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URUGUAY

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Introduction

Since the early 20th century, Uruguay has been considered a developed country in the Latin American context. But this status has deteriorated over the last decades due to policies that have given priority to economic growth over a more comprehensive view of development. In this regard, the view that the market would solve the problem of access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) was prevalent.

ICT infrastructure and access are relatively good in Uruguay, thanks to a flat geography, and to the fact that half the population lives in the capital Montevideo. Uruguay has a state-owned company, the National Telecommunications Administration (ANTEL), which holds the monopoly on fixed-line telephony. As a public enterprise, ANTEL shows satisfactory performance as far as efficiency is concerned and has achieved high coverage for fixed digital telephony. The mobile sector has been liberalised and various companies coexist, offering mobile access to 80% of the population. This gives the country a good basis for connectivity.

However, the fact that the population outside of Montevideo is scattered all over the country has negatively affected access, as it increases infrastructure costs per user. A programme for connecting schools called CEIBAL (*Conectividad Educativa de Informática Básica para el Aprendizaje en Línea*), which is analysed in this report, is intended to broaden access to infrastructure with a wireless network running parallel to ANTEL's. While its focus is schools, this programme offers great promise for widespread social inclusion through ICTs.

ICT policies for development in Uruguay

Information and knowledge society (IKS) policies and initiatives in Latin America have been marred by a technocentric approach which focuses on improving access to infrastructure and technology. This is indispensable, but not enough: as we know, in order to contribute to development it is necessary to bear in mind what ICTs will be used for. Otherwise public funds that have been invested merely lead to the creation of new consumers (Finquelievich, 2003; Mística, 2003; Mansell, 2002; Rivoir, 2005).

Although there is an awareness of this in Uruguay, IKS policies have been fragmented. In 2000, there was the intention to create a committee focusing on the information society, and to implement a strategy. But this policy lacked continuity, and there are records of activities only until 2003, even though some programmes are still going on today. There are also community-driven initiatives, which, although they could be considered successful, are unlikely to become as wide-ranging and far-reaching as national policies need to be. Since 2005, however, with the arrival of the first left-leaning government in the history of the country, IKS policies have gained momentum and new strategies and organisations have been created, including CEIBAL (AGESIC, 2007).

CEIBAL

CEIBAL is the first programme in the world to grant a laptop to each child and teacher at state schools in a whole country. It is the result of the One Laptop per Child (OLPC)[1] initiative, the brainchild of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The XO, as the laptop is called, is specially designed to be used by children, and has been adapted to suit CEIBAL's needs. It allows schoolchildren to be connected to each other and to the internet, and the laptops are loaded with educational software.

The implementation of CEIBAL started in the middle of 2007, with a pilot project in a school in Cardal, a small village of 1,500 inhabitants. Currently, 50% of the country has been covered by the programme, which involves a huge deployment of resources – financial, institutional and human. It is scheduled to be implemented in Montevideo by the end of 2009.

The programme was an initiative of the president of Uruguay, Tabaré Vázquez, who announced it during his inauguration as a means of promoting social inclusion. But the government officials in charge have had to develop the strategy on the fly, while at the same time handling operational and administrative challenges, dealing with team-building, and coordinating existing activities, amongst other things.

Some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this experience:

- It is important that the authorities had a vision of ICTs as a mechanism for social inclusion. It overcomes the linear and simplistic view prevailing among some segments of the population and its leaders, which holds that first we should satisfy basic needs and then provide access to technology. But children, and poor people in general, also have the right to access ICTs. Waiting for other development problems to be solved might mean that the time for "technology rights" never arrives.
- The government and, in particular, the president, run a risk when announcing these sorts of programmes when they are not an electoral promise, or part of the public

1 laptop.org/index.es.html

agenda or a social demand. Its characterisation as an initiative for social inclusion was important, as it is crucial for these actions to reduce inequalities. It aims to not only bridge the technological divide specifically, but also other existing divides, such as social, economic and cultural ones.

- The laptop was given to both schoolchildren and their teachers. This is an important element not provided for in the OLPC programme. It shows respect for the teachers, who can have access to a tool which not all of them are familiar with. Teachers are crucial in that they need to stimulate interest amongst the children. The importance of this role has been shown in a recent study on the experience in Cardal (ANTEL, 2007).
- The training of teachers has been an important consideration from the start and was put into action together with the distribution of laptops. However, it was difficult to train all teachers before the distribution of the laptops. This has generated much anxiety, insecurity and also discontent among teachers, with varying degrees of acceptance and use depending on individual teachers.
- The management of CEIBAL is the responsibility of an interdisciplinary committee with members from various institutions, which has allowed the input of different perspectives and dynamics. One of the strengths of the committee is that it is formed by educators, engineers and managers of the different state organisations involved. This boosts the initiative, and helps overcome obstacles more effectively, even if the process is more time consuming and not devoid of conflict.
- The fact that the programme has been developed without consulting its participants has turned out to be negative in terms of their involvement and commitment. There are also difficulties arising from the lack of a clear formulation of work strategies and methods. Teacher training and content, for example, have been developed along the way. But it is also doubtful that it could have been done in any other way. If proper public consultation processes were followed, involving teachers, politicians, technicians, professionals and public officials, the programme might never have got off the ground.

As several authors have pointed out, we need to stress the importance of the generation of e-content, which means paying attention to people's knowledge and capacity to use ICTs. People must be considered producers of information and knowledge, and not merely as consumers (Gómez et al., 2003; Mística, 2003; Camacho, 2001; Martínez, 2001). Others hold the view that for the democratisation of knowledge, social participation is necessary, not only in the design of policies, but of technology too (APC/ITeM, 2007; García Urea, 2007; Araya, 2003).

A factor that seems to be helping to surmount any difficulties that arise with the CEIBAL programme is the wide acceptance it has found in the population, above all among children. They have been visibly excited and enthusiastic about the novelty of using a laptop.

Taking advantage of the programme in a way that benefits the population more broadly is key. Because the children take the laptops home, communities can benefit. As a result, there have been various proposals (e.g., from the government, social organisations and the university) to encourage wider application of the programme. The most interesting and promising one is called the CEIBAL Support Network (RapCEIBAL),[2] which offers volunteer support that has contributed to its efficiency and smoothness, and encourages teachers and the population in general to take ownership of the plan.

Action steps

There is no doubt that CEIBAL will materially improve access to technology in Uruguay, and could form the basis for any initiative aiming at social inclusion through ICTs. Action should be taken to broaden the programme's opportunities for individuals, groups or communities.

However, several issues are important. In the first place, it is essential to stimulate the meaningful use of the technology, and go beyond mere access. It is therefore very important to offer useful content and services for both children and adults in order to improve their quality of life – satisfying needs, solving problems, and opening up opportunities. But to do this, a cultural change is necessary, so that we begin to see ourselves as producers and not just consumers of content.

In the second place, although access to information and knowledge through the internet is very important, it does not reflect the diversity of today's world – neither culturally nor linguistically. Through CEIBAL, children and teachers should be able to obtain and produce information about their society, its history, its culture, and in their own language. The production of this information should be stimulated and funded in various ways (e.g., by local industry, the academic community, or independent professionals). Some initiatives have been taken – for instance, development of digital content for the programme has been put out to tender – but there should be many more of them.

In the third place, more people should become involved in the programme, which is vast in scope. The state should continue to seek the cooperation of interested social actors and diverse stakeholders. There is still great potential to involve citizens, social organisations and various state institutions.

Finally, a central aspect of any policy is to monitor and evaluate it in a way that problems and obstacles can be overcome, or positive and successful processes strengthened. There is room to improve the monitoring and evaluation of CEIBAL.

To sum up, CEIBAL constitutes a major step towards social inclusion through ICTs. Its impact is unforeseeable, as there are no precedents of a similar policy. One thing is certain: it is crucial to include diverse perspectives and stakeholders in the programme. The results will depend on the course of future policy decisions. ■

2 rapceibal.blogspot.com

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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008 is the second in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH or **GISWatch** has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of information and communication technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2008** *focuses on access to infrastructure* and includes several thematic reports dealing with key access issues, an analysis of where global institutions stand on the access debate, a report looking at the state of indicators and access, six regional reports and 38 country reports.

GISWatch 2008 is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) and the Third World Institute (ITeM).

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