One of the main challenges facing ports in the Caribbean and Latin America, in particular, is having the necessary and adequate infrastructure to compete on the modern global stage. With the expanded Panama Canal now in operation and larger vessels traversing those waters, ports around the region are ideally located to capitalise on the shift in global shipping patterns, and as a result many are investing in the expansion and modernisation of their operations. When also considering the need for legislative updates, environmental protection and sustainability, however, such projects can be extremely complex.

For the past 20 years, the Inter-American Committee on Ports (CIP) has promoted the development of a competitive, secure and sustainable port sector across North, Central and South America. Mr Jorge Duran, CIP Secretary, describes the committee’s dedication to achieving its goals through training and capacity building, collaborating with the private sector, and engaging in political dialogue at the highest level.
By popular demand

As the only permanent inter-American government forum that brings together the national port authorities of all OAS (Organization of American States) member nations, CIP plays a crucial role in facilitating the cooperation and development of ports in the Americas. Having started out in the 1950s as the Inter-American Conference on Ports, CIP was eventually created in its current form in 1998, as the result of a vote taken by the 35 OAS member states.

"The OAS was established in 1948 and is akin to a United Nations for the American hemisphere," Mr Duran informs us. "It tackles issues under the four pillars of Political Affairs, Multidimensional Security, Human Rights, and Integral Development, and CIP falls under the remit of the Executive Secretariat for Integral Development. Since 1998 our mission has been to promote the development of competitive, sustainable, secure and inclusive ports in the Americas. Although much has changed, although the modus operandi has changed."

Indeed, throughout its early decades in existence CIP utilised various political instruments, initiatives and collaborations to pursue this objective, but since the 2000s it has been providing advice and technical assistance to the region's governments in relation to the privatisation of their ports. "The 2000s was certainly a decade that was characterised – at least in Latin America and the Caribbean – by federal governments letting go of their ports in the name of competitiveness and better operational efficiency under private-sector management," he adds.

Priorities for ports

Today, CIP focuses on six priority areas that its member countries have identified as critical to the development of the region's ports – that is to say, predominantly those in the Caribbean and Latin America, given that the US and Canada's ports present a higher degree of development. The first of these six areas relates to logistics, innovation and competitiveness; elements that are of the utmost importance to ports operating in today's global supply chain.

"The second priority area is sustainable management and environmental protection," Mr Duran outlines, "which aims to ensure that any progress is not made at the expense of the environment, and thirdly is port protection and security. Fourth is tourism, inland ports and waterways, ship services and navigation safety – inland facilities being particularly important in countries like Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay, while dredging is of importance to all member states. The fifth category is public policy, legislation and regulation, and our sixth priority area focuses on the issues of social responsibility, gender equality, and empowerment of women."

"Each of those priority areas is managed and addressed by a specific TAG (Technical Advisory Group). "The TAG for Port Protection and Security is chaired by Barbados, although we receive a lot of support from the US Government (such as grants from the State Department) to promote security practices in the region – especially in the Caribbean, which is an area of concern for the US," he reports. "We address protection and security issues through a tw-pronged strategy: on the one hand we organise high-level training with the US Coast Guard, and on the other hand we have regular drills.""}

Developing dialogues

CIP executes projects in its six priority areas through four key means, one of which is a political dialogue between the committee and its stakeholders – namely, the national port authorities of its 34 active members (the 35th member state being Cuba). "Each country structures their activities differently," Mr Duran explains, "and in the US, for instance, we work with the Maritime Administration (MARAD), while in Panama it is the Panama Maritime Authority, and in Mexico it is the General Coordination of Ports and Merchant Marine (CGPM)."

"The majority of these stakeholders were in attendance at the 11th Regular Meeting of CIP, which we held in Mexico City from 1–3 August, along with numerous representatives from the private sector," he reveals. "During these crucial meetings, which take place every two years, the member states approve an action plan for the next two years as well as a political resolution that calls upon members to continue working towards our sustainable development goals. This political dialogue is incredibly important because it helps to structure regional co-operation."

"Each country addresses its priority areas through capacity building, which mostly involves offering professional training scholarships, including master's degrees in logistics and multimodality, for example. Such programmes tend to last around one month and can take place online, in the US or even in Europe. "In the last four years we have increased the annual number of scholarships that we offer from 70 to more than 200 last year," states Mr Duran, "driven by the strong demand from our members for the best training in technology, sustainable management, security and many other disciplines."

"Another of our capacity building tools involves collaborating with the port authorities of the Americas to organise four or five major conferences every year. Last year we hosted 950 port officers from the Caribbean and Latin America at five different regional training events, where we shared best practices and encouraged the participation of the private sector."

"The third area of activity relates to the provision of direct technical assistance to member countries. "The Dominican Republic, for instance, recently launched its maritime and port vision for 2030, and in order to realise the goals within that vision there must be appropriate supporting legislation in place," he notes. "We have been providing assistance both in terms of developing the vision for 2030 and helping the Dominican Port Authority to implement the type of legislation required for modern ports."

"Our fourth field of action involves working with the private sector, which we believe plays a vital role in development. Indeed, we have more than 60 businesses and associations that have joined the committee in the last four years," asserts Mr Duran, "each paying an annual membership fee of between US$6,000–10,000 for the privilege of being part of this community, and having access to the highest levels of government and policy documents."

Productive partnerships

While the nature of CIP's governmental members is quite straightforward, the committee's private-sector membership is slightly more varied, and most of the ports that were privatised have since joined CIP as independents. "The federal government of Mexico, for example, sits on the committee through CGPM,

..."
but there are also 16 individual Mexican ports – the most important in terms of both trade and tourism – that have joined CIP,” explains Mr Duran. “Other private-sector members include salvage companies, environmental associations, security firms, dredging and consulting companies, shipping partners, and a range of other organisations.”

Keen to highlight some of those members that have proven themselves committed to supporting development in the region, Mr Duran continues “The North American Marine Environment Protection Association (NAMEPA) has carried out a great deal of valuable work across the region, including collaborating with us to run outreach campaigns and community beach clean-up drives, and provide educational materials for teachers. In addition, the Australian shipping company RightShip operates a port incentive programme designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cargo ships while in port, which continued to have an extremely positive impact with respect to port sustainability. We also have valuable members like the University of Miami Center for International Business Education & Research, and the Spanish government through our associate member Puertos del Estado (Ports of Spain).

“The US-based security firm Valiant has also played a very active role through various initiatives,” he affirms, “as has our associate member Hudson Analytica, a maritime security firm that has carried out a cyber security assessment survey on our behalf. Indeed, digital connectivity is an important area in which although we provide some advice, we are not technological experts, so we tend to refer those members looking to achieve paperless ports to Hudson Analytica. Essentially, however, a single paperless window is one step in our much wider goal of creating a Port Community System (PCS).”

An experienced navigator
Mr Duran has a proven track record of establishing successful strategic alliances with the private sector, having worked with the governments and private sector of the Americas in the design and implementation of development projects for more than 30 years. “I was born in Mexico but have spent time living in various locations, from London to Stockholm to Washington DC, on account of my father’s diplomatic postings,” he recalls. “I hold a double bachelor’s degree in Psychology and Latin American studies as well as master’s degrees in International Affairs and Science & Technology Policy, and have spent time working for the UN.

“Following that, I went on to work for the Latin American Institute of Educational Communication (ILCE) in Mexico City, where I eventually became Vice President of International Affairs. Then, in 2003 I moved back to Washington DC and became an independent consultant in various development, technology and education issues. One of those contracts led me to the OAS, where I became Chief of the Office of Science, Technology and Innovation, and it was in 2013 that the OAS asked me to lead CIP.”

Having had no prior experience in the ports sector, the last five years have presented an interesting period of learning for Mr Duran. “This is such a beautiful yet challenging area, and I am privileged to work with a community of truly committed and inspiring practitioners,” he enthuses. Indeed, working alongside Mr Duran is an all-female, multinational team of four. “My right hand for co-ordinating the private sector and our relationship with the US is Mona Swoboda, a German national, while Cristina Rechy, from Mexico, handles political documents and our governmental relationships, as well as some training components. Kayanna Parson Sinclair, from Nicaragua, is in charge of our portal and our image, and Montserrat Ambroz, also a Mexican national, is responsible for the remainder of our training components.”

A collaborative effort
CIP’s strategy going forward is ultimately linked to the plan of action that was approved at the 11th Regular Meeting of CIP in Mexico City, the theme of which was ‘Sustainability’. In fact, the Mexican government has provided us with the necessary financial resources to create a guide that will help ports in the region to become certified as sustainable,” Mr Duran reports, “so we will be working on that task in the immediate future. We also have some events and courses planned along the lines of security and protection, including an event in partnership with the University of Miami, as well as a maritime and port conference together with the government of Guatemala in November, which will focus on logistics and competitiveness.

In addition, we are working on a project to assist the Caribbean port authorities with disaster risk management and emergency response, the urgency of which became terribly apparent during last year’s hurricane season,” he reflects. Looking ahead, CIP is not only anticipating the implementation of ambitious projects but also the welcoming of new members with similar goals. “The unwavering support of our parent organisation, OAS, has been instrumental in CIP’s success and expansion over the decades – but so has the collaboration and commitment of our members and partners,” Mr Duran remarks. “My staff and I have excellent ideas, but without members and partners who are dedicated to the cause we would not make any progress, and we are always ready to comply with requests from both our private-sector and governmental members. Moreover, we are continually looking for new members and partners to join this community of practitioners who are committed to promoting port development in the American hemisphere,” he concludes.