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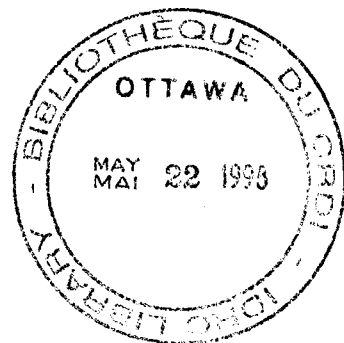
Report on the

Fifth Session of the Intergovernmental Committee of Unesco's
Intergovernmental Informatics Programme (IIP)

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by

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1.   I attended the meetings of the Intergovernmental Committee of IIP as the delegate for Canada; Canada is not (nor has been) a member of the 33-country Intergovernmental Committee, and hence has observer status at such meetings. I was quite familiar with IIP, having followed its development since its creation (in part, out of the demise of the former Intergovernmental Informatics Bureau -- IBI -- in Rome), and my program at IDRC has had contact with IIP over the last several years, in particular with respect to computer-based networking in Africa (the IIP RINAF program). However, it was my first opportunity to see the workings of the Intergovernmental Committee in action; to date, contacts have been through the Secretariat.

2.   I participated actively in the meeting of the West European Region on 6 December. This included Germany, Spain, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal as members and Australia, Austria, Canada, Cyprus, Greece, and IFIP as observers. This meeting was quite free and informal, and many of the points which were raised here -- and quite openly and explicitly at that -- were then presented at the more formal Committee meeting over the next three days. Essentially, many of delegates from the West European group were on the same wavelength (with Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada perhaps most outspoken) on the need for IIP to:

(a)   reinforce the connections and synergy among the three Communications Information and Informatics (CII) sector programs: IIP, PGI, and IPDC;

(b)   emphasize projects which are catalytic and pilot in character, with results which could (and should!) be transferred to other countries or regions;

(c)   reinforce the regional character of IIP projects, e.g. through networking activities;

(d)   provide strong technical inputs into projects;

(e)   evaluate the results of IIP projects and programs, determine the "lessons learned" (both positive and negative), examine carefully sustainability issues (i.e. Are IIP pilot projects able to get later funding for implementation? Do projects which get the IIP label but no initial funding then succeed in attracting other funding?);

(f)   widely and on an on-going basis disseminate information on the operational status of IIP projects and especially networks (e.g. Which nodes of RINAF are currently operational and to whom can one send an email message now?) and on the results of the evaluations and studies mentioned in (e) above;

(g)   effectively use informatics to provide access to and disseminate the results of the work of IIP and its projects;

(h)   demonstrate the value of the IIP program through (e)-(g) in order to be able to attract additional and more secure greater resources for its programs.

The Region selected Portugal to represent it as Vice-President on the Bureau (replacing Spain), and endorsed Mr. Biorci (Italy), current President of the Bureau, as its choice for President. Further information on the composition of the new Bureau is provided below.

3.   The meeting of the Committee was opened on 7 December by Unesco Director-General Mayor, who emphasised the importance of the work being done by IIP (and its sister programs in the information and communications sector, PGI and IPDC) during a period when knowledge is crucial in the global village. The presence of the DG was seen as significant by the IIP Bureau President, Mr. Biorci.

4.   There were two candidates for the Presidency of the Bureau, Mr. Biorci (Italy) and M. Diouf (Senegal). In order to seek consensus rather than a vote, things were worked out during a coffee break, with the result that the principles of continuity and rotation were each reaffirmed: Mr. Biorci (Italy) would continue as President, but there would be changes in the future [I would imagine likely towards a developing country, probably from Africa, next time]; M. Diouf (Senegal) withdrew his candidacy, but M. Diouf would serve as Vice-President for Africa, and an African would also be rapporteur (Tanzania).

5.   The other regional Vice-Presidents were: Cuba (Latin America), Syria (Arab states), China (Asian and the Pacific), Russia (Eastern Europe), and Portugal (Western Europe).

6.   The reports on the Bureau and the Secretariat were reviewed through the Main Working Document. Unfortunately, these consist mainly of statistical tables which say how much and which money went where, but do not talk about results. This came out in the discussion, and eventually M. Mentalecheta, IIP Secretary, talked about some activities which he felt had produced concrete results: centres for the production of software, centres for training in equipment maintenance, and RINAF (with Senegal, Morocco, and Algeria now connected to Europe, and at least 20 institutions equipped).

7. .   The issue of funding came up time and again. The current system of funding projects which get the IIP label depends on funding from Unesco and voluntary contributions from member states (including funds-in-trust). While some funding continues to come in (especially "tied"/in-trust funding which is designated to particular target regions or areas, e.g. by Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, etc.), the program can be said to be still struggling for financial resources, even with a subject which is as current as informatics. It was pointed out that some countries find bilateral assistance more effective, especially for national activities, and it was suggested that IIP should concentrate on areas where it may have particular strengths, e.g. regional and multilateral projects. Several countries announced their specific financial contributions during the discussion.

8.   The question of demonstrating value for money (points 2 (e)-(h) above) was reiterated, as a necessary step in securing funding. For example, IPDC currently spends 10% of its project funds on evaluation and it was felt that IIP should invest more in this area.

9.   Computer-based networking was a key topic, and the RINAF example was emphasized. Brazil gave a short explanation on the basics of networking (since it seemed clear that a fair number of delegates did not really understand this subject!). The delegate pointed out the three related levels: basic telecommunications infrastructure, services (e.g. email, Internet access), and applications (e.g. subject-specific discussion groups), and recommended that IIP concentrate on the

services level. RINAF is still at the start-up phase, having invested in equipment and training, and now must begin to deliver operational and sustainable services.

10.   I made a presentation when observer member states were invited to do so. It covered two main areas:

   (a)   the need for strong national focal points which could provide inputs to IIP by building upon experience from a variety of sectors (government, private, NGO, etc.) and also could establish linkages among these groups with the country and between similar groups in different countries; I referred specifically to Canada's efforts to establish an appropriate mechanism to do so (CIGID; see paragraph 12 below) and invited other countries to share their experience in this area;

   (b)   my perception that, in the era of a Knowledge Thirsty Society (the term used in the national Advisory Board on Science and Technology, NABST, here in Canada), the IIP Committee itself was also evidently "knowledge thirsty" (about the achievements of IIP in particular), and I emphasised again points 2 (e)-(h) above.

Leading in from the issue of making use of the networks to disseminate information about IIP and its projects (and other relevant information more generally), I suggested that Mr. Trumpy (Italy), the project leader on the Italian side of the RINAF project, be invited to talk of specific experience in this area; he then mentioned specific RINAF services (a mailing list, gopher, etc.).

11.   On the question of national focal points, M. Mentalecheta indicated that it was important that appropriate, technical organizations be selected, since they were expected to contribute to project design, monitoring, and follow-up whenever possible. He also felt that the national focal points in a region should meet and contribute to/participate in regional activities.

12.   I gave copies of the CIGID Concept Paper to M. Mentalecheta, to Mr. Biorci, and to various delegates. I got direct feedback from Mr. Biorci, who had read it overnight and who indicated that he "thought it was very well done". The importance of having an active, dynamic, multi-stakeholder national focal point came through in the discussions, although I had the distinct impression that Canada is one of the few countries which is actually trying to do this. Indeed, when I asked for advice from other countries which had longer- established focal points, I had the distinct impression that they were looking to us for a model! In any case, this indicates that our efforts at the national level in Canada are worthwhile.

13.   The Bureau reported on projects which had been selected for the IIP label at the session on 5 December 1994 (see attached list). There was no real discussion of the projects during the Committee meeting however.

14.   Mr. Yushkiavitshus, ADG for CII, gave a presentation, during which he highlighted:

   (a)   the ongoing and growing process of coordination among IIP, PGI, and IPDC and the need for more joint activities;

   (b)   the need to demonstrate results to donors;

   (c)   with the upcoming departure of M. Mentalecheta as Secretary of IIP, the importance of having a dynamic professional replacement.

15.   The issue of setting program priorities of IIP was discussed. I suggested that setting priorities had as much to do with what one decides not to do as with what one decides to do. One could examine what other agencies are doing, assess past investments made by IIP for value, and hence identify niches and potential partnerships. The current program areas are: training, networks, local production of software, informatics policies and strategies, research (especially R&D), and the use of informatics for modernizing public administration (the latter was added in 1992). Despite the paucity of resources, there was little desire evidenced to cut this list (perhaps in the hope that if the net were cast wide enough, funding could be found for more activities). The Bureau and Secretariat will review these program priorities with a view to making recommendations.

16.   A set of draft resolutions was tabled and discussed on the last morning. Unfortunately, I could not be present for all of the discussion since I had an appointment with the Canadian Ambassador and Permanent Delegate to Unesco, M. Jacques Demers. However, they were for the most part not especially exciting (as is often the case for such formal intergovernmental committee resolutions). They dealt with issues including: establishing synergy among IIP, PGI, and IPDC; examining the composition of the Bureau; strengthening regional infrastructures and networks; seeking additional funding; encouraging national focal points to play a more active role; and examining the possibility of a prize for young scientists in the field of informatics. The final version of the resolutions will be distributed by the IIP Secretariat with the meeting report.

17.   At my meeting with M. Demers, I briefed him on the work of IIP and Canada's interest in it (and in Unesco's information and communications sector more generally). I explained the rationale behind the selection of IDRC's Information Sciences and Systems Division as the Canadian focal point (given its long-standing program interests and contacts in the field), and told him what we were planning to do in Canada with CIGID and its multi-stakeholder process. I mentioned that CIGID could be good for business too, in the long term, citing the example of the delegate from Cyprus who told me that he would be interested in getting Canadian companies to bid on large informatics projects in public administration there, but that he did not have any good contacts (this is a role CIGID with which might assist, if it chooses to do so). I also indicated some of my concerns regarding IIP (see point 18 below), but I felt that given the importance of the subject (informatics, and Information and Communication Technologies more generally), the leading role Canada could play with its technical and industrial leads in this field, and the fact that IIP is still the only formal UN/multilateral program in informatics, it was worthwhile for Canada to participate and try to improve the program. On the question of funding for IIP, M. Demers made it clear that the official Canadian position was to not provide additional voluntary funding to Unesco programs, but that non-monetary, in-kind contributions (such as providing staff or consultancies) could be done. I indicated that I was not pushing for a Canadian monetary contribution to IIP; indeed I had concerns about the entire process of selecting and funding projects (the IIP label process) and the lack of emphasis on evaluation and results to date.

18.   One of my key concerns regarding IIP relates to the Secretariat itself. Given that such an intergovernmental process is by its nature formal, at times political, often non-technical (given that many of the representatives are not from informatics-related disciplines, there is a need for an especially dynamic, technically-sound, innovative, and modern Secretariat (which itself makes effective use of informatics in carrying out its functions). I (and other delegates, especial from Western Europe) felt that the Secretariat should conceptualize and propose programs, provide solid technical inputs and advice, and be more pro-active with respect to the Bureau and the Committee. Of course, final decisions rest with the member states, but a vibrant Secretariat could do much to put more spark in IIP. After all, informatics is a very "hot" field, and a program like IIP should be perceived as more leading-edge. This ultimately should lead to more investments, not only by member states and donors, but also by the private sector.

19. There are a number of issues for Canada to consider in the future:

(a) Should Canada seek election to the IIP Committee? I believe that it should, since it will better be able to influence the program there. Of course, as a member Canada would be expected to play a more active role (and the Secretariat will badger us for funding), but I believe if CIGID is well-established and operational, there are more ways to contribute than putting money into a pot. Financial contributions might eventually be possible if Canadian policy vis-a-vis Unesco changes in the future, but this would have to be discussed with CIDA, Foreign Affairs and International Trade, IDRC, and perhaps Industry Canada at an appropriate time. And this would depend very much, to my mind, on IIP heeding the advice in 2(g) above (i.e. demonstrating the value of its programs to donors).

(b) Should Canada make some concrete, non-monetary contribution to IIP in the near future? I believe that the areas which would be most relevant would be evaluation and perhaps the related documentation and communication of results. For example, Canada could offer to carry out (and fund) one or more program evaluation exercises, with a view to documenting the lessons learned, assessing impacts, identifying problems and gaps, and demonstrating value-for-money. These could be undertaken by Canadian consultants in collaboration with IIP and perhaps one or more Canadian institutions. This idea should be discussed within Canada in the near future, perhaps in the context of Canada's future role in IIP.