

OPPORTUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS

by María Liliana Mor and David Rojas



COURTESY POETA/TRUST FOR THE AMERICAS [3]

In 2005, the OAS Trust for the Americas foundation initiated the “Partnership in Opportunities for Employment through Technology in the Americas” program (POETA) to provide job opportunities to people with disabilities. Just five years later, more than 178,000 people in the hemisphere have benefitted from the program. The original priority of providing training for individuals has been modified to include a greater emphasis on strengthening local institutions and developing economic opportunities for the participants. Together, these elements are paving a way towards new development in the region.

POETA began with the support of Microsoft’s Unlimited Potential program in a few community technology centers in Guatemala. Today, 66 POETA centers exist in 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries. By the end of 2010, 89 centers will be operating in 20 countries and more than 50 local organizations will be

committed to fulfilling the mission and strengthening the program. POETA has also diversified its portfolio of donors in the last five years. While strengthening the relationship with Microsoft as a primary partner and donor, it has also involved fourteen other companies, development agencies, and government organizations as program sponsors. This impressive programmatic and geographic expansion is an example of how the program has evolved exponentially by understanding external dynamics and applying them to local contexts.

Elmer Rozas in Peru and Rodrigo Pérez in Mexico are two good examples of POETA’s work. Rozas, 48, participated in POETA trainings in 2005. The program helped him understand the importance of information and communications technology (ICT) and he became a leader in innovation among his colleagues and supervisors at

a radio station. In the process he broke with the paradigms associated with his physical disability. Today, Elmer is assistant manager of the municipal office for attention to persons with disabilities in Cuzco and also the general manager of his own advertising company which works in radio, television, written press, and the internet.

Rodrigo Pérez had his first experience working with information and communications technology when he attended a training at a POETA center at the University of La Salle in Mexico City. In spite of initial difficulties due to his visual disability, Pérez stood out as one of the best students in the class, and the knowledge he acquired through the program allowed him to pursue his economic independence. Today, he has an Internet Café where he also repairs computers.

Trust for the Americas advocates for inclusive social development in the region. Part of its basic work is to support the mandates of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and to create strategies for programs aligned with the Millennium Development Goals. POETA, developed by the Trust’s Information and Communications Technology for Development unit (ICT4D), is one example of this work.

POETA’s main line of work continues to be training in ICTs and on how to use technologies that have been adapted to empower people with disabilities to become active citizens, employees with dignity, business managers, and actors with ongoing access to development opportunities. POETA centers also help entrepreneurs develop their businesses and use information and communications technology.

The close relationship between the Trust and the OAS has helped generate a great deal of potential, allowing POETA to develop with the support of OAS local offices all over the hemisphere and under a solid framework of cooperation with local organizations. The relationship has also helped ensure the support of private and public sector groups in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Today, POETA is a hemispheric initiative that includes new populations. People with disabilities are served under the POETA Accessible program; at-risk youth under the POETA Youth program; and victims of Colombia’s armed conflict under a sister program called Mi Llave. All three programs promote the use of technology in inclusive training and education centers. The three programs are part of a growing network of actors from the private sector, government, and civil society. They promote the social and economic inclusion of vulnerable communities by



Participants in the POETA youth programs in the Caribbean, below, and in Saint Lucia, left. Opposite: A POETA coordinator teaches a participant with disabilities to use specialized equipment in Cali, Colombia

developing the beneficiaries' social skills and workplace skills and by raising awareness among other key actors in society.

In some cases, participants are finding work opportunities within the POETA centers themselves. Santos Grillet, a young man of 24, enrolled in POETA in Upata, Venezuela in 2009 looking for a way to overcome his disability after his leg was amputated. His interest in computer technology and his constant commitment to helping his classmates caught the eye of his teacher. Because of his great effort and dedication, Santos is now the coordinator of the POETA center, a job that helps him to continue to assist more people with disabilities.

Through a network of regional and local coordinators who act as multipliers and catalysts for the program, POETA is now offering services to local organizations in three major areas: training, advocacy, and inclusive labor practices. The coordinators conduct the ICT trainings, ensure the sustainability of the centers, and oversee activities that promote the inclusion of the participants in social and labor settings. While a standard plan exists, the work dynamic varies in each country depending on how the donor funds are allocated, what the conditions are in the local environment, and the

experience of the implementing organization. Currently, the labor inclusion and advocacy components are the strongest in Mexico, El Salvador, Peru, Ecuador, and Costa Rica where Microsoft's support is complemented by partnerships with the Multilateral Investment Fund of the Inter-American Development Bank in the first three countries and by the support of the US Department of Labor in Costa Rica. Results from these countries are being replicated in other countries as well, another advantage of the way the POETA network works.

The network aspect is crucial to the success of the program. That's why the Trust promotes interaction between local partners through the use of virtual tools like RED Trust and the POETA Youth Web Portal to share information about useful practices and generate more impact and visibility in the hemisphere. Another effort in the last two years has been the production of guides that are used to train employers about how to employ persons with disabilities. A job development curriculum has also been created to help POETA staff members establish relationships with the private sector and with the beneficiaries' families in order to help participants find

jobs. Information collection is also an important part of the work, both in terms of collecting baseline information about the employment situation and enterprises of vulnerable groups and in terms of conducting assessments of labor supply and demand.

POETA is currently offering a diversity of training opportunities that focus not only on empowering individuals but also on strengthening local organizations. With POETA guidance, organizations incorporate business models with the best strategies for sustainability adjusted to the realities of the environment and the population served. In this way, POETA has become a social franchise model focused on the creation of training centers. The Trust transfers economic resources, training, and information and facilitates multi-sectoral relationships for the implementation, follow-up, sustainability, and replicability of the program.

This franchise has been validated in partnerships like the one established in 2009 with the General Office of Job

Training Centers of Mexico's Secretariat of Public Education, through which more than 40 training centers in 33 cities of Mexico have decided to incorporate the POETA program into their plan of action. Five years ago, the Trust for the Americas could not have predicted that this social investment model would result in what is known as POETA today: a hemispheric initiative recognized by the United Nations and by the Municipality of Dubai in 2008 as one of the 12 Best Practices for improving the conditions of vulnerable groups.

No single strategy, exact pattern, or predetermined formula exists for determining the success of social programs, but some crucial variables appear to be the following: the ability to assess needs and analyze the environment in order to identify opportunities; and the ability to be dynamic in the search for solutions. In the process, political, economic, and social dynamics are generated that determine the course of a project and its evolution into an initiative with the ability to have a great impact at the local and global level. ❀

María Lilibiana Mor is the Program Manager for POETA at the Trust for the Americas. David Rojas contributed to this article.

