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CLADES: ITS ROLE AND FUNCTIONS

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Introduction

The present decade has witnessed important changes in the developing world. Perhaps one of the most significant is the identification of information as a basic element of development planning and the consequent need to create national, regional or international information infrastructure capable of expediting the flow of information from its generation to its most effective use.

The establishment of the Latin American Centre for Economic and Social Documentation (CLADES) under the Executive Secretariat of the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) at the beginning of the 1970s ^{1/} fulfills this requirements and it has been assigned a role which places it within the socio-economic information and documentation field in the region as a catalizing agent for the exchange of information on the basis of the establishment of national or regional information networks and systems; is helping to co-ordinate those already existing and to strengthen the national information infrastructures with a view to standardizing the level of technology and the knowledge of the human resources operating in the exchange.

The nature of the establishment of CLADES, which is the outcome of the expression of the governments' needs at the expert meeting held at CEPAL headquarters in 1970, describes it as an instrument sensitive not only to these explicit needs, but also to the new dynamics emerging from a review of the formulas applied to development plans and programmes, which to a great extent marked a crisis in the first half of the decade. The basic concepts obtained by CLADES from this review are the appeal for greater self-reliance on the part of the Third World, ^{2/} and for horizontal co-operation among the developing countries on the basis of the recognition that the developing countries have different supplies of human, natural and financial resources,

^{1/} CEPAL resolution 303 (XIV), May 1971.

^{2/} E/CEPAL/L.135, 7 May 1976, p.3.

have reached different stages of economic development, and have made differing degrees of progress in their production sectors and technological development. At the same time, however, these countries have some common denominators deriving from their state of under-development, colonial origins, economic structure and degree of dependence on the developed world, in addition to the persistence of widely differing economic and political thinking and, consequently, of economic policies. The aim, therefore, is for them to pool their efforts in order to take advantage of the relative disparities between them to generate a reciprocal supply and demand in respect of services and resources through a collective and united effort. ^{3/}

These concepts, incorporated as basic principles in CEPAL's programme of work for the next few years, find CLADES with a whole line of thinking built up on those bases, which, translated into a philosophy of action, brings it somewhere close to the concept of a decentralized model whereby the institution does not process all the information generated in the region, which would place it over and above the existing entities, but on the contrary promotes, co-ordinates and provides technical support for action conducive to the establishment of national centres by sector, discipline or mission to control, process and transmit the socio-economic information produced in the respective countries, in order "gradually to diminish the exclusively north-south interdependence and to open up a horizontal interdependence, that is, among developing countries and regions", ^{4/} and exchange information on an equal footing with the developed countries, either directly or through regional and international information networks and systems.

I. The role of CLADES

In the light of the foregoing, CLADES is assigned a role within the field of socio-economic information in Latin America and the Caribbean which may be defined as promoting interaction between:

^{3/} Ibid., p.6.

^{4/} E/CEPAL/1029, 18 March 1977

- a) National research, study, planning, co-ordination, development and other institutions generating information;
- b) National information units controlling, processing and disseminating information;
- c) National, regional and international information networks and systems by sector, discipline or mission; and
- d) Individual persons and institutions using the information. 4.1/

In assuming this role, CLADES has taken the following steps:

1. To construct a broad conceptual framework in which information is considered as a whole and independently, the treatment of the sources and the results of processing differing according to the needs of the users.

CLADES handles the concepts of information -considered as knowledge recorded for communication- and documentation as the whole set of activities permitting the transfer of information. It does, however, distinguish from its regular tasks the activities related to statistical information, whose processing and dissemination require other information techniques and specialists. Not on this account does it fail to consider it as part of the whole question of information, since both the knowledge-information contained in documents and statistical data-information have a social function to perform and altogether constitute a basic development resource. This is a crucial function in the solution of problems, the adoption of decisions and the appraisal of the development process, permitting greater consistency and more effective acting vis-a-vis the complex obstacles which the nations have to overcome in promoting their integrated development.

2. To formulate hypotheses on the information problem in Latin America and the Caribbean in order to establish problem areas requiring

4.1/ See annex 1.

the careful attention of government, national, regional or international specialists and institutions and promote specific studies and research that will lead to realistic solutions for accelerating the process of standardization and, therefore, of complementarity, integration and development of the various countries.

3. To study and select from among the existing computerized information control and retrieval systems those best suited to regional information needs, and test their technical operation in order to recommend their implementation with the aim of achieving a uniform and compatible information system which will permit the exchange and support of documents in decision-making, thereby preventing any further transfers of foreign systems not adapted to the real situation and priorities of each country.

4. To establish priority requirements in terms of document techniques, methodologies and working instruments for operation in the information system selected, with special attention to problems of adjustment or adaptation of those already existing, while also considering it a matter of priority to create some working tools which are more expressive of the Latin American situation, such as controlled vocabularies, analytical sheets, etc., or methodologies more in keeping with the cultural base of the human resources using them.

5. To set up a homogeneous professional team in terms of quality and professional level to provide technical advisory assistance and training to institutions and governments on request, with a view to supporting from this angle the strengthening of their information infrastructures and their incorporation in information networks and systems.

A study of each of these points has enabled CLADES to clarify its role, define the objectives of a plan of action, establish its functions and design a programme of activities, through the adoption of a pragmatic and realistic approach, which means that its services, on the one hand, are quick and reasonably cheap and, on the other, are compatible with the various needs of the regional institutions it serves. ^{5/}

^{5/} See annex 1.

II. The CLADES plan of action

Mention has been made of the fact that in the last few decades, the countries and international agencies concerned with development planning identified the information element as a prior basic resource, which must also continue in all phases of the development process. If consideration is given to the concentration of the capacity of a few industrialized countries to generate, control and utilize world information, and the implications this has in the economic and social sphere, it may be concluded that in the not too distant future the countries and institutions of Latin America and the Caribbean which are unable to control the information they themselves produce, or utilize that produced abroad, may be in danger of having to pay the high cost of being unable to direct or promote their development process independently, since they will not be in a position to participate in the new international economic order.

This situation has led CLADES to work out a plan of action the central objective of which is first, to collaborate in the co-ordination of information exchange activities and the establishment of networks promoted by international institutions, in order to put forward the concerted views of all the Latin American countries so that the solutions adopted will adequately reflect their interests. It should be noted, in this respect, that CLADES maintains close contact with the International Information System for the Development Sciences (DEVSI) promoted by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (CIDA), and endorses the position adopted by UNISIST to the effect that "information transfer is feasible without such a radical change only by making provision for the interconnection of existing (sub) systems, and inducing them to comply with multilateral standards and exchange agreements that will improve the overall efficiency and at the same time check the rising costs of information handling for each of them". ^{6/} Secondly, its aim is to help formulate national information policies and so strengthen the information infrastructures of the countries in the region that the transfer of information will become a continuing flow both into and out of the countries, through compatible mechanisms and adequately trained human resources.

^{6/} UNISIST. Study Report on the feasibility of a World Science Information System, UNESCO, 1971, p. 34.

These two aspects of the central objective of the plan of action represent a complex and long-range task for CLADES which, however, is facilitated by its role as Documentation Centre proper in the institution to which it belongs. If it is considered that CEPAL's main function has been the study of Latin America's urgent economic and social development problems, the use of the results of its research in the establishment of development policies and strategies, the transfer of such knowledge to those in a position to influence the design of policies in national, regional and sub-regional plans, and the creation of adequate implementation mechanisms, and that CEPAL has always acted within this general framework, as applied to the region, setting itself up as a centre of information on the economic and social situation in Latin America, developing a line of thought and interpreting the situation from an essentially Latin American standpoint, ^{7/} it is understandable that CLADES should have been able to speed up the process of reconnaissance of its area of operation, particularly in the technical processing of the documentation produced by CEPAL/ILPES and its dissemination throughout the region in one of its publication series. CLADES considers that the regional approach to the content of this documentation can be made explicit in the analysis only by a regional institution; hence it assumes this responsibility which at the same time leads to the gradual accumulation of experience that can be made available to the region in terms of information techniques, methodologies or systems of analysis which it is constantly developing in its workshops or laboratories for indexing, preparing controlled vocabularies, etc.

The broad field of action offered by Latin America and the Caribbean in the area of socio-economic information is wide-ranging and of a multi-facet nature; hence, CLADES has concentrated on a group of activities of both an internal and an external character between which there is a constant interaction and back-feed.

1. Its internal activities are undertaken within CEPAL in the capacity of a Documentation Centre which analyses, processes and disseminates documentation produced by the Commission and ILPES; advises the substantive Divisions on documentary matters and works closely with them as members of teams engaged in study and research on such specific projects as Women, Natural Resources, etc., which are considered of priority importance in the CEPAL work

7/ E/CEPAL/L.135, 7 May 1976, p.12.

programme; studies and develops data storage and retrieval techniques and systems; and prepares documentation working instruments which it then projects to the region through its external activities.

2. Its external activities are basically directed towards providing support for technical co-operation among countries, to particular countries and to regional agencies, in matters related to the whole question of socio-economic information and documentation, which influence their speedy, timely and efficient transfer.

These two types of activities have come to constitute for CLADES the basis of its continuing work; thus, considered as groups of a similar kind, they have made it possible to organize its priority functions and a general work programme aimed primarily at specific and feasible achievement in the short and medium term which are necessary for the preparation of information infrastructure, and at promoting the establishment of information networks and systems, leaving for the long term the planning of the exchange of information with compatible systems and related professionally trained human resources.

III. Functions of CLADES

Within the concept of documentation, as a group of activities permitting the transfer of information, CLADES carries out specific documentation operations which form part of its internal activities, but which are projected to the region through four basic functions that interact in the general performance of activities, based on a flexible organizational structure and its specialized human resources.

Documentation operations are divided into two programmes. The first relates to the analysis, condensation and indexing of documents produced by CEPAL/ILPES and their processing by means of the ISIS system, and the second consists of the operation of a workshop in which documentary techniques are analysed and developed with the object of systematizing data-analysis for use in the region, especially in institutions processing publications whose content is related to that of CEPAL/ILPES documents.

CLADES works closely with the CEPAL Library, whose organization enables it to make use of its important holdings which include all documents produced by the Commission and by the United Nations economic and social agencies, and also a selective collection of periodical publications and reference works on economic and social subjects. Thus, CLADES has been able to concentrate its purchases of bibliographical material on the formation of a highly specialized collection in the field of documentation and information sciences.

These operations give the CLADES team the opportunity to develop, demonstrate and utilize information which it then makes available to the region, properly tested and "thought out" in terms of the characteristics of the socio-economic information question in the region.

It may therefore be concluded that this first function gives rise to the functions dealt with below, which are duly based on experience but are open to changes produced by dynamic thinking that reflects the real needs of the countries of the region.

a) Technical advisory assistance in documentation

In the performance of this function, CLADES has been organized primarily to meet two types of requirements of institutions or persons requesting assistance:

(i) Requests for the establishment or rationalization of documentation systems and services, and (ii) requests for support in the selection and use of documentation techniques and the use of particular working instruments in specific regional or sub-regional projects.

This function is basically of a supporting and supervisory nature, the user being expected to participate substantially. The work of CLADES consists mainly of the formulation of a diagnosis methodology, proposals of alternative solutions, the provision of training for the human resources required and supervision of the establishment and entry into operation of the information system selected.

The user requesting such assistance should collaborate in preparing data for the diagnosis, and in evaluating the diagnosis and the solutions proposed for the establishment, operation and control of the system.

The experience gained in the provision of such advisory services has shown the need to organize follow-up and evaluation activities once the proposed system has undergone a reasonable trial period.

b) Training and in-service training

The accelerated incorporation of increasingly sophisticated technologies in the transfer of information, their increasingly varied uses in the decision-making process, the continuing theoretical studies and research in the area of documentation and information sciences, and the equal participation of other professionals in many aspects in this field oblige the information professional to keep alert and up to date in his discipline, which many authors define as being essentially interdisciplinary.

CLADES, conceived as an instrument which is sensitive to changes and which promotes action towards the establishment of a rapid flow of information within the countries, among the countries and throughout the region in the socio-economic area, attaches considerable importance to the function of training and in-service training of the human resources taking part in the transfer of information.

This function, which complements the provision of technical advisory assistance in documentation, entails the planning and preparation of courses and the organization of technical meetings, seminars, etc., according to the participants' level of professional and technical training. It therefore demands from the professional staff of CLADES continuing educating and practice in their sphere of action and a knowledge of the current stage of development of the countries of the region in this respect.

The repeated requests for training and in-service training from the governments has led CLADES to organize regional courses at its own headquarters in an attempt to ensure a multiplier effect with respect to the theoretical and practical knowledge provided.

In those cases where the governments expressly request training courses in their own countries, CLADES prepares alternative models as consistent with the countries' requirements, for use with the maximum participation of national information specialists.

c) Research studies

CLADES has assumed this function as a result of the application of a systems approach to the regional information problem. This analysis methodology has enabled it to identify some problems which constitute serious obstacles to the transfer of socio-economic information, thus impeding the development process of which, as noted earlier, information is a basic resource.

One of these problems is the absence of a complete and thorough diagnosis of the information situation at the national and regional levels. Obviously, a knowledge of the common problems confronting the countries helps to strengthen the understanding, co-operation and complementarity among them. Such a diagnosis affords the opportunity to define policies and evaluate action in this field.

Another problem is connected with what the DEVSIS Study Team has called the "iceberg" of literature on development, meaning that "it has been possible to show that the literature of economic and social development can be divided into three categories: articles in periodicals (journals), commercially available books or monographs, and a final category comprising a great variety of materials which have two common characteristics - they are usually very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain, and very seldom come under bibliographic control ... the first two categories represent the visible part of an iceberg, and the third category the invisible." ^{9/}

This documentation, which has been described as "less disseminated" or "unpublished", constitutes a rich source of information for the countries of the region; it comprises technical reports, theses, detailed descriptions of experiences, etc., and is generated by government, university

^{9/} International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, DEVSIS. Preliminary design of an international information system for the development sciences, 1976, p. 18.

or private bodies as the result of studies or research of considerable value for development planning. Its circulation, however, is restricted, and it is therefore accessible to only a limited number of users, who generally belong to the same institution or working group. This leads to duplication of effort and the under-utilization of resources with the repetition of studies that have already been carried out.

A third problem is the lack of documentation instruments and techniques consistent with requirements and available resources, and the overlapping and limited scope of the existing information services.

Modern documentation activities can be said to be comparatively recent in the region and, since the majority of such instruments and techniques have been devised and used in the developed countries, on being transferred to the Latin American context they have naturally encountered the problems of adjustment and adaptation of any initial phase. More often than might have been expected, however, the transfer has been costly but ineffective, and sometimes it has been difficult to know what system, technique or instrument to transfer in view of the uneven rates of growth in the information field. The result is that the user's information requirements are not satisfied, so he comes to rely more on the service of institutions outside the country or, in the last case, on its own "invisible college". This situation tends to isolate not only the user but often even the sectors responsible for development planning. The solution sought for maintaining a minimum of updatedness and accessibility of the reliable and useful information existing in the region has been to undertake the analysis and processing of documents; but the absence of channels of communication between information units and the scant dissemination of the results of this analysis, such as bibliographical indexes, bulletins of summaries or analytical bibliographies, prepared by means of techniques or systems that are not compatible with one another, have meant not global solutions but rather duplication of effort and high costs not compensated for by efficacy.

There are other equally important problems, which to a certain extent are involved in these first three; hence CLADES has given priority to and carried out studies and research on these three problems with the aim of providing the government with solutions of a more global, economic and realistic nature.

As regards the first two problems, CLADES is carrying out two regional projects financed by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in connexion with:

- a) An inventory of socio-economic information units in Latin America and the Caribbean;
- b) The acquisition and distribution of less disseminated documents produced by the integration agencies of Latin America and the Caribbean.

These two projects will provide the basic information necessary for analysing the information situation in the region. Specifically, the first project has consisted in the preparation of an inventory as a basis for: (i) a diagnosis of the possibilities and limitations of the general situation existing in the region with regard to its information infrastructure in the socio-economic field, and the possible integration of the regional information units or co-operative information systems or networks with a view to expanding their service capacity; (ii) a diagnosis in each country of the possibilities and limitations of its information infrastructure in the socio-economic field in the light of the information contained in the above-mentioned inventory; (iii) the establishment of regional and national information policies on the basis of the information provided by these two diagnoses.

The objective of the second project is to determine the reasons for the inaccessibility of a certain type of non-conventional documentation, such as technical reports, special studies, etc., which are sometimes of basic importance in development planning. These reasons could be: (i) the small number of copies printed; (ii) the lack of any clearly defined publication policy of the institutions generating the information; (iii) an indiscriminate view of what should be classified as confidential. 10/

As regards the third problem, CLADES plans to provide the elements for the implementation of an information system such as ISIS, which it considers may feasibly be utilized in the region from the standpoint not only of its lower cost but also of its harmonization with other information storage and

retrieval systems in operation in regional or international networks and systems such as AGRIS, ERIC and MEDLARS,* It has also studied the terminology used in the region in specific areas such as the environment and integration, with the objective of standardizing the transfer of information to institutions concerned with these two broad priority subjects all over the world.

As noted earlier, there are many other more wide-ranging problems to be faced, but these must obviously be dealt with by the countries as a whole and by each country according to its particular situation.

d) Dissemination

This function emerges as the result of the previous functions and is carried out in the form of two specific programmes: (i) publications, and (ii) organization of technical meetings of experts in documentation questions.

CLADES recognizes that, inasmuch as it operates as a Documentation Centre and analyses documents, studies techniques and systems and provides technical advisory services and human resources training, it is acquiring experience which it should make available to the region in order to promote an exchange of views on these tasks and the carrying out of joint activities with the governments. Since publications constitute the most rapid vehicle of widest scope, CLADES has organized a publications programme in order to disseminate its thinking, objectives, plans and programmes, indexing results and summary of CEPAL/ILPES documents; instruments of co-ordination and communication such as general and subject-matter directories, analytical bibliographies on what are considered priority subjects in CEPAL or United Nations programmes; tools for the standardization of analyses, e.g., thesauri; handbooks of procedures for operating with particular information systems, specifically ISIS at the present time; analysis methodologies that have proved effective in the design of inventories or the formulation of projects, etc.

* AGRIS International Information System for the Agricultural Sciences and Technology.

ERIC Educational Resources Information Center (United States), the basis of the Educational Information System.

MEDLARS Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval.

Its aim is thus to open a wider channel of communication for other information units or economic and social institutions concerned with the information problem in Latin America and the Caribbean.

It should be noted that the spirit underlying the dissemination of these publications is that of concerted thought and action based on a working document and therefore open to discussion and possible modification or change for the good of the individual countries and the region as a whole.

With regard to technical meetings, the experience gained when CLADES was established ^{11/} showed that it was both possible and advantageous to discuss information and documentation questions on an equal footing and to review plans prepared by the governments in this connexion. These meetings, together with a valuable exchange of views and experiences, produce a multiplier effect in terms of knowledge among the participating countries and permit the organization of co-ordinated programmes in the future which could be the basis for future information systems.

^{11/} CEPAL. Meeting of Experts in Documentation, Santiago, Chile, 25 and 26 September 1970. Informe sobre los debates y recomendaciones, Santiago, Chile, 1970.



