

WORKSHOP 5:

Internet — a Medium for the Poor?

The western public in general considers the Internet as an important means of democratic culture as it facilitates the direct experience exchange and discussion between citizens. User groups share their common problems and sometimes the actual information provided by the Internet can't be found elsewhere.

The workshop "Internet for the Poor" asks the question, if the developing countries – and especially the poor sectors – can also profit from the new technology. On the one hand, the telecommunication infrastructure especially in Africa, but also in the extended rural areas of Asia and Latin America are so deficient that there is no access to the Internet (or it is very expensive). On the other hand, most of the contents of the Internet reflect the needs and interests of the industrialised countries, or of the local economic and scientific elite of the developing countries. The workshop presented three case studies.

The Peruvian Internet Provider *Red Científica Peruana (RCP)*

pres. by Nina Fluck (cand. M.
Sc. Geographical Institute of
the University of Aachen)

Peru was one of the first countries in Latin America with access to the Internet. However, in contrast to other countries the first Peruvian Internet Service Provider was a non-governmental, non-profit organisation. It is called Red Científica Peruana (RCP), the Peruvian Scientific Network and was founded in 1991 by 43 private organisations. Central goals of RCP are the democratisation and the decentralisation of the information supply providing Internet access to ALL Peruvian people.

Although RCP is a non-profit organisation it is a self-sustainable enterprise. The organisation started its work with only one computer, three modems, three telephone lines and US-\$ 5000. RCP has only once received financial help (from the Inter-American Development Bank) since it was founded. All profits were invested in the infrastructure of RCP and in the meantime this infrastructure has a value of more than US-\$ 38 million. Despite the economic success, Red Científica tries to keep the price level for all their services as low as possible.

Peru is a poor country: more than 50 percent of the Peruvians are living on a subsistence level. The basic equipment for Internet access – a computer, a modem and a telephone line – is only at the disposal of a few people and only in the upper classes. This could contribute further to the increasing of the gap between rich and poor. The Internet could be a valuable tool for development but only if it's available to everybody. Red Científica had to find a way of making it possible for the poor to have access to the Internet. The first step to resolve this issue was to create "cabinas públicas", i.e. public Internet cabins. However, giving the public access was not enough: the people had to learn how to use and profit from the Internet. Therefore RCP provides training to teach not only the technological know-how but also to teach which benefits one can receive from

this new technology. Additionally Red Cientifica started pilot projects to demonstrate which possibilities the use of the Internet offers. A small farmer community in the Andean region, for example, could increase its income by selling its crops to a US-American food-trader, with the help of Internet contact. The logic behind this idea from RCP is: „We want to demonstrate that the Internet really is able to enhance the life of the people. We provide the know-how and the equipment to everyone”.

On the web sites of Red Cientifica and their more than 300 member organisations are lots of interesting contents which reflect the information needs of the poor, too. There are, for example, web sites in Quechua, the most important indigenous language, regional information and news from every part of the country, agricultural information, presentations of NGO's, Universities, handicraft manufactures and so on.

At the beginning of 1999, about 180 Cabinas Públicas existed in Peru. Cabinas Públicas have become a manner of doing business in Peru and an increasing number of Peruvians are discovering the Internet. 180 seems to be a lot, but Peru is a big country with an area of more than 1,2 million square kilometres and most of the Cabinas are concentrated in the capital Lima and the big cities of the coastal region. In other parts of the county they are rarely found. For poor people who live in rural areas of the Andean region or in the poor districts of Lima and other cities it is hard to reach a Cabina Pública. To add to this, the vast majority of the Cabinas Públicas are commercial companies which do not offer the training and education which poor people need to benefit from using the Internet.

Until 1995 RCP was the only Internet Service Provider in Peru. Since then, other providers have started to compete on the Internet service market. The most powerful competitor of RCP is Infovía, a subsidiary of the powerful telecommunication enterprise Telefónica del Peru. With aggressive advertising campaigns and price-dumping, Infovía conquers more and more shares of the growing Internet market. However, Infovía has no development-orientated background and entices the RCP-clients away. RCP is loosing its financial basis for educational and development work and Peru's Internet service market runs the danger of being only profit oriented and turning into an exclusive supply for the upper class. This situation makes it difficult to realise the plans of Red Cientifica to install Cabinas Públicas especially in the villages and rural areas of Peru.

Conclusion: The actual situation of competition with commercial Internet service providers makes it harder and harder to realise the development plans of RCP for the diffusion of the Internet and to make Internet accessible for every Peruvian citizen, especially for the poor.

NGO information exchange in the Democratic Rep. of Congo

pres. by Antoine Gnofam
(CAMECO collaborator)

For many years the public infrastructure in Zaire has been systematically abandoned by the Mobutu government. Nowadays outside of Kinshasa and the main cities there are hardly any roads, no telephone lines and no reliable postal service. There is also no sufficient provision of electricity, a precondition for use of computers and of having access to the Internet. Therefore



different NGO's sought to implement a telecommunication network aimed to have an uncensored, quick and reliable internal information exchange with the possibility of establishing continuous contacts to the international development community. Financed by a consortium of European donor agencies, the Réseau Européen du Congo (REC), high frequency (HF) radio stations were installed in the three most important cities (Kinshasa, Mbandaka and Kisangani). Each station was equipped with a HF modem and computer. By means of an appropriate protocol this system permits the transmission of data (as e-mail) using the atmosphere as medium.

It was foreseen to implement seven additional stations in the second phase. CAMECO was asked by some members of REC to evaluate the first project experiences. The on-the-spot study showed, that the system itself is really needed by the NGO's and at the moment it is an adequate technology, but the main problem of the project is the lack of training of the users. A European NGO specialised in technical projects has been responsible for the implementation of the project, and at the technical level they fulfilled the goals. Nevertheless the European specialists didn't succeed in the training and follow-ups of the local users.

Conclusion: Given the scarce communication facilities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the short-wave data transmission system at the moment is an adequate communication means for the NGO network, however, the sustainability of the project depends basically on the local follow-up capacities.

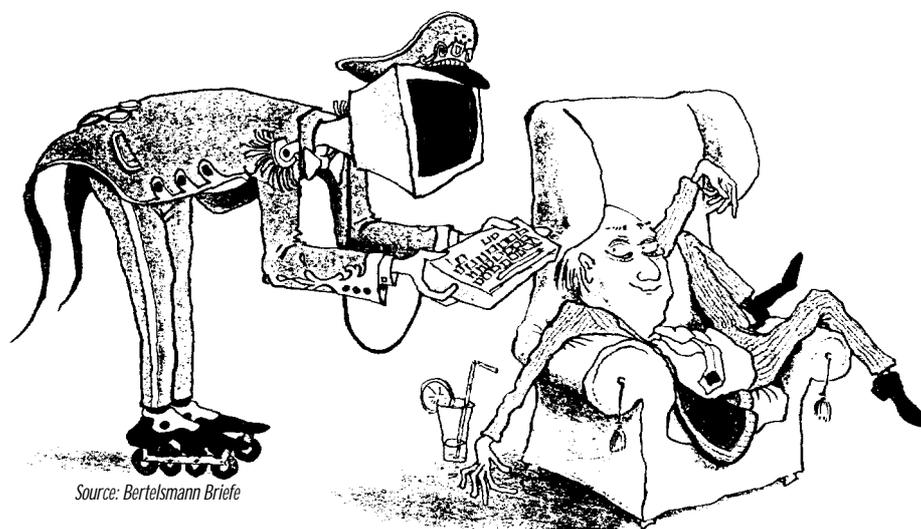
Estaciones transmisoras de ALRED



Use of Satellite Broadcasting and Internet by ALER in Latin-America

pres. by Humberto Vandembulcke (Latin American Association for Radio Education ALER / Union of Catholic Radio Stations in the Dominican Rep.)

In September 1997 the network of Latin American educational radios, Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica (ALER), started with the transmission of different radio programmes



Source: Bertelsmann Briefe

via satellite which at the moment are retransmitted by about 60 indigenous, community and educational radios all over the continent. According to the philosophy of ALER as a network of decentralised radio stations with the main focus on the poor sectors of society, the satellite programmes are conceived as an international forum of experiences provided by the member radio stations. The contributions from the different countries and regions are sent to the central station in Quito (Ecuador) by e-mail. From there they are sent to the ALER satellite segment, so that the participating radio stations receive a real-audio programming which they can retransmit immediately. The communication via Internet – especially its e-mail function – is vital in this process as it is the quickest and cheapest communication means between the contributing stations and the main office in Quito.

At the same time, in some Latin American countries e-mail is intensively used by the community radios for their local information needs. Many stations have established a local network of „community reporters“, i.e. delegates especially from rural area communities who inform the radio station about relevant developments in their area. In the Dominican Republic, for example, there are stations which maintain a network of about 80 „community reporters“, and now with the e-mail facilities the information flow between the „community reporters“ and the radio station has been significantly improved.

Conclusion: The ALER radio stations predominantly perceive the e-mail facilities of the Internet as a very helpful tool for recollecting information from the marginalised sectors of society and, in consequence, giving the poor a public voice. Internet is considered a medium to present the reality of the poor, although the great majority of the poor doesn't have access to the Internet at the moment.

As the case studies demonstrated, there are very different experiences regarding the use of the Internet in the developing world, and it has become clear, that the benefit for the poor depends on the specific purposes of a project as well as the national economic and political context. There was not enough time during the workshop to deepen all aspects of the Internet in the developing world, but it should be stressed that many participants of the workshop have accumulated significant experiences in the field. E.g. that is the case of the International Catholic Film Organisation OCIC (network of satellite phones, four Internet servers in Africa, web site of the Ouagadougou Film Festival etc.), the Stichting Porticus (collaboration with the Information Network of the Latin American Episcopal Conferences RIAL and the Catholic Migrant Farmer Network in USA), the Center for Religious Telecommunications in Dayton, USA (offering interactive distance education since 1983; which at the moment offers seven courses on theology and catechetics via Internet) and the German NGO for Appropriate Technology FAKT (specialised in communication technology for health purposes, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa).

Christoph Dietz and Nina Fluck