

# Information, development, globalisation and NGOs in Latin America

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## I. Introduction

It is not easy for me to come back to writing about this subject to which I was fully committed for more than fifteen years - my life in my new country (New Zealand) is so different from my past experience. But this conference on development is an excellent opportunity to look back and reflect on my total involvement in the life of a local community that was part of the web of international cooperative action for solidarity; to observe which issues of that time remain and which have changed; to examine the changes that have occurred and consider whether the issues that persist are likely to be long-term.

Firstly, to observe now - at the beginning of the third millenium - the huge increase in the role played by information in our daily life and in decision-making. Over fifteen years ago the development NGOs in Latin America, in promoting information for change, considered that their efforts for development could not be limited only to work in support of the organisation of social groups but that they should also lay emphasis on the institutional will to democratise access to information<sup>2</sup>. Today the development NGOs - also referred to by the multilateral organisations as CSOs (civil society organisations) - promote 'infoinclusion'<sup>3</sup> by fixing the democratisation of information as the main objective. This implies not only Internet connectivity but also the need to provide content from available sources of information, thus making it useful for sustainable development.

To the extent that the actors of civil society organise themselves consistently with strategies designed to close the gaps between the information rich and those who have no access to technological information, by conducting projects which integrate the needs of slum-dwellers, of the rural population, of micro-enterprises, of grassroots organisations, of community groups; and to the extent that public policy exerts pressure for the dissemination of the Internet in a more equitable and democratic form, a critical mass will be created ensuring that information becomes a collective good.

The affirmation of information as a collective good, and the prioritisation of local autonomy as a strategy for highlighting the importance of community traditions as a source of knowledge, humanises this globalisation which knows no borders and which is plunging more than half the inhabitants of the planet into economic and social

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<sup>2</sup> See: Hurtado, L. - op. cit. (1995) pp199-209.

<sup>3</sup> 'Infoinclusion' is a term coined in Brazil; it connotes both the inclusion of information as an element in the democratic process and the empowerment of all social groups by giving them greater access to information.

deprivation<sup>4</sup>. Focussing on the development NGOs of one of the continents most affected by deprivation, we note that their social function is oriented to undertaking action to provide content equal to the connectivity that already exists and to orient both content and connectivity toward the least privileged sectors of society. Everything will depend to some extent on the creation of a critical awareness that universal access to information is a joint responsibility of the different actors in civil society.

## II Experimentation and continuity in the use of ICTs by Latin American NGOs

In the 1980s, the NGOs were pioneers in the use of new information and communication technologies. It is a long time now since the first tentative efforts of Interdoc<sup>5</sup>, the worldwide network of NGOs which, from bases within Desco (Peru), Ilet (Chile) and Ibase (Brazil)<sup>6</sup>, experimented with the use of electronic mail and promoted teleconferencing among their members. In the 1990s they made available the first electronic communication service with the AlterNex node (of which the members were also founder members of the APC network)<sup>7</sup>. This work, initially experimental, has been updated at the rhythm of development of the Internet and the world-wide web and constitutes in the relevant countries and in the world of the NGOs a prime focus of ICT development, without however having lost sight of its main objective which is to be a service for the democratisation of information and to act as a reference for social organisations at the local level.

To support that statement, let us now look briefly at a comparison of four experiments considered to be landmarks at local, national and international level, with the aim of identifying their similarities and differences.

The first two are electronic communication services for the benefit of civil society.

The first, named Rits<sup>8</sup>, is located in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). Rits is derived from the Ibase-AlterNex<sup>9</sup> experiment, which notably was the main electronic communication service for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992<sup>10</sup>. The development of this service meant that AlterNex became one of the strongest non-academic organisations in the development of the Internet in Brazil in 1992. However, the emergence of the world-wide web increased the demand for the online services of AlterNex, with the consequence that it gradually moved away from the social principles for which it was set up, as it entered into competition with other Internet service providers. In the end AlterNex was privatised, and today it no longer has any link with the NGO community<sup>11</sup>. Rits builds upon the lessons and successes of AlterNex. It is a virtual

<sup>4</sup> See: UNDP (2000): "Human Development Report 1999". New York, Oxford; Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> International Network of Non-profit Organisations, started in 1984. See: [www.oneworld.org/interdoc/about/html](http://www.oneworld.org/interdoc/about/html)

<sup>6</sup> Desco = Centro de Estudios y Promocion des Desarrollo; Ilet = Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios Transnacionales; Ibase = Instituto Brasileiro de Analisis Sociais e Economicas

<sup>7</sup> Association for Progressive Communication, a worldwide partnership of 20 member computer networks in all five continents that links NGOs. See: <http://funderedes.org/gopher/a/5/5.1/5.1.6/5.1.6.1/lc.html>

<sup>8</sup> Information Network for the Third Sector. See: [www.rits.org.br](http://www.rits.org.br)

<sup>9</sup> Ibase, an NGO founded in 1981 as a pioneering initiative in the democratisation of information, itself founded AlterNex in 1989. AlterNex was a UNIX-based electronic information service providing electronic mail and conferencing. See: Afonso, C. (1996): "Internet no Brasil", in: [www.cg.org.br/infoteca/artigos/artigo9.htm](http://www.cg.org.br/infoteca/artigos/artigo9.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Afonso, C. (1996) - op. cit. p2.

<sup>11</sup> Munn-Venn, K. (1999); "Mission-Driven, business planning toolkit: case overview: Ibase/AlterNex (Brazil)"; in: [www.apc.org/english/ngos/business/buscase.ibase.htm](http://www.apc.org/english/ngos/business/buscase.ibase.htm)

network providing third sector<sup>12</sup> organisations with access to modern tools for communication, information management, technical support and the Internet. Rits attempts to offer economically viable Intranet services, since the purchase of such highly specialised software would not be within the budgetary means of NGOs. Rits therefore offers this service on a collective basis, guarantees connectivity, and supports ongoing training in the use of these types of tools. The objective of Rits is to promote 'infoinclusion' at national level:

*to resolve the problems of infrastructure, training, capitalisation of services, participation in decision-making, and wide and equal access to the content available on the Internet*<sup>13</sup>.

For this purpose it is proposed to create multipurpose community 'telecentres'<sup>14</sup> in the various regions of Brazil, to serve social and community organisations. Creating a community telecentre in state schools or in community centres is an effective way of providing adequate local solutions to access, in societies where the ideal of universal (individual) access will not be able to be realised for another two or more generations<sup>15</sup>.

Rits participates actively in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) of the Civil Society Internet Forum (CSIF), and in the group of experts of the World Bank's InfoDev (Information for Development) programme.

The other electronic communication service is Colnodo, a member of APC. It is operated by the Colombian Association of Non-governmental Organisations for Communication by Electronic Mail, with its head office in Bogota (Colombia). Colnodo facilitates communications, the exchange of information and experience among Colombian NGOs and provides specialised electronic communication services in human rights, the environment, gender, habitat and related fields<sup>16</sup>. This provider offers low-priced solutions, even down to 50% of the cost of commercial services, in order to bring online the documentation centres and databases of NGOs and other community institutions. Among the information available on its discussion lists are Colombian political issues such as the peace initiatives, especially the 1997 campaign for a vote for peace, called "Citizens' mandate for peace, life and liberty" - in which 10 million people voted to protect young people under 18 years from the armed conflict<sup>17</sup>.

This is to say that Colnodo sees its role as to unite efforts to maintain democracy, thereby strengthening civil society - (Colombian society has been troubled by many forms of violence for the past forty years)<sup>18</sup>. Its two main projects have links at

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<sup>12</sup> 'Third sector' is a term referring to the mass of organisations (often community-based) which are neither governmental nor commercial.

<sup>13</sup> Afonso, C. (2000): "Infoinclusion en Brasil: los retos a enfrentar y el rol de las ONGs"; in: [www.idrc.ca/pan/panlacmeet\\_discussion.htm](http://www.idrc.ca/pan/panlacmeet_discussion.htm)

<sup>14</sup> A telecentre is seen as an institution providing public access to the Internet and other telecommunications services such as telephone, fax, photocopying - but in marginal areas." In: Robinson, S. (1998): "Telecentres in Mexico". See: [www.unrisd.org/infotec/publicat/robi/robi.htm](http://www.unrisd.org/infotec/publicat/robi/robi.htm)

Note: The significant thing about the Rits proposal that the multipurpose community telecentre is seen not only as a place providing the necessary infrastructure, but also as a place for training and learning so that citizens can make the most of the Internet - (not so much keyboarding, but learning to use and communicate with it). This policy would compensate for the low number of Internet users (currently only about 5 million or 3% of the Brazilian population). See: Afonso, C. (2000), op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Carlos Afonso, founder of AlterNex and Rits. See: [www.alternex.com.br/10anos/cora\\_1207.html](http://www.alternex.com.br/10anos/cora_1207.html)

<sup>16</sup> See [www.colnodo.apc.org/sobre.html](http://www.colnodo.apc.org/sobre.html)

<sup>17</sup> See [www.bamako2000.org/passereles/applications/fiche-4.html](http://www.bamako2000.org/passereles/applications/fiche-4.html)

<sup>18</sup> Baron, L. (2000): "Uso de nuevas tecnologías de comunicacion e informacion para la construccion de la paz en Colombia". In: [www.idrc.ca/panlacmeet\\_doclui1.htm](http://www.idrc.ca/panlacmeet_doclui1.htm)

international and local level: firstly, Colnodo is a part of the 'Red de Desarrollo Sostenible en Colombia' (Colombian Sustainable Development Network), a project of the UN together with Colciencias and the Department of National Planning, aiming to create projects to promote Colombian crafts<sup>19</sup>. Secondly, there is a project called "Unidades de Informacion Barrial" (Unities of Neighbourhood Information) operated by community organisations in the neighbourhoods of San Cristobal, Suba and Bossa (in Bogota) with the aim of building information systems of local interest using the possibilities offered by the Internet, and setting up contacts between these systems and other organisations locally and globally. The need to close the information and technology gap remains a permanent challenge for organisations doing community work.

With this experiment, an attempt can be made to analyse the degree of relevance and influence of decisions taken by communities having first-hand access to interactive information and communication<sup>20</sup>. The extension of this project has lead Colnodo to work with other community organisations in other regions of the country, as in Cartagena, Barranquilla and Cali, to provide training, evaluation and follow-up. In this way Colnodo contributes to improving access for marginal sectors of the large cities, rural sectors and small towns, all of which still today have little or no access to ICT.

Moving now to look at the Andean countries, we see two outstanding centres which work from the periphery of their countries but whose characteristics, aims and convictions are a primary reference point in specialised themes of global interest, such as the El Niño Phenomenon in the case of CIPCA (in Piura, Peru) and the theme of coca, drugs and trafficking in the case of CEDIB (in Cochabamba, Bolivia). Both are documentation centres, however not only do they process and use documents but they both deal in careful analysis of information<sup>21</sup>. Cipca in Piura has its Cedir<sup>22</sup> which comes under its programme of regional activities, and Cedib<sup>23</sup> is a documentation centre on Bolivia which had its origins in Ineder, a regional centre similar to Cipca, and specialising in agrarian questions, local government and social issues. Cedib became an autonomous institution, while Cedir preferred to take advantage of the complex of interinstitutional relationships and national and international coverage which Cipca enjoys, given that Cipca has been chosen as a case study in much research on NGOs in Latin America or as a partner in development projects of international organisations<sup>24</sup>.

Cedib's mission is to provide information for development and promotion of democracy. To this end it has built up a library of books and newspapers on Bolivian questions, with more than forty thousand bibliographic records and two million press articles which are available on CD-ROM as a catalogue of the press in Bolivia in the 1990s. This is considered a valuable source of information by research centres

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<sup>19</sup> Trujillo, A (1999): "The Drum Beat 21-Colombia-Colnodo". In: [www.comminit.com/papers/p\\_0004.html](http://www.comminit.com/papers/p_0004.html)

<sup>20</sup> Cadena, S. (2000): "Unidades Informativas Barriales: reflexiones de un proceso de apropiacion tecnologica". In: [www.idrc.ca/pan/panlaacmeet\\_docsyl.htm](http://www.idrc.ca/pan/panlaacmeet_docsyl.htm)

<sup>21</sup> CIPCA (Centro de Investigacion y Promocion del Campesinado) periodically publishes four bulletins (also online), dealing not only with agricultural issues but also with regional government, the press and opinion about the region. See: [www.cipca.org.pe/irp](http://www.cipca.org.pe/irp). CEDIB publishes three online reviews: "30 dias" analyses the situation of Bolivia nationally and internationally, complemented by [bolivi@press](mailto:bolivi@press), and [coc@press](mailto:coc@press) which focuses on the theme of drugs. See: [www.cedib.org/publicaciones/index.html](http://www.cedib.org/publicaciones/index.html)

<sup>22</sup> CEDIR = Centre for Regional Documentation and Information; see: [www.cipca.org.pe](http://www.cipca.org.pe)

<sup>23</sup> CEDIB = Centre of Documentation and Information Bolivia; see: [www.cedib.org](http://www.cedib.org)

<sup>24</sup> See: <http://csf.colorado.edu/ipe/erb/kp/carroll/tc.html>; [www.deloitte.com/emergingmarkets/pe\\_eur/frames/content/eur2\\_fr.htm](http://www.deloitte.com/emergingmarkets/pe_eur/frames/content/eur2_fr.htm)

specialising in Latin America, in the same way as the libraries of North American universities, since the resource helps to overcome the almost permanent difficulties in telecommunication with the Latin American region<sup>25</sup>.

For its part, Cipca's Cedir, which has been operating for almost twenty years, has as its principal product the regional bibliography, which has enabled it to position itself as a centre that supports local knowledge. This means on the one hand that such knowledge is intimately linked to local culture and traditions, and on the other hand that Cedir should try to promote advanced knowledge with the help of technology. The published regional bibliography<sup>26</sup> is considered a landmark, given that it is not easy to obtain full and up-to-date information on the northern region of Piura from colonial times to the present day, in a country such as Peru where institutional continuity is precarious<sup>27</sup>. This effort to preserve the regional heritage has been recognised by the regional government of Piura (Cetar), which at a recent meeting, called on Cedir "to be the centre of reference and support for the whole process of strategic planning for 'Piura 2010, state and civil society'<sup>28</sup>.

Finally, the Cedib in Cochabamba is considered one of the most important NGOs specialising in the 'war on drugs'. Using the Red Andina de Informacion (Andean Information Network), it investigates the effects of US policy on the controversial question of drugs and trafficking, defends the rights of peasants and acts as an intermediary for peasants of the Quechua and Aymara cultures wishing to access the Internet<sup>29</sup>.

### III Conclusion

The setting up of community telecentres in various regions of the Latin American continent<sup>30</sup>, and in its various public areas such as schools, community centres, town council offices, etc., seems on the way to becoming one of the established methods of broadening the still narrow base of the pyramid of 'infoinclusion'. But this work must be carried out against a background of training and learning, so that people can master not only technical content but also idiomatic and cultural content. Admittedly, it is difficult to measure this work with impact indicators in the short term, because of chance factors such as the degree of articulateness, interest and stability of the community group taking part in the work. However it is unfortunate that in recent years international cooperation agencies have found it difficult to understand that this is a long-term effort, and have increasingly tended to favour short-term projects<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> "Because of traditionally unreliable telecommunications links in the region, Latin America places greater reliance on CD distribution of information than does the First World". See: [www.cornell.edu/colldev/cornelllibreviews10.html](http://www.cornell.edu/colldev/cornelllibreviews10.html)

<sup>26</sup> "Piura: region y sociedad - desrrotero bibliographico para el desarrollo", edited by B. Revesz with S. Aldana, L. Hurtado and J. Riquena. Cuzco, CBC, 1997, 766p; ISBN 84-8387-033-9.

<sup>27</sup> Boisier, S. (1998): "El desarrollo territorial a partir de la construccion de capital sinergetico" quoting: "The department of Piura, in northern Peru, with the help of Cipca, an NGO, has published a book of 760 pages consisting exclusively of bibliographic data on everything that has been published about Piura since colonial times. How many regions of Latin America can make a similar claim?" See: [www.eclac.org/lpes-Esp/doc\\_dppr1.htm](http://www.eclac.org/lpes-Esp/doc_dppr1.htm)

<sup>28</sup> Email (3-10-00) from B. Revesz, director of the regional development programme at Cipca - [brevesz@terra.com.pe](mailto:brevesz@terra.com.pe)

<sup>29</sup> Ulman, B. (1999): "The global political economy of new security discourses: "neoliberalism" and "war on drugs". In: [www.yildiz.edu.tr/ikidbil/siyaset/webvazi/buralink/proposal.html](http://www.yildiz.edu.tr/ikidbil/siyaset/webvazi/buralink/proposal.html) AND O'Donnell, S. (1995): "Using the Internet to strengthen the indigenous nations of the Americas"; in: <http://nativenet.uthscsa.edu/archive/nl/9512/01807.htm>

<sup>30</sup> "In Peru, a 'telecentre' would be called a 'cabina publica', in El Salvador an 'infocentro', in Mexico the concept is translated as 'telecentro'". In: Robinson, S. (1998), op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Projects for telecentres needed funding until an adequate service infrastructure is operating. However funders often do not allow sufficiently for training and technical support which require more time.

Nevertheless, progress is being made. Similarly, the updating of local information and analysing it from another perspective than the media's, which is the focus and mission of the Cedib in Bolivia, or constantly adding to a heritage of regional information as in the case of the Cedir in Peru, are tasks which emphasise the local dimension in the process of globalisation.

Continuity and extension in the long term will ensure the sustainable development of the populations who aspire to 'infoinclusion' and to receive a more equitable share of the benefits of Internet access. Alongside mainstream information society, (where individuals engage in internet chat and games; the scientific community disseminates new knowledge via university networks,; and the business community is developing e-business), civil society is responding with the creation of information points to meet the needs we have referred to in this paper. However precarious this effort is, it is significant and holds the promise of sustainable development and the integration of the peoples of the Third World, at least in Latin America.

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