Information technology ‘for and by’ low-income communities in Sao Paulo

Ricardo Y. Kobashi
Committee for the Democratization of Information Technologies Sao Paulo - CDISP
Rua dos Carmelitas, 140 – ZIP 01020-010 Sao Paulo-SP Brazil
www.cdisp.org.br - kobashi@cdisp.org.br

Abstract: Technology for and by communities

“Access to information and communication technologies helps in promoting citizenship, in improving education and health, and in reducing violence in low-income communities.” For the past five years, this motto has been enough to explain what we did and guide to our work. Not anymore. We have eventually realized that what we were doing was only part of the job. Or worst, there were parts of the job we were not even aware of.

When we say that we give access to information technology are we talking about use, or are we referring to technology design and transformation, as well? Is the digital divide about computer literacy? But what is computer literacy? Is Internet access only about connecting computers or does it also involve local content production and dissemination?

These are questions we are trying to answer with our projects and daily experience. And the answer is getting very clear: bridging the digital divide and promoting full community development goes well beyond mere access. It requires providing underserved communities with the power they need to use, transform and design information and communication technologies (ICT) towards their own community development and, in addition to that, the power to harness ICT itself to facilitate the creation improvement and dissemination of local tools and methods.

CDISP: Who we are

The Committee for Democratization of the Information Technology Sao Paulo (CDISP) is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization that, since 1996, has brought information and communication technologies to underprivileged groups in Sao Paulo. Through its Information Technology and Citizenship Schools (EIC), CDISP executes programs with the goal of reintegrating members of the communities, diminishing the levels of social exclusion that they endure.

EICs offer classes and activities that promote the transformation of excluded communities’ members into active and informed participants of the information society. The idea is to use modern technologies as a good pretext to spark community reflection and development.

Today, CDISP has more than 55 EICs operating in the Sao Paulo metropolitan area. There are about 180 communities in the waiting list.

Figure 1: CDISP meeting bringing together volunteer educators, community members and leaders, ICT professionals and others.
Community commitment

There is no such a thing as a School of Information Technology and Citizenship without local community commitment. And this concept lies at the core of our work. For CDISP, schools are the road, not the destiny.

Rather than offering computers to everyone, CDISP expects community members to take the initiative and write up a simple proposal introducing themselves and describing what they would like to do with the technology. Once the proposals are received, members of the new community are invited to join in CDISP’s training workshops and computer donation campaigns. Community support constitutes an important component of an EIC creation. And who decides if the new EIC is ready to start? A group made of CDISP employees, volunteers and representatives of the existing EICs leaders make this decision.

As much as CDISP relies on community engagement for the construction of new EICs, each EIC is in itself a powerful tool for community development and organization. We know that and we push that idea as far as we can. CDISP encourages cooperation and self-organization by helping EICs carry educational activities that address local problems and by organizing events for the exchange of experiences intra and inter communities.

It should be noticed that CDISP does not do philanthropy. EICs are the result of partnerships. On the one hand, CDISP helps in the initial organization of the school by providing free machines, software, wiring, and permanent technical, pedagogical and administrative assistance. On the other hand, schools are to be self-managed and self-sustained. Community members are also expected to contribute to CDISP’s mission achievement by assuming active roles in CDISP activities such as elections, barn-raise parties, assessments, campaigns and so on.

Today they ask for help, tomorrow they help

Most of the computers distributed to EICs are refurbished. A good number of the computers donated to us arrive broken, dirty, requiring upgrades, software installation, etc. Sometimes we have more than a hundred computers in our stock waiting for maintenance. So much work to do that we would have to spend our scarce resources hiring a technician. Not any more.

Today, we rely on ‘Mutiroes’ (barn raising parties). Whenever required, we invite ex and current students from EICs’ computer maintenance classes to spend a weekend at CDISP lab. For one or two days, we have young people from different communities and regions of Sao Paulo, working together, teaching each other, having a good time and, of course, fixing computers for the next batch of CDISP EICs.

The value of diversity

CDISP is very concerned about young people. We know that crime and drugs appear as an attractive economical alternative very early in life. Studies indicate that this is especially true...
for 13 to 20 year olds. For this reason, they constitute one of ours major target publics.

And besides that we still have a larger challenge. Exclusion is a social problem and we have to face it. We need to reach out to audiences from all social levels, origins and creeds to achieve our mission. And we have learned how to take advantage of this situation.

Based on its non-segregation approach for school creation and on the focus on local priorities, today CDISP has EICs that concentrate on children, youth, the elderly, people with special needs, illiterate people, and racial minorities.

The interaction among such diverse populations has proved to be beneficial in several ways. We see communities who have started to look with different eyes to their members with disabilities since a valuable discussion with members of an EIC for the handicapped. Or an EIC for the elderly that learned tricks from one that deals with the visually impaired. There are more and more examples of how diversity has been helping in our work. Now we are trying to find new ways of putting all these experiences together. We believe ICT can create a major impact in this direction.

E-Government and social inclusion

Brazilian government is using information technologies, and especially the Internet, to promote social control and participation (http://www.brasil.gov.br/). Our election process is already 100% digital. All income and expenses of the Brazilian federal government are stored in the SIAFI (Financial Administration Integrated System), a network system that can be easily accessed and that already supported several denounces of corruption. In the fiscal year of 2000/2001, more than 10 million Brazilian contributors have sent their tax declarations through the Internet (http://www.receita.fazenda.gov.br/). The government is using Internet reverse auctions (wins who presents the lowest price) to purchase from office supplies to food for public schools. Today in Sao Paulo, there are around 28,000 companies selling to the government through these Internet reverse auctions (http://www.bec.sp.gov.br/). Moreover, the Ministry of Education has the listing of all Brazilian university courses and associated performances available on the Web (http://www.inep.gov.br/).

These are all very valuable initiatives. However, we should not forget that only 6% of the Brazilian population has Internet access. We have to keep in mind the tecnological situation and cultural aspects of the 94% excluded not only from the benefits of the digital life, but also from the socio-politic context of the country as a whole.

It is for them – and for us – that more suitable technology has to be developed. CDISP sincerely hopes that the examples we are getting from our communities serve as inspiration for future initiatives.

Design and transformation of technologies: the real gap

Computer literacy and Internet access are the very first step towards an effective use of technology in the quality of life improvement of our communities. CDISP is doing that and we believe with some quality. Although we are financially constrained, we can fortunately count with a very rich group of community...
members and volunteers that helps us handle most limitations. Most, but not all.

Early in our work we have realized that the technology we were using was not appropriate for us. It had been built for people who had some money, some instruction and needs that were quite different from ours. It was made for private companies, governments and institutions with employees, budgets, sales, cultures and objectives very different from ours.

Today, browsing the Internet or CDROM libraries, one can easily find content about how to cook a fancy dinner or a low calorie meal. There are no recipes for a community-catering cooperative, though. One could also easily find software to manage business or personal finance, but nothing simple and good enough to manage a small, local, powerful and valuable community organization. While computers are getting faster and smaller, we would probably be happier with larger keyboards for our handy workers.

We understand that technology designed by for-profit companies will target those who can pay for it. We cannot. Therefore, if underserved communities want to have technologies that are better suited to their needs, they will have to start assuming an active role in the design of these technologies. And they will need all the help they could get.

But there is a beauty about digital technologies. Somehow they seem to have been created to be used and transformed by all and for all. We believe that, with the collaboration from existing designers, institutions, governments and companies we can turn this potential into reality. We can do it.

**CDISP as a benchmark initiative**

CDISP is recognized in Brazil as a benchmark initiative for the application of technology as an instrument for underserved community development. As a result, CDISP is very often called to contribute its experience and expertise to other NGO’s, the corporate sector, and the government. Past projects of this type include:

- **Informatica Solidaria**, with several civil society organizations as FIESP (Industry Federation of the Sao Paulo State), REBRAF (Brazilian Network of Assistive and Philanthropic Associations), Rotary Foundation and others—providing computers, training and administrative support for non-profit institutions.
- **Oficina de Inclusao Digital**, with the Brazilian federal government, RITS (Third Sector Information Network), sampa.org and others—reviewing and crafting policies for Brazilian “digital inclusion” process.

Past projects of this type include:

- **sampa.org**, with Instituto Florestan Fernandes – providing internet access for low-income communities. (http://www.sampa.org)

- **Informatica Solidaria**, with several civil society organizations as FIESP (Industry Federation of the Sao Paulo State), REBRAF (Brazilian Network of Assistive and Philanthropic Associations), Rotary Foundation and others—providing computers, training and administrative support for non-profit institutions.
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(http://www.inclusaodigital.org.br/)