The Internet...
Why? and What for?

Thoughts on Information and Communication Technologies for Development in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Introduction

"Digital divide" is a term used to describe one aspect of the deeply rooted inequalities of modern societies. Eliminating and/or redressing these inequalities requires, among other things, a social vision of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that places them at the service of human development.

Based on research conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean with the support of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), this document explores some of the conditions required to realize this vision.

The social vision of ICTs for development outlined in this document is based on the following premises:

▲ Connectivity per se is important, but it is not sufficient to contribute to development.
▲ Equitable access, meaningful use, and social appropriation of ICT resources are all necessary to take advantage of available opportunities and achieve positive results.
▲ Certain enabling environments must exist for ICTs to contribute effectively to development.
▲ Risks and threats exist and should be avoided or minimized in the use of ICTs for development.

After presenting examples of how the Internet is used for development in Latin America and the Caribbean, this document points out important areas where more in-depth work is needed if a social vision is to be strengthened:

▲ transforming public policy;
▲ incorporating gender analysis;
▲ strengthening evaluation for learning.

The challenge is immense, and success will be possible only with collaboration among the different sectors of society. To take advantage of the potential of ICTs for development in the region, there is an urgent need to integrate a social vision of ICTs for development, to bolster the creation of new knowledge, and to promote concerted action among governments, the private sector and civil society organizations.

ICTs are neither positive nor negative in themselves, but they are not neutral. Left alone, they end up reproducing and deepening existing inequalities in society.

The Internet...Why? and What for?
Schematic representation of the ideas in this document

The Internet... Why? and What for?
Starting points

This document is a response to an urgent need: to pause and reflect about the complex process underway to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as tools for development in Latin America and the Caribbean. Far from being the last word, this document seeks to offer a set of ideas that will be useful to people who are not specialists, but wish to be better informed so that they can make better decisions.

The term "digital divide" describes many of the political, economic, and social inequalities that exist in communities, countries, continents, and the world. Today, this divide threatens to widen existing gaps or divisions within society: it is therefore essential to rethink the potential of ICTs as tools for building more equitable and democratic societies.

There are no magic formulas
These ideas do not represent a magic formula. Instead, they seek to clarify and synthesize a vision based on the experiences of some 50 teams and projects in the Latin American region that have worked on these issues for several years, with IDRC support.

ICTs and the Internet
Different new technologies, practices, and means of communication converge on the Internet. This document regards the Internet as a hub where a wider set of ICTs for development can be explored and used.

Holistic view of development
This document rejects the view that equates development with economic growth. Instead, it adopts a holistic approach to development, characterized by the realization of human potential in its multiple facets, the achievement of economic prosperity with social equality, and the strengthening of democracy with transparency and social justice. This necessarily implies the elimination of inequalities in the distribution of power and resources in society.
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A social vision of the Internet

ICTs for development and, in particular, the Internet, are receiving increasing attention from governments, private industry, donors, and civil society organizations in both North and South.

It is clear that ICTs are neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for development. However, it is also evident that ICTs, primarily driven by commercial interests, are here to stay. It is therefore urgent that a social vision that puts the Internet at the service of development be strengthened.

The social vision proposed rests on four central elements:

- Going beyond connectivity;
- Promoting enabling environments;
- Minimizing threats and risks;
- Maximizing positive results.

In the social vision proposed, ICTs are not inherently necessary or beneficial. The challenge is, precisely, to be able to tell when, and under what conditions, the Internet can contribute to development.
Connectivity is not enough

Just a few years ago, only a few people thought that the Internet could contribute to social development. Now that the idea is more widely accepted, it is time to take it a step further. While it is no longer possible to think that access to ICTs alone will solve the problems of human development, the Latin American experience teaches us that ICTs can contribute to development on condition that they go beyond connectivity, to ensure equitable access, meaningful use, and social appropriation of ICT resources.

Equitable access

Strengthening public access to Internet resources continues to be a priority in the region. Equitable access means the ability to connect at a reasonable price and the ready availability of basic training in the use of the tools so that an increasing number of people can use these resources, regardless of their sex, class, religion, language, or race.

By itself, access to ICTs alone does not result in the generation of knowledge or the redress of social inequalities. This requires encouraging meaningful use and social appropriation.

Meaningful use

Meaningful use is defined as the ability to effectively use ICT resources and combine them with other appropriate forms of communication. Meaningful use also includes the possibility of people producing their own content and having access to other useful content in their own language. People make meaningful use of ICTs when they know how to combine Internet resources with community radio, face-to-face meetings, printed materials, and video, among others.

Beyond their functional uses, ICTs can contribute to development when there is social appropriation of Internet resources.
Social appropriation

Social appropriation occurs when Internet resources help transform daily life by contributing to the solution of concrete problems. Evidence of appropriation is not found in the use of ICTs, but rather in the changes that they have brought about in the real world. Only when Internet resources become useful tools for transforming everyday life do ICTs reach their full development potential.

The social appropriation of ICTs for development can be demonstrated in a number of ways, such as: by offering better medical information to patients; improving the quality of education through the use of innovative teaching resources; introducing varied, relevant programming into community radio broadcasting; increasing sales of local products in the marketplace; disseminating the results of local research; and coordinating action among diverse groups with common goals.

The challenge is to go beyond connectivity, which by itself is not enough, to include the dimensions of equitable access, meaningful use, and social appropriation of ICTs for development.

Defining beyond connectivity

**Equitable access:** Connectivity at a reasonable price, with basic training in the use of the tools.

**Meaningful use:** Effective use of ICT resources, both alone and in combination with other appropriate means of communication.

**Social appropriation:** Transforming reality by solving concrete problems with the help of ICTs.

Note: The concepts of equitable access, meaningful use, and social appropriation were developed in collaboration with Kemly Camacho and the Acceso team, and with the MISTICA virtual community.
Enabling environments

The introduction of ICTs is no guarantee of development. Their use must be understood within the context of social, economic, and political inequalities that the Internet alone cannot change. One of the lessons learned in Latin America and the Caribbean is that ICT's contribution to transforming social inequalities depends on the existence of enabling environments and favourable conditions.

In addition to infrastructure, political will, and other macro factors that facilitate change, four conditions are necessary for ICTs to contribute to development.

Integration into existing social practices

For ICTs to contribute to human development, they must be integrated into the existing practices of individuals, groups, or organizations. By starting with these practices, ICTs can become effective tools with practical applications in the real world. It is more beneficial to use ICTs to enhance existing practices than to promote new activities for the primary purpose of using ICTs.

In this light, the creation of telecentres that are disconnected from existing community organizations and initiatives is unlikely to contribute to development. By inserting ICTs into practices that already foster development, such as the work of community associations, public libraries, or schools, they are more likely to make real contributions to development.

Strategic view of communication

ICTs must be used as part of a coherent communication strategy, in which they are conceived as tools to accomplish clearly defined objectives.

Without a strategic view of communications and the role of ICTs, social organizations easily become "bogged down" in

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solving the technical problems of connectivity and trying to manage new and ever-changing technologies. In this case, ICTs become an end in themselves, and thus become an obstacle to achieving human development.

**Democracy and participation**

ICTs can contribute to making societies more pluralistic and democratic. However, their use, in and of itself, does not necessarily encourage citizen participation and democracy, especially when they are newly introduced. Achieving greater democratization is a precondition for the use of ICTs.

As in all development activities, ICT programs must include broad citizen participation from the outset, including the definition of problems and identification of possible solutions. Citizen participation, whether at the local, regional, or national level, improves the possibilities of appropriating, relevance, and the future sustainability of the activities being undertaken.

**Ethics and values**

Half a century of research and development work show that there is far more to human development than economic growth. Political, social, and cultural concerns—as well as the inclusion of values that touch people’s minds, hearts, and souls—are increasingly important.

The use and appropriation of ICTs for development should be inscribed in an ethic of solidarity, reciprocity, and enthusiasm, based on deep-seated values that seek to transform individuals and their relationships. This is one dimension that needs to be explored and strengthened in a creative fashion.
Not all outcomes are beneficial

Much has been said about the potential social benefits of using the Internet for human development, but much less has been said about its possible negative consequences. The Latin American experience shows that Internet use can have negative effects, although these are usually unintentional. It is also important to identify the potential threats posed by ICT use so that strategies can be designed to neutralize or minimize them.

The following four major risks and threats are highlighted:

**Increasing inequalities**

As with any communication technology, the Internet can reinforce existing social and economic inequalities and limit access to new opportunities to those who, because of their social class, race, language, sex, or age, already have access to them. In this way, inequalities in the distribution of power and resources can continue to increase in the real world, as they are mirrored in the virtual one.

By fostering access to the Internet with no concern for its use and appropriation, we may merely be opening up the markets to passive consumers of goods and services produced by others, at the expense of local providers or producers—without necessarily redressing social inequalities or contributing to development. Furthermore, those who encourage sectarianism, fundamentalism, xenophobia, and intolerance also use the Internet. This often results in practices that are contrary to human development.

**Homogenisation and imposition**

The content, language, class, and culture that dominate the Internet can have negative effects by generating a uniformity of ideas, preferences, and world visions. The illusion of increased democracy and plurality produced by the intertive
capacity of the Internet may be misleading if it, in fact, reinforces existing relationships of centralized control and domination in society.

**Saturation and paralysis**

Easy and direct access to information resources can easily lead to saturation: an unstoppable torrent of data with no purpose for anyone. More information does not necessarily mean greater knowledge. The ease with which people can become receivers and transmitters of information (through e-mail, discussion lists, web pages, etc.) carries with it the risk of trivializing the information.

Like the sun, which warms with the same rays that burn, the Internet can paralyse individuals and organizations by flooding them with the same resources and tools that make social action more dynamic. Instead of improving people's living conditions, ICTs can lead to overwork, stress, consumerism, and a deteriorating quality of life.

**Isolation and fragmentation**

The use of ICTs can create new barriers and isolate people from their environment if their virtual world becomes more important, more interesting, or receives more attention than the real world.

Furthermore, the growth and diversification of available information sources on the Internet can lead to over-specialization and compartmentalization: people and groups may reduce their spheres of interest to small "bubbles" of cybernetic exchanges, as a defence mechanism against information overdose.

Just as ICTs can contribute to development, they can also threaten the realization of human potential, the strengthening of democracy, and the achievement of equitable economic prosperity. Only citizens who are informed, organized, and capable of using and appropriating Internet resources can confront the threats posed by introducing ICTs into society.

We must anticipate that the use of ICTs can have adverse effects on development and look for ways of reducing these from the outset. Project monitoring and evaluation projects should go beyond documenting success and progress, and also identify negative results in the use and appropriation of the Internet for development.

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Promising results

The Latin American experience shows us that the results of using ICTs for development have not been as numerous or as positive as many enthusiasts initially believed. Nonetheless, when certain enabling conditions are in place and risks and threats are minimized, the meaningful use and social appropriation of ICTs can contribute -- albeit indirectly -- to human development.

There are three important types of positive results:

Participation in a larger world

The Internet makes it easier and quicker to access more sources of current information, as well as to exchange information and communicate quickly and at low-cost. It facilitates communication among geographically dispersed people and groups, and, with some limitations, between different cultures and languages. As a result, new "windows" are opened on the world, and many organizations and groups, including small or minority ones, can position themselves to participate in a virtual community of global interests.

Diversification of up-to-date information sources

Researchers and activists in the region are no longer as isolated and dependent on poorly funded local libraries. Now they can find out what their global colleagues are thinking and publishing at the moment, thereby becoming active participants in broader continental and global discussions and exchanges that generate new knowledge.

New forms of collaborative work

ICTs are used to help establish new alliances and to engage in decentralized, collaborative efforts. These uses of ICTs can create conditions that facilitate public advocacy and government accountability. They also foster complementary actions at the local, national, and global level. Instead of "thinking globally and acting locally," as the saying goes, it is increasingly necessary and possible to also think locally and act...
globally. The Internet provides opportunities for "glocal" reflection and action.

Decentralized collaboration
In Costa Rica, a strong citizen movement defends the social and public service interests of telecommunications, Indigenous groups, labour unions, environmentalists, students, and women have formed a decentralized network, expressing themselves by means of cellular phones, the Internet, flyers, the radio, and the press. This network allows each group to work autonomously, but in coordination with others. By joining forces and respecting the diversity of initiatives represented, the movement is able to have an impact on public policymaking.

Strengthening multiple voices
ICTs help empower people and organizations by strengthening their self-image and self-esteem. Before using ICT tools to tell the world about their views and priorities, or to describe their successes and failures, people and organizations are forced to clarify what they want to say. In this way, the Internet acts as a tool for building real alternatives to homogenization, by creating a favourable atmosphere for diversity, pluralism, and cultural and linguistic identity.

The Internet for empowerment
The use of the Internet as part of integral rehabilitation and educational programs for street children in Colombia and Ecuador has been a powerful incentive for the girls and boys to return to their studies and improve their reading and writing skills. In addition, the Internet has made them feel capable and active in a society that has systematically excluded and exploited them.

With the Internet, "We are an assembly when we are together and we are a network when we are in our homeland."

Indian Network of Oaxaca

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The Internet... Why? and What for?
A social vision with Latin American flair

This section describes some of the experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean that spurred this document. The initiatives described are drawn from a network of partners that includes Latin American researchers, activists, and academics that are carrying out research on ICTs and development in the region, with IDRC support.

In 2000, this network initiated a process of critical analysis and collective learning that helped identify the values and strategies that inspire the work in the region. This document is one of the results of that collaborative process.

The following pages contain:
- A map of partners in the region;
- An explanation of the values and strategies that inspire regional work;
- Some examples of ongoing initiatives.

The examples cited are ongoing regional initiatives that were designed to respond to specific conditions. Each initiative operates in the context of different enabling environments and threats, and offers different lessons on the use of ICTs for development in the region.
Partners in the region

Argentina
Centro de Estudios e Investigación sobre la Infancia
Fundación Evolución
Instituto de Investigación para la Justicia
Universidad de Buenos Aires
Universidad Nacional de Córdoba

Bolivia
Centro Internacional de Información y Documentación de los Pueblos Indígenas

Brasil
Ministério de Saúde
Rede Mulher
Rits
Universidade de São Paulo

Canada
Association for Progressive Communication
Canadian Advanced Technology Association
International Institute for Sustainable Development
Universalia Management Group
University of New Brunswick

Chile
GIS Internacional
Programa Interdisciplinario de Investigaciones en Centro de Estudios Sociales y Educación

Colombia
Asociación de Mujeres de La Cabaña
Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular
Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT)
Fundación Colombia Muycolor
Fundación Renacer
Instituto de Cultura y Bellas Artes
Universidad de los Andes

Costa Rica
Asociación Inscripciones
Fundación Acceso
Fundación Omar Dengo

Cuba
Centro de Estudios en Ingeniería de Sistemas

Ecuador
Agencia Latinoamericana de Información
Asociación Mundial de Radios Comunitarias
Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales
Fundación ChasquíNet
Intercom Nodo Equator
Universidad Tecnológica Equinoccio

Haití
Soyale Anmassyon Komunikasyon Sosyal

México
Red India de Oaxaca
Toñador
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana

Nicaragua
Fundación Desafíos
Puntos de Encuentro
Red de Desarrollo Sostenible

Panamá
Red Alto

Perú
Asociación Civil Transparencia
Comunidad Indígena Asháninka

República Dominicana
Fundación Resa y Desarrollo
Reseñas Alternativas

Uruguay
Programa de Desarrollo Regional
Red de América Latina

Venezuela
Centro de Animación Juvenil

Complete contact details at www.idrc.ca/pan/partners

The Internet...Why? and What for?
Common values and strategies

These are some of the ideas that emerged from the collective reflection of network members in the region about how to better use ICTs for development.

△ Values

Cultivate diversity and encourage inclusion
Respect gender, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences, in order to build societies in which there is room for everyone.

Leading by example
Strengthen a social vision of development and ICTs that involves civil society in the formulation of appropriate policies.

△ Work styles

Cultivate collaborative work
Take better advantage of available resources, based on relationships of trust and solidarity.

Strengthen local capabilities
Train critical users, not just passive consumers of information and resources.

Revise and update the collective vision
Keep the vision up-to-date, within the ever-changing context of values, policies, and technologies.

△ Strategies

Work at different levels
From local to national and international, and from fieldwork to theoretical research.

Maintain effective networks
Make intelligent use of ICTs to facilitate the exchange of information, lessons, and experiences.

Strengthen alliances
Between governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations to work together for human development.

Influence the formulation of policies
That reinforce a social vision of ICTs that goes beyond connectivity, strengthening the use, and appropriation of available resources.
Social vision in action

Many practical initiatives and research projects have been launched in Latin America and the Caribbean to make the Internet serve human development. This section describes some of the initiatives and projects supported by IDRC in the region, in which the following themes are of particular importance:

- Strengthening collaborative work;
- Improving community access to the Internet;
- Promoting social movements;
- Taking advantage of various media;
- Learning from evaluation.

Each example includes links where more information can be found. The complete set of activities underway is documented at www.idrc.ca/pam
Strengthening collaborative work

Building and strengthening collaborative networks in the region is both a mechanism and a research subject. What makes a virtual community? How can the Internet be used to strengthen it?

MISTICA - OLISTICA
The MISTICA (Methodology and Social Impact of ICTs in Latin America and the Caribbean) virtual community is the result of collaborative efforts that bring together more than 200 researchers and activists to experiment with on-line work methodologies and explore the social impacts of the Internet in the region. By using a variety of ICT tools and methods the community has formed a diverse group that is interested in and dedicated to the idea of using ICTs for development. These people and tools are shaping a vibrant virtual community seeking to understand the social impacts of the Internet from a Latin American perspective.

Building on this experience, OLISTICA (Latin American Observatory of ICTs in Action) is collectively engaged in creating an instrument -- nicknamed the isticometer -- for assessing the social impact of the Internet in the region. It combines qualitative and quantitative indicators to facilitate analysis and the production of reports to shape decision-making and influence the formulation of ICT policies for human development.

Somos@Telecentros
The Latin American telecentre network, Somos@Telecentros, supports efforts to strengthen the development of community Internet access centres in the region. The network promotes education and exchange programs, produces tools for telecentre operation on open-source Linux platforms, and designs appropriate methodologies for monitoring and evaluation.

Links:
www.funredes.org/mistica
www.funredes.org/olistica
www.tele-centros.org

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The Latin American network, Somos@Telecentros is a virtual community of telecentres that seeks to:

- Strengthen the operation and performance of the telecentres.
- Facilitate the exchange of experiences and the adaptation of management tools relevant to the social mission of telecentres.
- Identify and quantify the results of the telecentres and their contribution to local development, with evaluation frameworks and tools that are appropriate, flexible, and useful.

In the past few years, strong efforts have been made to create community access centres to the Internet to aid human development in Latin America. These telecentres, as they are generically called, offer diverse Internet-related communication services (mostly e-mail, web, and chat) and the use of computers and related hardware (scanners, printers, CD-ROM readers and/or burners). Computer use is possible even when the connection to the Internet is not working (which is fairly common). In many cases these centres also offer typing, photocopying, fax, and telephone services. In addition, telecentres generally provide training and user support.

Some of these centres are located in community and cultural centres, schools, and public libraries. Others operate in the offices of non-governmental organizations or in local government offices. In general, commercial Internet access operations, such as cyber cafés, are not geared to social development and are therefore not considered telecentres.

Solving concrete problems through the telecentres

The various telecentre experiences in the region have made some ICT resources more accessible to the population, particularly in remote areas. Although it may seem paradoxical, one of the most common problems faced is that telecentres offer solutions that do not seem to respond to the local population’s most pressing needs. Local people usually find the phone or typing services offered at the telecentres to be of great value, but they are seldom familiar with the more advanced resources offered, and do not know how they can be used to solve their problems. The lack of local support is another serious limitation.

Links:
Latin American network, Somos@Telecentros:
www.tle-centros.org
Unidades Informativas Barriales, Colombia:
www.uib.colnodo.org.co
InforCauca, Colombia:
www.ciat.cgiar.org

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Strengthening multiple voices

One of the Internet's most significant contributions to human development is its ability to strengthen the voices of sectors excluded from the dominant centres of information and decision-making. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there are examples of the use and appropriation of the Internet as a tool for self-expression to the rest of the world. Examples range from a local association of peasant women in Colombia, to an international coalition that develops communication and citizenship strategies for a global forum.

The Web Community of Social Movements

Among other initiatives, the Web Community of Social Movements seeks to strengthen the ability of Latin American social movements to appropriate the Internet as a tool for self-affirmation and for solving problems. The Web Community is founded on these basic principles:

- The Internet offers excluded sectors of society the possibility of expressing themselves and to collectively influence development.
- The under-used capacity of these sectors for taking advantage of Internet resources must be strengthened.

The Internet for Indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples are part of the traditionally excluded groups that today are looking to use ICTs. The Asháninka community in the Peruvian jungle and the Indigenous groups of Oaxaca in Mexico, among others, are using the Internet to strengthen their identity and increase their participation in global society.

Links:
Web Community of Social Movements
www movimiento.org
Asháninka Indigenous Community
wwwidrc.ca/pan/pr04240_1-c.htm
Indian Network of Oaxaca (RIO, in Spanish)
www.rio.org.mx

The Internet... Why? and What for?
The mediating role of CSOs is of vital importance. Although organizations use the Internet, most of the populations they work with do not. How can the bridge between the two be strengthened?

### What about civil society?

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are important players in many development activities, but could contribute more if they were strengthened and worked more effectively. Could ICTs help CSOs improve their performance?

### The case of Central America

One research project in Central America that combines qualitative and quantitative analyses has found that, despite a promising start, there is still much to do after five years of Internet in the region (see appendix for more details).

- E-mail is the tool most commonly used by CSOs (representing 90% of their Internet use). However, it is not used much to participate in discussion lists or virtual communities on subjects related to the organizations’ work.
- Many organizations still don’t feel that the Internet changes the products and services they offer.
- Most organizations are worried about information saturation, the small demand for communication within the country, the difficulty of keeping web pages up to date, and the use of the Internet for purposes unrelated to work. In addition, they are faced with new challenges, such as how to deal with immediacy and the handling of direct requests.

The adoption of the Internet as a tool to help improve organizational performance requires creating new visions, new capabilities, new knowledge, and new working procedures. These must be constructed in a collective and permanent fashion by the organizations in the region.

**Link:**

[www.acceso.or.cr/impacto](http://www.acceso.or.cr/impacto)
The Internet ... and beyond

In Latin America and the Caribbean, decades of experience with communication for development and alternative communication practices are now complemented and strengthened by the use of ICTs. One of the most powerful features of the Internet is the convergence of multiple communication tools, from text and image processing to remote handling of audio and video files. Internet resources can be combined with other means to become part of the toolbox available for development activities.

One of the most powerful examples of integration is the link between the Internet and community radio. These radio stations operate as local broadcasting centres for content that is distributed over the internet. They make content accessible to thousands of people through an inexpensive and versatile medium that is compatible with the fundamentally oral tradition of the region. At the same time, the Internet spreads local information and facilitates the exchange of information and programs between the different community radio stations, becoming a basic tool for collaborative work.

SIPAZ
System of Communication for Peace
In the midst of the violent conflict that ravages Colombia, there are numerous citizen initiatives that seek to build peace. These are supported by SIPAZ, which uses the Internet to exchange experiences and information between several sites in the country. SIPAZ fosters citizen education and community organization in conflict zones, and trains local correspondents in news gathering and reporting.

Planet Radio
The International Community Radio Association, AMARC, provides an online centre for information and exchange among Latin American community radio broadcasters. They can share questions and experiences, radio scripts, and audio files in digital formats. AMARC accompanies this initiative with a motivational and educational program of activities, whose lessons are being adapted to other areas of the world.
The Internet... Why? and What for?
Moving ahead

This section talks about three key areas that need to be explored in more depth to strengthen ICTs’ contribution to development in Latin America and the Caribbean:

- Influencing the formulation of public policy;
- Incorporating gender analysis;
- Evaluating and effectively disseminating results.

Recognizing the strengths and capabilities of initiatives carried out in the region, these themes have just begun to be explored. Instead of results, therefore, we here offer some leads that could help advance more in-depth analyses.

Finally, three major challenges will determine future work: integrating a social vision into the dominant trends in ICTs; stimulating the generation of new knowledge and capacities that take advantage of the potential of ICTs for development; and strengthening alliances among civil society, private industry, and government.

Beyond connectivity

Latin American flair

Policies

Moving ahead

Gender

Evaluation

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Transforming public policy

ICTs are increasingly affecting economic, political, and social life in the region. Latin American governments are trying to modernize their policies to meet new demands, from regulating telecommunications and Internet-related services to modernizing the State and the administration of social programs, including health and education. The challenge is to take advantage of an unprecedented window of opportunity for the formulation of integrated, inclusive policies that contribute to making ICTs effective tools for human development.

Civil society is absent in the formulation of policies

Public policies are courses of action to confront the problems that affect people in their personal lives, communities, countries, and in the world. Today, the state and the private sector are the most active participants in formulating policies that affect the social use of ICTs. But, without the participation of organized civil society, policy formulation is incomplete since not all initiatives that contribute to human development are economically profitable (as the private sector would like) or politically attractive (as the governments would wish).

Public policies require collaboration between sectors

The formulation of inclusive policies requires the participation of the state, the private sector, and civil society. Strengthening this relationship triangle is key to formulating successful public policies that promote ICTs for development at the local, national, regional, and global levels. Under these conditions:

- Civil society organizations have the opportunity to influence the formulation of policies that include their vision and experiences in identifying problems and possible solutions.
The private sector has the opportunity to contribute technically and economically feasible solutions, based on its business experience and social responsibility.

Governments have the opportunity to promote inclusive public policies that respond to the needs of society and the possibilities that ICTs offer in helping to solve them.

Focus for collaboration

Collaborative work in formulating public policies on ICTs calls for work in three major areas:

**Promoting a social vision of the Internet**
By encouraging a social vision of the Internet that goes beyond connectivity, public policies can promote the use of ICTs for human development.

**Creating favourable environments**
Public policies can create favourable political, economic, and social conditions to realize human potential and promote economic prosperity and democracy, under conditions of equality that foster the use of ICTs for development.

**Carrying out concrete actions**
By acting together, public, private, and civil society initiatives can increase their reach for accessing, using, and appropriating the Internet. Some examples include strengthening telecentres and other public services, improving the transparency of government actions, and offering secure electronic commerce transactions for promoting local goods and services.

The formulation of policies for the social use of ICTs requires the participation of the state, private industry, and the civil society. Only when these three sectors participate will policies be reached that respond to the interests of the society as a whole.

*Internet...¿para qué?*
Integrating
gender analysis

In Latin America and the Caribbean, ICTs for development projects are starting to include a gender perspective. While gender analysis is still in its early stages, it is the subject of multiple explorations in the region.

The challenge here is to strengthen this trend, so that opportunities to access, use, and appropriate ICTs do not depend on sex and contribute to the elimination of inequalities between men and women in society.

ICTs will not do away with gender inequality

By themselves, ICTs will not eliminate inequalities. However, their meaningful use and social appropriation can help redress these inequalities in gender relationships.

A gender perspective transcends connectivity

The first sign of a concern for gender analysis in ICT and development projects has been to ask how many women and how many men use the different services. These initial questions on access to technology should also consider issues of control, the type and quality of use, and the uses that are made of the resources. A more extensive gender analysis would also take into account differences in age, language, race, and religion.

A gender perspective promotes concrete solutions

From a gender perspective we need to encourage:

- Actions that foster equal opportunities to use, access, and appropriate ICTs.
- Mechanisms that compensate for existing inequalities in society and contribute to transforming them.

Links: Women’s Networking Support Program of the APC (Association for Progressive Communication)
www.apcwomen.org
www.apc.org

The Internet...Why? and What for?
It is quite probable that women are generally at a disadvantage in terms of access to and overall use of the new technologies, and that they suffer a greater proportion of the potential negative effects. For this reason, the strategic interests of women must be taken into account during the design, implementation, and evaluation of any project or action.

Gender analysis is a key aspect in the evaluation of ICT programs and development. This includes the disaggregation by gender of the information collected, but also implicitly calls for conditions where the information about women's access to and use of the Internet and ICTs comes from women themselves, and not only from their husbands or employers.

Note: This section was written with help from Sylvia Cadena and Sheri Dankey, and the results of the March 2001 meeting of the Women's Network Support Programme of APC, held in Manila, Philippines.

Major challenges for a gender analysis of ICTs

- Strengthening women's networks with a gender perspective in the use of ICTs.
- Generating and using gender-based data on access, use and appropriation of ICTs.
- Using ICTs to improve the quality of life of women, including the creation of new job opportunities.
- Strengthening a gender perspective in public policies on ICTs.
- Mobilizing resources for research, action, and evaluation from a gender perspective.
The impact of the Internet should be judged on the basis of people’s ability to satisfy their needs as a consequence of the results obtained by using the information.

Michel Menou

The Internet...Why? and What for?
**Impacts occur on different levels**

There are four levels at which ICT use can have a positive or negative impact:

- On people, individually or collectively;
- On organizations, whether they are private, public, or civil;
- On countries;
- On the region or world, i.e. beyond national borders.

On each of these levels the needs, questions, and evaluation methods are different.

**The questions must be clear before we can evaluate**

Evaluating the impact of ICTs on development requires clarifying the questions to which answers are needed for analyzing specific situations. These questions are not necessarily the same everywhere or for everyone. With clearer questions we can identify the most appropriate variables and indicators and prepare or adapt the instruments to be used for collecting information, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

**Evaluation is good if the results are useful**

For the results of an evaluation to be used, they must be collected and presented appropriately to the different target audiences. Effective dissemination of the results must be part of any evaluation's initial design process, since it is no longer enough to produce reports that gather dust on shelves or in filing cabinets, or get lost in the maze of the Web. Different users may require different types of products that allow them to understand what has been learned and apply it to their work, whether improving social practices or making decisions at different levels.

Links:

www.bellanet.org/leap/evalrica

*The Internet...Why? and What for?*
The Internet... Why? and What for?
Future challenges

This document proposes a social vision of ICTs for development inspired by the Latin American experience, and provides leads on how to go into greater depth in areas still needing work. To conclude, three major challenges are posed for maximizing the potential of ICTs for development.

▲ Generate new knowledge and new capabilities needed to take advantage of the potential of ICTs for human development.

▲ Integrate a social vision of ICTs for development into the predominant commercial and government visions, which are now the driving forces of the Internet.

▲ Strengthen the alliances between state, civil society, and private industry, as a way to incorporate a social vision of the Internet into policies and concrete actions for development.

These challenges complete the portrait that we have drawn in this document, and invite to continue reflecting on the Internet: Why? and What for? from the perspective of human development.
Internet ... Why? and What for?

Thoughts on Information and Communication Technologies for Development in Latin America and the Caribbean

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This document is the result of collective discussion process involving several partners in Latin America and the Caribbean. It was written during Ricardo Gómez's residency at Fundación Acceso in Costa Rica between February and March 2001. The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable contributions of the Acceso team and the MISTICA virtual community in the formulation of some of these ideas. They are also grateful for the input and comments contributed to earlier drafts of this document by:

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Latin American flair

Beyond connectivity

Moving ahead
Central America: Towards a social use of the Internet

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Towards a social use of the Internet

Programs to promote mass Internet use in Central America

Placing mass connectivity programs at the service of human development

- Simultaneously promote access, use, and appropriation
- Integrate ICTs into existing social practices
- Implement specific actions to minimize or avoid risks and threats

Challenges to strengthen alliances: scenarios and implementation strategies

- Rapid increase of social inequalities
- Gradual increase in social inequalities
- Reproduction of social inequalities

Summary
Towards a social use of the Internet

Just a few years ago, only a few people believed that the Internet could contribute to human development. Today, governments, private companies, donors, and civil society organizations (CSOs), in both the North and the South, are increasingly exploring the uses of information and communications technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet, for development purposes. Central America has been no exception, and in the last two years various social initiatives have been launched in each country of the isthmus to promote mass Internet access.

However, the Latin American experience shows that this process must be accompanied by a qualitative leap: simple access to ICTs does not solve development problems. Worse still, it can reproduce or aggravate social inequalities. To ensure that ICTs contribute to development, we must make sure that any action:

- Generates the new knowledge and skills needed to take advantage of the potential of ICTs for human development, which should be understood as the realization of human potential in its many dimensions, including economic prosperity with equity and the strengthening of democracy with transparency and social justice.

- Integrates a social vision of ICTs for development into the prevailing usage trends of business and government, who are the main engines driving the Internet at the present time.

- Strengthens alliances between government, civil society, and the private sector as a key way of incorporating a social vision of the Internet into specific policies and actions for development.
This document emphasizes two of these challenges: integrating a social vision of the Internet, and strengthening alliances among the different players involved. In particular, it proposes strategies to help improve programs and policies for a social use of the Internet:

To move beyond connectivity, to promote the social use and appropriation of the Internet, and to improve the conditions and enabling environments, while simultaneously minimizing risks and threats so that the Internet can effectively contribute to development.

To support strong alliances between governments, the private sector, and CSOs. For this purpose it is imperative to identify scenarios and design implementation strategies based on key players in each sector. To ensure the success of any action, it is essential that these be defined jointly by the individuals and organizations involved.

**Programs to promote mass Internet use in Central America**

Governments and private actors in the region have launched programs aimed at increasing the numbers of people who have access to the Internet, particularly among populations with limited spending power. These initiatives, which are generally in the experimental or pilot phase, differ in terms of their location, functioning, financing, and complementary services. However, they share a common goal: to give priority to the task of providing connectivity to the Internet and, in some cases, helping to resolve basic problems in the use of Internet tools.

These programs differ from the community telecentres promoted by civil society. The latter generally emerge as part of community development projects whose scope extends beyond the Internet.
Moreover, they are generally not designed to be massive or to have a national impact. At the same time, these telecentres differ from commercial cyber cafés, which are geared to a public that is able to pay for this service, particularly middle-class sectors from urban areas.

The table on the following page describes each of the programs underway in the region: Digital Centres in Guatemala; Infocentres in El Salvador; Multi-purpose Centres in Honduras; Telecentres in Nicaragua; Costarricense.Com and Municipal Telecentres in Costa Rica; and Infoplasas in Panama.

To accomplish the objective of contributing to human development, current mass programs in Central America face several challenges. They involve placing mass connectivity programs at the service of human development and strengthening alliances within the context of three main regional scenarios and implementation strategies.
Placing mass connectivity programs at the service of human development

Simultaneously promote access, use, and appropriation

If the Internet is to serve development purposes, connectivity alone, although important, is not sufficient. The vast digital divide is not just a question of access, but of what people and social groups are capable of doing with that access. To take full advantage of opportunities and obtain positive results requires equitable access, meaningful use, and social appropriation of ICT resources. The challenge facing existing programs is to reorient their actions so that they simultaneously promote access, social use, and appropriation.

The existing programs focus on connectivity to the Internet. In some cases, there is also a clear concern for aspects related to use
and appropriation of the Internet that can be further strengthened. For example, the Infocentros program in El Salvador is experimenting with training in the uses of the Internet; the Infoplazas program in Panama seeks to incorporate the Internet into education; and in Guatemala’s Digital Centres, there is talk of the need to use Internet resources to resolve practical problems, such as marketing products. However, the main emphasis is still on connectivity, with the risk of reproducing or increasing existing social inequalities.

**Integrate ICTs into existing social practices**

For ICTs to contribute to development, their use must be integrated into the existing social practices of individuals, groups, or organizations. This is one of the pre-conditions that must be fostered. It is more advantageous to use ICTs as a means to enhance existing practices than to merely promote ICT use. Thus, the challenge facing the programs underway is to enhance existing practices. Unless this is done, the introduction of mass actions disconnected from local organizations and local activities will have little chance of contributing to development.

Some of the current programs promote actions and structures that are especially aimed at increasing Internet access. However, to a greater or lesser extent, these initiatives interact with previously established community practices. For example, in Costa Rica the idea is to encourage community associations to take on the task of creating telecentres as part of their own activities. In Panama, the Infocentres are administered with the participation of community organizations. Although incipient, the introduction of public initiatives into previously established social practices that transcend the Internet is a second aspect that could possibly be promoted and strengthened.
Implement specific actions to minimize or avoid risks and threats

There are risks and threats inherent in the present use of ICTs that must be avoided or minimized. Like any communications technology, the Internet can reinforce existing social and economic inequalities. Use and appropriation do not occur through the “trickledown” effect of access. Rather, it is necessary to implement actions that are specifically designed for that purpose. By promoting Internet access without concern for its use and appropriation, we are merely opening up the markets to passive consumers of goods and services produced by others, without necessarily transforming social inequalities or contributing to development.

While people who benefit from social programs have limited access to telecommunications services, particularly the Internet, those who have the necessary economic resources are privileged in more ways than one: they have access to ICT resources, including information; and they also often have the means, skills, and knowledge to enhance their capacity to use and appropriate this tool. If social programs focus only on connectivity and leave aside aspects of social use and appropriation, these disadvantages will be reproduced and/or augmented.

Challenges to strengthen alliances: scenarios and implementation strategies

Strengthening alliances between governments, civil society, and the private sector is essential to translating the social vision of the Internet into concrete policies and actions for development. However, to strengthen these alliances in pursuit of a social vision of the Internet, it is also necessary to consider the specific environments and conditions in each country.
Thus, when initiating mass programs to promote a non-commercial use of the Internet, the Central American nations had different starting points, which varied according to:

- the social conditions of their populations;
- their respective situations in terms of telecommunications; and, in particular,
- the presence of private Internet service providers.

The combination of the above characteristics allows us to identify three scenarios, which help us to explore and analyze the effects that the Internet is having and its capacity to perpetuate or transform the original social conditions.

The three scenarios that follow explore the effects that the introduction of the Internet has had in Central America. In all three, although the existing programs focus mainly on providing connectivity, they either incipiently incorporate or do not incorporate at all concerns about social use and appropriation. Rather than starting “from scratch,” it is possible to incorporate a social vision of the Internet that strengthens the actions that are already underway.

Within each of the regional scenarios, we have identified an implementation strategy, based on the public or private actor whose participation is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition to promote a social vision of the Internet for human development.

While the actions to promote connectivity are more or less similar, the actions to promote social use and appropriation require a particular approach, depending on the individuals, groups, and countries targeted. Therefore, within each scenario, and under each implementation strategy, it is necessary to define concrete actions to be taken with the individuals and
organizations involved in order to effectively contribute to development.

**Scenario of rapid increase of social inequalities**
*(examples: Guatemala and El Salvador)*

In this scenario, the introduction of ICTs deepens and increases existing social inequalities. A great majority of the population lives in poverty and private telecommunications services, particularly Internet services, reach a tiny part of the population. By continuing this trend, mass connectivity programs will be unable to breach the growing digital divide, which is an expression of profound social inequalities. These inequalities will continue to worsen with the introduction of ICTs, which mainly benefit the most privileged sectors.

This scenario has the following characteristics:

- **Conditions of extreme social inequality**: between 50% and 70% of the population lives in poverty due to lack of income; of these, between 20% and 30% live in extreme poverty.

- **The total opening up of the telecommunications sector**, with little governmental participation in measures to compensate for the effects of privatization, for example, in rural areas and other areas that are unprofitable for the private sector.

- **Explosive increase of private Internet services**, whose potential market here is estimated at no more than 30% of the population above the poverty line. Among other things, this growth is encouraged by the development of fixed telephone lines, which also improve the possibilities of Internet access. The costs of Internet services are intermediate, i.e., neither among the highest nor the lowest in the region.
Fewer than 1% of the population have access to the Internet (between 0.6 and 0.7%). However, a rapid expansion is anticipated among economically solvent groups due, precisely, to the accelerated development of telecommunications.

Fast increase of social inequalities
(Guatemala and El Salvador)

- High inequality.
- Full privatisation and fast development of telecommunications.
- Explosive increase of private Internet services; average Internet costs in the region.
- Population accessing the Internet is less than 1%

Implementation strategy
The public sector has had virtually no involvement in initiatives aimed at incorporating the Internet into development. Until now, efforts to promote non-commercial Internet use have come mainly from the private sector. To promote a social vision of the Internet, the possibilities of collaborative work between CSOs and private initiatives should be explored, guided by the principle of integrating a social vision of the Internet into present actions. This collaborative work could also include actions to influence public policies to strengthen government participation in tasks where its presence is essential, such as incorporating the use of ICTs into public education.
Scenario of gradual increase in social inequalities
(examples: Honduras and Nicaragua)

In this scenario, the introduction of the Internet deepens and increases major social inequalities. A great majority of the population lives in poverty and does not have access to telecommunications services, even less to the Internet. In this scenario, the introduction of the Internet increases social inequalities more slowly than in the first scenario, for the simple reason that the country as a whole is at an impasse in the development of its telecommunications, including the Internet. If this situation continues, mass connectivity programs will be unable to bridge the widening digital divide.

This scenario has the following characteristics:

- High levels of social inequality: 70% to 74% of the population lives in poverty due to lack of income: of these, between 25% and 30% live in extreme poverty.
- Slow development of telecommunications and failed attempts at partial privatization of the public telephone companies. There is a freeze on investment, in anticipation of changes in the telecommunications sector.
- Slow expansion of private Internet services aimed at no more than 50% of the population that is above the poverty line. Internet connection costs are the highest in the region. The providers look for different ways to lower rates.
- Less than 0.5% of the population has access to the Internet (between .03% and .04%), and a slow expansion is anticipated.
Slow increase of social inequalities
(Honduras and Nicaragua)

- High inequality.
- Failed attempts at privatization, slow development and impasse in telecommunications investment.
- Slow expansion of private Internet services; highest Internet costs in the region.
- Population accessing the Internet is less than 0.05%.

Implementation strategy
The public sector has only recently begun to incorporate ICTs into public policies. International organizations, such as the International Union of Telecommunications, have been interested in promoting the non-commercial use of the Internet through mass programs. These organizations, in turn, have sought to build bridges with local and national governments. To promote a social vision of the Internet, it would be desirable to build upon these initiatives, integrating the private sector and CSOs.

Scenario of reproduction of social inequalities
(examples: Costa Rica and Panama)

In this scenario, the introduction of the Internet reproduces, but does not necessarily increase existing social inequalities. The number of people living in poverty is relatively low, and telecommunications services are not limited only to the most privileged groups. In this scenario, mass Internet programs could prevent the introduction of ICTs from reproducing social inequalities, rather than significantly increasing them.
This scenario has the following characteristics:

- Low levels of social inequality (between 20% and 30% of the population lives in poverty, and of these between 4% and 9% live in extreme poverty).
- In this scenario we see different telecommunication situations: a gradual opening up of telecommunications in Panama and a public monopoly in Costa Rica.
- The rapid development of the Internet has reached most affluent sectors (between 70% and 80% of the population is above poverty). Internet costs are comparatively low.
- Includes countries in which 1.6% and 3.9% of the population in Panama and Costa Rica access the Internet.

**Reproduction of social inequalities**
(Costa Rica and Panamá)

- Low inequality.
- Gradual privatization in Panama, public monopoly in Costa Rica, with fast development in telecommunications.
- Fast development of Internet services; lowest Internet costs in the region.
- Population accessing the Internet is about 4% in Costa Rica and 2% in Panama.

**Implementation Strategy**
The public sector has a leading role in the implementation of programs to promote non-commercial uses of the Internet. The strategy should be based on public initiatives to ensure that these actions integrate a social vision of the Internet. Public initiatives have gradually incorporated private sector participation. It is desirable to strengthen links between the public and private sectors and civil society organizations. Their presence in the design, implementation, and monitoring of public-sector programs is still incipient.

Towards a social use of the Internet
Summary

The digital divide is an expression of the profound inequalities that exist in society: this requires actions to promote a social vision that places technology at the service of development.

The challenge of promoting a social vision of ICTs requires a reorientation of existing programs, shifting from an emphasis on connectivity to actions aimed at promoting the social use and appropriation of ICTs. This means that the human and economic resources invested should be directed toward actions that not only offer connectivity at reasonable prices, but also provide basic training in the use of the tools to:

△ increase people’s capacity to effectively use ICT resources and combine these with other appropriate forms of communication;
△ resolve people’s practical problems and improve their living conditions with the help of ICTs;
△ provide follow-up and evaluate actions, results, and lessons that demonstrate the advantages of moving beyond connectivity.

This is an immense task that can only be accomplished through collaboration between the different social sectors: it is therefore essential to continue and strengthen concerted actions involving governments, the private sector and the civil society organizations to promote social use of ICTs in Central America.

For this to happen, CSOs engaged in developing a social vision of the Internet must work to build bridges with those actors who have already shown initiative and the capacity to invest resources in actions to further the non-commercial use of the Internet. It is to these groups that we must propose an agenda for action that goes beyond connectivity.