

# Technology: an investment in development

Latin America faces the challenge of building a digital economy based on innovation, growth, and productive efficiency

Yisel Martínez García

• OVER the last 10 years Latin America has made significant progress in the field of connectivity, with the most developed countries in the region gradually bridging the digital divide; providing more people with access to Internet. This has resulted in faster, cheaper connections and the growing presence of Latin Americans online. Although this sounds like good news, today half of all people living in the region are still unconnected, while the gap between those with access to the Internet of Things, for example, and those without, continues to widen.

Pablo Bello, executive director of the Inter-American Association of Telecommunications Companies (ASIT), which brings together the most important sector entities, both public and private, in Latin America, agreed to talk with **Granma International** about the challenges of technological development for the region, one of the most pressing of which, according to the regional expert, is closing the digital divide:

"This process requires a lot more investment. We're talking about building the most advanced networks, installing fiber optics, setting up fourth and fifth generation wireless. In order to do this and have world-class connectivity infrastructure, Latin American countries still need to take an important step to bridge the digital divide," he explained.

## BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Talking about closing the digital divide also means talking about investments and infrastructure at the level of those in developed countries, and knowing how to best use such resources.

"We need to know how to create value with connectivity, so that being connected basically means a better quality of life, creating sources of wealth, greater equality and opportunities for all.

"This is a field in which Latin America is still lacking. Efforts are being made to close the digital divide, but in terms of the efficient, productive and social use of information technologies as a key element for our development, we are very far behind the most developed countries," added Bello.

According to the ASIT director, another of the region's challenges includes trying to ensure that public policies focus on incorporating information technologies into all of their productive process, even the most rudimentary.

The idea is to do this in all Latin American countries and their productive sectors, and at the same time develop digital services, content, and applications which will enable us to bring about this technological transformation, while also

creating other types of productive activities based on, and making better use of, our own cultural resources. Of the 100 most popular websites in Latin America, 26 are Latin American, while three out of every four are foreign, noted Bello.

"Today, we are using the internet to transfer our cultural wealth to developed countries rather than within the region. We must take advantage of all that related to innovation, music, the arts, projects linked to our cultural attributes, languages, and use information technologies to do so," added Bello.

## WHY PRIORITIZE TECHNOLOGY?

On a continent such as Latin America, marked by disappointing economic growth and pressing social, healthcare, and educational needs, among others, why invest in technology and the internet when there are so many other urgent matters to address?

"It's about investing in the future, breaking the cycle of poverty and building a path toward growth and progress. It's a complex decision but when you look at the evidence and international studies, it's irrefutable," stated Pablo Bello.

According to reports on the region, if Latin America does not make significant headway in raising its productive competitiveness on a global level, its economic growth over the next 15 years will be between 40 to 50% lower than it has been during in the last 15 years.

"This means that if we don't make the changes to our productive infrastructure now, by incorporating the Internet and information technologies in order to create more value, what we are going to see is a lost decade. Ten, 15 years of very low growth during which poverty and misery will increase and problems will continue to get bigger.

"In order to break this vicious circle of poverty and meet the needs of citizens in terms of their quality of life, changes must be made to the region's productive infrastructure through the exhaustive use of technology. If we want to become developed countries, we have to do things differently and in order to do things differently we have to invest in technological change," explained Pablo Bello.

## PROGRESS IN LATIN AMERICA & CUBA

Several countries across Latin America have been making successful efforts to close the digital divide, most notably Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, and Costa Rica. However, according to Bello, despite the fact that all have very different policies and solutions, there are still sectors of the population in each of those countries,

ARIEL MONTENEGRO



Pablo Bello Arellano, ASIT executive director.

which are still unconnected. These are usually the poorest people, or those who live in remote areas, where connections either don't exist or are deficient.

"There are challenges in every country, but it's not about saying, that country has done well, we're going to copy them. Every nation is different and has its own characteristics. In some cases companies are public, in others they are private, or there's only one. Meanwhile, the evidence shows that positive results can be achieved with different models," stated Bello.

Regarding the region, the ASIT executive director noted that Cuba's indicators generally seem to be improving, before sharing his thoughts on the island's Plan for the Computerization of Cuban society, currently being implemented across the country.

"I think it's a well-defined plan and is progressing. Etecsa (national telecommunications entity) is undertaking important work in this sense with the expansion of wifi hotspots and home internet. This is all moving in the right direction; the problem is, of course, that Cuba has economic limitations, just like every other Latin American country. It's difficult for low-income families, which is why community models must be used, like the wifi hotspots in public areas. All this is moving in the right direction, but the issue now is how to speed up the process, something we have to work on together," insisted Pablo Bello.

What is happening in Cuba is very different from what's going on in other parts of the region, where although many countries are closing the digital gap and increasing internet access, there still remains much to be done in terms of the effective use, knowledge, skills, and practices associated with these information technologies.

In Cuba however, the situation seems to be the reverse; although it may have greater creative capacities, a significantly higher number of engineers and computer specialists working on developing digital solutions, applications for telemedicine, cultural pages, and projects, it is behind in terms of connectivity.

In this respect, Bello highlighted the enthusiasm and drive of young university students to maximize the potential of information technologies.

He went on to note how impressed he was with the country's development of healthcare applications linked to telemedicine, medical records, and hospital administration; while also praising Cuban engineers and computer specialists for their efficient and productive use of information technologies, as well as their ability to create solutions and develop applications, which has seen the island become a leader in this field, according to Bello.

"It's worth noting the extremely high level of Cuba's computer specialists, and specifically the role of women in the sector, which is far greater than that of other Latin American countries, where there is a clear difference, given that it is a male-dominated industry. I don't know how Cuba has been able to close the gender gap, but it's both exciting and fantastic to see women in leadership positions.

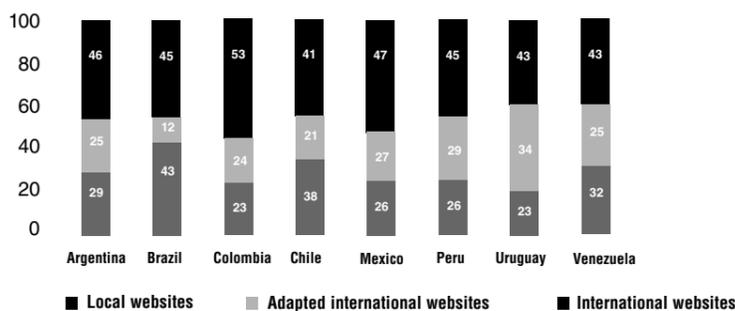
"I think Cuba's efforts to give universities the task of looking for solutions and creating working groups within the university context, in order to develop solutions for e-governance, and sectors like health, culture, and education, are without a doubt, a key element to the country's development.

"If I had to say anything it would be that Cuba needs to sell its skills and know-how abroad. Latin America needs to know about the work Cuba is doing, making the region a natural space where these solutions can even be sold. It's a market in which all this skill and knowledge can be used to generate more wealth for Cubans," stated ASIT's executive director.

Infrastructure, closing the digital divide, achieving world-class connectivity, telecommunications, and regional development in the field of technology is more than a good idea, it's a necessity; and doing so requires well-defined public policies able to generate the socio-economic changes needed to achieve this goal.

"Cuba is a leader in this regard. It is also a country from which Latin America has much to learn, and with great export potential, not only in terms of knowledge, but also solutions and software, applications and systems that could be used in other parts of Latin America." •

## Latin America: Composition of the 100 most popular websites



Latin America

Source: UIT (2016)

53% of people do not use the Internet

66% of homes do not have an Internet connection