

RIAL SEMINAR ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Rio de Janeiro, May 20 – 21, 2008

Panel 5 – Summary of Presentation by Trust for the Americas–OAS

POETA (Partnership in Opportunities for Employment through Technology in the Americas) is a hemispheric initiative, chiefly funded by Microsoft and carried out by the Trust for the Americas, a not-for-profit organization that cooperates with the Organization of American States. POETA's main aim is to provide training in computer science and systems for traditionally marginalized communities (at-risk youth and disabled people), thereby enriching their lives and democratizing connectivity in the Americas. The Trust currently has 47 POETA centers in seventeen Latin American and Caribbean countries, benefiting more than 60,000 people across the Hemisphere.

POETA's goal in setting up Inclusive Digital Opportunities Centers (CODIs) is to serve as a training platform and to facilitate, through nonformal education, the incorporation of its participants into the workforce. That is achieved through efforts organized with the support of universities and other institutes of education, private sector entities, state representatives, and civil society organizations.

Its specific objectives can be summarized under five headings:

- (1) Establishing Inclusive Digital Opportunities Centers (CODIs) with approximately 15 computers and internet connections, at the premises of a local institution selected by the Trust in accordance with its shared vision, experience, availability, infrastructure, human resources, and, most particularly, local recognition of its community commitment. The number of centers to be created per year and per country is based on the funding that the Trust receives from its various donors.
- (2) Training coordinators and trainers from the local partners, as a component of institutional strengthening. The training focuses on technology, educational integration, workplace preparation, and life in the community. This training is also made available to representatives of other interested local organizations with related aims.
- (3) Facilitating the beneficiaries' training processes in computer systems and the other modules offered in our study plan.
- (4) Developing and updating educational integration modules so that participants can take the advanced courses offered by the Center or attend classes at other local educational institutes.
- (5) Activities to promote the program and the technological center (CODI) within the community and with business owners in order to identify solutions for sustainability and job creation.

In addition, the Trust plans to expand the POETA program across the Hemisphere, to benefit a greater number of individuals in consideration of the different realities in each country. With this in mind, the Trust uses the following mechanisms to define its target population:

1. **Study of Needs / Diagnosis:** Research identifies the problems, national priorities, and current characteristics of the population and its context. A project lacking an adequate diagnosis runs the risk of having no impact. The diagnosis allows us to answer the following questions: What are the priority problems, scope and context, available information, and reliability? Who are involved

(target population), and what is the demographic, geographical, economic, and social context of the problem? Who are the main players in the problem (stakeholders)? What are the main causes and consequences? What solutions or projects approaching the problem are having an impact at present? What are the main difficulties?

Before expanding POETA and selecting the target population, the Trust performs a needs study to identify the target population, its requirements in accordance with each country's circumstances and demands, and the potential local partners. In El Salvador, for example, POETA's first effort focused on working with disabled people in San Salvador in partnership with FUNTER. However, in light of the increase in youth gang violence (*maras*) in the country, based on recommendations received by the OAS's technical units, and with the donor support of Microsoft, the Trust decided to set up technology centers in Soyapango to offer services to at-risk youth. Those centers are managed by the Fundación Amigos de la Educación (FUNDAEDUCA) and Don Bosco University. Based on the results of this experience and with the support of the Canadian International Development Agency, the Trust expanded its work with the establishment of eight technology training centers for at-risk youth in six countries of the Eastern Caribbean.

POETA centers pursue the goal of remaining inclusive and open to the community, in consideration of the inherent benefits of inclusive spaces that promote the social integration of the target population's members.

2. Focus: Based on the results of the needs study, the Trust focuses its work on areas that are coherent with community realities, the project's own guidelines, and the target population.

In addition to responding to local requirements, efforts are made to ensure that the available resources are managed efficiently. This ensures that the project is reliable and is accessible to the target population while not compromising its quality and impact, in consideration of its commitment to both the community and its donors.

Once the target population, center location, and local partner or organization that is to manage the center have been identified, the training process begins, based on the Trust's experience and using the modules employed at the center, particularly Microsoft's Unlimited Potential curriculum. It should be noted that each center can add modules according to its own experiences: language, business studies, finance, marketing, etc. These complement the original training in basic computer skills, which increases the job opportunities of the program's beneficiaries.

For the participants, POETA is a program centered on technology training that seeks to improve the employability or job placement capacity of the project's beneficiaries by bringing their skills into line with current requirements and future transformations in the economy and by promoting lifelong learning.

Specifically, the POETA program has a module for workforce incorporation called "Preparation for the Working World." Adapted to fit the local context, this module provides local partners with tools that serve as the basis for incorporation into traditional employment selection processes, including activities intended to foster attitude change among the participants.

It works to identify those skills that employers seek: teamwork, self-esteem, conflict resolution, etc.

The Trust also encourages direct work with employers (private and public sectors) in order to identify the beneficiaries' shortcomings in competitive skills and to promote the added value of equality in recruitment by raising awareness in personnel selection procedures.

Active social participation is a key element in the project's sustainability on account of its local and community ownership. This in turn furthers the personal and institutional transformation processes of the initiative's participants. At the macro level, those partial changes influence the generation of active social policies for participation.

Consequently, one of the program's strengths is its work in close conjunction with local partners in each country as a part of a process of institutional strengthening, in which local partners' experiences are taken to the hemispheric level. In Mexico, for example, the Trust works alongside organizations such as the Monterrey Technological Institute and the Mexican Youth Institute, both of which are renowned for their work with young people in Mexico, and their experience supports work at the regional level, through the hemispheric network managed by POETA.

In addition to their experience, the good work and renown of our local partners motivates young people's involvement with POETA, not just as beneficiaries but also as active participants in the development of the program. The participation of the target group (in this case, young people) in POETA not only validates the initiative; it also promotes the program's sustainability and its constant improvement through the recognition of the local strengths and opportunities it offers.

In order to ensure the project's sustainability, all aspects of its development are implemented in close consultation with local government and, in addition, bearing in mind the vision of the local partner; this helps ensure its viability and visibility. Sustainability and growth are achieved through the commitment and involvement of the organization when it takes ownership of a project and takes it directly into the community.