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Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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COSTA RICA

RURAL TECHNOLOGY HUBS: THE CASE OF NORTHERN COSTA RICA

KEYWORDS: rural, ICTs, gender, science and technolog

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Introduction

Costa Rica has signed 17 of the 18 international human rights instruments – with only the covenant on migrant rights outstanding. It is asserting itself in Latin America as a country with a growing and dynamic digital sector with high development potential. Most opportunities, however, are mainly concentrated in urban centres, which deepens existing economic gaps between urban and rural areas, to the detriment of the latter. This situation occurs in other countries both regionally and globally: the digital sector tends to generate concentrated activity in cities, excluding vulnerable people who live elsewhere.

This report considers the development of a rural technology hub in Ciudad Quesada, the capital of the San Carlos municipality in northern Costa Rica.

Since 2012, Sulá Batsú has been working in northern Costa Rica to promote the inclusion and leadership of rural women in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. Based on this experience, and on research and various formal and informal interviews we did, we will discuss some key elements of the rural ICT hub model. Our purpose is to support and consolidate the work of key ICT actors in the northern rural area and also to use this report as a basis to promote similar spaces in other regions of the country, as well as in other Latin American countries with similar contexts.

Main features of the rural technology hub in northern Costa Rica

The tech hub in San Carlos has been made possible thanks to a number of ICT companies which invested in the area, stimulating employment, the creation of new digital businesses, and the participation of the sector in other economic, social, political and cultural activities in the area. This sector has contributed to the economic dynamism of the area as a whole.

In Ciudad Quesada there are 11 ICT companies. Eight of them were created and are directed by young men from the same area.[1] There are two companies[2] that are nationally owned but operating in the area to take advantage of the opportunities of the rural hub and to contribute to its development.

Recently one transnational company[3] also set up here in order to benefit from the potential of the hub. Even if it is creating employment opportunities in the area, this transnational company also competes with small and medium businesses for specialised human resources, reducing the human resources available to local digital companies.

In total these companies have generated about 250 jobs, especially for young people in the same region. They are usually permanent jobs offering comparatively competitive salaries and high potential for learning and working in challenging environments. The market for these digital companies is primarily international (particularly North and Central America) and secondly local and national. Business innovation is key and explored by working teams led by young entrepreneurs.

A local digital technology chamber[4] was set up, allowing the companies to establish common agendas, work collaboratively and act collectively within the framework of other initiatives in the region. This has enabled the digital sector to become a major player in the development of the northern region of Costa Rica.

KEY FEATURES OF THE RURAL TECH HUB IN NORTHERN COSTA RICA

11 digital technology companies

250 jobs generated

8 companies set up by local entrepreneurs

2 companies run by national entrepreneurs

1 transnational company that recently set up operations in the area

1 local digital technology chamber

1 www.dinterweb.com, www.go-labs.net, www.ncq.co.cr, www.dotcreek.com, www.proditekcr.com, www.sistemasjet.com, www.compubetel.com, www.agempresarial.com

2 www.avantica.net, www.gbsys.com

3 www.growaccelerationpartners.com

4 www.ceticzn.org

Factors boosting the development of the rural technology hub

A combination of mutually reinforcing factors has encouraged the creation of the technology hub in this region of Costa Rica. It is necessary to further analyse the conditions which have catalysed its development. From discussions with various stakeholders, the following factors were identified:

- People with degrees in technology in the area: Definitely a key factor is the excellent training in digital technologies offered by academic institutions in the area. For example, the existence of university centres for the training of engineers in high technology has been a key factor in the generation of the hub. These specialisations have been instrumental in promoting research and keeping digital technologies up to date.
- The teachers of technological degree programmes are originally from the same area: A significant number of new generation teachers are from the same northern region, which strengthens an already present sense of identity. It is also essential to mention that many of these professors are themselves entrepreneurs who have set up small and medium-sized companies in the area. In this way a virtuous circle is created which drives new generations to create new initiatives and to participate in the hub.
- Opportunities for young people in the area: Although Costa Rica's universal model of development no longer exists and despite a reduction of social programmes at national level, there still remain some opportunities for people in vulnerable areas of the country that can produce considerable outcomes if taken advantage of. The possibility of accessing scholarships, internships, laboratories, grants and night courses, among others, have been invaluable for young men and women in the area to pursue degrees in technology and take appropriate measures to fulfil their potential as far as social mobility is concerned. When talking to students with technology degrees, the substantive impact that such a degree may have on members of peasant households is quite evident.
- A digital company as driving force of the tech hub: It is important to emphasise the role that one of the national companies has played as a pioneer in the development of the hub. It did not limit itself to moving part of its operations to the rural area generating employment opportunities for young people locally; it also made sure that local people managed its company. It has additionally promoted and supported other digital businesses in the local digital technology chamber.
- An electricity company in the area which provides local connectivity: It is important to mention the role of a local cooperative whose original purpose was providing electricity to the rural area and which has subsequently focused on telecommunications and rural connectivity. It has had a major role in reducing the digital divide in the area, and has also created a local television channel in partnership with the local digital technology chamber that is very popular.
- A strong culture of collaboration and working in networks in the area: One of the factors highlighted in the interviews is the importance of working in networks and establishing partnerships. Much of the development of the San Carlos municipality itself has been the result of these partnerships (integration is a special focus of the local development agency).[5] Despite the challenges faced in any partnership, regular meetings have allowed the partners to contribute where they can to the development of the municipality, based on their individual agendas.

FACTORS BOOSTING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A RURAL TECH HUB

1. Universities offering young people specialisations in digital technologies.
2. Teachers from the area who, with their own work and background, demonstrate the importance of digital technologies locally.
3. Programmes which create opportunities for young people in rural areas (scholarships, internships, appropriate schedules for working and studying, etc.).
4. Shrinking of the digital divide.
5. A culture of working collaboratively, e.g. forming partnerships and networks.
6. Pioneer digital companies which believe in the potential of rural areas.
7. Young people with roots in their own local area and the desire to remain and contribute to its development.

5 www.adezn.org

The municipality has a culture of working in partnerships and the digital sector has integrated well into these spaces and contributed value from its own perspective.

- A sense of being rooted in the area of origin: Digital entrepreneurs were in agreement on the importance of local roots. All of them have had the opportunity to migrate to urban areas and join national and transnational companies in the centre of the country. However, they decided to stay in the area, create their own businesses in the region, and attract new local professionals with work opportunities that encourage them to remain in the area. All the people we talked to express a genuine interest in contributing to their place of origin. Many other rural areas in the country could meet the other conditions listed above, but the desire of young people to develop their own local space is essential to building rural tech hubs.

A few words about the participation of women and marginalised groups

As generally happens in the field of digital technologies – and northern Costa Rica is no exception – the participation of women is very low. Participation is even lower among indigenous people, those of Afro-Caribbean descent, and people with disabilities. Major efforts should be made to ensure that the hub is inclusive of these population groups. If achieved, this would increase its impact.

To this purpose, our work has been focused on building women's leadership in the field of digital technologies locally. This has not been limited to promoting the integration of more women in the sector, but has also extended to building their capacity to become business owners. Under the umbrella of our TIC-as programme[6] which has been in place since 2012, Sulá Batsú worked with local networks to achieve this goal. There was significant support from all sectors to achieve our objective.

Conclusion and action steps

To conclude, the technology hub of San Carlos, although still in development, is a very important example to follow both at a national and international level. The hub shows how the economic sector of digital technologies can become a catalyst for inclusion if innovative approaches are applied. To make this possible it is necessary to:

- Continue developing the hub and documenting its progress so that a local development model based on digital technologies can be created.
- Work from the perspective of the economic rights of rural populations in the framework of the digital economy so that more vulnerable groups of people are included and the social exclusion of rural populations is reduced.
- Strengthen the factors that have catalysed the development of the hub (university degree programmes, scholarships, local teachers, entrepreneurs-teachers, etc.) and replicate these in other national and international spaces.
- Create public policies to support and encourage local digital businesses in rural areas.
- Consolidate networking between the digital sector and other sectors in rural areas that are mutually beneficial.
- Strengthen organisational associations in the sector such as the local digital technology chamber.
- Raise awareness about the importance of generating rural digital hubs among key actors such as students, teachers, entrepreneurs, customers and politicians.

6 sulabatsu.com/ticas

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2016

Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an "inventory of things" that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers' rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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