RISING TO THE INFORMATION CHALLENGE

by Neale MacMillan

In September 1992, shortly after the capture of Abimael Guzmán, leader of Peru's Shining Path guerrilla movement, an Ecuadoran politician contacted the Centre for Social Development (CDS) in Quito. Scheduled to appear on television, the politician urgently needed information on the Shining Path. For Eduardo Paredes, director of CDS, the request showed "that in this country, not even politicians have enough access to good information on a lot of topics, whether it is public health or the Shining Path." It was also telling proof for Paredes of the importance of the efforts of CDS to coordinate systematic information sharing among community organizations, many of which are geographically isolated.

The lack of information at the community level had already become clear to CDS when it organized a contest in 1990, called the history of my organization. "It was very interesting to see how this is a country of a fundamentally oral culture and not written," recalls Paredes. "A lot of information was being lost."

At the same time, CDS was receiving requests from several organizations for help in obtaining books in support of their educational programs. Setting up a centralized purchasing and distribution facility was suggested, and IDRC was approached for assistance in establishing a network of community bookstores. They would be located within organizations committed to non-formal education in communities, including labour unions, indigenous, urban and rural associations, and women's groups.

The goal of the network was to be financially autonomous, through selling books and services such as desktop publishing and printing. Since 1990, IDRC has supported CDS in organizing the network.Known as "Jatarishun" (a Quechua word for "Let's Rise Up"), the network quickly became a major distributor of publications throughout Ecuador among the NGOs and other groups that form the network. The original network -- now grown to some 42 bookstores -- met a demand that had previously been unsatisfied for inexpensive, accessible written materials on topics such as health, economic and political issues, agricultural and community development.

By 1992, the CDS and its colleagues in the Jatarishun network saw a clear need to go beyond co-publishing and book distribution. It was apparent to Paredes and the members of the CDS team that many organizations suffered from inadequate knowledge about themselves that hampered their ability to effectively manage the organizations and meet members' needs. "For example, they don't know how many members they have, how many affiliates, who are the directors of the different branches," says Paredes. However, network members were prepared to make changes. "There is an openness to modernization within our partner organizations, to become more efficient," says Paredes.

The second project supported by IDRC focused on using information technology to facilitate information management and computer-based communication within the network and with partners in the region. Three members of the Jatarishun network were chosen to serve as models for setting up databases and documentation centres, and to develop a methodology for establishing these services that could be used

throughout the network.

One participant in this experiment is a major trade union federation, the CEDOCUT. At CEDOCUT's head office in central Quito, national president Fausto Dután is dealing with the impact of government cutbacks on federation members, many of them in the public sector. He notes a 30% decline in union membership over the past four to five years, with 35,000 jobs lost in the public sector. "How can I survive this period of cuts? I will have to be involved with other organizations -- rural farmers, youth, women, and ecology organizations."

Dután sees a great need to provide training and education for unemployed workers. "It's only possible if we have the instruments needed. A solid database to answer questions like how many members do we have? is necessary for a struggle in this period."

RECORDING VITAL INFORMATION

On the other side of Quito are the offices of the National Federation of Peasant and Indigenous Organizations (FENOC-I), a second participant in the pilot project. Mesias Tatamuez, president of FENOC-I, recognizes the crucial importance of recording and systematizing information now stored in people's heads and in documents, particularly on questions of agrarian reform, one of the federation's main areas of activity.

"We receive information from unions, church groups, NGOs, the UN, Africa, and Russia," says Tatamuez. "We have to have a system to catalog this because the building is filling up with books -- 15 years of collecting, thousands of items in boxes, all catalogued on paper file cards. Otherwise we are out of touch with reality. We have to allow much more simple access to this kind of information."

South of Quito, in the city of Sangolqui, is the third network member in the pilot project -- the Telmo Hidalgo Cultural Institute for Popular Education (ICEP). Supported by the municipality, CDS, and several cultural organizations, its main function is as a library, especially for local elementary and secondary students. It also offers audiovisual resources, organizes cultural events, gives courses, prints educational materials, and sells books.

ICEP's director, José Elias Cárdenas, explains that the library is founded on the personal collection of the late Telmo Hidalgo, a noted union leader, politician, and educator.

One immediate task for ICEP is to computerize its services. "Here, they keep library statistics by hand in writing," says Paredes, noting the difficulty of analyzing data, learning about the clientele, and planning for the future using such a system. "The idea of a computer is that it will help people to manipulate this type of information in such a way that they can plan their growth," he says.

Once these three organizations have developed their own pilot databases, the goal is to connect them to each other via electronic mail. "Our plan is that in a few years, we can have our present network connected to a database that can be shared," says Paredes.

Paredes also foresees involving private individuals who possess valuable documentation on specific social issues in the network. "These people want to hang on to this stuff until they die rather than turn it over to some public place," says Paredes. CDS would help these people classify their private archives, and make references on their resources accessible to network members.

Paredes says CDS has no interest -- nor the resources -- to create a single, large documentation centre serving social movements. Rather, the vision is for organizations to establish their own specialized databases and documentation centres, and create a common research resource through the electronic network -- one that can also communicate beyond Ecuador when there is a need.

The long-term vision for Jatarishun also foresees it becoming a significant actor in determining the research and publishing agenda of NGOs and research institutions in Ecuador, so that they more closely reflect community needs.

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