

WORKING DRAFT

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**EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET IN CIVIL
SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS OF CENTRAL AMERICA**

Kemly Camocho
Fundación Acceso (Costa Rica)

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Evaluating the Impact of the Internet in Civil Society Organizations of Central America

Kemly Camacho

1. Presentation

The Fundación Acceso is a civil society organization (CSO) working to enhance the effectiveness of the region's civil society organizations by strengthening their organizational capacities. Currently, Acceso has three programs under way: 1) planning, monitoring and evaluation, 2) strengthening management boards, and 3) strategic communication.

Internet began to be used more intensively in Central America about five years ago, and yet there has been no research into its impact and implications in these countries. The Fundación Acceso has decided, therefore, to carry out a line of work to assess the impact of the Internet in Central America

This research, which was launched in September 1999, is intended to run for 24 months and is supported by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada. It is hoped that the findings from this research will contribute:

1. To assess state of the Internet in Central America to understand the experience of CSOs in adopting the Internet.
2. To analyze the impact Internet has had on the internal aspects and CSOs.
3. To construct useful instruments for organizations to follow up on their Internet adoption process.

Concrete products related to these goals are:

1. Tools that relate internal organizational capacities to their needs with strategic uses of Internet.

2. A methodology to share with Central American organizations to understand and testing results, effects and impacts of the adoption of the Internet.

Research into the impact of the Internet on civil society organizations in Central America does not start from the premise that this technological tool is in itself a positive instrument for the region's organizations. We have taken account of the possibility that our work may reveal negative as well as positive aspects in the performance of organized groups in our countries.

We want to understand the Internet phenomenon in Central American organizations so as to be in a better position to propose answers to the major questions that arise in countries of the South when it comes to appropriating the Internet:

How can our organizations, given their specific context and conditions of inequality, appropriate the Internet and create alternate way of using the Internet for countries of the South?

What capacities do organizations have to develop in order to turn this tool to their advantage and to improve living conditions in the countries where they operate?

The principal concern in analyzing the Internet in our region arises with the recognition that the hegemony of developed countries is reflected in the workings and dynamics of the Internet.

"In the global knowledge society, those who control financial capital will continue to control intellectual capital." (Michel Minou in a letter to Mistica, 19/5/2000).

"The digital gap does not exist in itself, but is the result of other social gaps, and if we do not move to make correct use of technology, those gaps will continue to grow" (Acceso team)

Reaffirming this thinking, we find that it is the developed countries that are creating the principal software and hardware for handling the Internet, that 90 percent of Internet production is in English, the presentation of the sites is based on concepts typical of northern countries, the information conveyed is primarily produced in developed countries, the sites, portals and search engines have been developed 85 percent by companies based in those countries, the possibilities of access and use are completely related to levels of development in terms of electrification, telephone service, education, literacy and meeting the basic needs of the inhabitants of each country.

Within this panorama, what must countries of the South do in order to compete with developed countries in the creation of technological tools? How can they learn to appropriate the Internet and the virtual world? How can they derive advantages from NICTs to create home-grown options? How can they create national conditions for making use of the Web? Should this be a priority task for our organizations and governments, given the great needs facing our peoples? Is it wise to promote an electronic literacy campaign, when we still do not have basic literacy?

"If we do not build it here, others will come from abroad and will lead us along their routes. If we do not build it together, some of us will impose our own routes on others. The proper thing is to cooperate and determine our own routes as a community, country, subregion or region." (Daniel Pimienta en Mistica)

How can organizations in our impoverished countries face the dilemma and the responsibility of not falling behind in the use of a technological tool that is now the prime mover in the globalized world to which we belong? How can they cope with this new form of communication and information, under very unequal conditions of development and with the responsibility to offer independent and indigenous options

With this project, the Fundación Acceso hopes to help find our own ways of using technology, based on the experience of organizations in Central America.

It is important to note that at present this research is exactly at the midpoint of its execution. We are putting into practice the methodological proposals derived from the framework that we developed during the first year of our work. In this paper, we present a big summary of theoretical and methodological approaches which delimited this evaluation. For the Aspen meeting we can present some results of these applications.

2. Initial concerns upon addressing the issue

The initial concern that we faced upon launching our research was to come to a clear understanding of what we meant by "impact" and by "impact evaluation". Both of these definitions were obviously going to be determinants of the theoretical and methodological design of our research.

We decided to define impact as "changes produced in a social group as a result of the insertion of a new component". This definition brought us to realize that assessing the impact refers not to analyzing the insertion of the new component itself, but rather the changes that this new component produces. In other words, if we focus on the insertion of the new component itself, we are addressing the obvious, but

as we move on to analyze the changes brought about by the insertion of the new component, we must delve further beneath the surface. It is this latter aspect that has interested us in our work over these two years.

On the basis of this thinking, the research that we are conducting defines the impact evaluation of the Internet on civil society organizations in Central America as the following:

Assessing the changes in the internal operations and the mission of organizations resulting from the incorporation of this new technological tool.

Another discussion this work has generated is the way in which we understand the digital divide. In this sense, we consider that:

- ✓ Closing the digital divide based simply on access to technology will not solve the situation of economic and political disadvantage that the least favored groups and countries are in.
- ✓ Connectivity, where a connection to the web is seen as an end in itself and not as a means, will not solve the problem of technology appropriation.
- ✓ An alternative vision of equitable access, strategic uses, Internet appropriation and its use for social change must be encouraged.
- ✓ Universal access, by itself, as an end and not a means, basically encourages the expansion of the consumer market .
- ✓ The creation of national policies for access to and use of technology should be based on participatory and inclusive processes/mechanisms

- ✓ A social vision of the uses of technology should be created and encouraged to confront the commercial vision and uses.

3. Constructing a theoretical and methodological framework

When we began our work to build an evaluation framework, the principal uncertainty we faced was how to come to grips with a reality that is changing so rapidly. One of the features that we found in our study of the Internet, in comparison to other fields of study, is precisely the speed with which the technology is adopted, and the changes that this implies. This is why we considered it important to build a framework that would delimitate and guide the work based on the definition of theoretical and methodological aspects.

3.1. The theoretical section

The work we are developing is based on the analysis of 5 categories and 5 evaluation questions. We also designed 26 variables relating to the analytical categories, and a number of indicators associated primarily to the quantitative variables. Table 1 shows how we categorized and related this entire conceptual scheme.

Table 1. The categories and variables of the framework for assessing the impact of the Internet in CA OSCs

CATEGORIES				
National context	Organizational Context	Results	Effects	Impacts
VARIABLES				
National policies on electrification, telephone service and telecommunications.	Fear of change	A newly developed institutional capacity.	New forms of communication.	<p>CULTURAL ORGANIZATION. Empowerment. Democratization. Participation. Consensus. Interpersonal relationships.</p> <p>WORKING PROCEDURES AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE Working procedures. Organizational structure. Decision-making process.</p> <p>POLICIES AND STRATEGIES. Relationship to mission, objectives and organizational strategies. Policies, strategies and institutional guidelines.</p> <p>TARGET POPULATION. Products and services. Communication. Expansion.</p> <p>UNDERSTANDING OF THE ENVIRONMENT. Detecting changes in the environment.</p> <p>INTERRELATIONSHIPS. Inter-institutional networks. Relationship with others. Relationship with donors.</p>
National policies on Internet use and access	Lack of knowledge about the potential and usefulness of the Internet for the organization.	Infrastructure installed in the organization.	Access to better and greater information.	
Public and private technological education	Lack of knowledge of the organizational changes and resources required to make use of the tool.	Internet services within the organization	New ways of exchanging services	
Public and private initiatives with Internet services	Agents of organizational change (internal and external)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Services used. Services provided. 		
Training in Internet use and technical support	Interest and need			
The national climate and attitude towards this technology	Approach to the adoption of new technologies in general.			
	Status of computerization			
ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS				
To what extent do factors of the national context inhibit or promote adoption of the Internet in organizations of civil society in Central America?	What is the relationship between know-how, attitudes and personalities that make up the organization and the way in which they cope with the changes provoked by adoption of the Internet?	What relationship can be observed between the installed capacity of the organizations and the use they make of the new technology?	To what extent does incorporation of the Internet affect, quantitatively and qualitatively, the processes of communication, information and organizational services?	To what extent does the adoption of the Internet change the organization's performance and fulfillment of its mission?

3.2. The methodological approach

Once we had designed our own way of understanding the phenomenon, we established the manner in which we would go about addressing the reality and how we would relate our findings to the theoretical framework already prepared. We divided this process into three phases:

1. **Exploratory phase.** Researchers will explore the current status of questions relating to the impact of NICTs, the status of the Internet within the region, and the national context in which organizations are working. This phase relies heavily on quantitative analysis. It consists of: 1) reviewing the theory and examining similar experiences, 2) analyzing the national environments, 3) characterizing the OSCs and their use of the Internet.

2. **In-depth phase.** The Fundación Acceso is interested not only in the quantitative and technical aspects of the process of adopting the Internet in the region's organizations. We also consider it important to examine feelings of success and failure, perceptions, values, culture, opinions, rejection and enthusiasm involved in using this new technological tool. These aspects will be addressed in this phase using qualitative tools. It consists of: 1) monitoring specific organizations, 2) in-depth case studies, 3) comparative analysis.

3. **The participatory phase.** The principal objective of this phase is to share perspectives about the results, effects and impacts of technology, concerns about the future, the advantages and disadvantages of Internet use for the organization, and the difficulties and the success factors inherent in adopting the tool. As well, we intend to validate the principal findings to date from our research, and use them as inputs in this part of the study. This phase consists of: 1) a regional meeting with organizations, primarily those participating in the case studies.

We intend to take a rigorous methodological approach, which means that the techniques and tools must be directly related to the analytical categories, variables and indicators previously defined. Empirical evidence will allow us to determine whether the models, preconceptions and hypotheses are correct. The fieldwork will enable us to answer the evaluation questions posed at the outset of our work.

At this point, we are in the midst of executing five of the activities:

1. Reviewing the theoretical background and other similar experiences as a constant feedback.
2. Analyzing the national contexts
3. Conducting a telephone survey of 100 organizations in the region's six countries.
4. Conducting the 15 case studies in the region's six countries.
5. Preparing a manual of strategic uses of Internet for OSC.

5. Lessons learned

We may summarize the principal lessons learned from execution of the project for evaluating the impact of the Internet on civil society organizations in Central America, in the following terms:

1. Joint reflection on and systematization of the experience of several years of the Acceso team's work in this area.
2. Development of our own methodology, combining researchers' training with Acceso's own experience, contact with the organizations and establishment of relationships with organizations and sympathetic and interested individuals.
3. Involving Acceso and its researchers in worldwide discussion of the impact evaluation. Presenting our own independent and indigenous viewpoint.

4. Knowledge of individual stakeholders and organizations with whom we can work together, discussing positions, establishing bonds of friendship, making joint proposals.
5. Constructing analytical models that go beyond merely compiling data, as was once customary in impact evaluation. If we were to point to any particular strength in our research, it would be this.
6. The emergence of two new lines of work in Acceso: analyzing, monitoring and contributing to national policies relating to the Internet; and, monitoring, evaluation and assessment of the impact of the Internet in Central America.
7. The contribution to the debate about a social vision of the Internet and digital divide referred to equitable access, meaningful use and appropriation of the Internet.
8. Working jointly with Central American organizations to discover methods, tools and instruments for assessing the impact, reconstructing the history, retrieving the underlying feelings and perceptions of the Internet.
9. Approximating the reality of the Internet in the region, where we have confirmed many of the perceptions and assumptions that we had at the outset, but where we have also made some new discoveries.