

The Internet and socially relevant public policies: Why, how and what to advocate?

Juliana Martínez and the Fundación Acceso¹ team

Introduction

This paper presents some ideas, developed from the viewpoint of a non-profit organization devoted to research and to the institutional strengthening of organizations (CSOs)² in Central America, on how such organizations can work more effectively towards their goals of social change. These ideas were inspired by an ongoing work programme of Fundación Acceso designed to encourage a breakthrough in the use of new technologies for social purposes, especially by CSOs engaged in advocacy work, by expanding their use from the purely organizational level to the field of public policies. To do this, we need to identify to what extent, and how, the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and in particular the Internet, can contribute to the design of policies for promoting social change that will respond more adequately to people's needs and to the agendas of CSOs. It should be noted that ICTs include a broad spectrum of new technologies, practices and means of communication. These technologies converge and rely on the Internet, the most swiftly expanding tool in Central American societies. Therefore, while this paper is focused on the Internet, it will occasionally refer more broadly to ICTs.

This paper reviews and explains the main assumptions guiding this new line of work, as a contribution to discussion both within our own organization and in other organizations in and beyond Central America. These are points for discussion, then, and not formal research results. The ideas discussed here reflect the research work of Fundación Acceso, as well as advocacy experiments relating to Internet policies in Central America, and the cooperation and exchange of ideas that Acceso has engaged in with Latin American and Caribbean organizations, with financial and intellectual support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and in particular its PAN programme.

We shall describe first the challenge that these ideas are intended to address: if the Internet is to serve as a public policy tool that is sensitive to social needs and to greater citizen participation, it will have to be the object of advocacy work by organizations that could benefit from such a tool. We next discuss the current situation and possible sources of synergy between the use of new technologies and citizen participation for social change. Since

the importance of public policies for social change is not a given, this paper explains why and under what circumstances policies constitute a decisive factor in fostering or inhibiting social change. Incorporating the Internet as a public policy tool can be approached from many viewpoints. For this reason, we explain what Fundación Acceso means by a “social vision” of the Internet that can be used and appropriated by people and their organizations. Both aspects relate to the question of “why advocate” addressed in this paper.

The intersection between what CSOs see as socially relevant policies and the potential use of the Internet for strengthening them is the second aspect discussed in this paper. The question here is “what to advocate”. We then go on to a brief discussion of government initiatives for incorporating the Internet, highlighting the difference between the kind of incorporation that CSOs would like to see and the things that governments are actually doing.

Given the distance that separates the current from the desired situation, we discuss some questions as to the kind of citizen participation in public policies that CSOs regard as strategic. Among these aspects, one is especially important: building alliances with organizations in the public and private sectors, identifying advocacy channels in light of national circumstances. These ideas serve as input for discerning “how” CSOs seek to influence the public policies they consider relevant.

Finally, we raise some key ideas for making the Internet an object of advocacy: identifying links between social needs and the potential role of the Internet for meeting those needs; strengthening collaboration between advocacy CSOs and CSOs working with the Internet for institutional strengthening, as in the case of Fundación Acceso; and reinforcing the capacity for influencing the use of the Internet, particularly through alliances with the private sector.

We believe that this paper will have served its objective if it sparks debate and helps to make the environment in which CSOs operate more sensitive to people’s needs, so as to ensure that the benefits of these new technologies are not limited to a small group.

Our starting point

Fundación Acceso has for many years been working for the institutional strengthening of CSOs in Central America. One of its areas of activity is strategic communication through the use of new technologies, and in particular the Internet, as a tool for helping organizations achieve their objectives of social change. In this line of work, Acceso is part of a relatively small group of Latin American organizations that have been thinking about and working with new ICTs. These include a network of organizations that have received support from the IDRC to conduct applied research on how to use the Internet for development purposes <<http://www.idrc.ca/pan/partners>>. This network is a valuable resource for organizations interested in using the Internet for development, as a reference group for collaborative work both in the

preparation of ideas and in the implementation of initiatives. An important manifestation of this community of interests and players exists in the MISTICA virtual community <<http://www.funredes.org/mistica>>, which embraces organizations, researchers and activists from around Latin America and the Caribbean.

At the same time, most of the CSOs in the region, social organizations and non-governmental organization (NGOs) alike, have become Internet users. One research study now underway at Acceso is examining the impact of the Internet on Central American CSOs and is finding a great variety in their uses of this technology.³

Yet, even among CSOs that make intensive and strategic use of the Internet, not all have adopted it as an object of advocacy for fulfilling their objectives. For example, there are women's, environmental and *campesino*⁴ groups that use the Internet for communication and coordination. Generally speaking, however, the Internet is not yet part of their advocacy agendas, for example, in monitoring government commitments, tracking resources earmarked for various target populations, or co-managing policies.

If it is to become a real tool of public policy, sensitive to social needs and greater citizen participation, the Internet will have to become, first of all, an object of advocacy by organizations that could benefit from this tool. It is on this challenge that the ideas discussed below are focused. The general context in which this advocacy strategy will unfold poses some major questions about whether the Internet can help to create more just and equitable societies. For the moment, the use of these new technologies seems to be limited to a few sectors of the population, thereby aggravating existing social inequalities. Elements of this context are summarized below as a general framework for CSO action.

Citizen participation, social change and new technologies

Latin American societies today face both new and long-standing social problems. High levels of poverty and insecurity, growing inequality in access to goods and services, and the lack of a voice for major segments of the population to express their needs are only a few of the acute problems that millions of people in the region face every day.

In terms of possible solutions, governments are promoting changes to the organization of the state, including decentralization and the devolution of decision-making and public services, and sectoral reforms that range from telecommunications and insurance to education and health.

What role can citizens play in linking problems and solutions? In contrast to the situation of a few decades ago, most of the peoples of Latin America today live under democratic regimes (at least in the formal sense). This offers new opportunities for citizen participation, which is essential for transforming formally democratic regimes into truly democratic ones. This is one of the

challenges facing social organizations and NGOs: to help channel people's needs and to provide voice and solutions.

In this sense, the arrival of ICTs, and the Internet in particular, is both part of the problem and a possible solution in Latin America. On one hand, the Internet can aggravate existing social, economic and political inequalities: the so-called digital divide, for example, has become yet one more factor of exclusion and differentiation among people. Yet, on the other hand, the Internet offers some possible responses: one example can be found in the regional alliances that this tool facilitates.

In all events, one item now on the agenda of CSOs in Latin America is this: to what extent and how can the Internet serve the people and help to build societies that are more just, democratic and caring?⁵ Clearly, finding the answers to this question is not easy, but research and political action focused on the social impact of the Internet offer a way to arrive at them.

If it is to tip the balance in favour of socially desirable impacts, policy advocacy will have to address new challenges that are both technical and political. Specifically, this paper explores why, how and where to promote the Internet as a potential tool for improving the capacity of public policies to meet the needs of the people.

What is clear is that the Internet's incorporation into public policies will not be neutral – it will occur as a function of the objectives, outlooks and social visions of the various players involved. To ensure that the views and goals of CSOs are taken into account – something that is far from being the case today – is the real challenge.

The following section discusses the importance of public policies in helping CSOs pursue their respective agendas.

Why public policies are important

In the first place, we may say that, from the viewpoint of , public policies are important to the extent that they are one of the available tools for meeting the needs of the people. In this respect, what we seek to encourage is that public policy should be seen as a means for solving social problems

There are in fact many possible tools for promoting the individual's welfare. These include the family, work, community, social organizations and, of course, public policies. The special feature of public policies is that they can either enhance or inhibit the capacity of other mechanisms for promoting individual and collective welfare. For example, policies on employment, housing or education can strengthen or weaken communities and families, and thereby facilitate or inhibit personal fulfilment through work or study.

As an instrument, public policies also have the potential not only to resolve concrete problems but also to promote social integration, i.e. to make sure that "everyone is in the same boat", with the same chances to be supplied with water, electricity, education and health services, for example. This sets

them apart from other available instruments for meeting public demands, which are of a private nature or are specific to certain groups. However positive solutions of this kind may be, they tend to divide society into circles of relationships and lifestyles that have virtually no mutual contact, and they exclude completely some major segments of the population, who are effectively “out of the loop”. For this reason, public policies are a very important tool, not only in practical terms (e.g. providing health services to the entire population) but also for promoting ethical principles (e.g. ensuring that everyone has the same fundamental rights to work, education or health, regardless of income).

In Latin American countries today, policies are not always so public nor do they always respond to the needs of those at whom they are supposedly directed. The policy arena is one in which stakeholders with particular interests and agendas are continually contending. The more or less public nature of policies will depend, then, on their ability to “aggregate demands” from the groups in question so that they can provide satisfactory responses to the respective interests and agendas.

Finally, if policies are to meet the needs of individuals, they must be implemented in accordance with the criteria of availability, quality and transparency. This means that the provision of goods and services resulting from public policies must meet these conditions:

- **Availability:** People must have access to services where and when they need them (and not months later, as happens in the public health system, or at a distant location, as is the case with many rural schools, or in exchange for a vote, as with many social assistance programmes).
- **Quality:** Services must not only be effectively available, but they must be of a quality that meets people’s needs in the technically and humanly most appropriate way.
- **Transparency:** Public policies must be the product of clear rules of the game, applied fairly and without preferences to the entire target population.

What does the Internet have to do with these objectives? What can it do for the quality, availability and transparency of public policies? To answer this question, we shall address, first, the vision that Fundación Acceso has of the Internet, as a means of putting technology to use for social purposes.

Promoting the Internet: a social vision⁶

Just as policies are a potential tool and a means of resolving social problems, the Internet is a potential tool, among others, for strengthening the capacity of policies to ensure quality, availability and transparency in resolving those problems.

Governments, private businesses, donors and CSOs are all turning increasing attention to the Internet. The assumption behind this paper is that ICTs are here to stay and that they are driven in large part by commercial interests that care little whether they are beneficial to the vast majority of the population. This reality is one of the main reasons for seeking to prevent the Internet from benefiting only one or a few groups and for ensuring that its benefits extend to the bulk of the population.

In such a context, the primary concern is this: how can we ensure that the Internet will have a positive impact on human welfare and that its positive impacts will not be outweighed by the negative ones? Experience in Latin America points to several elements for identifying and encouraging positive impacts. Specifically, on the basis of CSO experience in the region, we may say that if the Internet is to contribute to social change we must go beyond connectivity and promote equitable access, meaningful use and social appropriation of the available resources. This general assertion extends to the search for quality, availability and transparency of public policies.

Before considering how to apply this vision of the Internet to public policies, however, we need to define what we mean by each of these three aspects.

Equitable access

Equity access means making Internet connectivity available at reasonable prices and providing training in the use of the tools (e.g. connecting to the Internet or making use of navigation programs) so that more people can use them, regardless of their sex, social class, language, ethnic group or other factors.

In Latin America, where barely more than 2 percent of the population is connected to the Internet, strengthening public access will have to be considered a priority for some time to come. However, "being connected without knowing how to use the packages is to have no access. If all we have is a connection, those with the greatest ability to use the connected equipment will be those who, because of their social and economic situation, are already familiar with Internet techniques, or those who have accumulated enough knowledge to learn how to use it with a little instruction" (Camacho 2001: 10).

By itself, however, access to ICTs cannot generate or redress social inequalities. Moreover, much of the content of the Web at this time has nothing to do with the needs or interests of the great majority of the population. If the Internet is to enhance public welfare, then, we must go beyond access and foster its meaningful use and social appropriation.

Meaningful use

This means making effective use of Internet resources and combining them with other communication tools, such as face-to-face interaction, radio or the

press. The effective or “strategic” use of the Internet requires that people know when to use what tools (e.g. e-mail, search engines, portals) according to their objectives, individual or collective (Gómez and Martínez 2001). “Strategic use implies familiarity with the different instruments that the Internet offers (discussion lists, e-mail, web sites, databases, search engines and so on) and determining, depending on needs and available resources, when to use one or the other either as a consumer or a producer or both” (Camacho 2001: 10).

Secondly, it means knowing how to combine the Internet with other appropriate forms of communication, which we may call “user strategies”. “User strategies refer to the way the Internet is incorporated into an existing strategy (national, organizational or personal) of communication and information. In other words, how to combine the Internet with other, more traditional technologies, what resources to use, when, at whose expense, for whose benefit, and all the other considerations that imply a user strategy. Without a user strategy, the Internet will be utilized indiscriminately” (Camacho 2001: 10).

Taken together, user strategies and strategic use permit “meaningful use”. Both require certain conditions, such as the ability to produce one’s own content and to access useful content in one’s own language (Gómez and Martínez 2001).

Social appropriation

Beyond access and use, the real social contribution of the Internet comes when people appropriate it for their own use. Social appropriation means resolving concrete problems of everyday life with the help of ICTs (Camacho 2001). Evidence of appropriation must be sought not in the use of ICTs themselves, but rather in the changes that they have brought about in the real world (Gómez and Martínez 2001).

“The social appropriation of ICTs for development can be demonstrated in a number of ways, such as: by offering better medical information to patients; improving the quality of education through the use of innovative teaching resources; introducing varied, relevant programming into community radio broadcasting; increasing sales of local products in the marketplace; disseminating the results of local research; and coordinating action among diverse groups with common goals” (Gómez and Martínez 2001: 7).

“An individual (or for that matter an organization or country) will have appropriated the Internet when he or she can ask, first, ‘what do I want to resolve?’ and, having answered that question, has the resources and knowledge to answer the next question: how can the Internet help me to make effective use of this technology and to resolve the problem at hand?” (Camacho 2001: 9).

The challenge is to go beyond connectivity, which by itself is insufficient, to include the dimensions of equitable access, meaningful use and social appropriation of the Internet for social change. Public policies are a potential

tool for this, just as the Internet is a potential instrument for ensuring that policies meet social needs.

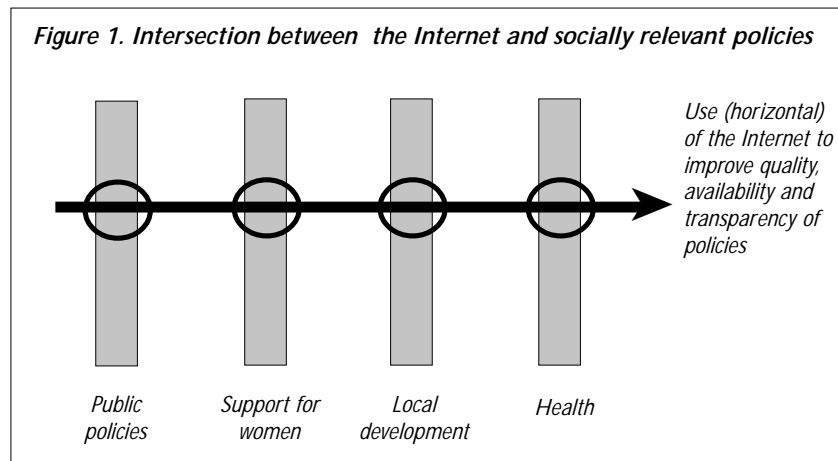
What social use and appropriation of the Internet may mean when it comes to transforming and improving public policies is something that will have to be worked out jointly with other organizations. It will not be possible to foster social appropriation of the Internet if the policy formulation process for incorporating the Internet takes place in isolation from the people and their organizations. Therefore, we need to identify points of intersection between the Internet and public policies, in the framework of a social vision of the Internet, but we must do so together with CSOs and in light of their current advocacy agendas. The ideas discussed below are intended as inputs for such a dialogue.

The intersection between national policies and the Internet

The point here is to consider the role of the Internet as a “potential” tool, the social contribution of which is not necessarily a given. The challenge, then, is to consider how and when the Internet can have a positive social impact if it is incorporated into public policies in such a way that they can respond more effectively to the needs of the people at whom they are directed.

Such contributions may, for example, improve the coverage, equity and availability of social services such as education and health, through the application of distance education or telemedicine. As well, we may think in terms of strategies for improving citizen participation in the formulation, execution, monitoring and evaluation of public policies.

These examples all revolve around strengthening the possibilities of intersection between real needs and the potential role of the Internet in improving the capacity of policies to meet those needs, as depicted in Figure 1. The vertical



bars correspond to policies targeted at specific groups (, for example) or at resolving specific problems (health). The ovals represent the possible zones of intersection between public policies and the use of the Internet to enhance their quality, availability and transparency.

This possible intersection between public policies and the Internet, as a function of the social change objectives of CSOs, is what we mean in this paper by using the Internet for socially relevant public policies.

The significant intersections will vary depending on the agendas of the different organizations, and taking advantage of them will depend on the capacity to negotiate and influence the respective government agendas, which are not necessarily consistent with CSO objectives. For example:

- 's organizations may see the Internet as a potential tool for the creation, together with public institutions, of instruments for monitoring recently approved legislation against domestic violence or other programmes to promote access to resources.
- For local development organizations, the Internet may be seen as an instrument for coordination and pooling information from the various government institutions involved on the local scene.
- For NGOs, the Internet may be a useful tool for exerting citizen control over public social spending and over government spending in general.

The objective that these three examples have in common is to improve the quality, availability and transparency of public policies as they affect the population. In some cases, this may imply strengthening existing policies through mechanisms of citizen participation; in other cases, it may imply the creation of new policies. In both cases, incorporating the Internet as a public policy tool must be accompanied by action and pressure from the organizations in question: indeed, what we are talking about is not influencing the use of the technology per se, but the social use of that technology.

These efforts will take place within a context determined by the process of incorporating the Internet into public policies, and one that does not necessarily mean strengthening the quality, availability and transparency of those policies. Below we summarize what is now happening in the region and the extent to which it is helping to create policies that are more sensitive to social needs.

Current government initiatives: a crucial juncture

In Latin America, and in Central America especially, we are at a crucial juncture in the effort to incorporate the Internet into public policies. What we have, in effect, are initiatives sponsored by groups of individuals within the overall government, or within specific institutions. Generally speaking, there has been no public debate about the priorities and actions to be pursued.

From the viewpoint of CSOs, therefore, these policies are unlikely to be appropriated for now. On the contrary, in fact, CSOs do not for the most part understand the purpose of these initiatives and see them as remote from the needs of the people.

According to the literature survey by Vega (2001), the questions that governments seem to be posing and hoping to answer through the incorporation of the Internet are the following:

- How can we keep abreast of technical innovations and use them for purposes of government (via electronic government) and the economy (via electronic commerce)?
- How can the Internet improve the efficiency, effectiveness and transparency of public policies?

These would seem to be the main considerations behind the growing interest of Latin American governments in the Internet as a tool. When we examine all the activities underway, we can identify some broad lines of action and certain government expectations with respect to forms of citizen participation in the new policies. It is in light of these actions and expectations that CSOs must consider their own agendas and expectations.

Based on a quick review of the Web and of Vegas's work (2001), we can distinguish three principal lines of government action.

Online information about existing services

This includes informing and consulting, and even allowing transactions to be conducted online: for example, the posting of information on the structure of government, on services provided, on the requirements for obtaining services and, to a lesser degree, on online procedures. It should be noted that the thrust here is to strengthen the provision of goods and services, in contrast to the third line of action discussed below, which is aimed at citizen participation in public decision-making.

It is this kind of action that has advanced the furthest to date in Latin America. Most of these initiatives are still at the stage of posting information, with the expectation that interactive mechanisms will be gradually incorporated for handling transactions, consultations, complaints and suggestions.

Another important set of actions is focused on what, from the government viewpoint, is a necessary condition for public access to online services: connectivity. Several Latin American countries have launched massive programmes to increase the number of people with Internet access. The characteristics of these programmes vary from country to country, and they may be managed at the national or local level, or both.

Creating new services and programmes

This includes building new technologies into old services, as in the case of primary and secondary education, and creating services that are possible only with the advent of these technologies, such as certain agricultural extension activities.

Activities of this kind are just beginning in the region. Progress is being made in at least two areas of social policy, namely education and health, through the creation of distance education and telemedicine programmes, and the introduction of electronic files, among other initiatives. Generally speaking, these are initiatives of individual institutions and do not represent overall government strategies.

Citizen participation in managing state and government affairs

This includes consultations with the public by legislators and responding to citizen demands for accountability by government.

This is the least advanced of the three kinds of initiatives discussed here. For the time being, efforts tend to be limited to obtaining public feedback on existing services or on the performance of parliamentarians, for example. Specifically, the facilities currently in place or planned for the near future consist of using e-mail for submitting opinions on policies and policy decisions.

Each of these three approaches to incorporating the Internet into public policies can be conducted, as Vega (2001) indicates, at three levels:

- National: as part of comprehensive central government policy actions
- Provincial, municipal or local: similar to the national level but involving provincial, municipal or local governments
- Institutional: in the case of actions of one or more individual institutions or ministries, rather than the government as a whole

These three lines of action depend on non-virtual social and institutional practices for making use of the Internet to promote citizen participation. In other words, the Internet by itself will not guarantee the quality and availability of information online, nor the suitability of new programs that are created, and the availability of online tools is not in itself a guarantee of participation in the affairs of state and government.

Generally speaking, most of the progress in Latin America is taking place through the online posting of national-level information (as in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay) or institutional information (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) (Vega 2001). There is no sign that the provincial or local level of government has taken such initiatives.

What is not clear about these initiatives is the extent to which they can strengthen the quality, availability and transparency of public services. The Internet cannot by itself transform policies where there are serious problems

of quality, availability and transparency. If the Internet is to contribute to changes of this kind, it will have to be accompanied by real participation from organizations and individuals. It is precisely this component of citizen participation that is lacking in the current process of incorporating the Internet into public policies.

At the same time, CSOs have been absent from the debate. Thus, when we speak of electronic government today, the official version of what it means is the only version in play. Yet incorporating the Internet into public policies is in itself a political act, subject to points of view, interests and perspectives, like any other aspect of politics and government. For that reason, we will not offer here a definition of what electronic government means, for example, and will instead content ourselves with presenting some lines of action and some examples of what is currently understood by the term.

How can citizen participation in public policies best be encouraged? The following are some ideas for addressing this issue and the various strategies available.

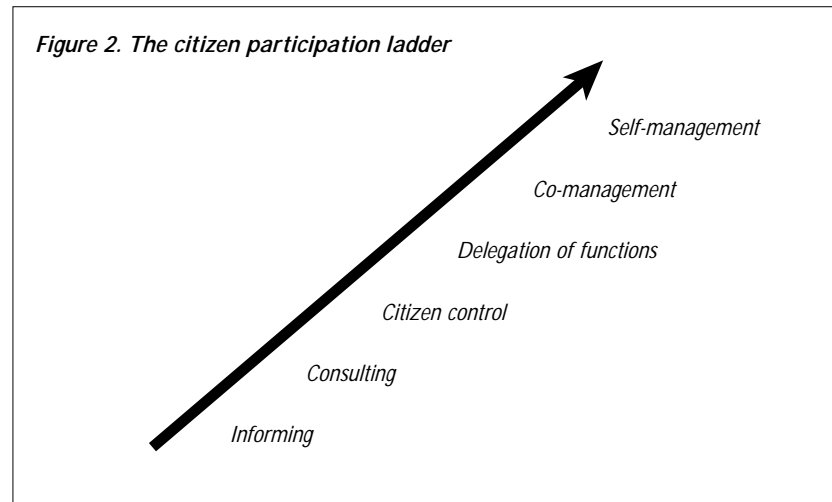
Public policies and citizen participation

Not all CSOs are interested in influencing public policies, and yet many in fact do so. Farmers' organizations seek to shift agricultural policies and free trade treaties in their favour; labour unions try to change labour, employment and social security policies; environmental groups seek to transform laws and decrees that militate against the sound use of natural resources. There are many such examples. What is clear is that there is a broad set of public policies that at a given time will be the object of lobbying by organizations that see themselves as potential allies of those policies or that feel their own agendas threatened by them.

For those organizations that do seek to influence public policies, citizen participation at the various stages of formulation of such policies is one way of ensuring socially relevant policies.⁷ Incorporation of the Internet into public policies is no exception. We need to identify, then, what components of public policies, and what points in their formulation, should be the object of citizen participation, what the expectations of CSOs are, and what actions governments are currently taking in this regard.

In theory, citizen participation can be appreciated with the image of a ladder, the rungs of which represent ascending degrees of citizen involvement, from merely being informed to actual policy management (Mora and Guerrero 2001).⁸ Figure 2 on the next page shows a sketch of this ladder of citizen participation, showing potentially permanent forms of citizen participation.

The following is a definition of each of the rungs of the citizen participation ladder. They should not be taken to exclude the possibility, however, that certain forms of citizen participation can apply to more than one rung at the same time.



Informing

This is the basic level of participation, where doubts are clarified, the scope, benefits and consequences of actions are explained, and fears are allayed. The purpose here is generally to avoid opposition, but not to incorporate the citizen perspective. Governments today are operating at this level when they seek to promote electronic government or electronic democracy.

Consulting

This involves a limited degree of participation, but it can be strategic when it is binding on decision makers responsible for the policy in question. At this step, decision makers submit the implementation of a given policy decision for public consideration. Costa Rica has an example of binding consultation of this kind involving the new municipal code. In other cases, such as hospital health boards, the consultations were non-binding.

Citizen control

At this point, power is transferred to for executing policies already established, but only within the scope of public policy (i.e. the privatization strategy is not part of this step). Through this mechanism, can effectively monitor government commitments and insist on the necessary corrections or changes to policy. Generally speaking, the level of citizen participation at this stage is still weak. One example in Costa Rica was the creation of Natural Resource Watchdog Committees.

Co-management

Here we have decision-making powers shared between government representatives and . In Costa Rica, we may point to the co-management of protected areas as the only concrete example. There are mechanisms, however, that could allow for further progress in this direction, such as collective bargaining between workers and employers. As with citizen control, this is a strategic stage for many CSOs, but it is just beginning to make its appearance in Central America.

Self-management

This is the highest rung on the citizen participation ladder, where the citizens design programmes, administer them and execute them. Examples in Costa Rica can be found in the indigenous territories and in community forest management.

Depending on the specific policy and the institutional and political setting, the “critical level” of citizen participation may be at any one of these rungs. While for some policies it may be critical to ensure effective public participation in the control of services (e.g. in the private contracting of public services), for other cases the critical level may be that of consultation (e.g. in formulating strategic policies such as signing of the free trade treaties now under discussion).

As well, the critical level for any one policy may change over time, and it is the CSOs that should define that level, since what is at issue is the mechanism of influence and not the end purpose itself. Yet we may say that CSOs are making significant efforts, at least in Costa Rica, to be involved at the levels of binding consultation, citizen control and co-management.

When it comes to incorporating the Internet into public policies, this is still tied up in the rhetoric of citizen participation, where governments are trying to establish a correspondence between democracy and electronic government as well as between electronic government and online information and consultation. To cite only a few aspects, current government efforts can be characterized as follows:

- The relationship is one way, from government to the people; and if a two-way relationship exists or is promised, the “second lane” will be limited to expressing opinions on specific aspects of services. This amounts to participation at the “informing” level, where each citizen, in principle, is to be informed.
- In general, initiatives are “gradualist”, i.e. they involve progressive stages in using the Internet in public management. They are “gradualist”, however, in the sense that use of the Internet will move

on from purely informative purposes to conducting online procedures, which will eventually replace over-the-counter transactions. In other words, the concept does not refer to moving up the ladder of citizen participation, but to deepening the role of ICTs in service delivery.

- Potentially, these uses of the Internet could strengthen the quality, availability and transparency of public policies. Yet this will not depend on the use of the Internet itself, as if it could somehow magically transform policies, rather but on the kind of input – not electronic but real – that citizens can have through electronic tools.

In short, if the Internet is incorporated into public policies in a context where the citizens have no say as to when, how and why it is done, the prospects for equitable access, meaningful use and social appropriation of the Internet will be severely compromised.

One way of increasing citizen participation at the higher rungs of the ladder is to identify allies within the public sector and to join forces with the private sector. Just as there are many kinds of CSOs within , the public and private sectors are also heterogeneous. It may be possible then to join forces with organizations in one or the other sector.

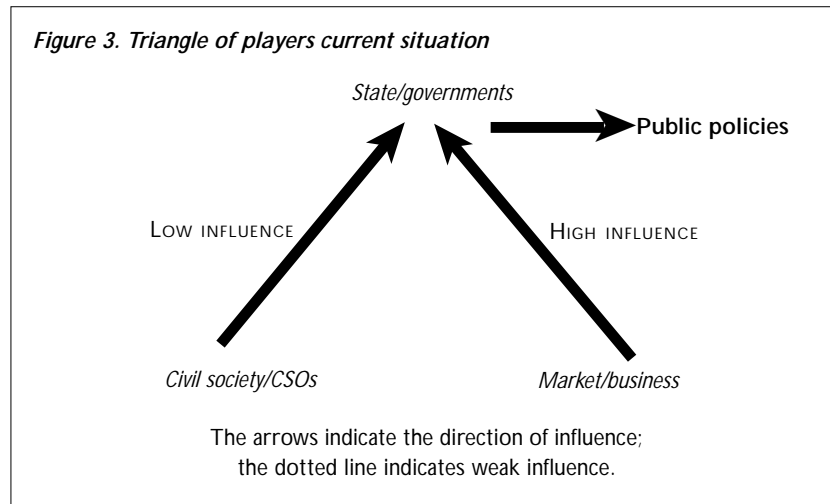
Building alliances⁹

The current incorporation of the Internet is largely the result of lobbying by private businesses to expand their markets for infrastructure, equipment, programmes, etc. The private sector's capacity to influence the public agenda in terms of incorporating the Internet into policies is very important, although not yet very visible. This is not to say that those interests are necessarily negative, but they do reflect a specific agenda that is generally tied to commercial interests in the production of computer equipment and software for government use or in securing government procurement contracts so as to enjoy economies of scale in the domestic electronics business.

Figure 3 represents the current situation in terms of influence over governments: private firms have a great capacity to influence policies, while CSOs have a low capacity to do so. As a result, public policies resulting from government decisions tend not to represent the interests and viewpoints of the different sectors of society.

Strengthening the relationships in the current triangle of players influencing public policies is a requirement for strengthening the quality, availability and transparency of policies. Moreover, it is essential if policies are to be in effect "public", i.e. if they are actually to aggregate the demands and interests of the various sectors of society.

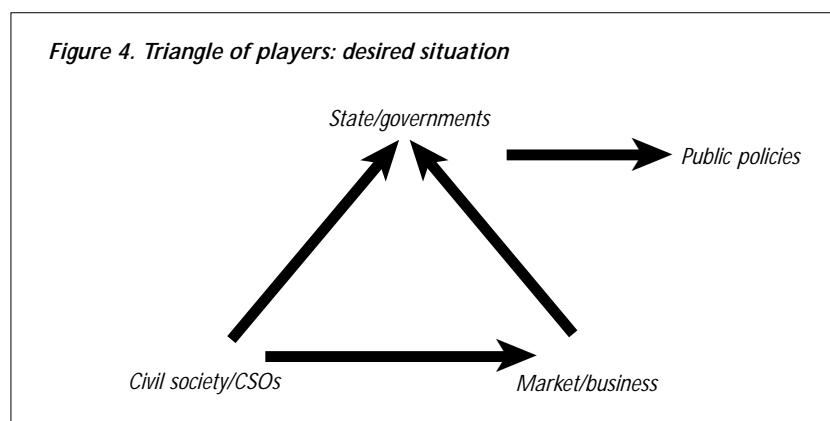
The building of alliances around the social promotion of the Internet is just beginning in Latin America, but it is making progress. For example, in March 2001 representatives of the public and private sectors and CSOs involved in strengthening telecentres held a meeting in Santiago, Chile. There



they reached an agreement on an agenda for universal Internet access <<http://www.elmostrador.cl>>. Yet we cannot at this time state that CSOs have anywhere near the degree of influence that the private sector has in promoting the incorporation of ICTs into public policies.

We may say that the triangle of relationships that must underlie any public policy capable of meeting the interests and agendas of the different players is that represented in Figure 4.

In the figure, the arrows in the triangle show the direction of influence. The goal is to arrive at a situation where CSOs employ the opportunities and possibilities of influence that seem strategic in terms of the national context, the type of policy involved and the particular juncture. In short, the idea is to ensure that public policies effectively aggregate interests and agendas from the different sectors of society.



Clearly, the desirable relationship among players is subject to the contexts in which the activities are being conducted: a national setting in which governments and policies are relatively strong (as in Costa Rica) is not the same as one in which governments and policies are relatively weak (as in Nicaragua). Similarly, major reforms to public policy as part of modernization of the state may imply different frameworks of action: from complete privatization of telecommunications (as in El Salvador and Guatemala) to the maintenance of a public monopoly (as in Costa Rica).

Incorporation of the Internet takes place within a broader environment and it is that environment, together with the objectives of the CSOs involved, that will determine the most reasonable and desirable advocacy strategies.

As part of our evaluation of the Internet's impact on Central American CSOs, Fundación Acceso examined the national environments in which the Internet is being incorporated at the organizational level. That analysis identified three broad scenarios in terms of the apparent social impact of the Internet on the respective national environment. Each impact points to a different advocacy approach, in accordance with each scenario (Martínez 2001).

Scenario 1: Rapidly rising social inequalities (examples: Guatemala and El Salvador)

Under this scenario, introducing the Internet deepens and widens the social divide. Most of the population (between 50 and 70 percent) is living in poverty (ECLAC 1998: 273) and private telecommunications services, and the Internet in particular, reach only a very small portion of the population. If this trend continues, mass connectivity programmes will be unable to contain the growing digital divide, which reflects profound social inequalities. The telecommunications sector has been totally privatized, and the state has done little to compensate for the effects of that move in rural and other areas that are of no interest to the private sector. The population with Internet access is less than 1 percent (between 0.6 and 0.7 percent), although rapid growth is expected among groups with adequate purchasing power, thanks to the accelerating development of telecommunications. In this context, with a public sector that has always been weak and insensitive to people's needs, initiatives to promote the non-commercial use of the Internet come primarily from the private sector. To promote the social vision of the Internet, the possibilities of collaboration between CSOs and those private initiatives should be explored, with a view to building a social vision into activities now underway. Such collaboration could include formulating advocacy objectives with respect to public policies in order to reinforce the government role where its presence is essential, as in the incorporation of ICTs into public education.

**Scenario 2: Slowly rising social inequalities
(examples: Honduras and Nicaragua)**

In this scenario, incorporation of the Internet is deepening and widening the existing social divide. A large segment of the population lives in poverty (between 70 and 74 percent) and does not benefit from telecommunications or Internet services, which are used by a very small sector of the population. The social divide is growing more slowly than in the first scenario because of the domestic impasse in telecommunications development, including the Internet. As in the first scenario, if things continue this way, mass connectivity programmes will be unable to halt the growing digital divide, which reflects enormous social gaps. In this scenario, telecommunications is developing slowly and attempts at partial privatization of public telephone operators have failed. There has been a stagnation of investment, which it is hoped that the telecommunications sector will overcome. The population with Internet access is less than 0.5 percent (between 0.3 and 0.4), and growth is expected to be slow.

The public sector is very slowly beginning to incorporate the Internet into its policies. International agencies such as the International Telecommunications Union have helped to promote the non-commercial use of the Internet through mass programmes. These organizations, in turn, have tried to build bridges with local and national governments. To promote the social vision of the Internet, it would be desirable to support these initiatives and to enlist the private sector and CSOs in them.

**Scenario 3: Reproduction of social inequalities
(examples: Costa Rica and Panama)**

The introduction of the Internet reproduces but does not necessarily exacerbate existing social differences. The portion of the population living in poverty is considerably lower than in the other two scenarios (between 20 and 30 percent), and telecommunications access is not limited to privileged groups. In this scenario, massive Internet programmes can prevent the arrival of the Internet from reproducing social gaps. In the telecommunications field, the approaches have differed: we find a gradual deregulation in Panama and a public monopoly in Costa Rica. In this scenario, access to the Internet is the highest in the region (1.6 percent for Panama and 3.9 percent for Costa Rica).

In this scenario, the public sector takes the lead in designing and implementing programmes for the non-commercial use of the Internet. Advocacy efforts must continue to focus on that sector for promoting a social vision of the Internet. On the other hand, public efforts have included private participation, for example in equipment purchases and technical assistance. Consequently, it would be wise to reinforce the bridges between both the

public and private sectors and CSOs, which still have a very limited role in the design, monitoring and execution of public policies.

Under any of these scenarios, as Fundación Acceso sees it, one of the great challenges for public policies is to improve their capacity to meet social needs. CSOs can contribute in this regard by offering their perspective as input to government decision makers.

The intersections between the Internet and socially relevant policies

In the next section, we discuss three broad challenges that must be addressed when advocating the use of the Internet in socially relevant public policies. The key is to define how to work with the Internet as the “object” of advocacy:

- (a) To link social needs to the potential role of the Internet in meeting those needs.
- (b) To work jointly with CSOs dedicated to public policy advocacy.
- (c) To strengthen organizational capacities for inserting a social view of the Internet into socially relevant policies, including in particular the building of alliances.

Linking social needs to a social vision of the Internet

The objective should be to harness the Internet for improving the ability of policies to meet social needs in a way that respects the criteria of availability, quality and transparency. As a point of departure, we may take people’s needs as reflected in the advocacy objectives of organizations working with or on behalf of those sectors. In light of these advocacy objectives, we can explore the role that the Internet might play, once it is incorporated into public policy, in responding to the interests and objectives of these organizations and the sectors they represent.

Identifying the intersection between the Internet and socially relevant public policies requires that those organizations have familiarity or contact with strategic uses of the Internet. Based on conversations with Costa Rican CSO representatives, we offer examples of the kinds of intersection between the Internet and public policies that can be identified through alliances with CSOs:

- ’s organizations are seeking to bring greater accountability to programmes of assistance and social advancement for low-income . One tool to this end could be a one-stop online shopping window where people can find out about programme priorities as they exist on paper and the resources actually deployed; all of this accompanied

by non-digital monitoring by 's organizations. Such information is not generally available to the public in a reliable and timely manner.

- Campesino organizations that promote organic farming can insist that the country's foreign trade offices maintain up-to-date online information on markets for their products. Currently, the small-farming sector is "outside the loop" of external trade offices.

Working together with CSOs devoted to policy advocacy

This strategy goes hand-in-hand with the previous one: it will be impossible to establish strong links between social needs and the potential of the Internet for meeting those needs unless organizations specialized in ICTs and CSOs devoted to policy advocacy pool their efforts to identify and defend social rights and needs.

This strategy consists of building bridges between organizations engaged in thinking and action on using the Internet for social change, such as Fundación Acceso, and organizations that, while they may be Internet users, have not until now considered the Internet as an object of advocacy but have experience in influencing public policies.

Generally, the second group comprises organizations that have varying familiarity with the Internet. The research that Fundación Acceso has been conducting among CSOs on the social impact of the Internet suggests that many of those organizations have Internet access, while a smaller group make "meaningful use" of it and still fewer show clear evidence of social appropriation of the Internet for purposes of social change.

The organizations with which it is most important to undertake collaborative work on the use of the Internet in socially relevant policies are those that already have significant capacity to influence their respective environments, including the relevant public policies. It is of strategic importance to build alliances with this group of organizations so as to bring influence to bear at this crucial time in the incorporation of the Internet into public policies and to demonstrate it to organizations that show less interest in using the Internet in this way.

What an organization like Fundación Acceso can bring to such an alliance is the progress it has made in developing a social vision of the Internet, as well as the results of research and experience in strategic use of the Internet among organizations. There are other Latin American organizations as well that are dedicated to using ICTs for development purposes, and they too can contribute inputs for building alliances of this kind.

When it comes to building alliances, then, the preestablished elements of a social vision of the Internet must be subjected to joint consideration, operationalization and construction with those organizations in order to build a shared vision.

Thus, there will be a need to discuss and define how concepts such as

“equitable access”, “meaningful use” and “social appropriation” are to be reflected in pursuing specific social objectives. For example, campesino organizations promoting clean production may make different use of these concepts from that of organizations dedicated to implementing international agreements, or NGOs devoted to the protection of children’s rights.

Inter-organizational collaboration should lead to an agreed advocacy agenda and strategies for promoting that agenda so as to forge a strong link between social needs and the Internet’s potential for meeting those needs.

Strengthening organizational capacities

In order to foster new forms of citizen participation, organizations must develop their own capacities, including those needed for establishing alliances. The challenge, when it comes to capacity building, goes beyond having a vision and establishing agreements among CSOs – it also implies building personal and organizational capacities for formulating agendas and executing and monitoring policies to incorporate the Internet as a public policy tool and as an object of advocacy towards that goal. This will frequently require not only technical and negotiating capacities but also the ability to exert pressure.

Efforts to strengthen these organizational capacities should be targeted at ensuring that the social vision of the Internet is effectively integrated into socially relevant policies. These capacities include the following aspects, among others:

Choosing the right time. Unless influence is brought to bear at the critical moment of incorporating the Internet into public policies, it will be more difficult to change the situation once it has solidified. Some public policies will be more “topical” and at a more advanced stage of development than others. It is important to make an assessment of this kind when establishing priorities, formulating proposals and establishing alliances.

“Preparing the ground”¹⁰ with individuals and organizations in the public and private sectors. As a point of departure, it must be recognized that neither of these sectors is monolithic and that, indeed, they consist of individuals and various organizations, many of which may be very supportive of the CSO agenda. Building alliances requires that we distinguish between those that are necessary (that cannot be excluded if advocacy is to be successful), those that are desirable and those that are possible (whether necessary or desirable).

Policy formulation capacity. The ability of CSOs to formulate solutions is not a substitute for the work of public institutions and officials. In seeking to influence policy formulation, we are thinking in terms of broad policy guidelines for linking social needs and the Internet’s help in resolving them.

Citizen monitoring and control. In many Latin American countries, governments are unreceptive to social demands, even in a formal way; or if they are receptive, we find that social demands are translated into legislation that must then be implemented. The task of the CSOs, then, does not end with the formulation of policies or with the understanding that they will be implemented: continuous monitoring is required during their execution. This capacity requires a combination of technical and political inputs, including technically valid assessments and indicators and political skills for appreciating when agreements are being fulfilled and for raising the alarm when they are not.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to identify a new challenge: to complement the use of new technologies in CSOs with their incorporation into the current policy advocacy agendas of these organizations in the region. We have therefore addressed a series of major issues for consideration and debate and, ultimately, for the preparation of strategies for meeting this challenge.

As our point of departure, we proposed that, if the Internet is to become a tool for making policies more sensitive to social needs, it must first become an "object" of advocacy by organizations that could benefit from such a tool.

Making the Internet an object of advocacy requires that we address the questions of what CSOs should focus their efforts on as well as how and where they should conduct them. In the first place, we described the current situation as one in which it is particularly important to define strategies for incorporating new technologies into a setting in which, in the absence of appropriate strategies, existing social inequalities are likely to deepen.

In the second place, we explained why we think that public policies should have an important role in improving living standards. We also noted, however, that public policies are an arena for contention among different segments of the population, which means that turning policies into tools that are sensitive to social needs is possible but not a sure thing.

In the third place, we asked what vision of the Internet could be considered a social vision capable of promoting social change and meeting people's needs. We next discussed the need to identify the relevant points of intersection between public policy and the Internet from the viewpoint of CSOs.

Fourth, we described the major government actions now being taken for incorporating the Internet, and we drew a distinction between national environments for purposes of analyzing the impact of the Internet on existing social inequalities, as well as the channels for bringing influence to bear in each case.

In the fifth place, we distinguished the ascending rungs of a "ladder" of citizen participation, which CSOs can identify and prioritize according to

their agendas and their respective environments, and which will be useful in defining their working strategies. The possibility of moving in this direction was shown to be a function of the alliances that can be built with other players in the private and public sectors, establishing priorities in accordance with the national contexts involved.

Finally, we outlined three broad challenges for influencing the incorporation of the Internet into public policies in ways that will meet social needs. Those challenges have to do with linking social needs to a social vision of the Internet; identifying those links together with social advocacy organizations; and strengthening the advocacy capacities of organizations, both in terms of the timing of their interventions and the definition of strategies for formulating, monitoring and evaluating policies.

As we indicated at the outset, this paper will have fulfilled its objective if it serves to spark debate on how to make national environments more sensitive to people's needs and if it has provided some elements for debate on how to complement the use of new technologies at the organizational level with their incorporation into the current policy advocacy agendas of CSOs in the region.

Notes

1. With financial support from the PAN programme of the International Development Research Centre.
2. organizations are understood here to mean private organizations with a public purpose, including social and non-governmental organizations.
3. For the results that this research is producing, see <<http://www.acceso.or.cr/publica>>.
4. A *campesino* is a subsistence farmer.
5. While it is true that there is a great variety of ideological and political orientations among CSOs, we refer in this paper exclusively to those CSOs that are committed to social change and to the principles of equity, solidarity and social justice.
6. This section is based on Gómez and Martínez (2001) and on Camacho (2001).
7. It is possible that, in some cases, CSOs will feel that they have the backing of the government or of elected representatives and will therefore not feel a strategic need for citizen participation in public policies.
8. This ladder was first designed by Arnstein in 1969 and subsequently adapted by Mora and Guerrero (2001). Taking the Mora and Guerrero ladder, we eliminated the first rung, "manipulation" (since this can occur at any point on the ladder), and we changed the name of the "delegation of functions" rung to "citizen control" (since the delegation of functions is largely relative to this aspect). With a few minor modifications, we have taken the description of each rung from Mora and Guerrero, including several of the examples relating to the environment and to municipal government.
9. The ideas presented here were originally developed in Martínez (2000).
10. The importance of "preparing the ground" for working relations with

organizations is one of the aspects that Fundación Acceso has been pursuing, based on advocacy experience of the National Association of Public and Private Employees (ANEP) in Costa Rica, and specifically during the negotiations between ANEP and the Costa Rican Exporters' Association (CADEXCO) in preparing ideas for a new national development strategy. A systematic presentation of the first part of these negotiations between labour and business is available at <<http://www.acceso.or.cr/publica>>.

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