
SDNP Honduras: Civil Society's Information System

"If God exists, I think He is to be found in this technology. It's marvelous how easy and how useful it is. We can find all the information we need and we can be in contact with the whole world. It makes our work much easier and it also helps us save money."

- Regina Fonseca of Honduras's Center for Women's Rights.

In November, 1998, soon after hurricane Mitch had whipped through Honduras, decimating some two million homes, Candelario Reyes sent a fax. Mr. Reyes is co-ordinator of a cultural center in Honduras's mountainous Santa Barbara region. He was seeking help for 2,200 villagers whose homes had been destroyed. The villagers, including nearly 900 children, were packed together in makeshift shelters without enough food, clean water, blankets or medicines.

Mr. Reyes addressed his fax to a Honduran non-governmental organisation [NGO] called Asociacion Compartir. Compartir is a member of RDS, the Spanish acronym for the Sustainable Development Network of Honduras, which provides email service and Internet access to (at last count) 449 organisations, 60 percent of which are NGOs. Compartir's director immediately sent an email message to a list of RDS members. The message explained that Compartir would serve as a conduit for all forms of assistance addressed to the displaced families in Santa Barbara. One of the organisations on RDS's email list was the Committee for Honduran Relief in Washington, D.C.

In less than four hours an email message was received from Committee headquarters, announcing that a check for US \$15,000 would arrive within ten days at Compartir's office, to be used for food, medicines, blankets and improved shelter for the families. Additional supplies would follow shortly.

Civil society's information system

This is one of many examples of emergency networking provided by RDS Honduras in the aftermath of hurricane Mitch, the worst natural disaster to hit Honduras in this century. "We put people who have information in touch with people who need it," says Raquel Isaula Peralta, National Co-ordinator of RDS. "And people who need something in touch with people who have the resources."

In its two-room office with four employees, four computers and 30 telephone lines, RDS was in the right place at the right time when Mitch struck, and soon became the hub of grass-roots disaster-relief networking in the country. During the six months following the hurricane, membership in the RDS network grew from 360 organisations to 449, scattered throughout almost all of Honduras's 18 provinces.

"Mitch really transformed us into the information system of civil society," says Mrs. Isaula. She says it was hard to convince people that they needed electronic communications technologies until, ironically, Mitch provided the opportunity. "All the television stations showed pictures of the satellite link to the Internet," says Mrs. Isaula, "so people began to realise the importance of these systems."

Mitch may have put RDS on the map, but the groundwork had already been laid. From the time it began in August, 1994, RDS made a priority of targeting NGOs, offering communications and networking services that were unavailable or unaffordable from other providers. RDS started with a two-year grant of US\$200,000 from UNDP, and a mandate to facilitate access to information about

sustainable development among key stakeholders in the country.

At that time, there were no national Honduran email providers. Even today, RDS is the only server that provides UUCP email access independent of international Internet lines. All other email is channelled through the Internet on international lines, and is far too expensive for many users, especially local NGOs.

As is the practice with all local SDNPs, RDS assembled a Steering Committee of key players from every development sector: government, NGOs, business, and academia. Representatives of UNDP and CIDA serve as consultants to the Committee, which meets monthly to provide guidance on issues of focus and orientation. The goal is to ensure that RDS provides the tools that will enable all development actors to participate in shaping a sustainable development path for Honduras. A Consultative Technical Committee supports the co-ordination of the topic-specific on-line discussion lists provided to RDS members.

But the actual introduction of Information Technology (IT) was only a means to an end. RDS has never lost sight of its primary goal of using IT to promote grassroots participation in sustainable development. It has done this by creating a community of civil society organisations and providing the means for its members to interact, exchange information and support one another. In addition to providing email and Internet access at reduced rates, RDS established a system of networks -- email mailing lists that grouped NGOs according to their development activities -- fostering not only communication but partnerships and, as a result, empowerment.

Strengthening public debate

The RDS Network reaches even beyond its immediate users. "Often the organisations we work with are themselves clusters of organisations," says Mrs. Isaula. "Our services facilitate information exchange among them all. They network between themselves and other groups in Honduras and abroad, as well as with the government."

RDS sends out information to its members on a regular basis, and provides what Mrs. Isaula calls "permanent meetings," or "virtual fora," rather like topic-specific chat rooms, for the various NGO member networks. Among the themes of these fora are human rights, external debt, energy, forestry, environment, women, and civil society. "Using these fora is the best way for our members to stay informed," says Mrs. Isaula. "Our members are scattered all over the country, but they don't have to go anywhere to meet together! They have 'virtual meetings' through our network. Using the phone or fax is expensive and it's less effective. Traveling around to attend meetings wastes time."

There are also fora centered on urgent, time-specific topics, such as a disease currently attacking coconut trees in parts of Central America, or ongoing disaster relief in the aftermath of hurricane Mitch. In one forum, NGOs were invited to offer suggestions for programmes to be funded by bilateral donors, in preparation for a conference in Stockholm in May 1999 focused on the post-Mitch reconstruction of Central America. "Our web site has the most information on proposals, projects and plans for the reconstruction of Honduras," says Mrs. Isaula. The "Rebuild Honduras" web page also contains a number of "virtual fora" on such topics as external debt, government transparency and efforts to eliminate corruption.

"All this information about Mitch and the reconstruction of Honduras is an example of the kind of information that is only available from RDS," says Regina Fonseca, director of the Center for Women's Rights, (CDM in Spanish) a large umbrella NGO. "Their web site is practically the only public space that is not controlled by government interests, in a country where the government does not tolerate dissent."

Indeed, a degree of public distrust is evident in Honduras with regard to established information sources, including some major newspapers with close ties to the government. Iliana Morales, collected suggestions from NGOs in an effort to have them incorporated into the government's proposals for the Stockholm meeting. As a journalist, Ms. Morales has strong views on the issue of public access to information in her country. "The communication media is largely controlled by the state," she maintains, "so alternative sources of information which can be useful to civil society have to be made available by other means. RDS is the centre of alternative information for civil society."

Spreading the word

From December 1994 until August 1997, RDS provided email service only, free of charge, with one computer (vintage 1986), one UUCP store-and-forward server and two staff-members. In those days, the very concept of IT was so new in Honduras that RDS had to convince nearly everyone of its potential benefits. "This was very difficult," says Mrs. Isaula. "People in Honduras had no idea what this system of computerised communication was."

RDS started with the NGO community. "We organised the NGOs according to subject categories," says Mrs. Isaula. "Some organisations worked with women, others worked on human rights, on livelihoods, education, etc." Every Thursday for four hours, RDS staff held a workshop in their office, using their one computer to demonstrate how to search for information and contacts on the Internet.

RDS held workshops on how to organise information when creating a web site, as well as one on "The Internet and Microcredit" which focused on the use of the Internet for fund-raising purposes, systems of credit and the preparation of project documents."It didn't take long for NGOs to realise that this is the most effective way to look for donors," says Mrs. Isaula. Another workshop showed NGOs working on habitat how to manufacture roofing tiles using information found on the Web.

Mrs. Isaula and RDS technician Erlin Palma also took the message outside their office, showing up at meetings all over the country, preaching the IT gospel. "As soon as we heard there was a meeting," says Mrs. Isaula, "we were there with our computer, talking about our Internet connection and making demonstrations." Today there are a total of 16 Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Honduras. RDS is not only the least expensive, it is the only one that provides the "added value" of training in IT use to all its members, as well as in the preparation of "content:" the selection and organisation of information to be made available on the web.

Working with the government

After NGOs, the largest sector of RDS's clients is the government. One of RDS's 449 member organisations, the Ministry of Education, has 58 interconnected offices and projects, each with email service provided by RDS. "We work hard to establish good relations with the government," says Mrs. Isaula. "Many ministries use our network. We trained staff from more than 15 government agencies, and our server hosts a number of their web pages."

But the government is not always comfortable with the newfound ability of Honduran NGOs to participate actively in the development process. Mrs. Isaula cites the example of RDS's work in preparation for the Stockholm conference in May, 1999. "The government has not released the funding proposals it planned to present in Stockholm," she says, "whereas we had put on line all the plans drawn up by civil society organisations. NGOs kept emailing their plans to the government and asking to see the government's plans, and the government objected to this. But our networking is only sending the government copies of information that were out there, and inviting them to be equally open with their plans."

The road to sustainability

Such tensions demonstrate that RDS has gone a long way toward fulfilling its mandate to promote the participation of all sectors in the sustainable development process. And while RDS was working towards this goal, it achieved financial independence as well.

In September 1997 RDS introduced a system of membership fees, charging clients between US\$6 and US\$20 a month, according to the services provided: \$6 for text-only, store-and-forward email, and up to \$20 for full Internet access. Fees are also charged for training seminars and workshops, with reduced rates for non-profit co-operatives and small NGOs. Mrs. Isaula says that the extra services RDS provides continues to give it an advantage over other ISPs. "We have to offer training," she says, "because the market is so competitive."

RDS still has US\$10,000 left over from the original UNDP grant. Last year's income from membership fees, training and workshops totaled about US\$70,000, enough to cover expenses for this year. To make it all official, in January 1999, RDS transformed itself from a project of UNDP to a legally registered Honduran NGO. This means that not only can RDS charge a fee for services and thus be self-supporting, it can also seek funding from other donors to expand the services it provides. For example, FAO is funding a number of national and local radio spots informing the public about RDS activities.

Recently, RDS turned its small, four-computer office into a kind of "tele-centre" open to the public six days a week. On average, a dozen people stop by every day to send emails or surf the Net. RDS plans to open three more such public facilities soon in secondary cities.

According to Mrs. Isaula, attracting more and more people to the use of IT remains a priority. "Promoting our activities is the most important thing we're doing. After all, what counts is the people who use our services. The technology doesn't work by itself."

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