

**Three decades of economic integration in Latin America: characteristics, evolution, obstacles, and challenges from 1990 to 2022.** The objective of this article involves analyzing the trajectory of economic integration in Latin America, thus approaching the integrating efforts ongoing between 1990 and 2022 and analyzing the different initiatives taking place towards this end, studying the documents and articles published that feature the models emerging over this period. Hence, our aim extends beyond understanding the concept in order to highlight the particularities that have undergone consolidation in the Latin American case, associated with the proliferation of regional integration focused initiatives. This resulted in a type of characterization outlining the reasons – despite repeated attempts– Latin American integration does not reach beyond the trial stage, reflecting in short-term alliances and initiatives with minimal social, political, cultural or even economic impacts.

**KEYWORDS:** Economic integration; International trade; Regional agreements; Latin America.

**Três décadas de integração económica na América Latina: características, evolução, obstáculos e desafios de 1990 a 2022.** O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a trajetória do fenómeno da integração económica na América Latina considerando os esforços integracionistas feitos entre 1990 e 2022, analisando as diferentes iniciativas que se desenvolveram relativamente a este tema, estudando os documentos e artigos que foram publicados, nos quais se apresentavam os modelos que foram surgindo ao longo deste período. Pretende-se não só compreender o conceito mas também destacar as particularidades que se consolidaram no caso latino-americano, associadas à proliferação de iniciativas integracionistas na região, que tiveram como resultado um tipo de caracterização em que se esboçam as razões pelas quais – apesar das reiteradas tentativas – a integração latino-americana não ultrapassou a fase de ensaio, materializando-se em alianças e iniciativas de curto prazo e de impacto social, político, cultural e mesmo económico mínimo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** integração económica; comércio internacional; acordos regionais; América Latina.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The economic development of nations directly relates to their ability both to generate wealth and to guarantee dignified and stable conditions for their inhabitants. This goal, common to all economies, has been recurrent on the American continent, more specifically in South America, given the historical conditions of poverty and the blatant need to improve its reality.

One of the resources crucial to achieving this objective stems from relationships with other nations and the nature and focus of these links; thus, besides the strictly economic facet, shared structures can also be developed in other areas and produce benefits for the population.

The goal of economic integration, which – as observed below – has been inscribed in Latin American history ever since its inception, has left a series of pacts, alliances, and agreements in its wake that have enabled some progress even while not completely coherent with the ideals by which each of these endeavors emerged.

There is ample specialist literature discussing the factors impeding economic integration processes in Latin America. The factors therein identified include the lack of political will to cede sovereignty, the absence of a robust

institutional framework, and the existence of ideological differences, among others. Concerning institutional weaknesses, Blanco, Echeverry, and Ortega (2020) and Paisano (2018), focusing on the specific cases of the Andean Community of Nations and the Central American Integration System (SICA), class this factor as a limitation for the success of these integration initiatives. Shifter (2012) asserts that the cession of state sovereignty is intrinsic to the essence of integration processes. Although many 21st century economic integration initiatives in Latin America achieved significant progress in terms of cooperation and political dialogue, not one of these initiatives is grounded in a genuine effort to cede sovereignty (2012, p. 55). In their works, Bouzas, Motta Veiga, and Ríos (2008), as well as Malamud and Gardini (2012), explore how institutional weaknesses pose obstacles to consolidating integration.

This article deploys documentary analysis to investigate economic integration in Latin America with emphasis on the processes developed between 1990 and 2022, establishing the singular factors that characterise the regional integration processes and identifying some of the key reasons the numerous initiatives implemented have neither attained the expected results nor generated substantial impacts on Latin American economies.

This paper is divided into four parts: the first section presents the methodology, detailing aspects such as the type of research, information search and selection strategies, methods of analysis, among other aspects. The second section reconstructs concepts and theoretical visions of economic integration, such as the concept of integration from a historical perspective, from the 1960s onwards, as well as the different levels of economic integration. The third section, by means of a documentary review, characterized both the evolution of economic integration in Latin America and the obstacles and challenges experienced between 1990 and 2022. The article closes with a series of conclusions and reflections.

## METHODOLOGY

This article, designed according to a qualitative approach, is based on documentary and bibliographic research undertaken with the aim of identifying the characteristics of the integration initiatives that have taken place in Latin America and elucidating on the most distinctive features of these phenomena according to the available literature.

We applied the bibliographic or documentary method to construct this article. Thus, we compiled, organized, systematized, and analyzed the information contained in scientific articles in indexed journals as well as outputs on this subject produced by international entities with regional incidence.

This study spans the Scopus, Scielo and redalyc bibliographic databases while also consulting the bibliographic repositories of international institutions.

We correspondingly collected and selected documents in any language for this review even though the majority of the results were in Spanish. The timeframe established for this search, classification, selection and analysis of information extended from 1990 to 2022. We applied content analysis for the compilation technique, deploying a background matrix as an instrument. This matrix included the following analytical variables: publication title, authors, year, objectives, methodology, discussion, categories of analysis, the main findings, the approach to integration, contributions and relationship with the topic addressed in this article.

Subsequently, we analyzed the information collected by means of Atlas-Ti prior to the identification of categories and labels. Hence, Atlas.ti contributed to the coding, classification and analysis of the selected sources. This software enables the systematic analysis of large amounts of data, making it suitable for conducting scoping reviews and analyzing texts of different types.

### KEY CONCEPTS

Economic integration is susceptible to explanation in different ways and through recourse to various fields of knowledge. Furthermore, although there is a structure and clearly established steps for processes of this nature, the territories involved, their political, cultural, and social characteristics all play fundamental roles in the emerging format of the respective union and, indeed, provide a key input to its consolidation as a functional model (Axelrod and Keohane, 1985; Pietrangeli, 2010; Panke, 2020).

Concepts such as international cooperation, regionalism, and economic integration are frequently incorporated into this type of process, with all associated with processes and strategies in international relations and serving to understand, theorize, and project the type of ties countries may potentially establish depending on the nature of these links.

International cooperation constitutes a model of working together to promote actions in support of the economic and social development of a nation, based on the interests pursued by a particular donor country and the needs of the respective recipient country, nevertheless, without ever losing sight of the overall objective that always aims at mitigating the effects of poverty in these communities.

In turn, regionalism, which embodies a form of international cooperation, (Figuères and Guilhot, 2006), promotes a structure of alliances with a similar nature built between countries that are generally geographically located in the

same region (Thompson, 1973). Complementarily, Fawcett (2004) points out that regionalism requires understanding as an evolutionary and cumulative process, growing and expanding to take on new tasks in different domains (Fawcett, 2004, p. 430). Thus, regional integration stems from shared values and a kind of sense of belonging of the participating countries which, in turn, also implies a series of common interests, similar political systems, facets of tradition and culture and, in most cases, economic complementarity (Ravenhill, 2009), striving to ensure each actor concentrates its participation on those areas where it can generate the greatest added value (Rodríguez, 2012; Russett, 1967; Mansfield and Solingen, 2010).

Finally, integration – and not at all a modern phenomenon – which in its beginnings was closely related to warlike confrontations and the need to seize territories to become stronger to fight the enemies of the day, took on a monetary dimension as far back as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the founding of the economic unit of Great Britain, followed by France, Germany, and Italy. However, as a term, it only gained recognition in 1939 in publications that emphasized the problems of a fragmented world economy alongside analysis of the integrative behaviors of some nations between 1700 and 1914, regarding rights of way, feudal collections, and other blockades, which put at risk the still nascent desire for international trade (Petit, 2014).

The term has acquired all its power and relevance as from the 1950s, continuing along its evolutionary path to this day after having become the strategy by which countries in different areas of the world pursue better positions, both economically and in terms of power, on the global stage (Bonilla, 2021).

In the Latin American case, the first proposals for integration date back to the times of independence. The emergence of yearnings for a free Latin America were also coupled with the desire to establish a regional union. According to Orso and Da Silva (2010, p. 3), these currents are clearly identifiable across two historical moments:

The first, from 1808 to 1826-1830, is characterized by the link between independence and union. That is, independence is closely linked to the unity of the nations that were becoming independent. The second moment, from the 1830s to about 1900, interlinks regional integration with the defense of the national interests of the states then in the process of formation, organization, and consolidation.

Although they seem distant references, both may provide not only explanations for the constant search for regional integration in Latin America but also the reason this desire first arose and since raised on multiple occasions and from different perspectives; from its very conception, Latin America was

TABLE 1  
Definitions of the economic integration concept

Reference	Proposed definition
Tinbergen (1954)	Argues that “economic integration is the creation of the most desirable structure of the economy through which artificial barriers to optimal operation are removed and deliberately introduces all desirable elements for coordination and unification”. This author also distinguishes between negative integration and positive integration: “negative measures involve removing barriers that separate economies and are generally the easiest to define and adopt (for example, remove tariffs between member countries); positive measures involve cooperation mechanisms (for example, harmonizing macroeconomic policies) that are expanded as integration progresses and that are usually more complicated to put into practice”.
Balassa (1964)	Defines economic integration as “the process or state of affairs by which different nations decide to form a regional group.”
Kahnert et al. (1969)	Economic integration consists of the process of progressively eliminating those discriminations occurring at national borders.
Machlup (1977)	The process of combining separate economies into a larger economic region.
Cohen (1981)	A process in which two or more governments of sovereign states adopt, with the support of common institutions, joint measures to intensify their interdependence and thus obtain mutual benefits.
Tamanes (1990)	Considers that economic integration “is a process through which two or more national markets previously separated and of unitary dimensions considered inadequate are united to form a single market (common market) of an ideal size”.
Martínez Peinado (1997)	States that “there are two dialectics regarding economic integration, one national and the other global. The first is contradictory to globalization, and essentially expresses the strategies of states to compete against all the others by grouping together. Any integration process, from this point of view, is at the same time a process of exclusion (of competitors). The second position not only contradicts the globalization process but is a necessary step in the imposition of globalization because it is the greatest strategy of the strongest sources of capital to take full advantage of the uneven development imposed by the international expansion of capitalism and the progressive weakness of the national state. In short: outside of an integrating process, an individual national economy has no future”.
Abdin (2013)	The unification of economic policies among different states involves the partial or complete elimination of tariff and non-tariff trade restrictions that existed between them before integration. This is aimed at reducing prices for distributors and consumers, with the goal of enhancing the collective economic productivity of the states.
Musat (2019)	Economic integration serves as the primary factor in eradicating economic frontiers between two or more economies. An economic frontier is defined as the demarcation where the actual or potential mobility of goods, services, and factors of production, as well as communication flows, is relatively low.

Note. Own elaboration with information sourced from the *Economic Theory of Integration and its Fundamental Principles* (pp. 139-140), by Petit (2014), <https://bit.ly/2Y6tPGR>.

perceived as a united territory and therefore capable of greater strength in the face of world order.

However, there is the need to delve into the concept of economic integration from a theoretical-academic perspective in order to produce a better understanding of these phenomena and their trajectories and, hence, facilitating the subsequent analyzes without losing sight of the singularities of the Latin American case.

These definitions point to an ideal vision in which different parties associate, based on their respective shortcomings and needs, to complement and leverage the strengths of each participant. Hence, this involves self-renewal to gain better market opportunities and, in the process, consolidating a mutually beneficial relationship in terms of internal exchanges.

According to this principle, countries are understood as social entities that need each other to survive. This notion becomes even stronger in Latin America as, with few exceptions, it has been evident throughout history that nations have individually been less competent in dealing with the global ecosystem and achieving positions of power in the key economic sectors.

Another aspect identified arises from how several of the cited authors conceptualize integration as a process that necessitates commitment from

TABLE 2  
Classification of the different integration types

Name	Definition
Free trade areas	Process in which tariff and non-tariff barriers to exports and imports of goods are eliminated. They involve two or more countries that agree to constitute a zone, while each maintains their own tariffs against third parties.
Customs union	In this model, the member countries of the agreement define a common external tariff against third countries, which balances the conditions with respect to the nations not belonging to the union.
Common market	Unlike the two previous formulas, this scheme allows for the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. In other words, a common market implies a customs union but with the liberalization of the productive factors.
Economic union	Economic union not only requires the existence of a common market but also, as an additional criterion, needs the harmonization of member state economic policies, which means coordination of exchange rate, fiscal, foreign trade, technical and customs policies.
Economic community	In addition to the aforementioned elements, an economic community requires the circulation of a single currency and the establishment of a central monetary authority.
Total integration	At this point, the appearance of a supranational authority happens, which holds the power to make decisions on fiscal, monetary and exchange policy, forming an economic and political entity recognized by the rest of the world.

*Note.* Own elaboration with information sourced from *Theory of Economic Integration* (pp. 3-5), Balassa (1964).

participating states for its success—thereby viewing economic integration as a collective endeavor.

While the economic and trade dimensions remain central to these perspectives, political, social, and cultural aspects can also be incorporated, thus resulting in a multidimensional vision of integration.

It is also important to consider how there are different levels of integration and, therefore, various models for configuring this type of relationship which, according to some theorists, is not only an individual event but rather a process made up of a series of stages that evolve and deepen the criteria that make the links effective.

Free trade areas, customs unions, common markets, economic unions and economic communities or total economic integration imply different degrees of coupling among participant nations and hence the need to define these concepts and understand the scope of each case.

Although the evolutionary process becomes evident to the extent that one advances from one model to another, the founding of any of these types of integration does not necessarily imply that participant nations must deepen their relationships. In other words, a customs union may remain as such for as long as participants want without incurring any search for new standards of articulation and integration.

This provides another way of expressing the same typologies in terms of their requirements and the processes that need implementing before advancing from one model to another in keeping with how theorists maintain there are small variations regarding the number of schemes and their required levels of integration.

TABLE 3  
Levels of economic integration

<b>Free trade area</b>	Abolition of tariffs				
<b>Customs union</b>	Abolition of tariffs	Common external tariff			
<b>Common market</b>	Abolition of tariffs	Common external tariff	Free movement of goods		
<b>Economic union</b>	Abolition of tariffs	Common external tariff	Free movement of goods	Policy harmonization	
<b>Total integration</b>	Abolition of tariffs	Common external tariff	Free movement of goods	Policy harmonization	Policy unification

Note. Sourced from *Integration Theory: A Theoretical Framework* (p. 15), by Franco and Robles (1995), <https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint30.1995.01>.

However, in the Latin American case, it is worth questioning whether any of the basic integration models represents an important and differential change with respect to the actual ability to negotiate with the most solid economies and obtain other political, social, and cultural benefits that derive from more structured integration formulas.

In this regard, Reyes (2007, pp. 8-9) affirms that a clear path to the development of Latin American countries requires effective integration processes, hence, agreements spanning greater coverage both in terms of territory and time in order to strengthen governance, institutionality, and regional policy cohesion:

Two essential reasons are among the basic justifications to strengthen integration processes, especially in developing nations, and even more so when they present characteristics of small relative markets: (i) the need to increase domestic aggregate demand as a factor that generates economic growth; and (ii) the requirement to expand production, which is reduced because it depends on a restricted domestic market, even though it has been expanded in domestic or subsystemic conditions.

There are other equally valuable reasons that are totally substantive to strengthen integration in social terms, for complementary production and services, for taking advantage of economies of scale, and in order to generate a greater “critical mass” in international negotiations. We also know that there are at least three essential links between economic growth and economic and social development: the direct income that governments can make to poor groups, either through supply or demand; social security and the general social protection network for people; and employment and strengthening of productive activities.

Impacts of this nature on any integrationist process require the elimination of a representative number of barriers and higher rates of harmonization regarding policies at different levels. However, although any integration process generates an increase in exchanges between its members, it is essential not to lose sight of the bloc concept and the impact this may generate in the global market, understanding that in the medium and long term, stronger negotiating conditions become the equivalent to improvements in the quality of life of the population.

#### **THE CHARACTERISTICS, EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES OF ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN LATIN AMERICA 1990-2022**

The search for documents and publications on the concepts and evolution of Latin American economic integration for a period of just over three decades (1990-2022) identified different articles that expressed critical positions in favor

of the main regional agreements reached over this period and in conjunction with all the conceptualization and ideology arising from this type of initiative.

This analysis aims not only to summarise the points of greatest interest put forward in these publications but also to build a historical account, not of the different agreements signed between the southern American continent nations, but rather of the implications and consequences each initiative leaves in its wake, analyzing both the progress and the results as well as the frustrations and annoyances that continue accumulating.

In accordance with the above, we focus on documents where Latin American economic integration constitutes the main object of study but without losing sight of how this neither accounts for the only tool to address existing problems on the continent nor the only factor causing all the hard edges to the realities of the various nations in this region.

This construct takes into account the various prevailing points of view on this matter, which are neither few nor homogeneous and stem from differing analytical perspectives. The relevance of economic integration as a catalyst for other types of processes has stood the test of time and become a global question, attracting the interest of many nations.

To open this exhibition, the Frambes-Buxeda (1993, p. 270) article, *Theories on integration, applicable to the unification of Latin American countries*, sets out the two strongest trends, historically speaking, in order to underpin our understanding of integration: "On the one hand, the so-called liberal, neo-liberal and structuralist classical economics and, secondly, the vision of Marxist and neo-Marxist political economy".

According to Frambes-Buxeda's (1993) point of view, this theoretical and historical perspective determines the facts that shaped the origins of Latin American integration, identifying how the process works in these nations as well as establishing some of the variables defining the actions for undertaking within the scope of future initiatives.

While it is true that integration results from a trend towards the economic internationalization of countries, this occurs in each country under specific socioeconomic conditions. That is, the process is carried out by various classes and social sectors with specific political goals, and also as a result of the influences exerted by the great powers. Integration is not reached automatically but by taking formal political action; for this reason, this trend frequently leads to supranational institutionalization. [Frambes-Buxeda, 1993, p. 304]

Thus, the author specifies how each integration process obeys a great variety of causes and displays diverse origins and foundations that reflect the economic, structural, and political particularities of each nation.

Although the reflections proposed by the author arise out of a comparison between the “capitalist” and “socialist” integration models, the objective is clearly to elucidate just how these schemes might serve as the basis for proposing a “theory of integration for the Third World”, thereby embracing the factors that make these countries unique and understanding how for developing societies improving their positions in the world economic system represents a criterion that determines the success of this type of initiative.

This analysis also outlines the “development” and “dependency” theories which, while not dealt with in depth, remain implicit in the discussion as the former refers to the effect of modernization and industrialization on the quality of life of national residents; and the second attempts to reveal the interests that might potentially maintain the distance between capitalist industrialized countries and Third World nations.

As Frambes-Buxeda (1993, p. 301) states, “in this theoretical discussion, four types of integration are often spoken of: capitalist integration, socialist integration, integration between underdeveloped countries and a ‘fourth type’ of integration between industrialized countries and some developing countries”; the reason the author warns of the low likelihood of survival of what he terms the fourth type of integration due to the inequalities and asymmetries prevailing among these economies.

In turn, Fuentes (1994), in his article *Open regionalism and economic integration*, explains the adaptation initiatives of Latin American nations to the world environment in the early 1990’s and addresses the concept proposed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (hereafter ECLAC) on “open regionalism” as a strategy for the development of the south of the continent.

As regards the adaptation initiatives, the author identifies five recurring characteristics in the trade agreements signed between 1990 and 1993: greater liberalization, greater preferential tariff reductions, fewer restrictive sectoral agreements, “superficial” type integrations, and the continued lack of any common institutions. Although in the present the initiatives undertaken do not look attractive, at that time they represented a great advance on the agreements signed in the previous decade. Another contemporary benefit stemmed from the expansion of intraregional trade and investment, which also contributed to the conception of a Latin American bloc, albeit only partial (Fuentes, 1994).

On the “open regionalism” that, according to ECLAC (1994), consists of strengthening integration between neighboring countries with similar characteristics and adding common policies to the equation to improve the level of national competitiveness in the region. The author details the main

components in the agreements reached among regional countries designed to guarantee the implementation of “open regionalism”.

However, beyond liberalization in terms of sectors and countries, establishing stable and transparent rules, the way of relating to other states with economies achieving a certain degree of stability, protection against third parties and fostering the participation of the different social sectors, among other characteristics, a more strategic insight requires identifying the facts were then becoming challenges for the integration process.

In this regard, Fuentes (1994) highlights (i) the dangers of closed bilateralism, which involves multiple political and administrative efforts to generate a large number of agreements, and the adaptation process that small countries must carry out merely to negotiate with a single neighboring country when it should instead be adjusting to the conditions prevailing in the world economy; (ii) the different strategies for stabilizing national macroeconomies and which, due to the disparities, potentially generate friction among nations and the corresponding need to carry out separate negotiations for more representative markets; (iii) overcoming “superficial” integration to reach beyond “product integration” and attain the capacity to draw up other types of policies of benefit to different sectors of society; and (iv) the tacit discrimination that small countries in the region may experience when subject to more demanding policies.

Despite the sudden and accelerated advance of integration processes that took place in those years, due to the transformation of world economic dynamics – among other reasons – more questions were raised than answers regarding what future initiatives should be prioritized. Tensions were anticipated regarding stabilization, problems in relation to the most vulnerable sectors and the need for a strong institutional component, which although deemed unnecessary at the time might have more clearly emerged over the subsequent period.

It was a time of great concern when solutions were sought through theoretical approaches tailored to Latin American characteristics. This also reflects the case of Franco and Robles (1995) and their article *Integration: a theoretical framework* that encapsulates the inclination of international economies towards integration models, furthermore recognizing cases such as those of Western Europe and East Asia but, and simultaneously, putting forward evidence of the concerns raised by these processes for less solid and developed economies, such as those of South America.

The South is made up of a group of poor countries that will be inhabited by four fifths of the world's population by the year 2000 and will only consume one sixth of total

international production (Brown, 1992, p. 80). Therefore, the governments and civil societies of these nations are obliged to adopt integration as the only policy option that will allow them to counteract the economic asymmetry between the North and the South, increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis developed countries, and confront their own political and social needs. [Franco and Robles, 1995, p. 12]

In addition, these authors outline the need for supranational entities to guarantee, facilitate and regulate this type of state interactions, and the presence of social integration as a binder of any economic initiative. The editors Franco and Di Filippo (1999) focus on this latter aspect in their book *The Social Dimensions of Regional Integration in Latin America*, alongside other authors who break down the multiple facets that make up the social dimension in multicultural and politically diverse environments.

Without ignoring how the central axis of integration processes is eminently economic, we here need to detail the social variables as they not only shape appropriate development of integrating initiatives but are also even able to promote them and produce real added value within negotiations.

Analysis of the reciprocal links between integration commitments and social policy can provide important contributions as the problems arising out of eliminating tariff and other barriers to trading goods and services – when there are important differences in wage policies, labor and other factors closely interrelated to competitiveness – are very similar in the subregional and international contexts. At the very least, determining whether these differences constitute obstacles to the advancement of integration and globalization processes is of interest. Indeed, it would be even more productive to determine how integration and globalization can contribute to achieving the social policy objectives of each country. [Franco and Di Filippo, 1999, p. 131]

After extensive analysis, the book proposes conclusions featuring different approaches, both to that time and even today, with Latin America having never implemented the Bolivarian integration project. However, the levels of integration built up over the years are now much higher than those achieved in previous decades, and specifically of that period. Although the future of integration looked promising at that time, from the current perspective, all the initiatives carried out have lagged in producing more effective political cooperation, cultural flows, and the mobilization of people.

In terms of the literature, while the 1990s began with a theoretical approach and ended with concern for social matters, the following decade sought to establish the connections between integration, development, and globalization. This does not any exclusion from the previous views but rather how they

took on greater relevance in keeping with the multiplication of trade agreements that continued increasing over this period.

*The general framework of Latin American integration* by Fernández (2006); *Integration processes in Latin America and the Caribbean: general characterization and potential of new integration axes* by Reyes (2007); *Regional Integration as a development instrument for Latin America* by Cancino and Alborno (2007); and *The integration processes of Latin America in the concert of globalization* by Aragon (2008) all approach common processes from different perspectives.

Firstly, the unequal exchange of goods, services and capital that already clearly prevailed between Latin American nations and industrialized countries; secondly, the low levels of economic growth that still remained insufficient for reducing poverty in any substantial or sustained way across the region; thirdly, the understanding of integration not as a means to disconnect from the rest of the world but, and on the contrary, as a mechanism to be stronger and better prepared for coping with extra-regional competitors; and finally, the dependence of international markets on particular economic policies.

Following this period of analysis and understanding of the effects of a still developing phenomenon, the last decade added to this analysis with historical studies carried out, ECLAC's vision that contrasted with the reality of nations, making an inventory of agreements and results, a critical position was adopted regarding the real impacts of more than three decades of integrationist intentions.

*The Evolution of Latin American Integration. Three historical conjunctures: 1810, 1910, 2010* by Orso and da Silva (2010) outlines the evolution of the integration concept in Latin America from its origins as an independent region in 1810 until 2010, when two centuries of freedom are commemorated. This work describes "wandering, unfinished and changing Latin American integration, due to its close relationship with the conjunctural context of each moment, and due to the excessive influence of the United States in the domestic issues of the Latin American nations, as well as their common regional issues" (Orso and da Silva, 2010, p. 191). This also notes that only through real political and social will can any genuine integration based on Latin American values be advanced.

The article *Economic integration in Latin America: the theoretical vision of ECLAC confronted with the evolution of the regional project* by Vásquez (2011, p. 117) aligns with these postulates and compares the leading reflections produced by ECLAC on the subject and prior to concluding that undoubtedly without:

Any Latin American integration capable of moving all of its members towards greater independence in relation to the interests of large transnational corporations cannot result from a process limited to the liberalization of intra-regional trade. The fundamental and

indispensable prerequisite then, is a profound democratization of the nation states that today can only result from a conscious and organized mobilization of civil society.

In turn, *Integration in Latin America – Trends and Challenges* by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean – ECLAC (2011) attributes particular significance to three fundamental aspects: first, the permanent challenge posed by integration processes due to the constantly changing conditions in the world economic panorama; second, the idealization of integration as the only condition able to promote the economic and social development of nations; and third, the lack of clarity of countries over the need and relevance of entering and even remaining in certain agreements.

All these variables play out for and against the level of success of this type of initiative that requires different levels of rigor and specific interests to become more profitable and strategic. Similarly, this concern is expressed in *The Map of Regional Integration in Latin America. Processes and Institutions* by Gil and Paikin (2013) who, after analyzing eight of the trade agreements in force at that time, report the need, despite the existence of a great variety of regional integration processes and with each displaying particular and diverse objectives rules, procedures and levels of consolidation, for each country to identify whether the ideologies and purposes of the bloc are consistent with their intra-governmental dynamics, and if the nation and its leaders are actually willing to negotiate common policies.

At this point in history, ECLAC (2014) published its document *Regional Integration. Towards an inclusive value chain strategy*, which focuses on the productive component of integration processes as a tool for promoting and strengthening agreements in the area. The text notes that:

If inequality is one of the distinctive features of the region, the promotion of equality should be a distinctive feature of its regional integration strategy. As a systemic challenge, it does not seem feasible to tackle it exclusively through social policies. A first obvious link is that established with the productive dimension. To advance with a productive transformation that contributes to reducing inequalities requires more and better productive employment, and a greater presence of sme, manufacturing, and services in exports. [ECLAC, 2014, p. 62]

Thus, the fundamental approach of this work seeks to label productive integration as a strategic axis of regional integration and, in this way, bestow the social stamp these initiatives need, especially in countries such as those in Latin America. The *Integration and its international agreements in Latin America* article by González, Moreno and Rodríguez (2015) also adopts this line

in emphasising efforts directed towards productive transformation and the need to innovate and obtain greater consolidation in technological processes, human resources, and social responsibility as the key factors to achieving long term sustainable growth.

Later, ECLAC advanced with two further studies. The first, *Development and Integration in Latin America* (2016) – in partnership with the Lula Institute, the Inter-American Development Bank – IDB, and the Development Bank of Latin America – CAF – aims to contribute to understanding the factors and circumstances that led to Latin American countries, despite their wealth in natural and human resources, becoming one of the most unequal areas in the contemporary world.

Although a virtuous and respectful integration process for sovereign nations has also proven a double-edged sword in fostering the rigid structures that have perpetuated poverty since 2010, ECLAC argues that:

Based on a broad concept of development, it is necessary to equalize to grow and grow to equalize. This implies, on the one hand, improving the living standards of people and their families and, on the other hand, conducting sustainable and inclusive growth processes that overcome the structural gaps in per capita income, poverty, investment, savings, productivity, innovation, infrastructure, education, health, taxation, gender and environment, among other characteristic aspects of the countries of the region, for favoring processes that strengthen political, economic and social systems that promote respect, diversity, and human dignity. [ECLAC, 2016, p. 288]

The second, *Prospects for international trade in Latin America and the Caribbean. Recovery in a context of uncertainty* (2017), applies a twist to the analyzes hitherto carried out and proposes studying regional economic behavior but in the international context. Based on this, ECLAC reviews the results achieved in specific areas and the opportunities for growth, linking regional vocations with global needs.

Furthermore, there are sectors with potential, such as commercializing services, which have not experienced significant development over the last decade but nevertheless offers great opportunities worldwide. In this regard, the document focuses on formulating recommendations for the agricultural sector, traditionally strong in the region.

However, more in-depth observations underpin the finding that, despite the improvement in the comparative advantages of this sector, achieving an outstanding and homogeneous performance requires making significant efforts that will not reflect in short term consequences. Therefore, it follows that.

The agro-export powers are still few, and they are basically concentrated in South America; this subregion represents almost 80% of the value of agricultural shipments in the region, and only two countries (Brazil and Argentina) are responsible for more than half of them. [ECLAC, 2017, 159]

Accordingly, even the strongest economic products need to undergo representative transformations not only in their technological and human aspects but also in their production processes and in leveraging the economies of scale capable of facilitating the long-awaited integration.

By the end of the last decade studied in this article, the positions represented in the documents took on a critical tone and more incisive regarding the persistent problems but without losing sight of the region's potential.

*Latin America: A Fragmented and Directionless Regional Integration* by Silva, Noyola and Kan (2018); *The dynamics and determinants of the economic integration process in Latin America* by Florensa *et al.* (2018); *Regional integration. A critical view of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences – CLACSO* (2019); and *Latin America: Problems and Opportunities of Integration* by Dutta, Rawat and Mishra (2020) compile valuable reflections on integration processes. To start with, according to Silva, Noyola and Kan (2018, p. 9):

When considering the commercial scope of this regional integration dynamic, the balance is not at all encouraging when some of the reference indicators are taken into account to measure its scope and depth: (i) The region suffered half a decade of falls in the prices of its export basket and a weak increase in export volume, a situation that may eventually have been left behind in 2017; (ii) Latin American foreign trade collapsed in 2015 and 2016; (iii) The level of intraregional trade is low and with a chronic tendency to decrease in times of slowdown / recession; and (iv) extreme volatility in exchange rates with dire effects on trade and regional economies (Argentine and Brazilian crises).

As a result, this multiplicity of factors and the shortcomings of the foreign trade performance produce differentiated effects in the different countries and subregions of the continent. It is ironic that, in the search for integration, the actions undertaken contribute to accentuating the asymmetries, in this case, in productive and commercial terms.

On the other hand, Florensa *et al.* (2018), although they limit their analysis to the period between 1962 and 2009, express ideas that are not alien to the current reality. Thus, we may conclude that:

The changes that are looming in economic policy and institutional strengthening in some of the Latin American countries could lead to an increase in the number of new

economic integration agreements. The creation of new agreements could not lead to the expected model of opening to the world, and in the consequent increase in international trade and economic growth, if the need for proper coordination in terms of economic integration in the region is not taken into account.

Once again, integration by itself, as a concept and theory, falls short of achieving the expected and above all necessary results in accordance with the expectations and demands of the Latin American countries.

Adopting a more political approach, CLACSO (2019) stated that the most relevant changes on economic integration in Latin America were achieved in the 2000s under the leadership of progressive and leftist governments that shared pro-integrationist agendas. These countries and their leaders understood that regionalism should be inclusive, equitable and depoliticized to achieve better results. However, their report also warns that “the rise of far-right governments in South America in the last three years has meant the reversal of these democratizing processes, highlighting the limits of democracy and its instrumental nature”. [CLACSO, 2019, p. 4]

Moreover, Dutta, Rawat and Mishra (2020), adopting an external perspective of the region and putting forward detached analysis of Latin culture, pose the duality of the coexistence of various integration schemes which, they state, should not be confused with the absence of regional ideologies in relation to values, norms, and other common cultural factors. They maintain there is a shared global notion and a Latin American regional vision while also warning about the institutional inability to regulate and govern under universal policies.

To sum up, according to Briceño-Ruiz (2018); Herrero Olarte (2018) and Nolte (2019), there is now a post-hegemonic era characterized by the increasing subregionalisation of economic integration consequently driving the emergence of three pillars: the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of the Americas (ALBA), and the Pacific Alliance. Considering Briceño-Ruiz’s opinion, these subregional schemes emerged out of diverse and contradictory models of economic integration as well as different models of political cooperation. Furthermore, new political and cooperations spaces were simultaneously created in South American and Latin American countries, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). Consequently, we may describe Latin American regionalism as a complex system of subregional and regional initiatives based on different economic and political models with diverse approaches to the role of regionalism in national economic development strategies alongside diverse conceptions of the role of foreign policy.

In other words, in this most recent era, post-hegemonic integration brings together a great variety of political and economic narratives about regionalism. In this sense, it may best be understood as informal economic integration with hardly any customs union (Van Klaveren, 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

The literature review conducted in this article identified several key aspects. Firstly, concerning Latin American integration, a multifaceted landscape is evident, characterized by numerous challenges of diverse natures, including historical, political, and economic dimensions. Furthermore, obstacles such as resistance to relinquishing sovereignty, institutional fragility, and ideological disparities have hindered integration efforts. As a result, despite the existence of numerous regional initiatives and agreements, the outcomes have not consistently aligned with the initial ideals and objectives. Conversely, historical analysis underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of integration models, questioning their differential impacts on negotiations, policy coherence, and cultural advantages.

In other words, the historical context emphasizes the difficulties faced by Latin American nations in their pursuit of economic integration and calls for a comprehensive approach that considers the unique circumstances of this region. Regarding the surrender of sovereignty, the research indicates that the success of integration processes requires a willingness to relinquish sovereignty at various levels in keeping with the scope of the initiative. Some cited authors even argue that none of the 21st century integration efforts in Latin America have involved genuine levels of sovereignty surrender. Latin American nations consistently grapple with this dilemma as they strive to balance the imperatives of integration and the preservation of national sovereignty.

The findings of this desk research also prompt an examination of integration processes beyond merely economic considerations. Recognizing that integration processes encompass not only economic but also social facets, scholars stress the importance of addressing social variables for effective development. The interdependence between economic growth, social policies, and the general welfare of the population emerges as a crucial issue. The potential advantages of integration include increased domestic demand, expanded production, economies of scale, and a strengthened position in international negotiations. This perspective requires a holistic approach to integration, considering its impact on poverty reduction, social protection, and job creation.

Aligned with the above, the discourse on integration in Latin America from the 1990s to the present clearly reflects changing perspectives, priorities,

and both global and regional contexts. Initially focused on economic theories and trade agreements, the discourse has broadened to encompass considerations not previously included, such as development, globalization, and social dimensions. Scholars have transitioned from the theoretical analysis of integration models to the practical evaluation of agreements, considering their implications and impacts on regional dynamics. This evolution signifies a maturing of thinking with increasing recognition of the multifaceted nature of integration and the need to address social, political, and cultural aspects for sustainable development.

Ultimately, the coexistence of multiple integration schemes underscores the diversity of the political and economic narratives, indicating a complex system that requires careful consideration of the different circumstances and objectives of each subregion. Understanding this complex evolution is essential for formulating effective policies and strategies that address the diverse challenges and opportunities inherent in the pursuit of integration in this region.

Additionally, beyond the factors expressed and analyzed above, we also need to consider the new challenges today facing humanity. Firstly, achieving sustainability is imperative to avoiding exhausting the resources available, despite Latin America's significant capabilities in this area. Secondly, the post-pandemic reality demands a different approach, with additional measures in all aspects against the imperative of continuing to close the gap and boost the participation of Latin American countries in the global market. Consequently, current and potential future integration initiatives must incorporate these items into the international agenda of objectives and structures.

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