

REGIONAL PLANNING AND CONSERVATION IN COSTA RICA: A CONTRADICTIONARY POLICY PROCESS?

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Costa Rica has been mentioned as a country with a successful conservation policy and a well institutionalized set of public and private organizations that are involved into the use and conservation of natural resources. In special, after a large set of institutional reforms during the 90's decade, the country has reversed a dramatic deforestation rate and achieved a 25% of its territory under a type of protected status. Different Governments have launched its own conservation programs, which are distinguished by global mottos like "Costa Rica no artificial ingredients" or "Paz con la naturaleza". The country has consolidated an image as a "green country. However, far beyond this image, still there are important and pending challenges to achieve a real greener development. For example, despite of several efforts, there is a lack of regional planning systems for a systematic use and conservation of natural resources. In Latin American countries the planning of the land use at regional level, called in Spanish as "ordenamiento territorial", has been largely developed in the literature, but with few examples in real practice.

In this article, we analyze the evolution and performance of several policy initiatives at local government level, aimed to achieve a regional planning system. We made use of primary and secondary information from public and private actors, who are involved into several processes of the definition and implementation of regional planning proposals. We assess the strengths and limitations of such initiatives in the promotion of a feasible ordering of land use at regional level.

We show an important gap between the performance of policies aimed to conserve natural resources *sensu stricto* and the performance of those policy initiatives related to the land use planning. For one side, the level of performance of conservation policies *sensu stricto* has resulted in important outcomes at country level, with a significant international support and Government commitment since the beginning of the 90's decade. On the other side, policy initiatives to norm and regulate at local level the regional land use have faced several limitations, such as an excessive centralization in the policy making process and administration, lack of capacities of local governments and local organization, and a lack of real political commitment in the regulation of land use. On the most obvious outcome of this problem is the disordered conurbation process in the so-called Great Metropolitan Area (GAM), which encompasses the four major cities including the capital San Jose. Surprisingly, the previous Government dismissed a seven years study aimed to propose regulations for this urban growth and protection natural spaces. This situation set a contradiction between the official "green" discourse and the political commitment in the regulation of land use at different levels. We conclude there is a need for filling up this gap and promoting regional planning system according to local level agendas.