SDNP Philippines: IT Pioneer

"Isn't that nice?" says Amy Morado Lecciones, "an NGO training the Government!" Ms. Lecciones is National Co-ordinator of PSDN, the Philippine Sustainable Development Network, established in 1993. For the last three years, PSDN has been holding quarterly, one-day training sessions in email and Internet use, web mastering and content. Some 20 participants usually attend the workshops: members of NGOs, the private sector, academia and the Government. But Government tends to outnumber other sectors in the workshops.

During its six years of pioneering Information Technology (IT) in the Philippines, PSDN has seen its role change dramatically, responding to a dramatically changing IT landscape. The project was launched in March, 1993, with grants of US $177,000 from UNDP, US $30,000 from the Foundation for the Philippine Environment and US $7,300 from CIDA. At the time, there was no Internet access in the Philippines, so PSDN set out to prepare the way for it.

Pioneering IT

"As early as '93 and '94, we were the only ones talking about these things," says Ms. Lecciones. "We conducted seminars and training courses for NGOs, people's organisations, academia and even the Government, telling them what information technology was, what a modem was, what it could do for them, all through the Bulletin Board System [BBS]."

Before the arrival of Internet access, PSDN established three Bulletin Board System (BBS) nodes around the country, holding workshops to teach people how to use them. It was an uphill struggle. "We went from city to city," says Ms. Lecciones. "People looked at us as if we were crazy, and we thought we convinced nobody." For one thing, few workshop participants had the necessary equipment, such as modems, to use the new technologies. So PSDN provided modems to a number of organisations, and the investment paid off. "These were very new users who got the hang of it when the Internet got here," says Ms. Lecciones. "The use of IT started mushrooming after a time. We really had a big role to play in that."

When the Internet came in 1994, PSDN was among the very first to offer Internet and email access, as well as intensive training in their use. They did the job so well that now, many government departments that started as customers of PSDN, are allocating funds for their own servers. "I think we've been successful because we were able to carry them through from dial-up technology to this stage," says Ms. Lecciones. "We served quite a number of big government departments when they were just starting. We even trained their systems administrators. Now they are justifying the acquisition of equipment and band-waves. It's good for them, it's bad for us."

An IT explosion

Since 1993, the IT industry in the Philippines has exploded. Today, there are nearly 500 commercial ISPs and more than ten gateways with E1 connections. In terms of hardware and high-tech services -- such as "roaming" service whereby a customer traveling in the US can dial the Philippines as a local call -- PSDN can no longer compete. To stay in business, it offers the lowest connectivity fees in the country, and provides technical "handholding" to its 100 customers, most of whom are NGOs with limited IT capacity. "We don't mind staying on the phone explaining to them, 'No, actually, this is how it goes...'" says Ms. Lecciones. "Commercial people don't do that."

Building content, promoting participation

Another unique feature of PSDN is that early on it established its own foundation, made up of key players in sustainable development. Eleven foundation members serve on PSDN' Steering Committee, which includes ex-officio representatives from UNDP and the Environmental Management Bureau, a government agency. All members pay an annual fee of US $100. They receive free IT access, and all are expected to further the cause of sustainable development through the material they publish on the web. In fact, the existence of the foundation itself via the peer pressure and support that it provides has been crucial in getting members to share their information with each other and to contribute to the development of such resources in the Philippines.

"There's hardly any content about the Philippines on the Internet," says Ms. Lecciones. "We would like to encourage other organisations to put their information on the net. For example, we have a biodiversity conservation database. I don't think people are on a level yet where they are willing to pay for this kind of information, but we would like to trailblaze into that direction."

In addition, to further their mission of promoting sustainable development, PSDN holds regular fora on issues related to sustainable development in the country. "That's our way of putting people together to exchange views and come up with solutions," says Ms. Lecciones. "Right now we're conducting a series of fora called the Water Forum series, in collaboration with the Foundation for Sustainable Development and the Presidential Task Force on Water Management." Participating stakeholders include representatives from the women's groups, farmers' groups, national and local Government, industry, and landowners. "It's an experts' forum," she says. "We're coming up with a management plan for the use of the Government."

Mission accomplished?

But life has not been easy for PSDN in recent times. When UNDP funding ended in 1995, PSDN staff took a voluntary salary cut of more than 60 percent. Since then, the organisation has existed - just barely - on the US $100 a year from the 30 members of a foundation it established, and US $13 a month from each of its 100 email and Internet access customers, most of whom are NGOs with limited budgets. Training workshops and seminars merely break even. "Nobody thought that we'd be able to survive this fierce competition," says Ms. Lecciones. "A lot of small entities like us have folded up already. Only the big ones remain. If you ask me, I think we've been successful in completing our mission."

Mission accomplished? It would seem so, since Filipinos are now willing to pay commercial servers for the technologies PSDN helped introduce. In fact, when Ms. Lecciones looks at overall conditions in her country today, she sees IT as the healthiest of all economic sectors. "I think the Philippines is in a kind of limbo right now," she says."The only area that is progressing is IT. Why? IT enables you to learn about everything that's going on -- everything. Nobody can fool you any more. We are now evaluating the niche we can occupy in the IT-aware world that we helped to create in the Philippines."

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