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Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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URUGUAY

HOW SOCIAL ACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXERCISE OF ESCRS IN A DIGITAL CONTEXT

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Introduction

Over a 10-year period (2005-2015) Uruguay experienced growth in its gross domestic product and employment rates while poverty and extreme poverty decreased.[1] Access to and use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) spread significantly throughout the decade because of an improvement in consumer purchasing power, and, as a consequence of the economic growth, the cost of devices had declined. As a result of public policies put in place to combat the digital divide, connectivity also improved for the most excluded sectors of population.[2]

In 1967 Uruguay was among the first countries to sign the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and since then the country has guaranteed the exercise of these rights through the implementation of public policies. Old and new social organisations, including unions and youth movements, advocated strongly to promote the ESCR agenda and policies were created in order to mitigate social as well as digital inequalities.[3]

This report analyses the challenges, obstacles and positive outcomes resulting from the implementation of the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) policy – known as the Ceibal programme[4] – which was aimed at promoting access to and use of ICTs at school. We explore whether the implementation of OLPC as an ICT policy contributed to enabling ESCRs, and the role that civil society played in the roll-out of the programme.

Human development through the internet: A country strategy

Since 2005 Uruguay has implemented public policies aimed at reducing social, economic and cultural inequalities, constituting a shift in the country's development strategy. Special attention has been paid to the importance of reducing the digital divide – evidence of this is the creation and implementation of the Uruguay Digital Agenda in three stages between 2007 and 2015. New actors were involved, and equity and social inclusion, citizen engagement, state transformation, innovation and knowledge generation, and national and international integration became policy guidelines.[5]

The state-owned telecommunications company Antel laid fibre optic cables throughout the country among other initiatives to make internet access universal.[6]

These policies are part of the country's human and information development strategy which seeks to promote ESCRs in order to boost economic growth in the era of globalised economies. In this context, a strategy based on innovation is required. While public policies have been focused on the improvement of social conditions without addressing the issue of how economic growth will be sustainable, the policies have managed to successfully reduce the digital divide for socially excluded citizens.[7]

Access to ICTs and their contribution to ESCRs

The Ceibal programme was launched in 2007, providing a free laptop to every student attending public primary, secondary or technical schools and to their teachers. The roll-out of the programme

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1 datos.bancomundial.org/pais/uruguay?view=chart

2 www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx

3 Pittaluga, L., & Rivoir, A. (2012). One Laptop per Child and Bridging the Digital Divide: The Case of Plan CEIBAL in Uruguay. *Information Technologies & International Development, 8*(4). itidjournal.org/index.php/itid/article/view/961/402

4 www.ceibal.edu.uy

5 www.agesic.gub.uy/innovaportal/v/447/1/agesic/agenda_digital.html?menuderecho=11

6 For example, Antel's "Universal Hogares" (Household Universal Access) plan offers 1 GB of internet access free of charge every month to every customer with a fixed telephone line. https://tienda.antel.com.uy/plan/mdm:prdoff:id:1318

7 Rivoir, A., Escuder, S., & Vázquez, G. (2016). El modo de desarrollo uruguayo: inflexión histórica o estancamiento estructural. In: F. Calderón (Ed.), *Desarrollo, Innovación y Multiculturalismo en América Latina*.

was gradual, with various technical applications and tools as well as educational content developed along the way.[8]

Given that one of the objectives of the programme was to contribute to social inclusion, promoting the exercise of ESCRs was concurrent to its implementation. Digital rights were part of the conceptual framework of the programme. Evidence of this can be found in the programme's operating guidelines with regards to access as a right: "Students should be able to access the internet (through Ceibal's network) within 300 metres from their homes."[9]

Nowadays 59.7% of Uruguayan households have internet access, 27.4% through a device provided by Ceibal. In the poorest households, internet access made possible by the Ceibal programme accounts for 53%.[10] A total of 670,312 people are direct beneficiaries of the programme, and 99% of schools now have internet access. Ceibal also provides Wi-Fi to public spaces (such as public parks and recreational areas) and at least 3% of households have internet access due to their proximity to Ceibal's Wi-Fi.[11]

Ceibal has been strongly supported by mainstream public opinion from the start. Public investment in the programme has never been a matter of controversy, as all major political parties endorse its implementation. Part of the national budget is allocated to finance the programme, so despite questions regarding its self-sustainability, its continuity does not depend on external donors or international cooperation.

According to data from Ceibal's 2014 Annual Evaluation[12] – where respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the programme's implementation – 67% of respondents declared they agreed and rated it as a very positive policy, while 79% of Ceibal's beneficiaries stated the programme would produce social change.

While most teachers initially agreed to be part of the programme's implementation, one of Ceibal's greatest challenges has been some teachers' lack of acceptance of the programme or their resistance to using the laptops. This may have come as a result of multiple factors: it was implemented as a top-down policy and it was not created within the public schooling system.[13] Because the programme was implemented as a top-down policy, it was enforced and efficient; however, it failed to involve key stakeholders such as teachers.[14] Some analysts point out that the system faces problems beyond the challenges that the introduction of technology may involve, including the difficulties it has in innovating and transforming itself to meet new challenges.[15]

Civil society actors were directly involved in the implementation of the programme. Their main motivation was to promote social inclusion and consequently they contributed by distributing laptops in the early stages, and later organised activities to promote the use of the laptops and acceptance of the programme among students and teachers. There are three good examples of civil society contribution to the programme:

- In 2007 the Ceibal Support Network (*Red de Apoyo al Plan Ceibal*)[16] was created. Through the network, 1,200 registered volunteers throughout the country supported the implementation of the programme, focusing their efforts on schools serving poorer areas. They conducted multiple activities in public places in order to promote the use of the laptops. Although the Ministry for Social Development and the Ceibal programme are supportive of the network's activities, volunteers are simply provided with a rulebook defining a code of behaviour as volunteers.

- CeibalJAM[17] is a volunteer organisation created in 2008 in order to develop applications and content for the Ceibal programme. It has two aims: "to master and spread information technology through the Ceibal programme" and "to develop free software applications to boost the programme's educational outcomes". Most CeibalJAM volunteers are computer engineers or students taking a degree in computer science. They received the international Prix Ars Prize for three applications they developed for the programme, "Conozca America", "Soukoban" and "Pyfrogger".[18]

8   www.ceibal.org

9   Plan Ceibal Strategic Guidelines. www.ceibal.edu.uy/documents/informe%20plan%20estrategico%20ceibal.pdf

10 According to the National Statistics Institute's Household Survey.

11 Plan Ceibal 2014 Annual Evaluation. www.ceibal.edu.uy/Documents/Evaluacion-Anual-2014-final.pdf

12 Ibid.

13 Larrouque, D. (2012). *Plan Ceibal en Uruguay. Un exemple de bonne gouvernance*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

14 Pittaluga, L., & Rivoir, A. (2012). Op. cit.

15 Angeriz, E., Bañuls, G., & Da Silva, M. (2010). TIC, XO, y después: Nuevas relaciones con el conocimiento, nuevas construcciones de la subjetividad. Ponencia presentada en X Jornadas de Investigación de Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de la República.

16   www.rapceibal.info

17 ceibaljam.org

18 ceibaljam.org/?q=node/892

- The Flor de Ceibo programme, created by the Universidad de la República (the national public university), is a research programme focusing on community building. Students enrolled in different degree programmes volunteer to take part in a wide range of cultural and social actions (art, the use of digital resources, the creation of audiovisual content, issues of cultural identity, etc.). Actions are coordinated with Ceibal's management and financed by the Universidad de la República (it covers teachers' salaries and travel expenses). More than 5,000 students and 100 teachers have taken part in the programme. Students work in groups led by a teacher who creates a work plan to achieve specific goals collaborating with local organisations.[19]

The positive impact of the Ceibal programme is that it has strengthened ESCRs in Uruguay. It has helped to develop communities, and given marginalised groups access to technologies and the internet. The participation of civil society and academics in the programme has presented an alternative to the development of public policy which traditionally was the result of a state-centric approach.

One of the greatest challenges faced by those involved in the programme's implementation was to encourage the families of the students to also use the technology, in this way helping to enable their socioeconomic rights. One of their main goals has been to ensure the responsible and meaningful use of the laptops in households – particularly in low-income households. Among families whose only access to the internet is through the Ceibal programme, the laptops are primarily used for communication (71.8%), searching for information (85.7 %) and entertainment (82.8 %). Only 11.5 % of families use them for structured, educational purposes.[20]

Nevertheless, access to the internet and to technology enables them to access information about labour rights, social protection, culture and health and has the potential to improve their economic situation.

Conclusions

Based on our experiences we can conclude that the implementation of the programme designed to enable access to technologies for educational purposes has strengthened the exercise of ESCRs

by promoting digital inclusion as a crucial element of human development. The Ceibal programme was implemented in the context of economic growth and policy-driven human development, which facilitated the process of inclusion. However, the true scope of the programme's success can only be measured by analysing if it empowered its users, and through examining how it impacts on their economic and social opportunities over time.

The programme has managed to guarantee widespread access to the internet for Uruguayans. Ceibal consolidates digital skills and abilities which enable the ESCRs of individuals and communities. In the context of technologically mediated societies, this is a positive development for traditionally excluded and marginalised groups. However, the main challenge – when access is given – is to enable people to expand and create knowledge and to stimulate their use of internet access for educational purposes.

Action steps

The following recommendations and observations can be made when developing an ICT-for-schools programme such as Ceibal:

- When policy implementation requires multistakeholder participation – and stakeholder cooperation is crucial to success – efficiency cannot be the single guiding principle. Policy design should reconcile citizen engagement and technical expertise. This process might take time. The cooperation of teachers, who may at first be reluctant to engage, is critical when an educational policy has to be put into practice.

- A school-based programme, especially when students can take technology home, can be used to promote the use of the internet as a means to improve the economic opportunities of communities and their access to services and to culture, especially among those who are socially excluded.

- Civil society should contribute by training students and adults in the use of technology and the internet, enabling them to acquire digital skills and promoting their critical analysis of online information. This media literacy will contribute to the internet's potential to enable their ESCRs.

- Students should be trained to make good use of technology and innovative teaching strategies should be promoted. This strengthens the capacity of students to learn through ICTs and the capacity of schools to teach using ICTs.

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19 www.flordeceibo.edu.uy
20 Based on National Statistics Institute data.

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The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an "inventory of things" that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers' rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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