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CREDITS

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Virtual Community MISTICA

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This document has been written in a collective way (see the chapter entitled "process") to serve as a point of reference to various activities related to the Mistica™ and Olistica projects, which are both coordinated by FUNREDES, the Networks and Development Foundation™.

More specifically, it is meant to be a medium for an alternative way of assessing the social impact of ICT in Latin America and the Caribbean. This assessment will be inspired by the "Isticometrics" principles, which establish that indicators need to be developed through cooperative processes. In this way, it is possible to link the priority developments as established by communities, and to elaborate the indicators in agreement with the social relevance of the phenomena to which they are tied. This relevance cannot indeed be left to the preconceptions held by elites or dominant protagonists. The perspective lies in the objective that societies, activists, and especially the people who ought to enjoy their benefits, participate in the formulation process of public policies.

Using a kind of vocabulary which can be understood by people who are not experts in the field, this document hence tries to shape the vision of the Internet as a tool for social development. Since 1999, a group of people (scholars as well as grassroots activists) have been conceptualizing this vision through virtual fora. The completion of this document should go beyond the mentioned projects, and it may represent a contribution from our region to the international, on-going debate on Information Society.
The Mistica project has already produced two collective documents, on the same topic, although from different approaches:

**Doc-SAM:** the "Letter to Emilio or the Oneiric Relation of the Samaná Meeting" (5/99) focuses, in both pedagogical and multimedia ways, on the description of participative democracy processes and on the spirit which has resulted from it among the Mistica community. This document is extensive and easy to read; it is useful to those who wish to join the Mistica UC (virtual community) or to understand the dynamics of the project.

**Doc-CV:** "ICT in Latin America and the Caribbean in the Globalization Context" (4/99) focuses on the vision the Mistica VC has of the connection between ICT and society. This document is comparatively long and has been written by and for specialists of the field. In a way, the present document updates the Doc-CV, while trying to make it accessible to a larger audience.

We shall add to this list a document that has not been written collectively, and is not part of the achievements of the Mistica project; however, it has resulted from extensive consultations, and to a great extent it reflects the debates within the Mistica VC:

"Internet, What For? Thinking about ITC for the Development of LAC" (3/01) by Ricardo Gómez and Juliana Martínez. It is a large and pedagogical document, intended for a non-specialist as well as specialist audience.

Moreover, there exists other regional documents with a similar perspective, which come directly or indirectly from collective reflection in other frameworks:

"Letter to Aunt Ofelia: Seven Proposals for Equitable Development with the Use of NICT" (4/02) by Ricardo Gómez and Benjamin Casadiego: it stems from a collective creative session that took place during the workshop on Experiences Sharing on Social Appropriation of NICT for Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, organized by ITDG, in Cajamarca, Peru (3/02).

"Telecentres, What For? Lessons on Community Telecentres in Latin America and the Caribbean" (9/02) by Ricardo Gómez, Karin Delgadillo and Klaus Stroll: this stems from the experience of the project Somos@Telecentros.

These various documents, including the present one, represent an original and regional production by Latin America and the Caribbean on issues related to the Information Society.
The process of elaborating the present document in a collective way was formalized by Kemly Camacho, from the Accesso Foundation, as follows:
- she wrote an initial proposal which tried to gather the consensual contents of the debates which had been going on in the last months within the Mistica Virtual Community (UC);
- this initial proposal was submitted to discussion within the coordination group of the Olistica project;
- a second version was produced, integrating the comments of the coordination group;
- following this, the document was submitted to discussion within the Mistica UC, with a discussion agenda running on for several weeks;
- finally, the comments which had been gathered were integrated into that document, in order to produce the last but one version;
- this version, then, was reviewed by the coordination group and was finalized by the person in charge of the project, Daniel Pimienta, before being handed in to the UC, in order to enable the members to determine whether their comments had been properly integrated, and to issue the final document.

The text which has been produced through this process reflects, in a generally consensual way, and in broad outline, the views of the Mistica participants; however, it must be clear that the document has not been formally endorsed by each of the Mistica UC members.

The final comments, which broaden the perspectives of this document, are gathered in the thread of messages that begins with:

The Mistica Virtual Community, composed of men and women from Latin America and the Caribbean, has developed for some time a reflection on topics such as digital divide, the information and knowledge society, and the social impact of the Internet.

Under the general heading of “A Social Vision of the Internet”, we have developed a collective reflection, as well as initiated and promoted various actions.

These actions aim at improving our understanding of the consequences and impact of this technology when it is part of our societies, and at promoting a social appropriation of the Internet. We, who make these proposals, share principles, the gist of which will now be presented.
The Internet is a social matter, not only a technical or a commercial one.

We do not see the network of networks only as a technological platform. Rather, we consider it as a new space of interaction between human beings, which we have created for our own benefit.

This place is changing through the very interaction we are developing. Hence we consider that the technology must be seen, analyzed, managed, studied and used from a social point of view, trying to understand the new types of relations that are being created within the place, the new social processes that are being generated, the cultural evolutions that occur, the new worldviews that are being built, the new economic relations that are being established.
The Internet should not be understood only as the network of networks, from a technological point of view, i.e. as interconnected computers. The Internet should rather be seen as the network of human networks that are related to each other, where computers are nothing more than the mediating technological platform.

Clearly, since the network of human networks rests on a technological platform of interrelated computers, it works with novel and particular characteristics. Because the relations are mediated through the technological platform, both form and contents of communication are altered.

On the other hand, we hold that it is important not to consider the Internet only as a tool whose goal would be to implement new forms of commercial exchanges which is what now defines the priorities of the private sector, what impels and supports it. The Internet should rather be used to boost structures as well as economical, political and social relations which offer alternatives to traditional patterns. Should it be driven only by the market, the Internet would reproduce and increase existing social inequalities.

Civil society is to play a crucial part in the defining the new types of relations and social constructions that ought to be developed from the integration of information and communication technologies. This is not only a stake for governments and private companies.
In order to analyze processes, carry on projects and elaborate proposals related to the technology, we use the following categories: equal opportunities of access, sensible use, and social appropriation of the Internet. We believe that it is important to simultaneously consider those three aspects in order to achieve socially positive results as the Internet continues to be incorporated into our countries.

We understand equal opportunities of access as the opportunity for everyone to have access to the benefits of the Internet. Here we include both the access to the very technology and the development of technical and methodological capacities enabling people to make effective use of the whole potential that is thus made available. The obstacles to equal opportunities of access are not merely technical and financial, they are also educational, linguistic and cultural.

In this respect, we are also concerned with the search for alternative connections and free or inexpensive training, as well as for politics, decisionmaking and governance of the Internet. We are interested in getting involved in the definition of the policies related to domains, costs of space in the Internet and legal matters that have to do with technology, in such a way that our visions and interests would be taken into account.

We see a difference between the mere use and the sensible use of the technological tool. We prompt actions which promote a type of use that relates the needs of the various social groups to the search for alternative solutions, aiming to fulfil these needs through the use of the Internet.

We emphasize the social appropriation of the Internet, so that the tool will acquire meaning in the daily life of social groups and become a tool allowing new knowledge to be generated. This will make it possible for people to transform the concrete framework of their lives.
We, who study, investigate, evaluate and prompt actions related to the Internet with a social vision, explicitly claim that we mean to use the technology as a tool aiming at the transformation of societies.

We then want to discover and promote ways in order to contribute to building novel societies led by common values, such as fairer relations, resulting in less discrimination and more equal opportunities.

Also, from each of our specificities, we emphasize our commitment to promoting actions that will bring all Internet-related opportunities to the least privileged groups in our societies.
We do not believe that the Internet by itself can produce changes that will transform the social and economic conditions of the less privileged groups in our societies and in the world. We do not contemplate a straightforward process; we do not believe in an automatic relation or in one of cause and effect between the Internet and social development.

In order to take advantage of the Internet as a tool for social development, some processes should exist, that would permit the communities, organizations and countries to make the technology their own, in such a way that it would become a meaningful part of their daily lives. In other words, the Internet does mean something about the opportunity to improve living conditions, that it can be something close and relevant to the transformation of existing social, economic, and political relations.

We insist on changing the meaning of the actions related to the Internet. At present they give priority to the installation of connections and equipment, and then wonder what use they can be put to. We call for a previous cooperative reflection, in order to determine what the main problems and needs are, how the Internet can contribute to solving problems and fulfilling needs, and then determine if, how and where, equipment and connections should be installed.

The Internet is an open frame, which we can still take advantage of whether we are organizations, communities, individuals or countries, as long as we aim at improving the conditions of living of the less-favored people.

However, we are also aware of the fact that everything depends on the actions which are to be soon undertaken, and that the possibilities to take advantage of the Internet for social transformation, may either shrink or expand.

In this respect, the Internet must respond to a strategy of communication and information that will be adopted by us, who desire an improvement of the societies in which we live.
The so-called digital divide originates in the social divide. First of all, we consider that the digital divide does not exist in itself, but that it is a consequence of social divides. That is to say, the pre-existing social, economic, political, differences, as well as the distribution of power and resources, do create it.

In order to face the digital divide we need not only to make use of computers, but also to develop the necessary capacities among the groups so that they can take advantage of the technological tool in order to strengthen political, social and economic development.

This means, besides being able to access connected computers, to improve one's personal self-esteem, one's community organization, one's educational level, one's capacities of interaction with other people and groups, one's level of empowerment in order to make proposals, among other things. To reduce the digital divide means that the groups we work with have the capacity to take advantage of the technology in order to improve their own living and environmental conditions.

In sum, the digital divide should not be measured only in terms of infrastructure (for instance, the number of on-line computers in a given place). We shall evaluate the capacity that we have built in relation with the information process as well as with the relations that currently exist on the Internet regarding the beneficial knowledge that is likely to improve our living conditions and our mutual support relations.

Confronting the digital divide is not an individual matter, but a collective one. For this reason, we do not agree with those who present the way of facing the digital divide from an individual point of view. The digital divide is generally evaluated in terms of the ratio between a given population and the number of connected computers. We want to promote the idea of a more collective option. In this way we hold that the benefits coming from the Internet do not originate in the very connection, but in the effects generated by the connection.

That is to say, we will be able to speak of a reduction of the digital divide if the benefits of the tool reach a whole community, even if this community has a small number of connected computers or even no computer at all.

When we talk about facing the digital divide, we speak of communities, organizations or families who benefit from the Internet although they are not directly connected, we do not speak of a one-to-one relation, from the individual to the machine.

For instance, in a given community, a group of youngsters can access the Internet from their school (not from their community) and thus discover, through the tool, a new way of purifying the river water into drinkable water.

They discuss it with adults, adapt the information to community conditions, carry out a similar project which is relevant to local needs and to their own worldview, and eventually manage to produce drinkable water from the river.

If this serves as an example and is followed by similar actions, then the benefits of the Internet will be brought to the whole community. We will speak of actions that permit to reduce the digital divide in the community, in spite of the very fact that only a group of youngsters have access to the Internet and that there does not exist any computer with Internet access within the community.
We hold that the digital divide should be evaluated in terms of the benefits of the Internet that reach (or do not reach) the populations; we also hold that this is not merely achieved through a technical connection. The processes are obviously made easier whenever connections are available in the community, but a mere connection definitely does not make a difference.

Consequently, we encourage actions that reduce the digital divide by bringing the benefits of the Internet to the populations from a community point of view, and not only actions that aim at connecting every individual to the Internet. We hold that efforts and resources available to reduce the digital divide should not focus on hardware, but in processes at the community, organization and nation levels; these processes should bring the benefits of the technology to the main part of the population.
6. SOCIAL DIVIDES IN OUR SOCIETIES ARE REFLECTED ON THE INTERNET; WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR TAKING ADVANTAGE OF AND DEFENDING THE EXISTING OPEN PLACES.

Obviously, differences do exist on the Internet. We do not all have the same opportunities to access what is available on the network, the same opportunities to disseminate what we produce, nor do we have the same technological resources and equipments to take advantage of the tool. These differences are related to technology costs and knowledge.

We are concerned about this trend, even though we believe that many open spaces still exist. We work to prompt actions which reduce the danger that the Internet might become a tool handled mainly by the economic resources of the people who participate in it.

We seek to have those to whom our societies grant fewer opportunities be listened to, find in the tool both a space to speak with their own voices, to interact and to organize with other people, and a place where they will find such information as will help them to find solutions and to fulfill needs.
The Internet is above all a tool which is able to create and to reinforce human networks. Its use makes it possible to create a new social network that we need to understand and to make our own.

The Internet is a tool that can facilitate, improve, and ease the processes that are occurring in the countries, communities, organizations and regions, which aim at improving the living conditions of the bulk of the population.

Consequently, we prompt actions that tend to integrate the Internet into current social practices and organizational initiatives, improve the living conditions of the less privileged, and promote the development of extensive cooperative processes.
8. THE INTERNET PROVIDES INFORMATION, NOT KNOWLEDGE.

We hold that the Internet is an endless source of information, but that it does not provide us with knowledge. We ourselves do produce knowledge, in individual or collective forms, through assimilating information, reflecting on it, adapting it to our own experiences, needs, contexts, and worldviews, discussing it with other people, either face to face or in a virtual way.

Generating knowledge implies that a “thinking process” should be developed. The essence of this is definitely human. The Internet helps us throughout the process and makes it easier, because it allows us to find similar experiences, lessons learned, new ideas about similar issues, because it brings us contributions, because we thus expand our visions, or because we discuss extensively with individuals and groups from many parts of the world. However, the process through which knowledge is generated does take place outside the Internet.

We hold that it is necessary to overcome the myth according to which information is knowledge, and its consequences according to which the very fact of being connected to the Internet allows to have more knowledge.

9 - GENERATING NEW KNOWLEDGE IS AN ENGINE FOR A CHANGE THE INTERNET CAN BOOST, BUT IT MUST BE UNDERSTOOD HOW TO SWITCH ON THE IGNITION.

Generating knowledge through the use of the Internet as an information and communication tool, is not a simple process. It requires discovering new abilities, new capacities, variations in the work processes, as well as new educational profiles that will make it possible for us to better take advantage of the tool in order to generate knowledge. If we do not carry out these kinds of reflections, and do not implement changes, we face the risk of having a great deal of information at hand, but of being paralyzed by the unmanageable quantity of data.

Building knowledge that offers new solutions to needs, improves the ways things are done, and presents alternatives, will be the driving force behind the transformation of our societies. However, learning how to do this is not a spontaneous process. We therefore try to initiate research and studies that emphasize both discovering these new ways, and promoting the concept in international agencies, local and national governments, organizations and communities.

Discovering these new ways of doing things, should be done in connection with social activists, so as to allow the building process to take into account various worldviews, and to stimulate the process through which the Internet as a technological tool is appropriated. The point is that the Internet should become a useful tool so that the socially less privileged can generate new knowledge that will allow them to improve their living conditions and transform the societies in which they live.
Similarly, when we talk about the impact of the Internet we try to understand how the Internet has transformed the daily lives of individuals in their personal affairs, their jobs, in their social relationships, at the level of the general organization or of the citizen.

When we talk about valuing the impact we try to understand to what extent the Internet is transforming the realities we live, as components of social entities, both at the group and at the personal levels. We do not emphasize such realities as the number of computers, connection speed, the quantity of messages, etc. These figures may allow us to understand the context in which we live. However we try to go beyond appearance to get to the substance, to what will remain of this transformation.

11 - IT MATTERS TO US THAT THE USE OF ITC SHOULD LEAD TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS THAT BRING POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGES FOR OUR REGION

We want to make sure that a new information and knowledge is being built. We are careful not to be repeating a slogan. We believe that all societies have had their own ways of generating knowledge and that this has to do with the cultural context. We carefully observe the ways in which social, political and economic structures are being currently altered, in order to make sure that the existing structures are not strengthened and that the evolution is a substantial one. Moreover, we do not consider that the Internet is currently the only factor which makes societies evolve. We adopt a critical and integral look, through which we can analyze the numerous factors and dynamics that constantly participate in their evolutions.
We hold that the Internet can also have negative effects in social, organizational, and personal life. What circulates through the medium often has more to do with quantity than with quality. The Internet may generate work overload, saturation, limitation in personal contacts, feelings of immediacy, diminished opportunities for reading, thinking and enjoyment.

Also, it is perfectly possible to live without the Internet in spite of all the contextual pressures, that incite individuals, organizations and institutions to be connected.

Be that as it may, this decision has to be taken with full knowledge of the facts, that is to say, after having had a chance to know the dynamics implied by the Internet.
In this framework, we would like to summarize our position, and to propose a series of questions, in order to analyze the various proposals and actions that are developing in relation to the introduction of the Internet into our countries and communities.

1- **On equal opportunity of access**
   
a- Is priority given to the least favored groups?
   
b- Is technical and methodological training integrated as part of the connectivity?
   
c- Is access given to all Internet resources so that people can choose what suits them? Or is access restricted to certain services?
   
d- Do the processes through which Internet access is provided (whether already under development or to be developed) promote collective access to the technological tool? In what sense do these proposals and actions promote the reduction of the digital divide in terms of connected communities, organizations, and families?

2- **On sensible use**
   
a- In what way do the developing (or to be developed) uses of the Internet make it possible to build less discriminatory relations, that promote equal opportunities?
   
b- In what way do the developing (or to be developed) uses of the Internet promote the transformation of existing economic, political and social relations?
   
c- To what extent do the uses of the Internet that are promoted take part in existing social practices and do not represent enforced or undesirable changes?
   
d- To what extent do the uses of the Internet that are promoted strengthen the participative processes among the groups we work with?
3- **On social appropriation**

a- In what way do the current (or to be developed) actions encourage the beneficiary populations to give the Internet a proper, autochthonous and genuine meaning, that respond to their daily lives?

b- To what extent do the current (or to be developed) actions encourage the people among whom projects are carried out to participate in the definition and the managing of what is going to be achieved through the use of the Internet?

c- To what extent do the actions that are being initiated through the Internet support communitary, organizational and national processes which promote an evolution toward fairer, more equal and more sustainable societies?

d- To what extent do the actions that are being initiated promote processes that allow to bring the benefits of the Internet to the less privileged, especially to the ones who do not have access to the tool?

4- **On generating new knowledge**

a- To what extent do the uses of the Internet that are being initiated solve concrete needs of the people whom we work with?

b- To what extent do the uses of the Internet that are being initiated contribute to the search for alternatives to the problems identified by the groups we work with?

c- To what extent do the uses of the actions that are being initiated, contribute to improving the conditions of the less favored?

d- To what extent do the uses of the Internet that are being initiated allow to expand the available information within communities so that people may take decisions with more appropriate criteria?

e- To what extent are actions initiated in order to improve the ways relevant information is selected, organized, and interpreted in relation with the daily life of the groups we work with?

f- In what way do promoted actions prompt structural changes among peoples and organizations, so that they can develop innovating processes which allow to integrate the benefits of the Internet into their daily lives?
5- On the defense of protected spaces on the Internet and the dissemination

a- How do the actions that are promoted boost the production of local contents?

b- What level of participation do the people with whom we work have in the development of local contents?

c- To what extent do actions which are promoted allow to disseminate and promote local contents?

d- In what way is the Internet promoted as a space of expression for the less favored and for popular cultures?

6- On the social change produced by the Internet

a- In what way do the actions which are promoted for the development of the Internet prompt elements such as development of personal and collective self-esteem, community organization, improvement of educational standards, capacities of interaction between people, empowerment, or development of the capacity to make proposals from the people with whom the work is done?

b- In what way are actions for the development of the Internet transforming the daily lives of the peoples, from an individual, occupational, interpersonal or citizen viewpoint?

c- What level of probability is there that the transformations produced by the actions that are carried out, have a follow-up in the future?
Since Feb. 1999, when discussions in the Mistica UC were launched

“Internet” is a communication protocol (TCP-IP), which allows computers to communicate with each other. "The Internet" is a network which allows people to communicate and inform themselves through the use of computers and protocols. For this reason we prefer using the phrase "the Internet," which refers to human networks, above the technological stratum.

And quite often, due to limitations in the interface, “immediating”... (in the sense of making superficial).
Trabajando la Internet con una visión social