MAKING THE CONNECTION

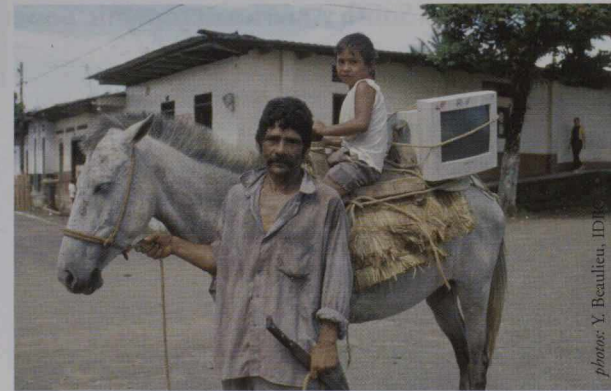**An organization supported by Canada helps bridge the digital divide across the hemisphere.**

There's an image in Ben Petrazzini's mind, an image that takes form as he talks about what the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA) does.

A teacher, say, in Colombia, helps to develop an innovative software tool for teaching math to Grade 3 students. The software is made available on line in Colombia on the National Education Portal, and the following day it can be downloaded and used by schoolchildren from Baja California in northwestern Mexico to Tierra del Fuego on the southernmost tip of South America. Instantly, resource-poor schools have a new teaching tool.

Three years after becoming operational, the ICA is making this type of instant connectivity a reality. The institute supports the development of information and communication technology not only for schoolchildren, but also for villages that need Internet connections, public servants who want to share best practices and businesspeople looking to increase their knowledge and to develop skills.

"Most countries work in isolation," says Petrazzini, the ICA's acting manager. "We're seen as kind of an objective partner that facilitates integration across the region."

Operating on a five-year, $20-million budget through 2007, the ICA finances some projects and acts as a facilitator in others. It has the flexibility to work with governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector,

▲ Tangled wires connect concrete houses in Olocuilta, El Salvador.

◀ Digital boom: In Belén de los Andaquíes, Colombia, a father and his son transport a computer monitor on horseback.

says Luis Barnola, a senior program specialist with the ICA in Ottawa. "We're a catalyst."

The ICA was created as part of Canada's contribution to the 2001 Summit of the Americas, held in Quebec City. It became apparent during the digital boom of the 1990s—when the Internet went from being a novelty to a necessity—that parts of Latin America and the Caribbean needed a boost.

Working through Canada's International Development and Research Centre, with 10 full-time employees based in Ottawa and Montevideo, Uruguay, the institute has supported 60 initiatives since 2002.

For example, it has worked to connect the national education portals of various Latin American countries. This connection is up and running and would allow the sharing of the Grade 3 math software that Petrazzini gives as an example.

"Those portals were working in isolation, so what the ICA has done is fund the creation of a regional network," says Petrazzini, who is based in Montevideo.

"The ministries of education of each country are members of the network, and when they produce educational content, that content is immediately circulated to the whole region," he says. "It's very powerful, because it multiplies educational content and it allows kids everywhere to have access to the same new pedagogical tools."

There are many other ICA projects. For example, @Campus, a pilot e-learning platform designed by the Mexican public service, has trained more than 800 Mexican public servants in an effort to improve efficiency and accountability as well as strengthen democratization. The project, which is being hailed as a model internationally, is ready to deploy to other countries, explains Barnola, who spearheaded the initiative.

Connectivity is not limited to teaching tools. The ICA is also working on such technology as wireless fidelity (WiFi) and connecting remote areas using low-cost, high-speed Internet.

Says Petrazzini: "A number of our projects are aimed at giving communities that are excluded the chance to enter the information age." ❧

Learn more about the ICA at www.icamericas.net.