

## FORUM

former Web developer now working as a consultant for a software company. A few years ago, a loose federation of friends and I organized to help non-profit, humanitarian groups better use the Web. We have had graphic designers, business professionals, a networking engineer, and others participate. We have written software, designed sites, consulted about domain name issues, and hosted sites. Each of us does this work outside of our professional roles in businesses, and we see that our skills are important to those we assist. Additionally, the software company I work for has facilitated my participation in WSIS. Businesses are not the enemy of WSIS objectives!

As WSIS moves toward implementing its action plan and toward Tunisia, WSIS and the ITU should decide at their highest levels to encourage greater business participation. They should seek participation among individuals from businesses who have proven themselves interested and influential in furthering the Information Society. They should also seek participation from companies whose offerings are particularly significant to accomplishing WSIS goals. As WSIS does so, this global effort will become more mature and effective. ■

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## US-Based Latino Youth: The Engine of Empowerment and Development for Latin American Youth?

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I attended the WSIS Conference in Geneva this past December. As a Latino student in the United States, I was delighted to see firsthand the diversity of participants from the furthest reaches of the world. Yet, I was dismayed to find that Latin American participants at the conference, save Bolivia, were few and far between. In fact, with the exception of Canada, the Americas (15% of the world population and nearly 40% of the global GDP) were underrepresented at the Geneva conference. Even the United States was absent from any significant portion of the dialogue. As a youth from Northern California and part of the Latino Dispersion, I was struck by the possible intersections of information and communication technologies (ICTs), Latin America, and Latino youth in the United States.

There are tremendous changes in the demographics of the United States that will have immeasurable impacts on the socioeconomic climate of the nation and the Americas more broadly, and affect the diffusion of the Internet and ICTs. The U.S.-based Latino population in the United States, in 2002, became the largest minority in the country, at 13.5%.<sup>1</sup> That same population is also the fastest growing ethnic group, reaching over 50 million, or 16.4%, of the U.S. population by 2007. Within the next 20 years, Latinos will become absolute majorities in bellwether states, such as California and Texas. Spanish will become an increasingly significant language during the same period. These changes in population and language will impact ICT diffusion directly and indirectly in the region.

Just as immigrants from southern Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s became the engine for the Industrial Revolution in the United States, the U.S.-based Latino population has the potential for a major role in this coming Information Revolution. The Latino population is already actively bolstering the U.S. economy, effectively powering the "bread and butter industries," from assembly line positions to domestic housework and seasonal agricultural work. Latinos are filling jobs at the lowest levels of the socio-economic pyramid. However Latinos have

1. <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Profiles/Single/2002/ACS/Tabular/010/01000US1.htm>

been notably underrepresented in America's high-tech, wealth-creating engines through ICT entrepreneurship, as in Silicon Valley in California. In the past decade they have been absent as innovators in the critical transition to the Information Society/Knowledge Economy. A distinctive U.S.-based Latino voice on the Internet is essentially non-existent today. For example, there is no online portal that combines quality information content with a Web community that represents the best of Latino aspirations in the Americas' Information Society. But what about tomorrow?

I believe the U.S.-based Latino Dispersion is in a unique position to be a stronger ICT player in the United States, and a possible engine of ICT empowerment for Latin America at large. A huge portion of U.S.-based Latino earnings are already sent as remittances that revitalize entire communities in Latin America. By 2004 year-end, the Inter-American Development Bank forecasts that remittances will reach the unprecedented level of US\$40 billion, greater than total foreign direct investment into the region; with an as-yet-uncertain impact on long-term growth among Latinos on either side of the U.S./Mexican border.<sup>2</sup> Participation in the Information Society and new technology-driven services and industries could help revitalize the Latino population on both sides of the border, and it is clear that U.S.-based Latinos could be in a good position to participate. But first, we must develop greater awareness of these potentials.

The indicators are all there. The U.S.-based Latino population (only 10% of all Latinos in the world), in its aggregate, has more purchasing power than the entire population of Latin America. Moreover, the same 10% has the highest penetration rates of Internet usage, at the highest speeds of connectivity. The same 10% is the most diverse, coming from dozens of nations, and is the best-educated Latino population in the Americas. Beyond these characteristics, the U.S.-based Latino population has experienced a population spike, and now, nearly half (47.5%) of all Latinos are under age 25, a huge Internet user population.<sup>3</sup>

The benefits of ICTs will eventually reach all the Americas, but it is likely that these benefits will be

seen first among Latinos in the United States, given their relatively higher income and education levels. Some of the ICT applications developed by U.S.-based Latinos can be easily applied in Latin America, and the shared cultural identity between the U.S. demographic and Latin America could also make a positive contribution, moving the region toward an Information Society. In fact, the United States should no longer be considered separate and unique to the Americas. As Latinos continue to migrate north making the United States their home, and coupled with the relatively higher fertility rates among Latino families, the United States is becoming *more* Latino.

U.S.-based Latino youth must seize the opportunity, begin to read the "signs of the times," and take leadership roles in their communities to help develop the solutions necessary to developing 21st-century solutions in the Information Society. To achieve this, education will be more essential than ever to ensure that U.S.-based Latinos are empowered to reap the full benefits of the Information Society. Education is the primary hurdle which prevented their participation in the 1990s, and this is where reforms must take place. It is unreasonable to expect a population where two thirds of youth have parents with less than a high school education to be full-fledged participants in an economy with high educational requirements.<sup>4</sup> But it is reasonable to begin by using ICTs to provide alternative education to the failing conventional education systems to elevate and empower U.S.-based Latino youth.

New initiatives can serve the needs of the empowered U.S.-based Latino community that could carry over into increased representation at the WSIS Tunis conference in 2005. U.S.-based Latinos have the wherewithal to make ICT development a reality, not just for their local communities, but for their counterparts south of the border. As the ever-increasing levels of remittances demonstrate, the spillover effect from U.S.-based Latino populations to Latin America is real. New technologies have created a "death of distance" phenomenon that must be harnessed for the spillover effect from North America to South America to be sustainable. The challenge now is to enhance communications among U.S.-based Latinos, starting with the signifi-

2. Millman, Joel. Latin Americans Boost Home Coiffers. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/site/docs/pdf/Remittances%20Senders%20and%20Receivers%20LAC%202003%20Final.pdf>

3. <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hispanic/ppl-165/tab01-1.pdf>

4. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p20-539.pdf>

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cant youth population, to increase our mutual awareness and to seek out common solutions to some of our common problems.

In the 20th century, Latin America missed the Industrial Revolution; the 21st century need not be another “lost century” as the Information Revolution brings renewed opportunities for participation in the global economy and economic development for its citizens. As the Chinese and Indian diasporas in the United States have helped their homeland economies, now too can the U.S.-based Latino population, led by a generation of tech-savvy youth, become the engine of empowerment and development for Latin American youth. ■

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