

Governance/Administration-Corner

■ Bridging the Digital Divide? The Latin American and Caribbean Action Plan for the Information Society (eLAC) Re-Considered

The information and communication technologies (ICTs) have a significant impact on all spheres of society. The complexity and speed of the changes produced by these technologies in economic, political and social terms require specific institutional frameworks to promote ICT access, use and skills. Such frameworks serve as indispensable preconditions for individuals to participate in environments driven by constant transformation. At the same time, the gradual shift from industrial to information and knowledge societies generates an increasing digital divide between developed and developing countries, between nations that belong to a specific region and even between localities and places within a country. Hence, public policies are needed not only to guarantee basic ICT access, use and skills but also to mitigate the effects of this digital divide.

For these reasons, ICT public policies gained in importance and reached supra-national priority. Collaborative research and policy formulation efforts between governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), representatives of the private sector and international organizations are essential not only to understand and tackle the challenges and risks induced by the digital divide, but also to make use of the opportunities implied by ICTs and applied knowledge in terms of development. The Latin American and Caribbean Action Plan for the Information Society (eLAC) is, in this regard, an emblematic example of a policy initiative enforced at a regional, supra-national level in order to foster information societies in Latin America. The eLAC initiative is, in short, a regional strategy for bridging the digital divide through the use of ICTs to develop eight spheres considered as priorities for the region: ICT access, education, e-government, promotion of policy coordination at the national levels (policy of state), enabling ICT environment, productive development and innovation, social security and environment. By developing and communicating a long term vision with clear goals which were evaluated, re-designed and updated within short periods, eLAC emerged as an effective policy initiative throughout the last ten years.

Therefore, eLAC represents an interesting project to understand and analyze some of the traits of successful ICT public policy-making that is characterized by a clear developmental approach. The following two questions are of major interest for analysis:¹ Is eLAC a successful comprehensive regional policy initiative for bridging the digital divide? If so, which policy recommendations can be deduced to further improve it?

The applied methodology combines two research techniques: On the one hand, it utilizes a descriptive case-study approach to analyze the political context that promoted eLAC's policy

formulation; to pinpoint the major features and content of eLAC; and to describe its changes and adaptations over time. This approach allows the assessment of the ICTs for development (ICT4D)² perspective that the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) promotes through eLAC for the region. On the other hand, a comparison is drawn between the ICT4D perspectives of ECLAC and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Finally, policy recommendations are offered with a focus on the education sector which is considered as the sector that requires more urgent attention in Latin America (according to the ECLAC).

The research findings can be summarized, as follows:

- a) The digital divide is a multi-folded public policy challenge.
- b) An effective ICT4D perspective correlates with a continuous development of and with ICTs, meaning that further development and usage of these techniques are a tool, and not an end in themselves.
- c) A gradual shift from information to knowledge societies is promoted through qualitative rather than quantitative improvements in terms of information production, selection, dissemination and transformation.
- d) Knowledge and information are key elements not only for promoting economic, social and political development, but also for empowering people.
- e) The endorsement of ICT literacy, through the encouragement of lifelong learning, adult education and capacity building approaches, as well as the enhancement of a well-thought investment in research and development (R&D) are some elements that could be potentially incorporated for improving eLAC's overall impact in Latin America.

In a nutshell, eLAC is a holistic policy initiative that resulted in the development of an effective information society policy framework to reduce the digital divide. However, the human development aspect requires further attention and should be focused more specifically on (1) attaining quality education for all and lifelong learning; (2) mobilizing science knowledge and policy for sustainable development; (3) building inclusive knowledge societies through information and communication (UNESCO, 2010, p. 3). Hence, the UNESCO's ICT4D perspective is useful for complementing ECLAC's approach through a more pluralistic and human rights view of the digital divide.

1 For further information about the study presented, as follows, contact Inge Roeniger Desatnik, Master of Public Policy graduate of the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy at Erfurt University (inge.roeniger@gmail.com).

2 The term ICT4D refers to a developmental approach that considers ICTs as enablers for social and economic progress as well as powerful tools for aiding economic and social development when such technologies are adapted and used specifically for this purpose.

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