

## **The Bogotá of my dreams: a city that improves the quality of life of its inhabitants through creative solutions to optimize existing resources**

In my country, Colombia, 75% of the population lives in cities,<sup>1</sup> according to the latest census, carried out in 2005. I live in Bogotá, the capital city, where 21% of Colombia's urban population,<sup>2</sup> more than 6.8 million people, reside.<sup>3</sup> Currently, it is one of the 40 largest cities in the world and one of the 10 largest in Latin America.<sup>4</sup> My city's large size not only creates opportunities because it is a dynamic economic, social and cultural center; it also poses major challenges for ensuring that all inhabitants have a good quality of life.

Bogotá was founded in 1538, in the middle of the Andes, the legendary mountain range stretching from Argentina to Venezuela in western South America. During its nearly 470 years of existence, Bogotá has been a political, economic and cultural center of the country, receiving people from all regions. Beginning in the mid twentieth century, this immigration increased due to the violence caused by guerrillas and insurgent groups, which are concentrated in rural zones. Many people have been forced to flee to major cities such as Bogotá ("between May 1999 and August 2002, 8,362 displaced families in Bogotá received assistance, equivalent to approximately 35,000 individuals.")<sup>5</sup>

From a more informal perspective, Bogotá is a city where Colombia's regional and cultural wealth converges. Colombia is a country with coastlines on two oceans, a wide range of climate zones and high levels of biodiversity. It is a country rated among the happiest in the world. Bogotá families are a mix of extraordinary customs, with generations hailing from the Caribbean, the Pacific, the coffee-growing or Amazon regions, while others were born in the city. My Bogotá is perhaps one of the best reflections of the cultural and ethnic wealth of Colombia. It is also one reason the city faces enormous challenges for social inclusion.

### **Bogotá: a city of educational, labor and business opportunities**

Bogotá offers wonderful opportunities for inhabitants thanks to its education services, as well as the size and dynamism of its labor and business markets. Colombia's primary, secondary (6% of

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<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Administrative Department (DANE), "Proyecciones nacionales y departamentales de población. 2006-2020," ("National and Departmental Population Estimates, 2006-2020"), September 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates by the author, based on the report "Proyecciones nacionales y departamentales de población, 2006-2020" ("National and Departmental Population Estimates, 2006-2020"), DANE.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> The Principal Agglomerations of the World, City Population, <<http://www.citypopulation.de/World.html>> consulted on 23 March, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Bogotá Cómo Vamos Project, Office of the Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Displaced Population in Bogotá: A Responsibility for Everyone," June 2003.

the country's schools) and higher education (35% of its universities)<sup>6</sup> services are concentrated in Bogotá. Bogotá residents have an average of 9.6 years of schooling, higher than the average for the main urban areas of Latin America (9.2 years),<sup>7</sup> which indicates that education opportunities in the city permit the development of human capital that meets international standards.

In addition, the diversity of sectors present in Bogotá offers abundant labor and business opportunities. The economy of Bogotá has been growing since 2000, reaching 6.8% in 2006.<sup>8</sup> Bogotá is the region with the largest number of economic units (industry, trade and services) in Colombia (approximately 320,000, equivalent to 23% of the total economic units of this type nationwide).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Colombian capital has the country's largest labor market, concentrating 18% of jobs nationwide and contributing a quarter of all new employment generated in the country.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Bogotá is ranked third among Latin American cities that most stimulate the creation of new businesses,<sup>11</sup> which indicates that the opportunities offered are not only for people seeking employment, but also for entrepreneurs who have the potential to generate it.

### **Despite the educational and economic progress made, Bogotá faces major social challenges**

Bogotá also faces major challenges, however, such as a high rate of poverty and unequal income distribution. Although the poverty rate in Bogotá has decreased in recent years, it is still alarming: in 2004, 43.4% of the population lived below the poverty line, compared with 54.6% in 2001.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in the area of the city with the most equitable income distribution, the 10% of individuals with the highest income earn nearly 10 times more than those belonging to the 10% with the lowest income. In the area with the worst income distribution, the 10% with the highest income earn nearly 30 times more than the 10% with the lowest income.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Proexport Colombia, <<http://www.proexport.com.co/VBeContent/NewsDetail.asp?ID=5706&IDCompany=20>>, consulted on 23 March, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., National Education Ministry Data.

<sup>8</sup> Invest in Bogotá, <<http://inviertaenbogota.net/content/modules/general.jsp?ID=1866>>, consulted on 23 March, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Estimates by the author, based on data from the DANE Sistema de Consulta de Información Censal del DANE (Census Data Consulting System),

<<http://190.25.231.242/cgi-bin/RpWebEngine.exe/PortalAction?&MODE=MAIN&BASE=CG2005BASICO&MAIN=WebServerMain.inl>>, consulted on 23 March, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Proexport Colombia, <<http://www.proexport.com.co/VBeContent/NewsDetail.asp?ID=5705&IDCompany=20>>, consulted on 23 March, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Bogotá Chamber of Commerce, "Observatorio del Emprendimiento en Bogotá" ("Bogotá Entrepreneurship Monitor"), September 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Bogotá Cómo Vamos Project, National Human Development Program, "Pobreza y distribución del ingreso en Bogotá," ("Poverty and Income Distribution in Colombia"), December 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Another major challenge is the school dropout rate: an estimated 30% of students who enter the public school system do not complete their high school education (last two years of secondary school).<sup>14</sup> Studies suggest that economic factors are the main cause of high school dropout and nonattendance rates, especially in secondary school. These factors are associated both with families' inability to cover education costs and with higher rates of child labor due to the difficulties these families face in meeting basic needs.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, the lack of public safety still figures prominently among the city's problems. Although Bogotá crime rates in 2006 were at their lowest level since 1998, there were more than 1,300 murders, over 450 traffic deaths, more than 30,000 robberies (of individuals, homes, establishments and vehicles), 30 kidnappings and 15 acts of terrorism.<sup>16</sup>

In short, the Colombian capital offers a wealth of educational and economic opportunities, which need to be strengthened to address problems such as poverty, income concentration, school dropout rates and the lack of public safety. Bogotá must strive to create more opportunities to confront the challenges identified, especially poverty.

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<sup>14</sup> Estimates made by the author based on the intra-annual dropout rate reported in "Estadísticas del Sector Educativo de Bogotá 2006" ("2006 Statistics of the Education Sector of Bogotá") of the District Education Secretariat, published in Bogotá in November 2007, assuming 11 years of education (primary and secondary school).

<sup>15</sup> District Education Secretariat, "Estadísticas del Sector Educativo de Bogotá 2006" ("2006 Statistics of the Education Sector of Bogotá") published in Bogotá in November 2007, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Bogotá Chamber of Commerce, "Observatorio del Emprendimiento en Bogotá" ("Bogotá Entrepreneurship Monitor"), September 2007.

**The city of my dreams:  
One that takes advantage of existing resources to achieve social inclusion**

The city of my dreams is one where all of us, including the most disadvantaged, have the possibility of living the life we want. It is a city where we can all feel safe. A city in which the facilities we use are in harmony with nature and our natural environment. But above all, the city of my dreams is a city of happy human beings. One where all our hearts are full...full of passion, strength and hope.

If Bogotá is to become the city of my dreams, we need to do more than to improve the quality of public services, transportation infrastructure, education, health, housing and communication. We need to do more than stimulate employment and access to credit to create and strengthen businesses and professionalize non-profit organizations, among other aspects. The programs implemented must also respond to the needs of the urban population so that they can become tools to enable each individual to create his own happiness.

One might argue that millions need to be invested and consequently, that only cities in developed countries with sufficient resources could achieve this dream. But I believe it is an issue that goes beyond the amount of resources: it is a matter of how effectively they are used. I believe that a city like Bogotá, with serious resource limitations, can use what has been or is being invested in a much more effective way to further progress toward making it a city inhabited by happy human beings. To achieve this requires creative solutions, many of which we young people can generate.

**An example of existing resources with unexploited potential: computer rooms**

For example, the district government has provided 28,000 computers to 706 public schools<sup>17</sup> as part of a policy to improve education that the city's different administrations have developed since 2000. Additionally, the district government provides regular maintenance services to more than 400 computer rooms in the city<sup>18</sup> to ensure that they can operate at maximum capacity. Nevertheless, these facilities are not fully exploited since most are not open in the evening and on weekends.

Moreover, the Colombian government, through its learning service, offers online courses free of charge. These courses are offered in different subjects, with a focus on job skills. Nevertheless,

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<sup>17</sup> Integrated Network for Participatory Education, RedP, < [http://www.redp.edu.co/ques\\_datos.htm](http://www.redp.edu.co/ques_datos.htm)>, consulted on 23 March 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

these courses are not reaching more people because a large percentage of the low-income population does not have access to computers with Internet access, even though resources are available to offer more courses and serve more users.

What would happen if these low-income residents of Bogotá could access the free online courses in the computer rooms already established in district schools? This is only one example of two loose ends in our economy, which represent an enormous resource investment. If they were joined, they could increase their impact using resources already budgeted. What is more, this type of initiative could be developed to help resolve many of the city's key problems, such as the high levels of poverty and income concentration.

However, as mentioned earlier, the real needs of the population must be identified in order to propose programs and projects with a positive impact. Consequently, it is necessary to determine why low-income individuals have problems accessing education. During college, a group of classmates and I wanted to gain a better understanding of this issue, for which reason we conducted a study using primary (interviews, focus groups and surveys in three of the poorest city neighborhoods) and secondary sources (previous studies).

We learned that the problem goes beyond the lack of resources to continue one's education. Once an individual leaves the traditional system, if he wants to return, he may have trouble adapting due to his age. In addition, in cities such as Bogotá, when people are employed and look after their homes at the same time they want to study, the long commutes (an individual may have to travel two or more hours from his home to his workplace) seriously limit access to education or traditional training services. This problem is due to the city's great distances and the inadequate mass transport system. Moreover, the poorest neighborhoods are generally located on the outskirts of the city.

Thus, the challenge is not only to facilitate access to traditional education, but also to identify tools and methodologies to overcome barriers of adaptation due to age and the lack of time to commute to the training location.

E-learning is one way to overcome these obstacles. E-learning is education that is offered through online networks and therefore can be accessed anywhere in the world where there is a computer with Internet access. Individuals can study their courses whenever convenient and at their own pace, without their age or social characteristics creating barriers of adaptation.

Furthermore, each student can receive assistance in accordance with his level of progress in the courses since the tutor can check which courses he has passed and which he has not, identify those which are causing him problems and determine whether his learning pace is fast, slow or average. This permits a personalized education, a practically utopian situation in the traditional education system.

Currently, an increasing number of education institutions in Spanish-speaking countries, such as Mexico, Spain and Colombia (as mentioned earlier) offer e-learning at different levels. Each of the computer rooms maintained by the district could become e-learning classrooms where thousands of people could take the courses offered, in accordance with their interests, and thereby improve their access to labor and business opportunities.

Facilitating disadvantaged individuals' use of technology is in itself extremely important because the computer and the Internet have become everyday tools for development in the knowledge society. Training individuals to use the computer and the Internet opens the doors on a world of information that gives them the tools to explore and to establish contact with other individuals in similar situations for mutual learning and support. It means giving them the tools to take advantage of technological advances implemented by the government and society as a whole. It has already become a factor of social inclusion.

Thus, the city of my dreams is one that provides opportunities for all of its inhabitants, both through effective resource investment and the full exploitation of existing resources. The Bogotá of my dreams will be a city that puts its existing resources, such as computer rooms and online courses, at the service of those who need them most.

### **The role of young people: generating creative solutions for the efficient use of existing resources to benefit the disadvantaged**

*"(...) the poverty problem is not the exclusive responsibility of the city government; it requires the joint efforts of the nation, social organizations, private entities and citizens in general."*<sup>19</sup>

After learning about the situation described above, my classmates and I decided to find out why the facilities were not being used to their full potential. We discovered that the obstacles impeding

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<sup>19</sup> Bogotá cómo vamos Project, Minutes of the Forum "¿Quiénes son y dónde están los pobres en Bogotá?" ("Who and where are the poor in Bogotá?") of 17 August 2005. Representatives of the district government, experts and members of social organizations participated in this event, as did local council members and mayors, who offered their perspectives on the issue.

the optimal use of this infrastructure are associated with the interaction among several actors, such as the schools, the community, the local government and the course providers.

To determine how to optimize the use of the facilities to serve the population living in poverty, we developed a pilot project in 2003. During this project, we used one of the computer rooms, located in a district school in a low-income neighborhood of southwestern Bogotá, to enable local residents to access an online course on basic computer skills offered by a Mexican university. We obtained permission from the school principal to use the room and the Mexican institution to access the online course.

The project confirmed two basic hypotheses: 1) that schools are ideal locations for this type of project because they are located in neighborhoods where the beneficiaries live, thereby resolving the travel time limitations that occurred previously; and 2) that the e-learning methodology satisfies the learning needs of the beneficiary population by permitting each student to progress at his own pace and to take the same course with individuals of different ages and cultural characteristics without this negatively affecting his learning process.

The result of the project was that 15 individuals learned to use a computer and search the Internet, which gave them the capacity to access jobs not previously considered, organize their microenterprises and document the activities of the Community Action Boards<sup>20</sup> of which they were members, among other things. The pilot project was a success thanks to the willingness of the school to lend its facilities, the availability of a quality course and the presence of an active, participatory community. We realized that there was a simple, effective way to help improve the quality of life of low-income individuals of our city.

This was the beginning of the project. Thanks to this experience, we decided to design a model that would permit the use of not just one or two, but many, computer rooms in the city to benefit the community. This model was our thesis project for a degree in business administration. We contacted several actors to participate in the project: schools, the district education secretariat and online course providers. The focus was on identifying the needs and constraints of all actors to design a win-win model that would effectively promote all actors' participation.

During our research, we learned that schools were not using computer rooms during extra hours because there was no one to make sure that no equipment in the room was damaged or stolen, which would affect their education facilities. Although the district education secretariat wanted

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<sup>20</sup> "The community action board is a civil, social and community non-profit organization for social management, with legal capacity and autonomy, voluntarily formed by local residents who join efforts and resources to achieve integral, sustainable development in the context of the exercise of participatory democracy." Law 743 of 2002.

schools to open the rooms for longer hours, it could not force them to do so. Therefore, schools needed to be motivated to develop this type of project. Additionally, for the course providers, it was important to have a student population large enough for their courses and to be familiar with the training needs of the community.

In an attempt to satisfy the needs of all project actors, we designed an online organizational model facilitated by a non-profit organization that coordinates the project, ensures the efficient use of resources and at the same time facilitates and supplies what project actors needed. This was an innovative model in that it leveraged existing resources, supplied by different actors who are now connected online through the facilitating organization, to achieve greater impact than in the past.

Today, this project has become a reality through a legally established non-profit organization that operates five computer rooms in Bogotá public schools, serving more than 100 people every weekend, whose ages range from 15 to 60. This organization is responsible for coordinating service delivery to the beneficiary population by linking schools, online course providers, community leaders and project beneficiaries. In addition, this organization encourages the actors mentioned to participate in the project through: donations of new computers to schools, remuneration of personnel that provide in-person learning support to beneficiaries, monitoring to ensure proper use of equipment and dissemination activities to reach more beneficiaries.

In the future, a project like this one could extend beyond the computer rooms of public schools in Bogotá. It could also be adapted to reach the 2,340 private schools in the city<sup>21</sup> and even to establish computer rooms in independent community spaces, such as community centers, with donations of equipment in good condition that could be adapted for community use. This type of project could even be implemented in other cities of the country and the world. The only thing needed is computer facilities with Internet access that can be used more efficiently to benefit the community.

This experience demonstrates that we young people can play a key role in making Bogotá the city of our dreams. We can use the skills acquired to think creatively and design solutions that the city needs so that existing resources can be used more effectively and a virtuous cycle can be generated that takes Bogotá one step forward. Young people's commitment and energy are essential for the city's development. To promote this work, we must awaken the sense of urgency, the need to do something, but most importantly, to realize that young people really are

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<sup>21</sup> District Education Secretariat, "Estadísticas del Sector Educativo de Bogotá 2006" ("2006 Statistics of the Education Sector of Bogotá"), Bogotá, November 2007, p. 24.

capable of doing that something. Because in order to achieve the changes we all dream of, citizens and government, for-profit and non-profit organizations must work together. It requires the teamwork of all actors of society.