Colombia's Laptop Warrior — Connectivity for Peace and Progress

Vilma Almendra coordinates the telecentre in the town of Santander de Quilichao in southwest Colombia. (CIAT Photo: Silvia Andrea Perez)

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Gerry Toomey

Vilma Almendra, a 23-year-old Paez Indian from Colombia, seems to fit perfectly the description of what Canadian Aboriginal Chief Dwight Dorey recently referred to as the modern "laptop warrior." [See related sidebar: Digital Outreach to Canada's Aboriginal Peoples]

Almendra is part of a growing movement to use Internet communications as an antidote to violence against Indigenous peoples. She and Dorey addressed a Canadian-Latin American aboriginal forum on information technology and connectivity, held in Ottawa from March 24th to 26th. The three-day meeting, sponsored by the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA) and several Canadian federal government departments, was webcast live on the Internet via the Aboriginal Canada Portal.

"In Northern Cauca there is a great deal of guerrilla and military activity," says Almendra. "For several years there have been killings, disappearances, and threats against our leaders. On the one hand, the guerrillas have been saying our leaders are collaborating with the paramilitaries. On the other hand, the paramilitaries believe we're collaborating with the guerrillas. So our leaders are being killed by both sides."

She says that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are playing a key role in denouncing human rights abuses in Colombia — a country that has been plagued by civil war for the past 39 years. Armed attacks, bombings, kidnappings, and political and drug-related murders, directed against both civilians and the military, are a fact of everyday life in Colombia.

Moreover, the 80,000 Paez Indians of the country's northern Cauca region have suffered racial, linguistic, and cultural discrimination, land seizures and, as recently as the early 1990s, have been the victims of mass killings. In addition, month after month, year after year, the chronicle of murders and disappearances of Indigenous people in southwest Colombia has accumulated. [See related sidebar: The Roots of Conflict]

Using a telecentre to protest for peace

Almendra coordinates the community information service, or telecentre, in the town of Santander de Quilichao in southwest Colombia. The telecentre — part Internet café, part library, and part meeting place — is housed at the headquarters of ACIN, the Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca [association of Indigenous governing councils of North Cauca]. It's one of three Internet-equipped information services in southwest Colombia supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The project is managed jointly by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) and the Autonomous Western University Corporation, both in Colombia.

In the spring of 2001, ACIN and other Indigenous organizations, fed up with violence, staged a massive peace-and-protest march. Some 30,000 people walked from Santander de Quilichao to the neighbouring city of Cali, Colombia's third largest city. Their aim was to list and denounce human rights abuses, particularly killings and abductions, and bring them to national and international attention. Almendra and her telecentre played a pivotal role in the march's communications and logistics.

Facilitating fast reactions

An ACIN staff member drove a motorbike to and from the advancing flank of the march, bringing regular news updates back to the telecentre. Almendra then sent out communiqués by email to individuals and organizations, including journalists and human rights groups.

As temperatures soared, marchers began to suffer heat exhaustion.The telecentre got the word out that more drinking water was needed. It also arranged for local firefighters to come in and gently hose down the demonstrators — a humanitarian gesture given the hot tropical sun, not a crowd control tactic.

As part of the march's final rally in Cali, ACIN's then president Marco Cuetia was scheduled to deliver a speech denouncing the violence and listing the names of all the Indigenous victims. But he soon discovered he had misplaced his speaking notes. An urgent cell-phone call to the telecentre, followed by email correspondence with a university close to Cuetia's location, solved the problem. The president got a printout, proceded with his address as planned, and thereafter became more convinced of the benefits of connectivity. He had previously been concerned that the potential disadvantages of ICTs might outweigh the advantages. He was particularly concerned about the risk that freely flowing information might be used against Indigenous interests.

Connecting to opportunities

ICTs are also helping Paez and other Indigenous communities to push ahead with their own social and economic development. ACIN runs programs to improve the education, health, land management, and legal protection of Indigenous people, and to monitor legislation and its repercussions. The ACIN telecentre provides the necessary communication channels and information base needed to run the association's development programs. It helps Indigenous governors to remain in regular contact with each other and allows ACIN staff to tap domestic and international sources of project funding, training, and expertise.

"A letter from Bogotá to Santander de Quilichao can take 15 days," says ACIN planning coordinator Marino Fiscue. A big payoff from the telecentre's Internet service, he and other staff point out, has been an end to "missed opportunities."

In the past, ACIN was often unaware of important events relevant to its interests and work. Sometimes it simply found out about them too late to participate. More recently, the telecentre has helped the group to plug into the international communications loop. In one case, it put staff in contact with a Swedish group sponsoring a meeting on women's rights. In another, ACIN's youth group coordinator was able to attend a meeting in nearby Ecuador that he wouldn't otherwise have known about.

Indigenous communication

The telecentre also serves as a cyberspace portal for the wider Indigenous community. The vast majority of these people have neither computers nor telephones. The staff have helped many Paez to use the Internet to circulate pictures of friends and relatives who have gone missing after armed attacks on towns and villages. They also assist with job searches, preparing CVs, sending personal emails, photocopying, as well as producing posters and pamphlets.

Breaking news and other information is regularly downloaded from the Internet onto computer diskettes. Almendra then sends the diskettes by local minibus to an Indigenous radio station that lacks Internet access. Combining public radio and telecentre services thus extends ACIN's reach into the remoter communities it represents.

Reaching out to the world

ACIN leaders had to grapple with a deep-rooted fear of sharing information — whether through cyberspace or through conventional means. What if enemies were to exploit the enhanced information flow to undermine Indigenous activities or, worse, to identify human targets? As Fiscue explains, "We were afraid that other Paez leaders could be killed in the future. When we publicly denounce violence, the established parties and paramilitaries don't appreciate it."

As Fiscue feared, the violence has continued. Two Indigenous officials have been among the victims over the past year. In March 2002, Samuel Fernandez, a popular community leader and former governor of a Paez reserve, was abducted near Santander de Quilichao. The next day, his tortured body was found on a roadside. More recently, Aldemar Pinzón, a Paez activist and legal aid coordinator who had been investigating various assassinations, was himself killed.

"What we're doing on the Internet is telling the world about this," says Almendra. "We have succeeded in reaching international audiences — something we weren't able to do before we set up the telecentre. We can now communicate with the media, donor agencies, and human rights and environmental organizations. In the past we depended on non-Indigenous advisors and intermediaries because we didn't know how to communicate. With the telecentre, we ourselves can now publish information about our own situation."

Gerry Toomey, a freelance journalist based in Chelsea, Québec, Canada, has traveled to Colombia several times on writing assignments about rural development.

For more information:

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Sidebar

Digital Outreach to Canada's Aboriginal Peoples

Chief Dwight Dorey, a Miíkmaq from Nova Scotia, Canada, sees better information connectivity not as a threat to cultural identity, but as a source of social, spiritual, and economic benefits. The National Chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, which represents the interests of off-reserve Indians, Métis, and Inuit, was a keynote speaker at a recent international forum in Ottawa.

Canada's "large and growing" community of citizens of aboriginal ancestry reached 1.3 million in 2001, roughly 4% of the national population. More than three-quarters of them do not live on reserves administered under the Indian Act. "Our people are all over the map," Dorey told the connectivity forum. The off-reserve diaspora of aboriginal people, many of them poor and some of them homeless in the urban hinterland, constitutes the "longest street in Canada, and all too often the hardest to connect with."

Dorey's proposal? "A laptop warriors program whereby trained and knowledgeable connectivity outreach workers go into the communities and give people the direction that will make a positive difference in their lives and their futures. Beyond the necessary hardware, software, and information components — the bells and whistles of connectivity — it seems to me that outreach, getting the service to the people, and getting the people to the service, is where the rubber meets the road."

For Chief Dorey, better connectivity is a way to fight ignorance and racism, at the same time as improving aboriginal people's access to information about health, affordable housing, and other necessities. He also sees it as a way to send out "spiritual and emotional lifelines" to those in need.

Sidebar

The Roots of Conflict

Indigenous people in Colombia face a centuries-old struggle over the use and control of Indigenous lands. Among the many modern-day players in this complex and seemingly intractable conflict are left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups, drug lords, various levels of government, and private landowners, both individual and corporate.

The Indigenous people, especially in rural areas, are trapped in an economic, political, and military quagmire. The guerrillas use remote Indian reserves in the forested Andean highlands as refuge from their Colombian army and paramilitary enemies, says Marino Fiscue, planning coordinator for an Indigenous association in southwest Colombia. This rugged terrain provides a relatively safe jungle corridor to move armed patrols from one area to another. And to get cash, the guerrillas often try to extort protection money (or "vacunas", Spanish for vaccinations) from local authorities.

Adding to this complexity is the redistribution of ancestral lands to Indigenous groups. The government is now about half-way through the process of returning 150 square kilometres of land to the Paez people. This is a slow exercise, requiring compensation packages to private owners of pockets of land within the redistribution zone. A sore point with the Indigenous people is mineral rights, which they view more as a means of conserving their natural resources than exploiting them commercially. Under the current land concession program, the government retains mineral rights.

Then there is the narcotics problem for which Colombia is so well known. The drug lords try to entice poor Paez farmers to grow crops for their lucrative, illicit enterprises: poppies, marijuana, or coca, depending on altitude and terrain. Under Plan Colombia, a US-funded anti-drug campaign, the Colombian government now promotes the use of defoliants to eradicate coca crops. This solution is rejected by the Paez because it is environmentally destructive, particularly in ecologically sensitive mountain environments.

"Our official position is that we oppose the use of toxic chemicals to eliminate cocoa production," says Fiscue. "However, the Paez are willing to help with the eradication manually."