

# ANALYSIS OF THE MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION IN COLOMBIA

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## Abstract

Intermunicipal and interregional cooperation has been increasing as a strategy to deal with issues that transcend administrative boundaries. The efficient provision of public services, the boosting of economies of scale and the appropriate allocation of resources are some of the benefits of territorial cooperation. However, such gains may be limited by the political configurations of the different municipalities, their rivalries and alliances. In Colombia, due to the local government's promotion of this matter, multiple entities have been created. Territorial Associative Schemes have become consolidated as a form of formal associativity that develops regional projects through joint planning. This article aims to contribute to the study of the impact of coordination between local governments through formal arrangements. A

conceptual and historical framework is given for Associative Schemes in the country. Two case studies of the Schemes are presented: one related to the promotion of regional agricultural development; and the other to the coordination of environmental actions.

**Key words:** inter municipal cooperation; Municipal Association; coordination; decentralization; local governance.

## ANÁLISIS DE LA ASOCIACIÓN MUNICIPAL EN COLOMBIA

### Resumen

La cooperación intermunicipal e interregional ha ido en aumento como estrategia para abordar cuestiones que trascienden los límites administrativos. La prestación eficiente de servicios públicos, el impulso de las economías de escala y la asignación adecuada de recursos

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son algunos de los beneficios de la cooperación territorial. Sin embargo, estos beneficios pueden verse limitados por las configuraciones políticas de los distintos municipios, sus rivalidades y alianzas. En Colombia, debido a la promoción de este tema por parte del gobierno local, se han creado múltiples entidades. Los esquemas asociativos territoriales se han consolidado como una forma de asociación formal que desarrolla proyectos regionales a través de la planeación conjunta. Este artículo pretende contribuir al estudio del impacto de la coordinación entre gobiernos locales a través de arreglos formales. Se presenta un marco conceptual e histórico de los esquemas asociativos en el país. Se abordan dos estudios de caso de los esquemas: uno relacionado con la promoción del desarrollo agrícola regional, y el otro con la coordinación de acciones ambientales.

**Palabras clave:** cooperación intermunicipal; asociación municipal; coordinación; descentralización; gobernanza local.

The decentralization process in Colombia began in the mid-1980s and achieved greater prominence with the Political Constitution of 1991. After almost 30 years of this new political and administrative start in Colombia, whose main actions were the recognition of a Social State of Law (Ramírez, 2019), and the layout of territorial autonomy, in a promising process of political, administrative, and financial decentralization (Maldonado, 2011), there are several analyses of the challenges and achievements that can be highlighted.

Colombia has 1,103 municipalities and 32 departments (Table.1), which correspond

to the category of territorial entities. A territorial associativity is a form of Intermunicipal Cooperation that has gained strength in Colombia. Since the 1991 Constitution, different strategies have been presented to promote decentralization to provide further relevance and autonomy to the regions. Associativity has been constituted directly from the territories as a strategy to solve problems and take advantage of potentialities beyond political limits, challenging regional administration paradigms. This chapter will analyze the municipal associativity in Colombia as an organized and legitimate mechanism of governance at an intermediate scale created to support the fulfillment of the mission of the State, in which the coordination between actors to define agreements and arrangements in the definition of competencies and actions, generate positive results of inter-municipal cooperation.

This analysis is divided into four sections. The first section, the hypothesis and the theoretical framework and relationship, analyzes territorial associativity. The second section presents a general context of territorial associativity in Colombia, describes the most relevant components, and illustrates the legal framework with the main provisions that define the scope of the actions of the schemes. The third section consists of two case studies on municipal associations in Colombia - the *Association of Municipalities of Catatumbo* and the *Valle de Aburrá Metropolitan Area* - based on the hypothesis of the elements defined in the conceptual framework. Finally, the last section presents the main general conclusions of the analysis.

## **HYPOTHETICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH IN THE ANALYSIS OF MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATIONS IN COLOMBIA**

The analysis proposes a study hypothesis that associative schemes are configured as scenarios for coordinating actions between territorial entities and the national government to fulfill the State mission<sup>1</sup>. Their success and results are linked to the governance processes in which they play a prominent role. This legitimacy is achieved among their actors, the defined competencies, and the institutional maturity which must overcome and face circumstantial situations.

An initial concept of governance is that proposed by Gerry Stoker, “creating the conditions for ordered rule and collective action” (Stoker, 1998, p. 17), who directs the discussion to a situation of collective interest that requires arrangements, conditions, and *institutions*.<sup>2</sup> Another more detailed approach proposed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) “consists of the formal and informal rules, procedures, practices and interactions within the State, and between the State, non-state institutions and citizens, that frame the exercise of public authority and decision-making in the public interest” (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020, p. 15).

1 For this article, the institutional arrangements within the framework of the Territorial Associative Schemes of Law 1454 of 2011 do not include other types of institutions such as the Federation of Municipalities and the Federation of Departments in Colombia because they are not configured as entities of a public nature.

2 Institutions are the formal and informal rules and norms that organise social, political and economic relations. (North, 1990)

The concept of coordination suggests that it is a mechanism, *formal and informal*, of mutual learning, planning, and delivery based on aligning policy. It comes from the need to “ensure that the various public and private organizations charged with delivering public policy work together and do not produce either redundancy or gaps in services” (Peterlin, 2010). It implies arrangements and agreements between actors, which can be framed, as Helmut Willke suggests, as a close relationship between coordination and governance, in which actions and behaviors through communication become scenarios with administration. Understanding governance as “the activity of coordinating communications to achieve collective goals through collaboration” (Willke, 2007, p. 10).

On the other hand, cooperation “refers to the practice of people or entities working together with commonly agreed-upon goals and methods, instead of working separately in competition” (Khamis, et al. 2006). At first glance, very similar to the concept proposed for coordination, however Willke offers an exciting differentiation between these concepts based on Luhmann’s complex systems theory, and for this academic input, coordination can be understood as the established order, and cooperation is the result of operations performed in a set order. In other words, “coordination creates order within complex systems, whereas cooperation creates results from combining operations in complex purposive action” (Willke, 2007, p. 14).

In addition, within the framework of that order of agreements and arrangements, the idea of hierarchies stands out. According to Willke, “hierarchies become the governance

mode of choice when problem-solving depends on an ordering of expectations and when there is no more cost-efficient way of getting things –transactions– done” (Willke, 2007 p. 24). For this analysis, hierarchies become part of that internal order –necessary for institutions or these associative schemes– among others, and having clear game rules to reduce transaction costs with established processes and organization charts.

### Political Boundaries and Coordination

The Latin American case presents some historical characteristics that must be considered. Given its colonial past, the national administration was influenced by the municipal division that recognized local powers as an extension of central power (Cravacuore, et al., 2016). In Colombia, mayors and governors were not elected but were selected by the executive until the Constitution of 1991. The paradigm of this centralized organization was reinforced by the geographical reality and the difficulty in connecting the different population centers.

After promulgating the 1991 Constitution, the municipalities became central actors of territorial policies in Colombia. The central government gave them responsibilities related to the provision of public services. However, political decentralization gave responsibilities with limited resources. According to the Fiscal Performance Index (DNP, 2019), 85% of the municipalities in the country depend on direct transferences from the central government to afford essential functions. Furthermore, more than 53% of territorial entities had been categorized as *At Risk* or *Vulnerable*, meaning that

besides the dependency on national transference, they were at risk of having a deficit or high indebtedness.

This reality affects the capacity for investment in regional and strategic projects. The focus of national spending is on the municipalities’ function and provisions of public services –like sewerage, education, or health–, giving less attention to interregional investment that could encourage positive externalities, spillovers, and spatial development across borders. In this scenario, coordination between municipalities that consider the similarities and common challenges could serve as a strategy to take advantage of cooperation.

The inter-municipal association as a coordination mechanism is an arrangement between municipalities based on a common goal. According to Silva, et al. (2018), associating between territorial entities is a tool capable of coordinating local powers to face shared challenges, the dilemmas of territorial scale, and resource rationing.

In general, inter-municipal cooperation arrangements are seen to deal with problems for which the municipalities have a suboptimal size. For example, they could allow the provision of public services efficiently –because they have high costs and municipalities alone have low tax collection capacity–; reduce costs in the provision of public services to larger communities; enhance the possibility of regional planning; increase the bargaining power of partners –compared to the power they would have individually; and offer the option of seeking support and resources as a block in national and international entities (Teles, 2016).

A final conceptual approach is related to the definition or scope of competence, which

for this analysis will be understood as “a change in the balance between the State and public institutions in the field of common goals and objectives and, in consequence, of responsibility” (Karpa & Akimov, 2021) In the understanding that “the joint activity of all the subjects of society requires new forms of cooperation, the definition of spheres and subjects of activity of each subject for an effective cooperation, the distribution of functions and competences of subjects, the formation, and consolidation of their statutory characteristics” (Karpa & Akimov, 2021, p. 43).

To conclude this section, in general terms, it is proposed that municipal associativity is a coordination mechanism between actors such as territorial entities amid the governance of the Colombian State. As part of this, arrangements and agreements related to the scope of action of these schemes or competencies, are possible, among others, due to the internal organization or hierarchies and rules of the game and defined area.

### GENERAL CONTEXT OF THE ASSOCIATIVITY SCHEMES IN COLOMBIA

Colombia’s integration and territorial articulation have been framed in the historical process of an administrative and political organization characterized by a centralism tendency. The organization of territorial Provinces<sup>3</sup> and

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3 The origin of provinces dates back to the constitutions of 1811, 1832, and 1843, as well as the Constitutions of Gran Colombia, in which the territory of *Nueva Granada* was divided into provinces that were subdivided into cantons, and these, in turn, were divided into parish districts. With the Constitution of 1853, the

Associations of Municipalities<sup>4</sup> were the first model adopted to promote relations based on essential relationships such as the exchange of agricultural products and, over time, the swap of services. Subsequently, at the end of the 1980s, Metropolitan Areas were created to promote strategic situations in urban growth and the provision of services in capital cities and surrounding municipalities.

Afterward, the Political Constitution of 1991<sup>5</sup> represented the most decisive change of vision in the organization of the public administration in the decentralization process. In this milestone, emphasis was placed on the need to advance an adequate territorial organization to

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cantons were abolished so that the national territory of Nueva Granada was divided only into provinces and parish districts. In the Federal Constitution of 1858, the Colombian states were created, substitutes for the *neogranadinas* provinces, which were divided into districts, but now of a municipal nature. The *Länder* were organized into regions that had no administrative functions. The arrival of the centralist Constitution of 1886 transformed the states into departments, and these were divided into provinces without administrative functions, which grouped municipal districts (Ramírez & Aguas, 2016).

4 The municipal associations were promoted in the Political Constitution of 1968, whose integration depended on the Governor, a political figure appointed by the President of the Republic at that time (Bustamante, 2007).

5 In 1991, the Colombian Congress convened a National Constituent Assembly to promulgate a new Constitution due to multiple demands of the population and agreements within the framework of a peace process with some of the groups that years before had taken up arms. Some of the changes were decentralization, understood as a process to generate greater autonomy in the territory in administrative, budgetary, and political management, as well as the recognition of indigenous groups as subjects of constitutional rights (Archivo General de la Nación Colombia, 2021).

fulfill the State mission, and express reference was made to the possibility of configuring associative schemes. During the thirty years after the Constitution of 1991, different laws and regulatory decrees on associativity were issued. The Organic Law of Territorial Ordering<sup>6</sup> –Law 1554 of 2011– stands out, which establishes the objective of associativity and creates categories of Territorial Associative Schemes in which today's types of schemes are framed.

Territorial Associativity in Colombia is a principle of territorial planning and development that materializes with the formation of associations between territorial entities and integration instances to take advantage of economies of scale. It generates synergies and competitive alliances to achieve common development objectives. They will be promoted by the State and constituted freely and voluntarily for the autonomous and self-sustainable development of the communities (Congreso de la República, 2011). In line with this, territorial associative schemes are framed as figures of integration between territorial entities in Colombia. Currently, Metropolitan Areas, Associations of Municipalities, Provinces, Planning and Management Regions, and Administrative and Planning Regions are configured as Territorial Associative Schemes.

Despite different schemes, Colombia currently faces a fundamental challenge in the differentiation by competencies of all these figures. It is possible to identify a differentiation

between the associative schemes that presently operate based on their actors, which due to the territorial division in Colombia, will be either municipalities or departments, and the regulatory scope of the general functions of the schemes (Table 2). However, a clear definition of competencies will achieve a better understanding of these figures of integration in the decentralization process in the country, maximizing coordination and reducing transaction costs in any action undertaken by the associative scheme. For this analysis, we will focus on schemes developed solely by municipalities or municipal associations.

In general, the municipal associations –Metropolitan Areas, Associations of Municipalities, and Provinces– have in common the execution of impact overcoming the territorial division between municipalities, planning with scope in ordering and environmental management. This is in addition to having the municipalities as a scale of associates, contributing to territorial development through the provision of public services. All these have as a principle of action, the coordination between the associated actors and those involved in each activity. It is essential to point out that in the organization of the Colombian State, in addition to the departments, municipalities, and associative schemes, other actors are identified, such as the companies that provide public services, the Autonomous Environmental Corporations, the entities of the executive branch of the national order, among others. The associative legal framework is presented below with particular emphasis on the coordination that is intended to be obtained (Table 3).

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6 Organic Law in Colombia: “understood as a normative text aimed at regulating the legislative activity of the Congress of the Republic on certain matters or contents pre-established exhaustively by the Political Constitution” (Senado de la República de Colombia, 2007).



**TABLE 1. DEPARTMENTS, MUNICIPALITIES, AND ASSOCIATIVE SCHEMES**

Name	Category	Definition
Departments	Territorial entity	It is a territorial entity of the intermediate level in the political-administrative organization of the Colombian State. The entity has political, fiscal, and administrative autonomy within limits indicated by the Constitution, one of them being mediating interests between the nation and the municipality. Municipalities integrate it.
Municipalities	Territorial entity	It is the fundamental territorial entity of the political-administrative division of the State, with political, fiscal, and administrative autonomy within limits indicated by the Constitution and the laws of the Republic.
Associative schemes	Administrative entity	It is created by the voluntary integration of territorial entities to coordinate and execute actions that go beyond the political-administrative limits for the fulfillment of the mission of the State.

Note: Own elaboration based on Colombian regulatory provisions.

**TABLE 2. ASSOCIATIVITY SCHEMES, MEMBERS, AND DESCRIPTION**

Associative Scheme	Members	Functions According to Law
Administrative Planning Regions (APR)	Departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Promote actions that contribute to concretizing the regional development approach, considering the needs, characteristics, and economic, cultural, social, and environmental particularities, and promoting the strengthening of the institutional capacities of the territorial entities.</li> <li>-Promote coherence and articulation of planning between the territorial entities that comprise it and the different government levels.</li> <li>-Promote the incorporation of the regional approach in the Territorial Ordinance Plans, the Departmental Ordinance Plans, the Development Plans, and the different planning instruments.</li> <li>-Participate in the ordering and planning processes of the natural resources of the ecological and environmental components of the region.</li> </ul>
Planning and Management Region (PMR)	Departments and municipalities	Allow promoting and applying harmoniously and sustainably the principles of complementarity, concurrence, and subsidiarity in the development and execution of the powers assigned to the territorial entities by the Constitution and the law.
Metropolitan Area (MA)	Municipalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Program and coordinate the harmonious, integrated, and sustainable development of the municipalities that comprise it.</li> <li>-Rationalize the provision of public services by the municipalities that comprise it.</li> <li>-Execute road infrastructure works and develop projects of social interest in the metropolitan area.</li> <li>-Establish regulations on territorial planning, the specific guidelines, and guidelines for planning the territory of the municipalities that comprise it to promote and facilitate the harmonization of their Territorial Planning Plans.</li> </ul>
Association of Municipalities (AM)	Municipalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Jointly organize the provision of public services.</li> <li>-Execute subregional projects and fulfill their administrative functions.</li> <li>- Integrate the development plans of its associates in a joint comprehensive planning model.</li> </ul>
Administrative and planning provinces (APP)	Municipalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Jointly organize the provision of public service.</li> <li>-Execute subregional projects to promote territorial development.</li> <li>- Environmental management.</li> </ul>

Note: Own elaboration based on Colombian regulatory provisions.

**TABLE 3. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE ASSOCIATIVITY SCHEMES IN COLOMBIA**

Reference	Main Topic	Coordination Approach
Political Constitution of 1991	Art. 209: Administrative functions.	The administrative authorities must coordinate their actions for the proper fulfillment of the purposes of the State.
	Art. 285, 286: Territorial entities.	Territorial division. Willingness to create new stays in compliance with the mission of the State.
	Art. 306, 306, 307: Governors and departments.	Functions of governors and ability to create planning regions and regions as territorial entities.
	Art. 315, 319, 321: Mayors and municipalities.	Functions of mayors and capacity to create associations of municipalities.
Law 136 of 1994	It is related to the organization and functioning of municipalities.	Art. 149. Provisions to create associations of municipalities to coordinate the provision of public services, execute works, and fulfill the State's functions under the principles of efficiency and effectiveness.
Law 617 of 2000	It is about the strengthening of decentralization and regulations for the rationalization of national public spending.	Art. 18, 20, 25. Coordination between territorial entities, associativity schemes, and mechanisms to finance projects of common interest.
Law 1454 de 2011	Organic Law of Territorial Planning.	Art. 3, 6, 9-20, 27, 30, 31, 32. Territorial associative schemes, conformation, and figures. Delegation of competencies and coordination between territorial entities and associative schemes in the fulfillment of the functions of the State.
Law 1625 of 2013	The regime for metropolitan areas.	Provisions on the creation, operation, and powers of metropolitan areas. Metropolitan areas are considered a scheme to strategically coordinate actions such as public transport services, urban expansion, and environmental issues.
Law 1955 of 2019	National Development Plan (2019-2022).	Art. 249, 250, 251. Official registration of associative schemes, coordination between entities to develop projects with a regional impact, overcoming borders of internal territorial division.

Note: Own elaboration based on Colombian regulatory provisions.

Among the municipal associations in Colombia, the metropolitan areas have reached a higher degree of maturation, a fact two crucial elements can explain: first, the country's metropolitan areas have capital cities as core municipalities, entities with a higher level of development compared to the other municipalities with the capacity to collect taxes from the commercial activities and services that are provided there. On the other hand, metropolitan areas have achieved a greater incidence in

spaces such as Congress, allowing them to regulate their own operation with a more express delegation of competencies, environmental authority, and public transport services.

### **Characterization of the Current Municipal Association Schemes**

By 2022, the associativity schemes in Colombia could be tracked with data from the Registration System by the Interior Ministry. The



country has four (4) Administrative Planning Regions (APR), eleven (11) Association of Municipalities (AM), four (4) Planning and Management Regions (PMR), six (6) Metropolitan Areas (MA), and five (5) Administrative and planning provinces (APP). Considering territorial entities can establish associativity at the municipal and departmental levels, a characterization according to their status is presented below.

There are 178 municipalities in the country associated under some associative figure. Within them, six belong to two different Associativity Schemes, all of them from the Antioquia Department. The Associative Scheme predominates in the country's Association of

Municipalities (AM). Ninety-five municipalities use this figure to associate. Metropolitan Areas (MA) are the second most used figure by municipalities, with the particularity that they have a city considered a development node. In total, thirty-three municipalities are associated with this figure. The Administrative and Planning Provinces (APP) associate thirty-nine territorial entities and the seventeen Planning and Management Regions (PMR).

Table 4 shows the distribution of entities according to the categories of the Rural Mission (DNP, 2015). These categories were based on the density, size of the municipality, and population distribution between the capital and the dispersed area. The category *Cities*

**FIGURE 1. TERRITORIAL ASSOCIATIONS SCHEMES**

**I. Municipal Associations**



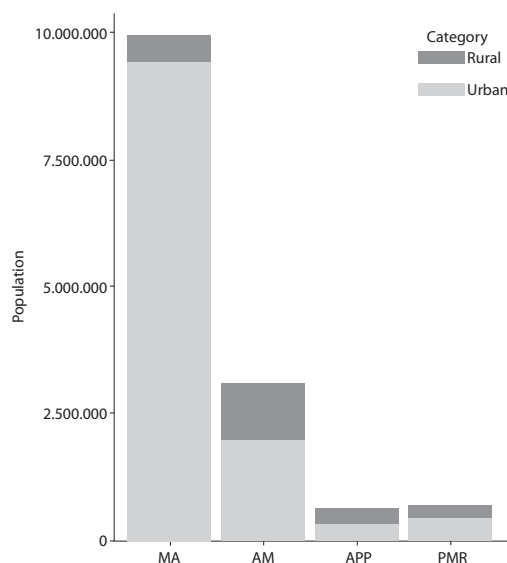
**II. Regional Association**



■ Not associated ■ Belongs to an Association

Note: Own elaboration from the Registry System of the Ministry of the Interior.

**FIGURE 2. POPULATION BY TYPE OF ASSOCIATIVE SCHEME**



Note: Own elaboration from the Registry System of the Ministry of the Interior and Rural Mission of the National Planning Department. (DNP, 2015).

and Agglomerations includes the municipalities with the highest population density and largest size, followed by the *Intermediate*. Municipalities categorized as *Rural* are those with a low population density.

**TABLE 4. DISTRIBUTION BY RURAL CATEGORY**

Category	MA	AM	APP	PMR
Cities and agglomerations	25	5	0	2
Intermediate	4	28	21	8
Rural	4	62	18	7

Note: Own elaboration from the Rural Mission of the National Planning Department. (DNP, 2015).

Additionally, Table 5 shows the distribution of the same entities, considering the distribution provided in Law 617 of 2000, which categorizes the municipalities according to their administrative and fiscal management

capacities, measure based on the size of the population and the value of the current annual income. According to this categorization, the municipalities with a population of more than 500,001 inhabitants and whose current unrestricted yearly income exceeds 400,000 monthly legal minimum wages are considered *Special*. Those with a population between 100,001 and 500,000 inhabitants and whose annual current free income exceeds 100,000 and up to 400,000 monthly legal minimum wages are classified as “First,” and the category gradually descends as they have less population and less free current income destination.

**TABLE 5 . DISTRIBUTION BY RESOURCE CATEGORY**

Category	MA	AM	APP	PMR
Special	3	0	0	0
First	12	3	0	0
Second	5	0	0	1
Third	0	0	0	0
Fourth	12	2	0	0
Fifth	0	5	3	2
Sixth	1	85	36	14

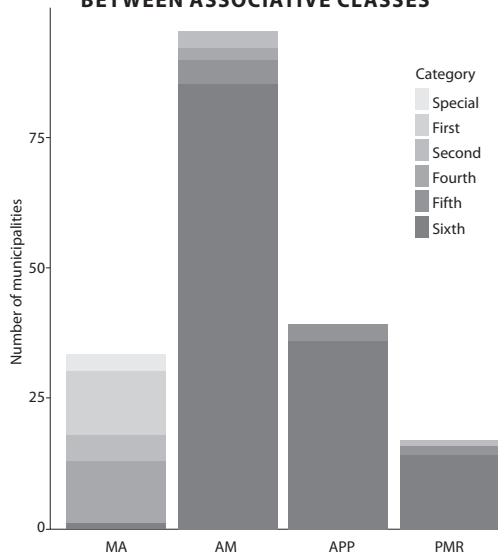
Note: Own elaboration based on Colombian regulatory provisions.

In the case of the associated municipalities in AM, most entities are rural (62), with a lower concentration of Cities and Agglomerations (less than 5%). This implies that this kind of associativity is being carried out by entities that do not have a high population density and territories that may be potentially disconnected. Likewise, this associativity concentrates on municipalities with low resources, 89% of which are Category Six and 5% are Category

Five. This distribution shows that small municipalities with scarce resources may use associativity as an action strategy.

Regarding the APP distribution, 39 municipalities are associated with this figure. Of these, 18 are rural, and 21 are Intermediate. Reviewing the distribution by categories, it is found that 92% of these municipalities are in the Sixth category and 8% in the Fifth. Similarly to the AM, this scheme concentrates on entities with a low population density, which are dispersed and disconnected. It should be remembered that this type of associativity cannot exceed the departmental administrative limits and that all the provinces are in the department of Antioquia.

**FIGURE 3. RESOURCES DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ASSOCIATIVE CLASSES**

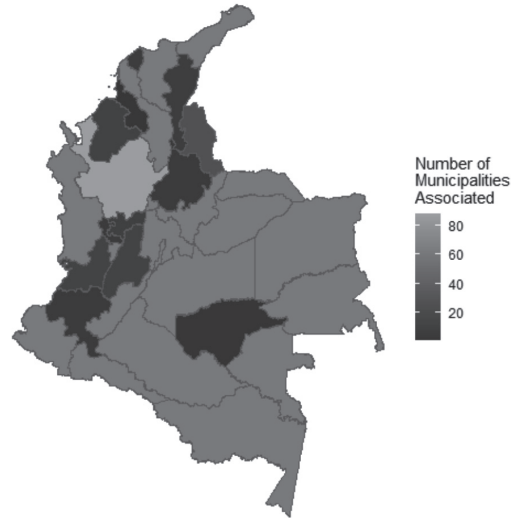


Note: Own elaboration based on Colombian regulatory provisions.

On the other hand, 33 municipalities are associated with MA. Of these, four are rural, four

are intermediate, and 25 are cities and agglomeration. This implies that this scheme occurs because of interactions between entities with a high population concentration. According to the distribution, 3% of the municipalities are in the Sixth category, 36% in the Fourth, 15.2% in the Second, 36.4% in the First, and 9.1% in the Special. It is important to note that it is the only type of Associative Scheme with Special category entities, which is related to the fact that the areas are integrated by municipalities around a dynamic node. This makes them the Associative Schemes with the highest concentration of municipalities with the most significant economic capacity.

**FIGURE 4. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF SCHEMES BY DEPARTMENTS**



Note: Own elaboration from the Ministry of the Interior Registry System.

The PMR has the characteristic that entities of different levels can be associated, such as municipalities, departments, and even other

Associative Schemes. However, to-date, in no report of a non-municipal entity it has been decided to associate through this figure. In total, 17 municipalities are associated, of which seven are rural, eight are intermediate, and two are cities and agglomerations. In addition, 82% of the municipalities are in the sixth category and 12% in the fifth category.

Regarding the distribution of Regional Associativity, there are four current APR. With this, almost 69% of all the Departments belong to at least this type of Regional Associative Scheme. As seen in Illustration 1-II, Antioquia, the Caribbean, and Eastern Regions are not in an APR yet. However, Antioquia is the territory with the most associated municipalities, followed by Santander -in the frontier with Venezuela-, showing interest in those regions for associative strategies. San Andrés, the insular Department of the country, possibly due to its geographical position, has not joined any associativity scheme. One of the current APRs is categorized as Special because it has Bogotá, the country's capital, as one of its members. Additionally, Tolima is the only Department that is associated with two APRs.

## **TWO CASE STUDIES OF MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATIONS IN COLOMBIA**

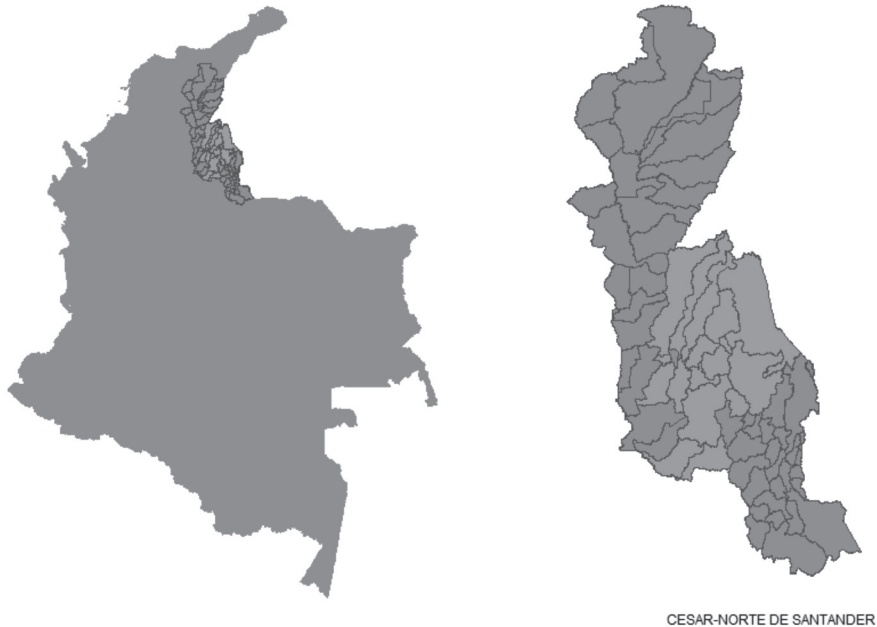
Two case studies of municipal associations are presented which will be identified in this section. They are characterized by the voluntary composition of municipalities in Colombia in two different areas of the country, a brief approximation of the constitution process, a description of the agreements, and arrangements between the actors that have defined

and guided their activities or the scope of their powers, -effective coordination processes-, and institutional organization and hierarchies established within these entities that lead to specific results of cooperation in the fulfillment of the functions of the State.

### **Municipal Association of Catatumbo, Province of Ocaña, south of Cesar**

The Municipal Association of Catatumbo, Province of Ocaña and Sur del Cesar Asocatatumbo was founded in 1993 with the objective of “be[ing] a platform for multilevel governance in the management and implementation of public policies for local and regional development” (Asociación de Municipios del Catatumbo, 2022). It comprises fifteen municipalities: *El Carmen, Convención, Teorama, El Tarra, San Calixto, Hacarí, La Playa, Ocaña, Ábrego, Villa Caro, Cáchira, La Esperanza, Sardinata, González y Río de Oro*, between two departments: *Norte de Santander and Cesar*. It has a total extension of 4,826 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 300,000 inhabitants.

Catatumbo is a border territory with Venezuela characterized by the natural wealth of its territory; however, their climatic conditions are suitable for large-scale cultivation of the coca leaf, the main ingredient for the manufacture of cocaine. There are also laboratories that produce it, taking advantage of the dense jungle of the region to be hidden from the Colombian Public Force, who fight these illegal groups and their source of funding. Likewise, this area has been the basis for peace processes (Asociación de Municipios del Catatumbo, 2022). One of them is the Peace

**FIGURE 5. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION OF CATATUMBO**

Note: Own elaboration from the Ministry of the Interior Registry System.

Laboratories agreed at the beginning of the 2000s. This international cooperation program promoted the strengthening of the social fabric and grassroots organizations to take the population out of their direct involvement in the conflict. The Catatumbo Association was one of the participating actors in this program, and as a result, it strengthened its legitimacy among the actors in the territory.

Asocatatumbo has achieved important recognition in the exercise of its functions; its associates agreed that agricultural development would be one of the best that needed to be coordinated on a larger territorial scale. In 2000, an articulation process with the Municipal Technical Assistance Units began, which lasted

four years to promote high-impact projects. This process matured with the support of the National Government to Provincial Agribusiness Management Centers, with specific regulations for their operation. Through this center, run by the Association, the National Government, through the Ministry of Agriculture, initiates a process of delegating powers to Asocatatumbo to provide technical assistance in the area, with the support of the Government of Norte de Santander and associated municipalities. This assistance represented leverage of financial resources for this scheme and its strengthening to continue operating. According to the Association, in the different stages of technical assistance, an estimated

12,000 small farmers have been trained in planting, production, and agro-industry processes (Asocatatumbo, 2016).

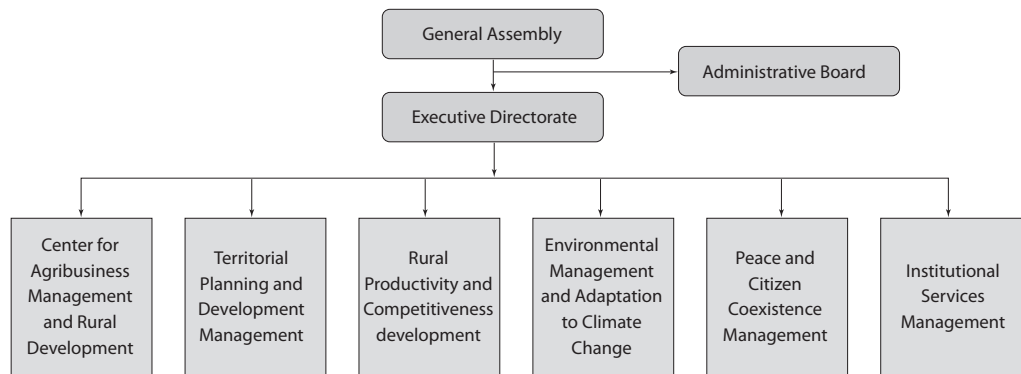
In terms of hierarchies, the scheme has a General Assembly, the Administrative Board, and the Executive Directorate. The General Assembly is made up of the mayors of the associated municipalities. Its functions are to define the association's general actions and the associates' contributions annually and monitor the fulfillment of the objectives. The Administrative Board comprises five (5) mayors of the associated municipalities. They appoint the executive director of the association, approve the position plan, and decide on administrative matters. The executive management is responsible for the legal representation of the entity, public and institutional relations to promote the services and achievements of the association, as well as the management of cooperation agreements between the associated municipalities and other public and private institutions (Asociación de Municipios del Catatumbo, 2022).

Additionally, the association has six technical management units: the Center for Agribusiness Management and Rural Development, Territorial Planning and Development Management, Rural Productivity and Competitiveness Development, Environmental Management and Adaptation to Climate Change, Peace and Citizen Coexistence Management, and Institutional Services Management.

The internal organization of Asocatatumbo has undergone modifications and adjustments according to the maturation processes of the entity; this has allowed it to attend to the demands and new challenges that the scheme faces; it is an entity that adapts to the changes and achieves results from appropriate internal management. The coordination between the General Assembly -associate mayors-, the executive director, and specialized technical offices has led to the development of institutional processes that have been formalized over time.

As a result of the coordination and cooperation promoted by the Associative Scheme,

**FIGURE 6. THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART OF ASOCATATUMBO**



Note: Own elaboration from Asocatatumbo (Asocatatumbo, 2016).

the region has benefited greatly. In agriculture, the institution promoted the organization of producers, creating more than 50 farmers' associations and two federations. In addition, it has supported 24 productive alliances to make them more efficient. Asocatatumbo also managed the electrification process for nearly 15,000 rural families, promoted the improvement of rural housing for 1,150 families, and structured the regional aqueduct and sewerage project for 23 township headwaters. Finally, the association is a cadastral manager, hosting a microsite to develop online procedures, and has deployed a Geographic Information System for the region (Asocatatumbo, 2022).

Based on the elements outlined, it is possible to affirm that the Association of Municipalities of Catatumbo is a scheme that has managed to configure itself as a vehicle for coordination on an intermediate scale between different actors, with some arrangements and agreements on their competencies that clearly define the object of the association. The context in which it develops gives it a leading role by having the legitimacy of the community and allows it to show positive results to its associates, a product of inter-municipal cooperation.

### **Valle de Aburrá Metropolitan Area**

The *Valle de Aburrá* Metropolitan Area was founded in 1980 and is a scheme that associates the ten municipalities that make up the Valle de Aburrá: *Medellín* as the core city, surrounded by the municipalities of *Barbosa*, *Girardota*, *Copacabana*, *Bello*, *Itagüí*, *Sabaneta*, *Envigado*, *La Estrella* and *Caldas*, with the

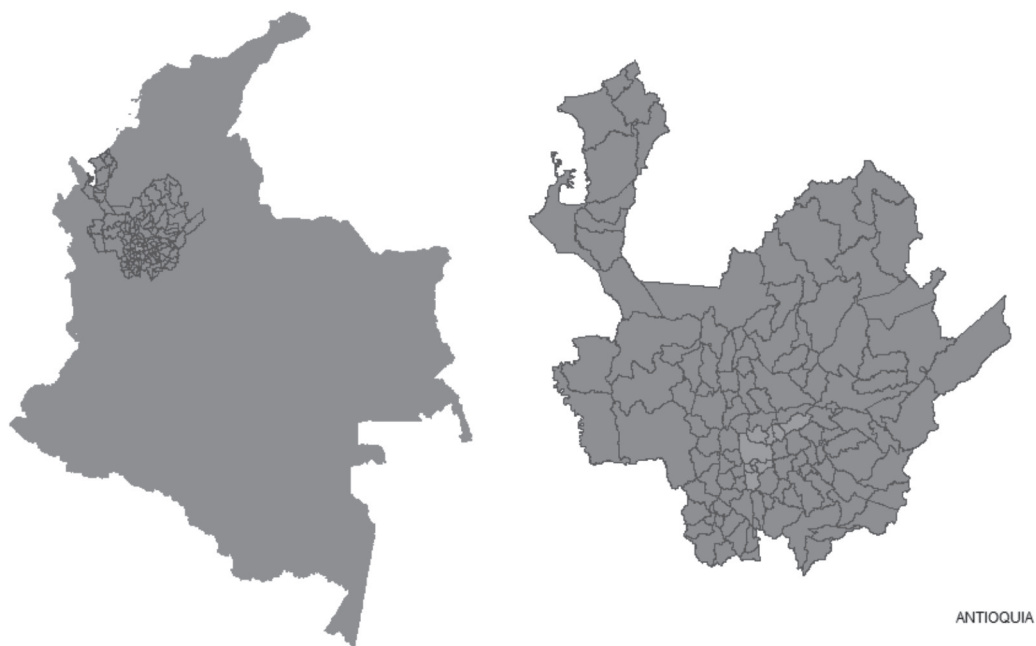
objective of coordinating “actions in the provision of public services, environmental and risk management, land use planning and urban expansion in the sustainable development of the area and human development” (Area Metropolitana del Valle de Aburrá, 2020).

The Aburrá Valley is located in the central mountain range of Colombia in the center of Antioquia. The Medellín River crosses it from south to north, and ten municipalities are established within it that are supplied with its waters and are surrounded by mountains. Most of the inhabitants of Antioquia are in the municipalities that comprise it. The ten towns also share problems and potentialities that influence the environmental, economic, and social aspects of the entire Aburrá Valley. It has an area of 1,165.5 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 3,886,999 inhabitants.

Since the 18th century, the settlements that gave rise to the municipal seats of the Valle de Aburrá were outlined. In the 1950s and 1960s, the industrialization process and the growing rate of peasant migration to urban centers accelerated the population growth. This led to an overflow of the urban centers closest to Medellín, producing a phenomenon of conurbation or continuous built-up area (Area Metropolitana del Valle de Aburrá, 2020).

It is the most developed scheme with more than forty years in operation. Its wide recognition at national and international levels responds, among others, to a clear differentiation of competencies between the mayors, the Area, and the other actors that converge in the territory. It also responds to the financial capacity of the scheme with a budget close to



**FIGURE 7. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF VALLE DE ABURRÁ METROPOLITAN AREA**

Note: Own elaboration from the Ministry of the Interior Registry System.

229,542,000 US, if one takes into account that the core municipality is Medellín, the capital of the Department of Antioquia; the second most important city in the country for the development and the services that are provided there. Its performance has generated credibility not only in its associates but also in the community (Area Metropolitana del Valle de Aburrá, 2020).

One of the most outstanding competencies that the municipalities have delegated to the Metropolitan Area is the Environmental Authority. This is an important aspect that allows the Area's institutional independence and influence on public policy. Based on this competency, the Aburrá Valley is recognized

for having an environmental observatory, comprehensive management of the environmental plans of the municipalities as well as solid waste management, and leadership in metropolitan planning, among others. It is essential to highlight that as an Environmental authority, the Area has led processes of design, formulation, and implementation of public policy and is in charge of the execution and coordination of the performance of public policies in the municipalities that make up the scheme.

In terms of hierarchies, the main decision-making of the *Valle de Aburrá* lies on the Metropolitan Board, made up of the Mayor of Medellín, the Governor of Antioquia, the mayors of the other nine member

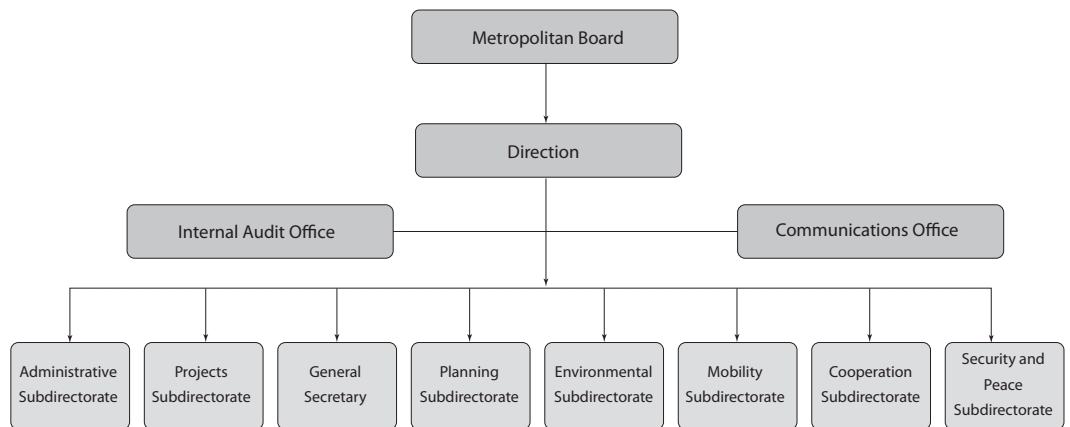
municipalities, a councilor representing the Council of Medellín, and a councilor in the representation of the councils of the other municipalities that are part of the Valle de Aburrá Metropolitan Area. The area has a Direction, an Internal Audit Office, and a Communications Office.

The current organization chart of the Area is an institutional design product of the maturation of a scheme with more than 40 years since its creation. Institutionally, it is the most robust associative scheme in which agreements and arrangements between the actors are identified, which requires a coordination process so that the Metropolitan Area has a specific role in the intermediate scale of governance in fulfilling the mission of the State. The creation of detailed technical dependencies and offices such as the Planning Sub-directorate or the Environment Sub-directorate stands out, through which the powers delegated to the scheme are addressed.

Regarding environmental matters, the Metropolitan Area (MA) has managed to develop different projects. For example, *Siembra Aburrá* aimed at addressing the tree deficit, has planted 1 million trees (AM, 2018). At the same time, in the MA, 76% of public transportation uses clean fuel. Moreover, the associative scheme has promoted the use of bicycles as a sustainable means of transportation, with more than 55 km of bicycle paths built and bicycle loan stations (AM, 2015).

The associative scheme has created an early warning system to support meteorological risk management (rainfall, floods, mass movements, and air pollution) and the Environmental Emergencies Unit to address affectations on natural resources that require immediate attention. The Metropolitan Area is also a cadastral manager and has developed a website to facilitate the processes and has created a geographical and statistical information system for the entire region.

**FIGURE 8. ORGANIZATIONAL CHART OF VALLE DE ABURRÁ METROPOLITAN AREA**



Note: Own elaboration from (Area Metropolitana del Valle de Aburrá, 2020)

## CONCLUSION

Territorial associativity in Colombia has been an essential tool for territorial entities in fulfilling the mission of the State. Before the Political Constitution of 1991 established a general legislative framework to move toward decentralization, having associative schemes as vehicles of action, the municipalities have historically been operating with integration logics for the materialization of their projects, overcoming challenging scenarios, and strengthening the social fabric from the cultural processes of each territory.

The decentralization process in Colombia, whose most outstanding milestone is the Political Constitution of 1991, gave an essential role to the integration mechanisms to promote the development of the Country. The Constitution, accompanied by the different laws and regulations, has given way to the consolidation of these intermediate schemes in the territorial division of the country. Territorial Associative Schemes can be seen as actors that stimulate or promote governance processes at the intermediate scale between departments and municipalities.

Coordination is the order that materializes through a territorial associative scheme by offering the possibility of developing actions based on the agreements and arrangements between the interested actors. A clear definition and scope of agreements and arrangements between territorial entities to materialize from the level of the associative scheme are reflected in some defined competencies on which the action of the associative scheme is concentrated. In an entity without express competencies, it is

challenging to have clarity about the objectives and goals to be achieved.

The institutional organization, evident through the establishment of institutional processes and hierarchies, are two essential elements in materializing the agreements and arrangements expected to emerge through the scheme. The legitimacy of the territorial associativity by stakeholders stimulates a suitable environment for the scheme to develop its actions and guarantees aspects such as financial sustainability to continue with its process.

The success of the associative schemes can be understood as the positive inter-municipal cooperation, the result of the order and coordinated process -actions and arrangements- materialized by the municipal association.

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