



# Assessing the determinants of territorial cohesion: Evidence from Colombian departments



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## ABSTRACT

Territorial cohesion is a concept that is generating growing interest in both the academic-scientific and political arenas. This paper presents an approach to the analysis of territorial cohesion and, more specifically, proposes a definition of the concept and its dimensions in order to empirically test the approach on the Colombian departmental model. To this effect, a methodology was designed that, by using Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) to calculate composite indices, measures and evaluates the level of territorial cohesion in Colombian departments from a multidimensional and integrative perspective, and identifies the factors that influence that cohesion. The results could provide useful data for policy makers in the design of public policies to influence factors that facilitate more balanced and inclusive territorial development. This is especially relevant in light of the recent signing and ratification of the Peace Agreement in November 2016, given that the Colombian Government is currently in the process of designing policies that have the potential to promote cohesion within its territories.

## 1. Introduction

One of the most widely acknowledged characteristics of Latin America and the Caribbean is the region's high levels of inequality between territories. Despite the substantial drop in poverty rates noted in recent years in every country within the region, this favorable macroeconomic performance has not led to a reduction in the concentration or redistribution of wealth. As a result, Latin America and the Caribbean continues to be the region with the highest levels of inequality in the world (ECLAC, 2016). In effect, there are areas where the population enjoys living standards that could easily be compared to those of developed countries, which coexist with other areas characterized by marginalization, exclusion and extremely poor quality of life (Buitelaar et al., 2015).

Colombia shares this same Latin American and Caribbean reality. Moreover, it could be said that in many respects Colombia faces an even more complex, as well as unique, situation. A result, primarily, of the internal armed conflict that has ravaged the country in the past five decades. The conflict has affected territories in very different ways and, as evidenced in the National Development Plan 2014–2018, *Todos por un nuevo país* (Building a new country together), Colombia presents significant imbalances in levels of economic and social development by

region. In certain areas, poverty and underdevelopment prevail; to which a lack of security and opportunities can often be added. Furthermore, the country lacks sufficient and adequate communication infrastructures that would facilitate improvements in connectivity between regions and integrate its most remote territories.

Inequality in Latin America takes many forms that are reinforced in a reciprocal way. According to Stewart (2001), these include vertical inequalities between individuals –in various dimensions of well-being and in assets and capacities that are key to human development– such as access to opportunities, public assets, education and health (De Ferranti et al., 2004; Buitelaar et al., 2015), access to land (Deininger and Squire, 1998), remuneration for factors of production (ILO, 2013), and political participation and justice (Hoffman and Centeno, 2003). In turn, the region is also characterized by significant horizontal inequalities between socially and culturally constructed groups, such as ethnic groups (Ferreira and Gignoux, 2008), gender groups (Deere and León, 2001), and territories per se if these can be understood as a social construction (Modrego and Berdegué, 2015).

Horizontal inequality in reference to territories alludes to the disparities that exist between different regions in the same country. These territorial inequalities are in addition and different to those that impact individuals, and constitute an important component of universal

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inequality that deserves much needed attention (Elbers et al., 2004; Berdegué, 2012; Modrego and Berdegué, 2015).

In this context, the concept of “Territorial Cohesion” is of great significance because it offers an opportunity to approach the dimensions involved in the concept of territory from a pragmatic and integrated perspective. A perspective aimed at overcoming the frequent challenges faced by every territory, to a greater or lesser extent, in terms of development. This concept emerged in the European Union (EU) at the beginning of the 1990s and since then a series of events has given rise to a wide-range of debates and discussions on the concept. Three events stand out in particular: (i) the EU Second Cohesion Report (EC, 2001) which, for the first time, includes the territorial dimension of cohesion, (ii) the launch of the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (EC, 2008), and (iii) the inclusion of territorial cohesion in the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon as one of the three main pillars of the EU Cohesion Policy (Treaty of Lisbon, Article 158).

In Latin America and the Caribbean in general, and in Colombia in particular, the importance of incorporating territorial cohesion in the analysis of inequalities between regions lies in the nature of development conditions in Latin American countries. A structural condition in the economic development model of Latin American countries impedes growth and the generation of wealth from having a redistributive effect. By the same token, economic disparities between regions have, in many cases, a spatial and territorial quality. In a study performed in Colombia, Pérez (2007) argues that there are no random patterns in the distribution of territorial poverty and that, furthermore, patterns occur in clusters. The nature of this inequity is rooted in historical reasons that are expressed via a set of behavioral development economic indicators that denote the dilemma that underlies the recent adoption of cohesion criteria in public policies (Buitelaar et al., 2015).

Regional development and territorial cohesion are issues that are currently emerging or returning to the political agendas of Latin American governments; a phenomenon that is increasingly attracting the attention of analysts and decision makers. This new interest in the territorial dimension of development at a national level is based on a series of objective factors that have emerged over the last decade, which require a more explicit territorial approach from national public policies. These factors include challenges such as social inequalities, territorial competitiveness and environmental sustainability. Implementing national policies conducive to territorial cohesion and to achieving balanced, sustainable, and inclusive territorial development is becoming increasingly important in order for countries to advance.

In Colombia, these issues have been expressed, to a certain extent, in the aforementioned 2014–2018 Development Plan, which advocates a territorial structure in which to organize the implementation of national pillars and transversal policy strategies by region. This structure is an improvement on the territorial approach set out in the 2010–2014 National Development Plan, which recognizes regional differences as referential frameworks in which to make public policies and sectoral programs. One of the main pillars underpinning the current development plan is the attainment of peace. The government’s main priority within its vision of peace, from a territorial perspective, is to end armed conflict, guarantee rights, and strengthen institutions (Jaramillo, 2013). This perspective involves paying differentiated attention to territories with the aim of closing internal gaps between the center of the country, its regions, and its departments. This is especially important for those territories most affected by the impact of internal armed conflict, whose level of development has fallen even further behind.

However, although the concept of territorial cohesion is not widely used in the political agendas of Latin American countries, the importance assigned to the regional and territorial nature of national development has become clearly established. So too has the need to advance in incorporating a territorial dimension into public policies. In the same vein, studies by Massiris-Cabeza (2012) and Massiris-Cabeza et al. (2012) highlight that territorial management in all Latin America countries, including Colombia, has been based on sectoral or multi-

sectoral, rather than territorial, policies. As such, they strongly advocate incorporating the notion of territory in the design and implementation of public policies.

These circumstances –the context of territorial imbalances and the need to advance in incorporating a territorial dimension in public policies– give rise to the need to undertake research capable of addressing the intellectual and political challenges that emerge as a consequence. Accordingly, several projects using the concept of territorial cohesion have recently been launched in Latin America. Their aim is to contribute to political and institutional changes to generate opportunities and capacities which enable territories to express their potential for development and reduce territorial inequality. As such, it is important to highlight projects developed by institutions such as the Latin American Institute for Economic and Social Planning (ILPES) under the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), as part of the EUROSociAL (2011–2015) regional program, and RIMISP’s Territorial Cohesion Program for Development (2013–2015).

In the case of Colombia, it is also important to highlight a series of one-dimensional studies that analyze different inequalities and departmental disparities in relation to diverse elements including economic performance, poverty, malnutrition, levels of education, access to basic services, and infrastructures (Bonet and Meisel, 1999; Vilorio, 2007; Bonilla, 2008; Pérez, 2008; Galvis and Meisel, 2009, 2012, 2014). And more recently, Cabeza-Morales (2015a) and Cabeza-Morales and Gutiérrez-Rey (2015) presented an approach to the development of territorial cohesion and its normative reinterpretation in Colombia. Furthermore, albeit not from a territorial cohesion perspective, the studies performed in Colombia by the Rural Territories Observatory (OTR) under the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) should also be highlighted for their contributions to the advancement of territorial development indices. In this regard, other notable studies are those performed by the Geographic Institute Agustín Codazzi (IGAC) in the field of land use planning and sustainable development, and by Gutiérrez-Rey (2010) on territorial organization, sustainable development and territory in Colombia.

Despite these advances, and the emerging interest in analyzing regional and departmental inequalities commonly observed in Latin America, and more specifically in Colombia, from a territorial cohesion perspective, there are currently no known studies that quantify the dimensions of cohesion in an integrated way – associating them with territories that have autonomy for the administration, planning and promotion of their economic and social development–or identify the factors that determine their degree of cohesion. Territorial cohesion is still considered a diffuse concept whose components still need to be clarified in order to make it operative for the purposes of designing public policies.

In this context, the main objective of this research is twofold, on the one hand, to take an approach to the concept of territorial cohesion that facilitates its understanding and applicability in the case of Colombia and, on the other, to measure and evaluate the territorial cohesion of the country at a departmental level and identify the principal factors associated with it. The results obtained potentially provide useful data for policy makers in the design of public policies that would facilitate more balanced and inclusive territorial development. Interest in this research is further increased by the fact that the Colombian government is in the process of implementing peace agreements. A process which entails the government recognizing, among other things, the need to make regional differences visible as a referential framework for making and implementing public policies, which correspond to the characteristics and priorities of each region in order to boost the cohesion of its territories.

## 2. Analytical approach to the concept and measurement of territorial cohesion

Territorial cohesion is a concept that has played an important and

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