

VIRTUAL EDUCA 2003

Speech by

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The Inter-American Agency for Cooperation and Development's mission is to tap the considerable capabilities of the member and observer states the Organization of American States (OAS), to augment technical cooperation and training programs to help the people of the Americas overcome poverty and advance their economic and social development. The Agency, which is the technical cooperation arm of the Organization of American States, also enhances partnerships with the private sector and civil society and supports new and more effective forms of regional cooperation initiatives. The core of our current focus is to capitalize on the advantages provided by the revolution in digital communications.

First and foremost, this revolution makes possible extraordinary advances in education. The innovation processes in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have shown increasing impact and relevance in these fields. Today ICT have a stronger pedagogical potential from what they did just a few years ago when this conference was just conceived. They have spurred not only a growth of more diverse range of alternatives to deliver open and distance programs, but also the improvement of the traditional school teaching and learning methods at all levels.

Our purpose today is to discuss that revolution as it applies to education. For that purpose I want to make three points. First, educators to make far greater efforts to take advantage of the advances in ICTs. Second, we must endeavor to deliver the content available in the capital cities to the rural and disadvantaged areas. Third, we must support all those activities that enhance and expand the educational offer.

Schools and universities must, for the accomplishment of their basic functions, familiarize themselves with new technologies, such as satellite television, computers and information networks; scientific research and the teaching-learning process would not perform effectively without these resources. Society generates and demands a new technological culture, in which literacy and mathematic skills are no longer enough. The profile of professional and workplace skills and abilities is permanently being modified at a greater speed. The improvement and transformation of educational systems through an efficient use of ICT is a primary objective to be achieved.

The task is doubly urgent because of the sad condition of education in less developed countries and faces significant difficulties and challenges. In these countries, social inequalities are a fundamental problem, deeply rooted in demographic, economic and cultural factors. The existing poverty and exclusion experienced by large population segments is clearly reflected in the educational indicators. According to the UNESCO, literacy rates in "more developed regions" as opposed to "less developed ones" are in a ratio of 98.7% to 70.4% in rural areas, with a strong

bias against women¹. Even where enrollment is improving at the elementary level, the fundamental condition is still suffering from high dropout and failing rates. Rigid and centralized public education systems are proven not to work.

We are making headway. The student-computer has improved so that “some countries average 2 or more computers per group of 30 children in primary schools; and between 2 and 5 computers per 30 children in secondary schools”. The standards are Ireland, where this went from 37 to 18 students per computer and in the United States relationship is of 8 students per PC. In Sweden and Norway, the leaders in this area, the ratio is of 6 students per computer.² Considering the distribution of computers in society, the more developed regions have 269 for every 1000 inhabitants, while the less developed ones only reach 12. As far as Internet hosts are concerned, the former region has 470 for every 10,000 inhabitants, while this number in the latter falls dramatically to 3.³

My second point, we must keep working towards helping the rural areas get the content available in the capital cities. According to the World Bank's, *1999-2000 World Development Report*, “the great majority of secondary schools and growing numbers of primary schools are now connected to the Internet. In some countries the majority of the schools became connected within a single year.” For example, in 1998 Ireland had 14% of its primary schools connected; for 1999, however, this proportion reached 95%. At the secondary level in a year Portugal, for instance, went from 30% to 100% school connectivity.⁴ In contrast, Latin America has not seen this type of increase even with the pressing need and interest to do so.

The impacts and repercussions of the ICT revolution are two-fold. On the one hand, they significantly increase coverage of services. On the other, they have considerable impact on the quality of these services. They force significant changes over the ways we carry out our everyday activities, to the point where a cognitive gap emerges between those with access to ICT and those without it.

This is particularly evident in developing countries, where rural areas and ample sectors of the urban population have little access to ICTs. Today's asymmetric distribution calls for national strategies to reduce the gaps. The potential social benefits of ICT externalities are far more powerful than in developed countries because, more people will benefit from them in more ways. In sum, ICT is our most powerful tool to close the developmental gap in developing countries. Our great challenge is to harness those technologies not only to improve the quality of educational services, but to accelerate knowledge distribution and learning opportunities throughout society.

My third point is that give us enormous opportunity to better generate content. We spoke of the contrast in performance between rural communities compared to urban areas. In rural areas teachers have little opportunity to improve skills while in-service. More developed nations have managed, despite their own rigidities and bureaucratic restraints, to create more

¹ UNESCO. *Informe Mundial sobre la Educación*. Madrid: Santillana- Ed. UNESCO, 1998, p.106.

² Ibid, p. 53

³ The World Bank. *World Development Report 2001/2002*. Washington, D.C. 1999, p. 267.

alternatives, offer various curricular options that address the teachers' and students' individual interests and meet the requirements of an ever-changing and demanding job market.

So what do we do about it? Unless aggressive actions are taken, the dynamics of the global economy and the new trends in job diversification will widen this gap in the next few years. It is estimated that for some OECD countries, the creation and diffusion of knowledge generates almost half of their GDP⁵. Public expenditure for education in more developed regions, which have a population of 885 million inhabitants, amounts to \$1.1 trillion dollars; whereas in less developed ones, which have a much larger population of 5 billion, this expenditure only reaches \$248 billion dollars. Furthermore, the net school enrollment at secondary level in industrialized nations is 95.8 %, while in developing ones is only 48.8%. At the higher education level, where the contrast is more evident, enrollment is 59.6% and 8.8%, respectively. Consequently, the number of research and development scientists and engineers for each million inhabitants shows marked contrasts: in Japan this ratio is of 6,309 and in the United States, 3,732; while in El Salvador and Nigeria, for instance, this proportion falls to 19, and 15, respectively.⁶

We at the Agency, view this dynamic and have come up with several programs that we consider practical answers to help the American countries. First, we have developed and launched the Educational Portal of the Americas. The Agency's Educational Portal is a vast Internet resource for online educational and training opportunities that provides access to more than 4,500 distance learning courses offered by accredited universities in all academic disciplines, information on fellowship opportunities, courses for the professional development of teachers, news events and related links of interest. One of the Portal's priorities became the assurance and reliability. We have also begun an e-fellowship program given the fact that all distance learning is costly. We have also started exploring ways to give certification in many different fields.

The Portal is a success with over 60 million hit thus far. It has already obtained over 1000 fellowships for qualified individuals and government officials to take advanced degrees in their home country, thereby alleviating the need to travel abroad and lose time away from the job. The Portal also provides information regarding scholarship and fellowship opportunities, programs of study, and links to best practices in education and training.

Second, the Portal has begun the Americas Virtual Classroom, an interactive virtual environment housed on the Educational Portal of the Americas (www.educoas.org), allows users to obtain professional certification and to participate in educational activities and services similar to what one would receive at a traditional academic institution. The Virtual Classroom was designed by the Inter-American Agency for Cooperation and Development as a tool to bring better educational opportunities to remote and underserved areas. The Virtual classroom was launched this year with the online course "Calidad de la Educación Básica". This course will

⁴ OECD/CERI. Education Policy Analysis 1999. Paris. 1999, p.55.

⁵ El Banco Mundial. Informe sobre el desarrollo humano. Madrid. 2001, p.26

⁶ UNESCO. Informe Mundial sobre la Educación. Madrid: Santillana- Ed. UNESCO, 1998, p.106-110.
The World Bank. World Development Report 2001/2002. Washington, D.C. 2001, p. 235.

provide teachers and administrators at the primary and secondary levels an introduction to the concept of total quality management applied to education.

Third, another line of action is the traditional Inter-American Scholarship Programs of the OAS/IACD. We now provide more than 3,000 scholarships a year to students in Latin America and the Caribbean. It operates in conjunction with LASPAU in Boston, and has recently expanded its program considerably by establishing a university collaboration by which we reduce costs with partner universities throughout the Americas and the Fulbright Program of the United States. In addition, we have launched a new corporate fellowship program between the OAS and the private sector companies.

Fourth, after extensive analysis, the Agency considers that the best way to accelerate the active transfer of knowledge and services to small communities is through the establishment of Community Learning Centers or Telecenters. We greatly favor the concept of “cyber-café” so that the Telecenters might not only render important services but become self-sustainable. In addition to bringing important educational services to the communities and by that I mean Education with a capital “E”, the Telecenters can grow faster if they become an entrepreneurial activity themselves, and provide incentives for young people to acquire the practical knowledge necessary to earn money, from the sale of services to the sale of products, thus becoming small businessmen themselves. Thus the telecenters, for example, can also become an important component to stimulate local economic development.

In this regard, the IACD is very much involved in issues concerning rural connectivity and delivery of relevant content. We sponsored a recent meeting in El Salvador, which brought the major players in the field of distance education together with the purpose of establishing a regional collaboration mechanism to take advantage of what is already available and thus preventing duplicity of tasks and to potentialize individual efforts. We are also planning a major initiative in Caribbean based St. Lucia jointly with the World Bank.

The region’s situation, however, in terms of connectivity and the inherent costs of the new technologies, especially in infrastructure, pose an enormous challenge. Because this challenge is too large for any one actor to undertake on this own we must engage all sectors. A more efficient use of resources, financial, human and technological, is needed. This can only be accomplished by collaboration and by contemplating self-sustainable schemes. This means aggressively promoting alliances between the public and private sectors, especially in the issues of connectivity and services to rural areas. Already, throughout the Americas, the public and private sector, NGOs, and multilateral organizations are supporting initiatives in this regard. This only emphasizes the need to work together to create synergies. Our mission at the Agency is to applaud and support these initiatives for adaptation and replication of successful solutions and content.

ICTs are the means through which we can bring to the population access to content and training. They also represent another urgent need: the necessary instrument for communities throughout Hemisphere to capitalize on the opportunities stemming from the integration

processes currently sweeping the Americas. ICTs are an essential tool to undertake projects to aid in the region's development efforts. These technologies coupled with other resources and initiatives have intrinsic characteristics uniquely suited to stimulate education, health, cooperation and trade and open opportunities to participate.

Current efforts by governments, the private sector and civil society, NGOs, multilateral institutions as well as other actors in areas focused on social, educational, entrepreneurial and economic development have experienced increased attention in recent years. Today, almost every country in the Americas has some sort of project or projects aimed at reaching disadvantaged populations through ICTs with the ultimate objective of promoting social and economic development. These efforts have not gone unnoticed and thus the Agency's primary goal is to identify what works, what we call successful or consolidated practices and help accelerate their adoption and replication to help developing countries 'leap-frog' and achieve a qualitative jump on developmental issues, such as the on-line offer of government, educational, and health services, as well as the promotion of entrepreneurial activities by encouraging the creation of small business.

The actions already undertaken, the creation of pertinent and appropriate content, as well as educational, training and administration models constitute an important database of consolidated or successful practices that may help to save time and money for other actors involved. In this sense the Agency expects to become a repository of consolidated and successful experiences, models and content that others may use to their advantage. It is because of this that it is vital to not only share experiences in different ICT applications, but to structure a viable cooperation mechanism that helps us better face existing limitations and potentialize individual efforts. Reaching this objective may very well help to set the basis for Latin America and the Caribbean to make a qualitative jump in their development through the use of new technologies.

In summary and in this context, Virtual Educa is to be applauded and we proud to be co-sponsors. It is a unique event that gathers many governments, international and academic institutions, private sector firms and civil society organizations as well as multinationals all revolving around the efficient use of ICTs for development and education. It gives us a great opportunity to focus on concrete results to make an important difference for significantly increasing the educational offer as well as the quality of educational content.

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