

INCORPORATING INDUSTRIAL WASTES INTO MORTAR MIX PRODUCTION: A STEP TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The incorporation of calcined sludge (CS) from water treatment plants and nitrophosphogypsum (NPG) into mortar mixtures has been investigated as a potential strategy to reduce the consumption of ordinary Portland cement (OPC) and subsequently lower the carbon footprint of construction materials. Two scenarios were subjected to analysis: in the first, CO₂ emissions resulting from the treatment of NPG and CS were considered; in the second, emissions were considered negligible due to the reduced energy demand of waste treatment processes compared to OPC production. The chemical composition and mechanical properties of the mortars were evaluated through the use of X-ray fluorescence (XRF) and compressive strength testing. The mortar mixtures were prepared with a water-to-binder ratio of 0.485 in accordance with the ASTM standards. The mortar mixture containing 5% NPG and 5% CS exhibited a 6.65% increase in compressive strength, reaching 38.96 MPa after 90 days. Despite a slight reduction in early strength, long-term performance was enhanced by the formation of additional calcium silicate hydrates. Regarding sustainability, a reduction of 62.06 kg CO₂ per cubic meter of mortar was achieved in both scenarios, with more substantial reductions in Scenario 2. These results show that incorporating NPG and CS supports the circular economy by utilizing industrial by-products and provides a sustainable alternative to OPC, significantly reducing CO₂ emissions while maintaining or enhancing mechanical performance, thereby aligning with global efforts towards eco-friendly construction practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Colombian Caribbean region, there are raw materials with high potential as mineral admixtures or partial replacements for Portland cement (OPC). When implemented in mortar mixes, these materials exhibit performance similar to traditional mixes due to their chemical and mechanical properties (Bohórquez González et al., 2020; Palma & Sierra, 2011). The sludges from water treatment plants (WTPS) are residues from the water purification process, studied for their potential (Chang et al., 2020). According to a report by the WTP company of Atlántico, Colombia, an average of 8.6 m³/s is drawn from the Magdalena River (AAA, 2024; Superintendencia de Servicios Públicos Domiciliarios, 2023). Torres-Lozada et al. (2022) determined that the production of sludge, based on the volume of treated water, can range between 2% and 5%. The cited values are contingent upon the specific materials required by the

treatment process at each facility. Based on a sludge production rate of 3%, it can be estimated that approximately 7,681,125 cubic meters of sludge are produced annually in the Atlántico department (Colombia) alone.

Several studies have supported the use of WTPS in the construction sector, either as a supplementary cementitious material (SCM) or in combination with other waste materials (Daza & Medina, 2017; Ruviano et al., 2021; Daza Márquez, 2022; Mahanna et al., 2024). For example, incorporating calcined sludge in mortar mixes was evaluated by He et al. (2023), and a 10% improvement in compressive strength was achieved by adding 10% sludge ash compared to OPC mixes. Additionally, using alum sludge as a partial cement replacement in mortars was investigated by Liu et al. (2022), and enhanced resistance to high temperatures was observed. Mortar mixes containing 20% alum sludge kept higher compressive strength after exposure to temperatures of up to 800°C, surpassing sludge-free mixes by 15%

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. Similarly, the addition of up to 5% sludge in brick manufacturing was reported by De Carvalho Gomes et al. (2019), resulting in a reduced environmental impact while maintaining satisfactory mechanical properties, demonstrating its viability for use in ceramic materials. These studies indicate the potential of drinking water treatment sludge to improve mechanical properties and durability in construction applications while also contributing to waste reduction and carbon emission mitigation (Z. He et al., 2024).

On the other hand, phosphogypsum (PG), an agro-industrial byproduct from the fertilizer industry, has demonstrated chemical properties that could complement or enhance those found in WTPS for the development of ternary mortar mixes as partial replacements for OPC. Fertilizer production is expected to increase from 47 million tons in 2020 to 49 million tons by 2024, resulting in a rise in the waste generated [2]. The PG-producing industry maintains that its chemical and physical properties make it unsuitable for other industrial sectors, such as construction and agriculture. However, PG has become an essential component of cementitious materials because of its high calcium oxide content (up to 42%) (Rashad, 2017). If converted correctly, the PG byproduct of agro-industrial processes can be used as a substitute raw material for building materials (green technologies). Adding PG to hydraulic mortar mixtures is a promising approach for use. It has been acknowledged as one of the most advantageous ways to dispose of PG because of its low preparation costs and broad use, which align with the global building materials industry's drive toward green and low-carbon growth (Ohji et al., 2017). However, nitrophosphogypsum (NPG), an agro-industrial byproduct of the fertilizer industry, is a kind of phosphogypsum produced in Colombia's Caribbean region and derived from the manufacture of nitrophosphate fertilizer.

In the Atlántico department of Colombia, one fertilizer industry generates an average of 62,000 tons of NPG waste per year (Palma & Sierra, 2011). NPG contains impurities and toxic elements, the majority of which are typically deposited in open landfills for natural degradation, risking potential environmental impact. Due to this method of final disposal, the physical and chemical characteristics of this residue are not fully considered for utilization in the construction sector despite its high content of calcium oxide, a significant compound in the composition of cementitious materials (Rashad, 2017).

The present research evaluates the effectiveness of utilizing calcined residues from water treatment plants (CS) and NPG in mortars for the construction sector, expressed as the percentage of recyclable residue relative to the captured volume at the plant. The primary focus of this research lies in incorporating these residues into a value chain, aiming to contribute to the circular economy by utilizing these materials as sustainable solutions in construction.

1.1 Research significance

Incorporating industrial waste materials, such as WTPS, and agricultural byproducts like NPG into mortar mixtures presents a pivotal step towards sustainable construction. This research highlights that using these materials can significantly reduce CO₂ emissions without compromising

the strength or workability of the mortar. These findings motivate the exploration of waste valorization, offering a commercially viable pathway for eco-friendly material development and aligning with global sustainability goals in the construction industry.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research involved the preparation of cubic mortar samples. The mixing, casting, and curing methods were conducted following the standards outlined in ASTM C305 (2020a), ASTM C109 (2021a), and ASTM C511 (2021b), respectively.

2.1 Mortar mixtures

Four (4) mortar mixtures were formulated, incorporating two (2) types of industrial waste. The first one corresponds to NPG, which, according to the literature, is primarily composed of CaO and SO₃ (Rashad, 2017). On the other hand, the second waste type is associated with CS, with SiO₂, Al₂O₃, and Fe₂O₃ being the primary components (Ruviano et al., 2021). A fertilizer company from the Colombian Caribbean donated the NPG. It was calcined at 600°C for two hours, crushed, and sieved through a No. 200 sieve (75 microns) (Figure 1). The water treatment sludge was exposed to the sun for 36 hours to eliminate free water. It was then crushed, and the same procedure was followed for the NPG (Figure 2).

The waste materials were considered as a partial replacement for cement at weight-to-weight ratios with replacement proportions of 10%, as estimated according to the existing literature (Calderón-Morales et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2020; Rashad, 2017; Świerczek et al., 2018; Vouk et al., 2017). Both wastes underwent thermal treatment at temperatures of 600°C for 2 hours. The elemental chemical composition of CS and NPG, obtained through XRF analysis, along with their physical properties, is summarized in Table 1. XRF analysis was conducted on the Vanta M Series Handheld instrument. The NPG is primarily composed of SO₃ (52.74%) and CaO (39.8%), with minor amounts of SiO₂, Al₂O₃, Fe₂O₃, and MgO. In contrast, the CS material has a high content of SiO₂ (61.59%) and Al₂O₃ (21.36%), with minor amounts of Fe₂O₃ (10.09%), MgO, and other components.

Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) analysis of NPG revealed the presence of elongated, prismatic particles with adhered impurities. These particles were subjected to thermal treatment, resulting in their reduction (Figure 3) (Rashad, 2017; Godoy et al., 2019; Daza-Marquez et al., 2024). In contrast, the SEM images of CS revealed needle-like shapes with porous and inhomogeneous surfaces, particularly in agglomeration areas. The control of particle size resulted in an improvement in the homogeneity of NPG, whereas CS exhibited localized porosity (Figure 4) (Husillos Rodríguez et al., 2011).

The fine aggregate used was natural sand from Santo Tomas, Atlántico, with a fineness modulus of 1.98. The average particle size (D50) was 0.425 mm, while the D10, D30, and D60 were 0.268 mm, 0.335 mm, and 0.460 mm, respectively. The uniformity coefficient (Cu) was 1.72, and the



FIGURE 1: Open-pit NPG quarry.



FIGURE 2: WTP sludges.

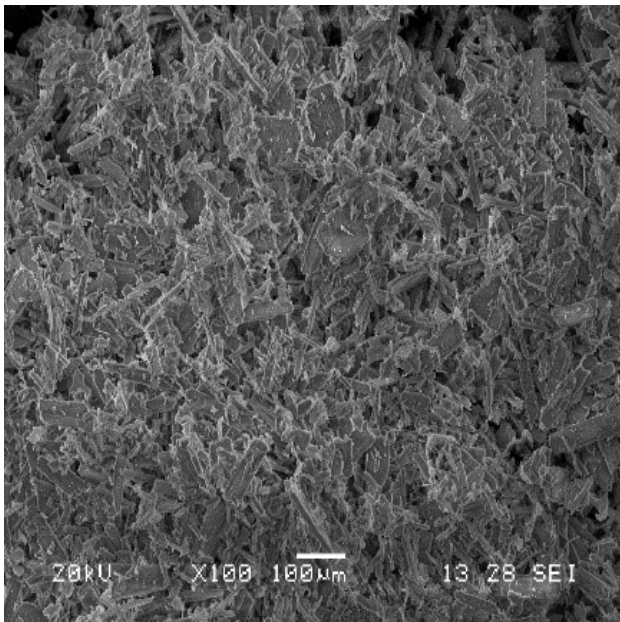


FIGURE 3: SEM images of NPG.

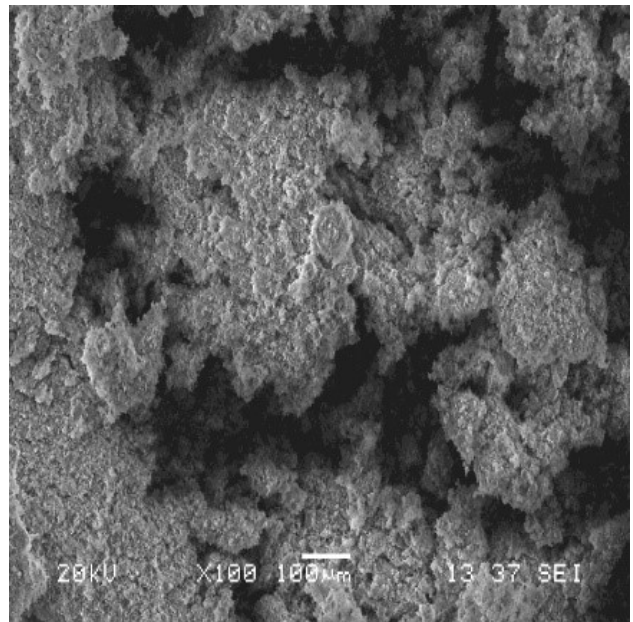


FIGURE 4: SEM images of CS.

gradation coefficient was 0.91. The specific gravity of the sand was 2.61, and its water absorption was 0.78%. These properties comply with the corresponding ASTM standards for sand characterization. The mix was prepared using tap water that met the ASTM C1602M standards (2022).

The quantities of each mortar mixture type are presented in Table 2. These typologies originate from a prior investigation conducted by the researchers (Daza-Marquez et al., 2024; Daza et al., 2023; Daza Márquez, 2022), wherein it was determined that they exhibited optimal mechani-

TABLE 1: Chemical characterization of binders.

Binder	Oxide in %						
	SiO ₂	Al ₂ O ₃	SO ₃	CaO	Fe ₂ O ₃	MgO	Others
NPG	2.48	0.69	52.74	39.8	0.07	0.18	0.83
CS	61.59	21.36	0.18	1.39	10.09	1.44	3.95

TABLE 2: Quantities of material categorized by type in kg/m³ with a w/b ratio of 0.485 to produce 1 m³ of mortar.

Mix	Sand	OPC	NPG	CS	Water
M0	1833.28	666.65	0.00	0.00	325.84
MN10	1833.28	599.98	66.66	0.00	325.84
MN5C5	1833.28	599.98	33.33	33.33	325.84
MC10	1833.28	599.98	0.00	66.66	325.84

cal performance after 90 days of curing according to the guidelines of ASTM C109 (2021a).

2.2 Experimental methods

Once the mixing process was completed, the workability of the fresh mortars was evaluated according to the standard procedure outlined in ASTM C1437 (2020b). This method, commonly known as the flow table test, measures the consistency and flow of the mortar mix (Figure 5). To evaluate the mechanical performance of the mortars, the compressive strength of mortar cubes with dimensions of 50 mm × 50 mm × 50 mm was tested at intervals of 28 and 90 days according to ASTM C109 (2021a). For each mortar type, three cubes were prepared and tested (Figure 6), with the average compressive strength reported.

2.3 Environmental feasibility and system boundaries

This environmental analysis aims to investigate the environmental impact of producing a mortar mixture using different industrial waste materials as a partial replacement for cement. Through a life cycle analysis, an estimation of CO₂ emissions generated from each of the experimentally proposed typologies for producing 1 m³ of mortar was calculated (functional unit).

In this study, two scenarios were considered. In the

first scenario, waste materials (NPG and CS) are commercialized within the construction sector, and their treatment results in an environmental burden due to emissions generated during the drying and calcination processes. In the second scenario, a greater environmental benefit is assumed, where the waste materials are used in a way that results in near-zero emissions due to the lower energy demand of their treatments compared to cement clinker production.

2.3.1 CO₂ evaluation and boundaries

The following parameters were considered: the quantity of material to be treated, treatment method, CO₂ emissions, and performance based on the waste's availability. A cradle-to-gate approach is used to construct the examined system (ISO 14040:2006 (2020)). The system boundaries, illustrated in Figure 7, encompass the raw materials and all subsequent processes, culminating in the mixed mortar at the gate.

The CO₂ emissions arising from each material employed in mortar production were determined using the method reported by Yang et al. (2013), using equation Eq. (1). Where C_e is the total carbon emission of the element or material, CO_{2-M} is the carbon emissions in the material phase (including the treatment), CO_{2-P} represents the emissions of the production phase. Emissions associated with material transportation were not considered because of their high variability.

$$C_e = CO_{2-M} + CO_{2-P} \quad (1)$$

CO₂ emissions linked to materials (CO_{2-M}) were calculated using Eq. (2), following reference values of the existing literature. W_i represents the volume unit per weight in kg/m³, while $CO_{2(i)-LCI}$ is the constant emission in kg per kg of material in $CO_{2-kg/kg}$.

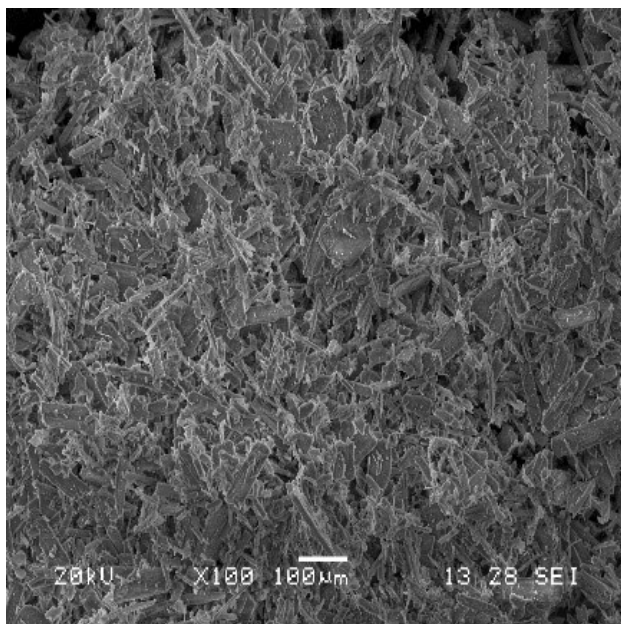


FIGURE 5: Measurement of the slump flow in the mortar.

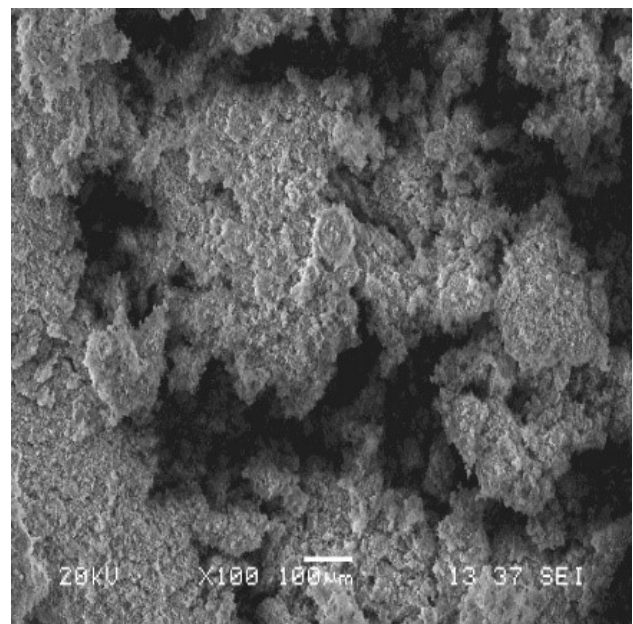


FIGURE 6: Compressive strength assessment setup.

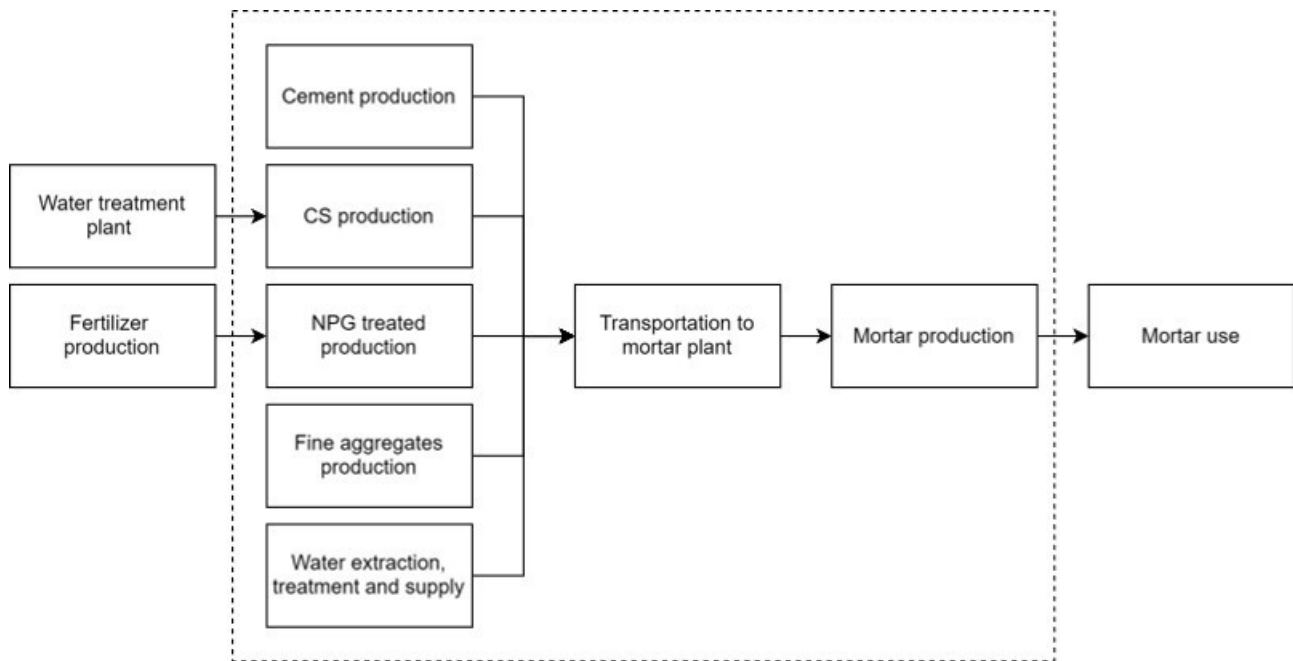


FIGURE 7: System boundaries considered in the environmental analysis.

$$CO_{2-M} = \sum_{i=1}^n (W_i \times CO_{2(i)-LCI}) \quad (2)$$

2-kg/kg.

2.3.2 Data collection

The data utilized to formulate the LCA of raw materials was obtained from peer-reviewed scientific literature. The composition of the mortars from previous studies was used as a reference to assess the environmental impact of mortars containing mining residues. Table 3 outlines the CO₂ emissions (in kg per kg) associated with 1 kg of cement, sand, water, NPG, and CS, along with the corresponding data sources.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Workability and compressive strength

Figure 8 summarizes the workability and compressive strength results for all the mixtures. The control mix (M0) showed the highest workability, with a flow percentage of 131.90%. In comparison, the mix with 10% NPG (MN10) had a 3.44% reduction in flowability, achieving a flow of 127.37%. This reduction likely occurs because of NPG ab-

sorbent properties, which reduce the free water available for cement hydration. Its porous nature increases the water demand, limiting the mobility of the mortar during mixing (Bhadauria & Thakare, 2006; Rashad, 2017).

The MN5C5 mixture, containing 5% NPG and 5% CS, experienced a more pronounced decrease in flowability, with a value of 115.48%, reflecting a 12.48% drop compared to M0. This significant reduction in workability likely results from the combined effects of both supplementary SCMs. Their porous nature causes them to absorb more water, limiting the free water available for cement particle dispersion and hydration. These findings align with previous studies where highly porous SCMs like NPG and calcined sludge reduced workability by absorbing excess water (Chen & Poon, 2017). On the other hand, the MC10 mixture, with 10% CS, also showed reduced workability, achieving a flow of 117.51%, representing a 10.90% decrease compared to the control sample. As in MN5C5, the porous structure of CS increases the water demand, negatively affecting the mortar's flowability (Krejcirikova et al., 2019).

The M0 achieved a compressive strength of 36.53 MPa. A 9.41% reduction in compressive strength, reaching a value of 33.09 MPa, was observed in the MN10 mix containing 10% NPG. This decrease in strength is attributed to the reduced reactivity of nitrophosphogypsum, delaying the formation of C-S-H during the hydration process (Alaghebandian et al., 2020). Furthermore, the crystalline structure of NPG is believed to limit the development of strong bonds within the cement matrix, negatively affecting the mechanical properties of the mortar. In contrast, the MN5C5 mix, with 5% NPG and 5% calcined sludge, achieved the highest compressive strength, with a value of 38.96 MPa, representing a 6.65% increase compared to the control sample. It is suggested that the combination of NPG and calcined sludge in these proportions enhanc-

TABLE 3: CO₂ emissions per material for mortars.

Material	CO ₂ -kg/kg	References
Cement	0.9310	(Yang et al., 2015)fly ash (FA
Sand	0.0026	(Yang et al., 2015)fly ash (FA
Water	1.96× 10 ⁻⁴	(Yang et al., 2015)fly ash (FA
NPG	0.1414*	(Nana et al., 2023; Lv et al., 2024)
SC600	0.0356*	(Huang et al., 2024; Lv et al., 2024)

* The corresponding value already includes solar drying, calcination, and crushing emissions.

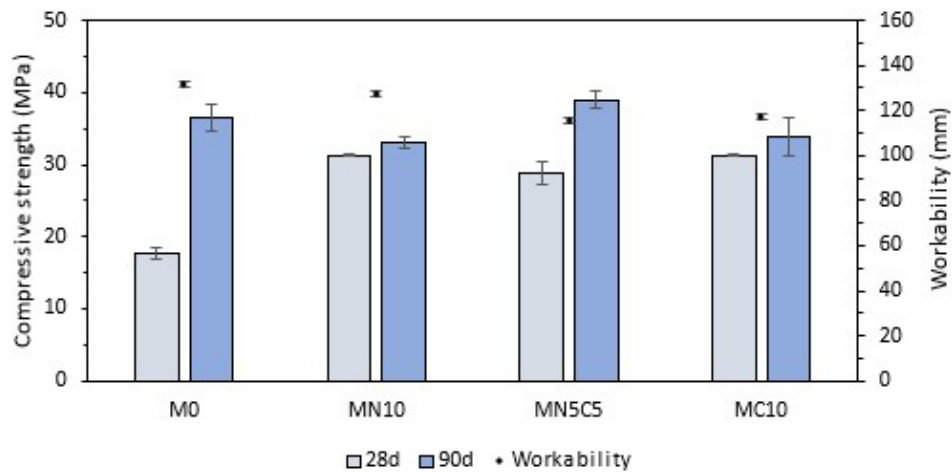


FIGURE 8: Workability and compressive strength in mortar mixtures.

es the long-term mechanical performance of the mortar. The high reactivity of calcined sludge likely accelerated the formation of additional C-S-H, contributing to the improved compressive strength observed at 90 days (Hewlett & Lis-ka, 2019; Lothenbach et al., 2011).

A compressive strength of 33.83 MPa was recorded for the MC10 mix, containing 10% CS, showing a reduction of 7.39% compared to M0. While calcined sludge is highly re- active, it is believed that the partial substitution of cement with 10% calcined sludge reduced the available portlandite (CH) for reaction, thus limiting the formation of C-S-H and negatively affecting the compressive strength of the mor- tar.

3.2 Environmental feasibility

It is essential to determine the quantity of each mate- rial required per cubic meter of mortar, measured in the same units. In total, 666.65 kg/m³ of OPC is necessary to produce 1 m³ of traditional mortar with a water-to-cement ratio of 0.485. The relationships between quantities and CO₂ emissions in kg/kg and kg/m³, based on the specified dosages by type (Table 2), are presented in Table 4.

For scenario 2, it is noteworthy that, because of the thermal treatment applied to mineral admixtures (at temperatures of 105°C and 600°C), which is lower than the clinkerization temperature of cement (approximate- ly 1350°C), and with only 24 hours and 2 hours required for the drying and calcination processes, respectively, the CO₂ emissions for NPG and CS approached zero (Jacoby, 2020). It is important to highlight that, since both waste

materials are currently being studied for their potential use in the construction sector and are not yet commercialized, the environmental impact (i.e., CO₂ emissions, renewable energy sources) is attributed to the primary process that generates these wastes (Almusaed et al., 2024).

Once the CO₂ emissions per type of material are known based on their dosage, the next step involves calculating the total emissions released to produce one cubic meter of mortar according to the mix typology. The results obtained from both scenarios are presented in Figure 9. Mix typol- ogies formulated with NPG and CS contribute to reducing at least 62.06 kg of CO₂ for each cubic meter of prepared mortar.

In Scenario 1, which incorporates CO₂ emissions from the processing of NPG and CS based on the values pre- sented in the literature, a notable reduction in emissions is observed as the cement content is diminished. The highest emissions were observed in the control mix, designated as M0, with 625.48 kg of CO₂ equivalent. The primary source of these emissions was identified as the cement. A reduc- tion to 572.84 kg CO₂ is achieved in mix MN10, where 10% of the cement is replaced by NPG, a reduction of 8.4%. The MN5C5 mix, which contains 5% NPG and 5% CS, further reduces emissions to 569.31 kg CO₂. The most significant reduction is observed in MC10, where replacing 10% of the cement with CS reduces emissions to 565.79 kg CO₂, a 9.5% reduction compared to the control. Overall, substi- tuting cement with NPG and CS, especially CS because of its lower emission factor, results in significant CO₂ reduc- tions. In Scenario 2, where CO₂ emissions from NPG and CS are considered negligible because of their processing methods, total emissions are further reduced compared to Scenario 1. The control mix (M0) remains unchanged at 625.48 kg of CO₂, as no alternative materials are intro- duced. However, for MN10, MN5C5, and MC10, the emis- sions decrease uniformly to 563.41 kg of CO₂, representing an additional reduction compared to Scenario 1. This con- sistent reduction across the modified mixes highlights the significant environmental benefit of incorporating NPG and CS, especially when their emissions are minimized (Singh et al., 2023).

TABLE 4: CO₂ emissions (kg/kg) of each material used in mortar mixes.

Mix	Sand	Cement	NPG ^(a)	CS ^(a)	Water	Total
M0	4.77	620.65	0.00	0.00	6.39×10 ⁻²	625.48
MN10	4.77	558.58	9.43	0.00	6.39×10 ⁻²	572.84
MN5C5	4.77	558.58	4.71	1.19	6.39×10 ⁻²	569.31
MC10	4.77	558.58	0.00	2.37	6.39×10 ⁻²	565.79

^(a) The CO₂ emissions generated by waste are close to zero in scenario 2.

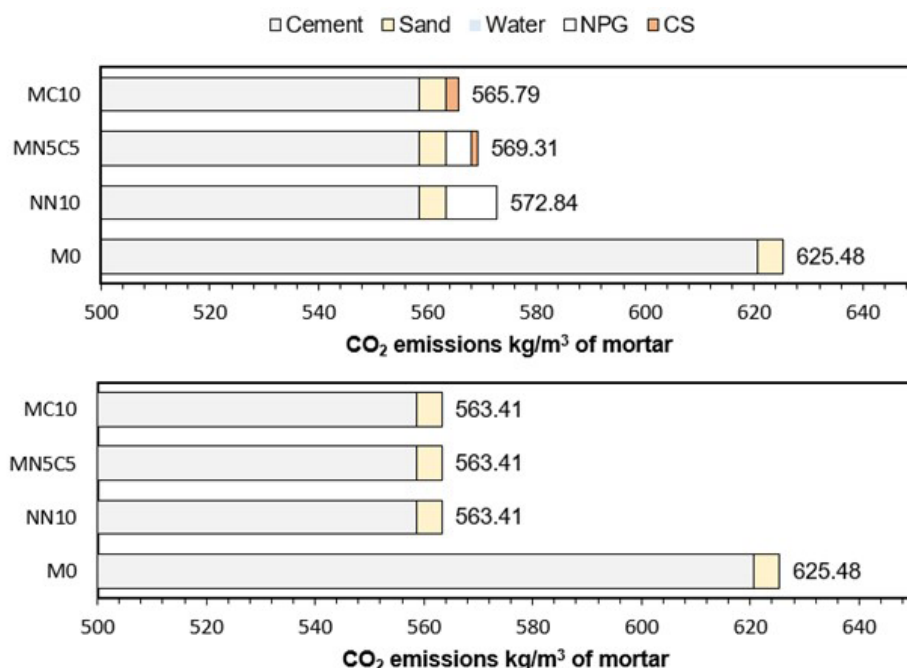


FIGURE 9: CO₂ Emissions based on mixed typology (a) scenario 1 (b) scenario 2.

By correlating the environmental benefits of incorporating each of the proposed mortar samples with the mechanical properties of masonry mortars, it could be established that the simultaneous and individual implementation of NPG and CS does not significantly affect the properties of traditional mortar. Furthermore, it represents an environmental advantage in terms of CO₂ emissions into the atmosphere.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigates the potential use of CS from water treatment plants and NPG as partial replacements for OPC in mortar mixtures, with a particular emphasis on enhancing environmental sustainability. The following conclusions were derived from the study:

All proposed mortar typologies exhibited comparable compressive strength values to the control sample at 90 days, with an average strength of 35.64 MPa across the different mixes. The compressive strength at early ages exhibited a range of results, with reductions of 7.39% and increases of 6.65% compared to the control sample. Although there are slight variations in mechanical performance, the environmental benefits of reduced CO₂ emissions and waste utilization make these differences worthwhile.

Although there were slight reductions in early strength, the mixture comprising 5% NPG and 5% CS exhibited a 6.65% improvement in compressive strength at 90 days, suggesting long-term performance comparable to traditional OPC mixtures. From an environmental perspective, Scenario 1 (which accounts for CO₂ emissions from NPG and CS processing) resulted in a notable reduction in carbon emissions compared to the control mixture. The environmental impact was further reduced in scenario 2 (where the CO₂ emissions of NPG and CS are considered negli-

ble). This was due to the lower energy demand of processing NPG and CS compared to the production of OPC. This demonstrates that, despite slight mechanical variations, these industrial byproducts maintain the mechanical integrity of the mortar while significantly lowering its carbon footprint. This offers a more sustainable solution in both processing scenarios.

The utilization of CS and NPG contributes to the circular economy by enhancing the value of industrial by-products, minimizing waste, and promoting sustainable construction practices without compromising the mechanical performance of cement mortars.

Overall, the findings highlight that CS and NPG are viable alternatives to OPC in mortar mixtures in the Caribbean region of Colombia, offering both environmental and technical advantages. Further research is required to optimize these materials for maximum sustainability benefits.

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