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Inter-organization Consultation on Scientific and Technical Information Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean

San José, Costa Rica 21-25 April 1980

Position Paper

by

Information Sciences Division

International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

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Overall Policy

The major thrust of the IDRC Information Sciences program is to support the developing countries in establishing means of access to the information required for economic and social development purposes. Particular emphasis is given to the building of mechanisms for achieving access to the information produced within the developing countries themselves, and for exchanges among these countries. The IDRC also seeks to help build avenues by which the developing countries can secure relevant information from the more industrialized countries, particularly through programs of cooperation that will enable developing countries to escape from the condition of dependency.

General Strategy

IDRC is a "responsive" organization. It does not seek to impose its own solutions in developing regions. It offers its financial and other support to those endogenous initiatives that are most promising for achieving a rationalized use of developing-country resources and obviating unnecessary waste and duplication.

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It is for such reasons that IDRC has paid particular attention to regional efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean to develop regional cooperative information systems and to participate in global cooperative information systems.

Such systems, however, normally provide only inventories of available information. Hence, other components of the IDRC program stress the importance of information evaluation, selection and re-packaging. Others again address the need to have rational information policies and programs at the national level. And, finally, IDRC also seeks to enhance developing-country capacities by paying attention to the development of human resources and of appropriate tools for information handling in a developing-country environment.

Components of Overall Program

These may, therefore, be summarily listed as follows:

a) Support for development of, and participation in, regional and global cooperative information systems that respond to areas of development priority for Latin America

b) Establishment of specialized information analysis centres on narrow topics of particularly high priority

c) Assistance for the development of national information infrastructure in a very few selected countries

d) Training relevant to the needs of the programs that we are supporting and generally within the context of these programs

e) Improvement of appropriate tools, such as thesauri and computer software.

Projects

IDRC works like a foundation making grants for particular activities in particular institutions for particular periods of time. To supplement this, it can also assign its own professional resources, or the professional talents of consultants to fill short-term gaps and to overcome short-term technical problems.

The following list indicates our principal projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, but is not a total list (IDRC has also been marginally involved in programs to support developing-country use of remote-sensing data for cartography, the building of industrial extension services, and the promotion of research in mass communications).

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(a) Cooperative Information Systems

IDRC has supported:

- the development of AGRINTER as a regional component of AGRIS by awarding grants to IICA and CIDIA

- the development of DOCPAL by awarding grants to CELADE

- the development of a regional program to support the information needs of planning ministries, development banks, development practitioners and development researchers (applying as far as possible the methodologies of DEVSIS) by awarding grants to CEPAL (CLADES and ILPES) and to the sub-regional components managed by CDC, Port-of-Spain and CSUCA, San José

- the development of a cooperative information network in the field of education by awarding grants to CIDE, Santiago

- the development of a regional information program on human settlements (LATINAH) by awarding a grant to CENAC, Bogota

- the development of a regional network handling information on potable water supplies and sanitation - REPIDISCA - by awarding grants to CEPIS, Lima.

(b) Specialized Information Analysis Centres

This component of the IDRC program is more strongly represented in other developing regions, particularly Asia, than in Latin America. However, in Latin America, IDRC has supported:

- the Cassava Information Centre at CIAT (Cali, Colombia)

- the Rural Youth Documentation Centre at ITCA, San José.

(c) National Information Infrastructures

For several years IDRC has been supporting the efforts of the Government of Bolivia to establish SYFNID (Sistema y Fondo Nacional de Informacion para el Desarrollo), a mechanism to develop a national information policy and to rationalize Bolivian investments in sectoral information programs.

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The IDRC Board of Governors has approved a grant to the Government of Jamaica to help it fulfill the program of NACOLADS (National Council on Libraries, Archives and Documentation Services) which stresses the development of the National Library of Jamaica and the establishment of a national network for handling socio-economic information.

(d) Training

Latin American information scientists are able to compete with other professionals for the fellowship programs of IDRC. Last year two out of five Pearson Fellows were information scientists from this region.

But the main thrust of IDRC support for training comes in the form of sub-components of other projects. While we sometimes arrange for people to attend universities for higher degrees, most such training is "on the job" or in highly specific short-term courses. We are particularly impressed, for example, by the cost-benefit effectiveness of courses set up within the framework of cooperative information systems, such as those managed by AGRINTER.

(e) Tools for Information Handling

An IDRC staff member produced the specialized thesaurus that is used by the Cassava Information Centre. IDRC has arranged that a Latin American specialist participates in the production of the multilingual AGROVOC, which is planned for use as the indexing tool in AGRIS. An IDRC consultant has prepared a thesaurus for the Central American industrial information network, coordinated by ICAITI, Guatemala.

IDRC has supported ISIS installations on appropriate computers in Santiago, Chile, and Cartago, Costa Rica. We recently organized, at Cartago, a consultation among all Latin American ISIS users.

IDRC offers its own set of software (MINISIS) which is functionally compatible with ISIS and which operates on mini-computers. Although several installations of MINISIS have now been made in other parts of the world, including Africa, the first installation in Latin America has not yet taken place.

TRENDS FOR THE FUTURE

We recognize that there remain several sectors of high development priority which are not yet served by appropriate mission-oriented cooperative information systems. Perhaps the most obvious lack is in the field of health. IDRC stands ready to respond to regional initiatives in these other areas.

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For the consolidation of existing cooperative information systems, IDRC recognizes that future investments are most needed at the national level to ensure that countries can derive maximum benefit from the programs that have been established. Recently we have awarded grants to five national participants in AGRINTER. We look forward to being able to make small grants to national participants in DOCPAL and INFOPLAN.

But, Latin America is a vast region and, within it, there are some natural sub-regional groupings with institutions that reflect the common interests within such sub-groupings. Already we have, as previously indicated, supported the efforts of CSUCA and CDC to manage sub-regional programs within INFOPLAN. We are studying the possibility of supporting a sub-regional program for the English-speaking Caribbean within the framework of AGRINTER.

Finally, IDRC does not ignore the importance of carrying information to the ultimate user who may have no formal scientific or technological training. We are exploring with ICAITI, Guatemala, the possibility of establishing a cooperative program to reinforce industrial extension services in Central American countries.

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