

**The Democratic Communication for Adult Education (DECADE)
Project in the Caribbean**

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Abstract

The DECADE (Democratic Communication for Adult Education) is a project of the International Council for Adult Education to develop creative and affordable ways to use new information and communications technologies (ICTs) as a tool for global adult education and learning. The underlying principles of the project come from a concern that there exists a widening gap in the availability and use of new ICTs in some countries and sectors; and that there is a need to integrate new technologies with traditional, widely used and most available means of communications.

The ICAE project in the Caribbean examines the feasibility of establishing a Caribbean Regional Communication Centre (CRCC) providing electronic communication and information-sharing capacity, with emphasis on regional relevance and sustainability; integrating new technologies with existing means; and responding to identified learning and training needs, including where appropriate distance education and learning. The feasibility study, conducted in the region, and supported by UNDP and UNESCO, attempted to place the concept of democratization of adult education and learning within the context of the regional social practices and culture, and specific communication needs of the Caribbean. The study was conducted in six countries, representing each language grouping and the geographical spread within the region. The report concludes that there is distinctive need for establishing the CRCC and presents several recommendations on its location, management, policy and functions, and sustainability of operations.

The following presentation is based on *The Democratic Communication for Adult Education (DECADE): Project in the Caribbean. Feasibility Study* (ICAE, 1999). It is a brief summary of the project's background, main objectives, limitations and methodology, and presents its main findings, conclusions and

recommendations, and outlines some further steps and still existing questions.

The DECADE Project

The DECADE (Democratic Communication for Adult Education) is a project of the International

Council for Adult Education to develop creative and affordable ways to use new information and communications technologies (ICTs) as a tool for global adult education and learning. The underlying principles of the project come from a concern that there exists a widening gap in the availability and use of new ICTs in some countries and sectors; and that there is a need to integrate new technologies with traditional, widely used and most available means of communications.

One of the main recommendations of the CONFINTEA V (Hamburg '97) discussions on the theme of new technologies and adult learning was that new technologies and conventional ones should complement one another and should be integrated. Related to this is the ICAE's own principle of the DECADE project emphasizing the need for integration of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) with those more traditional, widely used and accessible, such as print, radio, etc. The DECADE further emphasizes that the exact mix of communication ways should be determined by each of the regions individually in accordance with needs and cultural and social context. This concept of ICAE is in line with CONFINTEA V discussions on adult learning and new technology that emphasized that "the use of new technologies raises many problems that need to be solved in a manner appropriate to each context" (UNESCO, 1997). As the CONFINTEA V *Agenda for the Future* states:

The development of new information and communication technologies brings with it new risks of social and occupational exclusion for groups of individuals and even businesses which are unable to adapt to this context. (p.4)

DECADE in the Caribbean

The ICAE chose the Caribbean, the host region of the Council's next World Assembly of Adult

Education, as the location of its pilot project within the DECADE. The pilot project in the Caribbean examines the feasibility of establishing a Caribbean Regional Communication Centre (CRCC) providing electronic communication and information-sharing capacity with emphasis on regional relevance and sustainability; integrating new technologies with existing means of communication; and responding to identified learning and training needs, including distance education and learning. The feasibility study conducted in the region and supported by UNDP and UNESCO attempted to place the concept of democratization of adult education and learning within the context of the regional social practices and culture, and specific communication needs of the Caribbean.

Feasibility Study

The regional feasibility study was conducted in 1999 in cooperation with the Caribbean Council for Adult Education (CARCAE), the ICAE regional member organization, and supported by UNESCO Kingston and UNDP. The study had the following objectives:

1. To assess the need for and feasibility of establishing a Caribbean Regional Communication Centre (CRCC);
2. To develop a report/proposal for the establishment and sustainable operation of the CRCC;
3. To develop a policy document on the use of the Internet and networking technology; and
4. To obtain the commitment of stakeholders to support the establishment and sustainable operation of the CRCC.

The study produced a comprehensive report

addressing institutional capabilities and modalities of operation; range of target groups, projected impact, ongoing viability and sustainability, recommendations, including institutional base for the CRCC, projected cost, and suggested funding sources and/or revenue generation; a policy paper on establishing the Caribbean Regional Communication Centre (CRCC), and a bibliography of adult learning literature and resources in the region.

With limited funding available, it was not possible to conduct a comprehensive study of all CARCAE's member countries. Therefore, six countries - St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Guyana, Martinique, and Curaçao - were selected to participate. The selection took into account language representation, size and location, types of populations and ethnic influences present in the countries.

The Sixth General Assembly of the Caribbean Regional Council for Adult Education (CARCAE) served as a major resource for the study. Its focused thematic discussions, and in particular those on capacity building for institutional strengthening of adult education organizations, using distance learning materials and communication within the adult education system; literacy and the needs of special groups; gender and adult education; and environment education identified key issues, policies, existing needs, and priorities in each area, and explored mechanisms for delivery, securing resources, and facilitation. Key conclusions and recommendations fed into the feasibility study (CARCAE 1999).

Among particular and specific problems and challenges related to access and use of the information and communications in the region, the study cites the following:

- Low use of information sources and services;
- Unequal transborder flow of information, with raw data often flowing out from developing countries and packaged information coming back in;
- Relatively high cost of acquiring and maintaining information resources and operating information services;
- Advanced technologies are primarily introduced for the support of transnational business rather than for meeting the basic needs of people;
- Reliance on transnational corporations, to provide the communication services that allow participation in global developments, often pitting the capital, technology and human resources of the transnational against that of state authorities of developing countries who are frequently not as skilled in negotiation techniques and technical competence.

Furthermore, several factors that negatively influence the information capacity in the region are also taken into account (Primus, 1998):

- Limited and constrained network access resulting in insufficient access to information, productivity tools, and communication services;
- Insufficient capacity and connectivity;
- Lack of planning and coordination among the countries;
- Limited processing power and reliability;
- Lack of support for the development of local content and applications;
- Limited skilled human resources;
- Few strategies for capturing the benefits of ICT

- The need for leadership;
- Lack of funding for ICTs investments.

Detailed data and information on the adult education and learning institutions and infrastructure were gathered through a questionnaire designed and distributed within the six surveyed countries. Despite the delays and obstacles in getting back the questionnaires, the survey afforded a wealth of information on existing adult education organizations and delivered programmes, programmatic focus areas, target groups served, existing and currently used media and technology, available resources such as expertise, materials and equipment, information sources and library resources, and meeting and public space.

Detailed and comprehensive information is included in the feasibility study report and I will not attempt to present it here. However, I would like to mention that 43 percent of all organizations and institutions that responded to the questionnaire were government or quasi-government and a substantial number (40 percent) represented the private/non-governmental category. This indicates that both sectors play an important role in the delivery of adult education in the region and that their active involvement in the project and close collaboration is essential. It should be noted that universities were excluded from the sample, except for the continuing education departments of the University of Guyana and the University of the West Indies.

Recommendations

A. The report concludes that there is a distinctive need for establishing the CRCC. Among potential direct benefits to organizations, country and/or the region identified by responding organizations were:

- Networking and sharing of information on various aspects of adult education and learning, i.e. techniques, methodologies, ideas, experiences;
- Sharing of human and material resources, including print and non-print materials for teaching and research, especially Caribbean-based materials;
- Provision of databases on training, expertise, and existing institutions;
- Facilitation of a common curriculum for programmes in the region, and student exchange;
- Creation of a virtual “meeting point” for electronic discussions of various current topics and issues in order to develop a consensus approach to problem solving; and
- Delivery of training programmes for instructors and trainers, and directly to adult students.

B. Functions, components and policy: The CRCC’s functions will include collection, organization and dissemination of information and resources on various aspects of adult education and learning in the Caribbean; development and production of resources, including databases, public and affordable access to the Internet and electronic resources; training; delivery of distance education programmes and courses. The CRCC will also encourage research and the collaborative development of programmes. Networking with existing institutions and organizations is essential for the functioning of the CRCC, and the Centre should establish links on local, regional and international levels whenever possible. Cooperation with existing institutions and agencies and working with the regional expertise will allow coordination of the

provision of services and programmes. Use of distance education methodologies for the provision of the training and programmes should be encouraged, including the use of the teleconference networks in the region.

Based on the project's basic principle of the integration of traditional and new communications media, as well as existing learning needs identified by the study, some possible components of the CRCC could include:

- Library/information centre - The CRCC should include a well organized, comprehensive collection of print and audio-visual materials, including resources and literature on various aspects of adult learning and education. Particular attention should be given to materials and resources developed within and related to the region, and to international relevant materials. The Feasibility Study identified and listed some resources, but further and more detailed research is needed. Professional and efficient organization of the library is essential. Special services, such as reference service, preparation of subject bibliographies, customized information searches, selective dissemination of information, and development and maintenance of the CRCC website are envisioned. Active collaboration among adult learning and education institutions in all sectors as well as cooperation and involvement of individuals is essential in building a comprehensive and accessible collection.
- Computer centre - An essential component of the CRCC providing public and affordable access to computer-based technology and learning materials. It will also be responsible for the development and maintenance of

the regional databases. Learning activities of the centre should be two-pronged, focusing on self-instruction and learning. To that effect the centre would acquire and provide access to equipment, software, reference and course materials; develop and produce its own training materials based on its experience and practice, and organize orientation and training sessions. The second aspect of the learning process could focus on a variety of organized and facilitated workshops and courses. These services could be offered on a fee-basis and developed into a systematic income-generating activity.

- Distance teaching/learning centre - This component should be developed in cooperation with already existing educational institutions offering and delivering distance education programmes in the region based on their experience, expertise, available technology and infrastructure, and support. The main conclusions of the CONFINTEA V discussions on the subject and its recommendation should be addressed in developing a detailed plan for this service. These include emphasis on open learning systems as offering a greater degree of learner-centred methodology; flexibility in time and space; accessibility in more remote areas; use of local community services; and recognition of non-formal and informal learning processes - in addition to the conventional and formal educational systems.

It is envisioned that English will be the primary language of the CRCC, but every effort should be made to have information and resources produced by the CRCC translated into other languages of the region.

C. Institutional base: It is recommended that the CRCC's functions and services be integrated into an overall educational strategy of a host institution since the option of placing the Centre within an already existing organization is more feasible than creating a new centre. Among the organizations and institutions surveyed, JAMAL Foundation (Jamaica) was the only one that expressed both willingness and readiness to host the CRCC. Another option was the establishment of the CRCC in St. Lucia and two institutions were identified as possible hosts. However, further discussions with potential hosting organizations revealed that although there is a keen interest, there is no single organization that would take on the organizing of the CRCC on its premises within the foreseeable future.

D. Strategies:

- Planning and management – It is recommended that the establishment of the CRCC be undertaken under the auspices of the Caribbean Council for Adult Education (CARCAE). While ICAE initiated the project and will remain actively involved in the implementation phase, it also recognizes that CRCC should become a regional project and sees its role as an advisory body. A governing board should be established with an adequate representation of all types of organizations involved. The recommended composition of the board calls for representation from governmental and non-governmental organizations.
- Fundraising – A concentrated effort should be made by all institutions involved in the project to raise funds sufficient to proceed to the implementation phase. The Feasibility Study identified some potential funding sources.

- Cooperation and networking – The CRCC should establish cooperation and networking with similar and related institutions and centres on local, national, regional and international levels. Intersectoral cooperation is essential.
- Outreach, marketing and publicity.

E. Questions and further steps: To ensure the successful establishment of a viable and sustainable CRCC an essential element is the response and active engagement of the regional institutions, organizations and agencies. This presentation constitutes the first attempt to probe the response of the region. While ICAE retains its interest in the project and offers its support, the CRCC will only take shape if the Caribbean is interested and ready to do it.

The points and recommendations presented need further discussions. There exist some questions and issues to be resolved that would determine the process of the project implementation. Among them:

- Confirmation of the CRCC location within the offices of JAMAL, or other alternatives;
- Partners and funders;
- CRCC structure, equipment, and cost involved; and
- Planning and management.

Conclusion

The CRCC is an example and a model attempting to address new learning environments and the changing practice of adult learning. Addressing this issue, CONFINTEA V documents state:

The change in the learning environments is not just about providing adults with flexible learning

opportunities and information services in the workplace and home. It is also about how adults participate in the information and communications technology, how information is used in this environment, how the local cultural infrastructure ... is used. (UNESCO Institute for Education, 1999, 9)

The deliberations at Hamburg also identified the following factors as having positive effects on the enrichment of the learning environments through ICTs:

- Political and financial willingness to invest in new technology;
- Up-to-date infrastructure, computers, data networks accessible to the public;
- Information campaigns;
- Suitability of teaching and learning materials for adults;
- Networks providing opportunities for all adults to get familiar with ICTs; and
- Partnerships between educational institutions, governments and cultural services.

The successful implementation of the CRCC would comprise and require all of the above factors. To move from feasibility to establishment of the centre is a common challenge and opportunity for all sectors of adult education in the region, including governments, universities, agencies and NGOs.

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