road safety. ECLAC has provided support and advisory services, generating important regional agendas and even presidential mandate proposals, such as the “Mesoamerican Road Safety Declaration”, which establishes road safety as a priority in the region’s countries. It was presented to the Ministers of Transport at their meeting on 16 July 2009, in San José, Costa Rica, and they decided to establish a regional road safety task force and to include acceleration of the Pacific Corridor in the priority programme to be presented at the summit as part of the road safety agenda.

Subsequently, at the 11th Presidential Summit held in Guanacaste, Costa Rica, the Presidential Declaration referred to the need to harmonise vehicle weight and size and road safety standards. Progress will be assessed at the next summit, to be held in Colombia in June 2010.

Electric interconnections

In the energy field, the MP has promoted important projects aimed at establishing the Regional Electric Market, which will enhance trade. These are regional projects creating opportunities for trading electricity and creating new companies in the sector.

The Central American Electric Interconnection System (known as SIEPAC), an important part of this integration mechanism, consists of the construction of approximately 1,790 kilometres of electric power lines from Guatemala to Panama and the connection of 15 transformer substations, at a cost of more than 500 million dollars, which will facilitate trading up to 300MW of power and the establishment of a regional electric market. The SIEPAC has been under construction for 2 years under the responsibility of the Distribution Network Owner, headquartered in San José, Costa Rica, and is scheduled to become operational in 2010. Construction is currently reported as 69% complete.

The electric interconnection between Guatemala and Mexico was officially opened in October 2009, when the Mexican President, Felipe Calderón, visited Guatemala. Electricity can now be traded between the two countries. When this line is connected to the SIEPAC network, Mexico will be able to trade electricity with the entire Central American region.

Future plans include extending the electric interconnection to Colombia when the Panama-Colombia line comes into operation. In March 2009, these Governments signed an agreement to implement an operative regulatory framework. Likewise, *Interconexión Eléctrica Colombia-Panama* (ICP), the company responsible for building and operating the line, was also created. The length of the line is 614 kilometres, part of which will be laid under the sea in order to prevent environmental impact on the Darién Gap. The project has a cost of 300 million dollars.

Furthermore, one of the Mesoamerica Project's goals is to strengthen national power transmission systems, foster the use of renewable sources of energy and support national rural electrification plans.

The regional electric system will also include a regional fibre optic network known as the Mesoamerican Information Highway. It will reduce the digital gap in Mesoamerican countries and enable the development of more efficient information and communication technologies, consistent with world programmes such as e-LAC, promoted by ECLAC, and other goals.

Furthermore, biofuel production is being promoted by means of regional cooperation between Colombia, Central American countries and Mexico. Indeed, two pilot plants using Colombian technology were recently opened in El Salvador and Honduras; similar plants are currently under construction in Chiapas, Mexico, and Guatemala. These plants represent the first step in the establishment of a Mesoamerican Biofuel Science and Technology-Sharing Network.

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