

CHANGES IN THE ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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1. Context of the changes

Already with one foot into the 21st Century, it is quite clear for all those who are interested in vocational training and work in it, that deep and fascinating changes are taking place in this field. Like many others, this is a world-wide phenomenon, although it assumes different patterns.

Latin America and the Caribbean, a region that has had its own particular “hall-mark” for organising and managing vocational training, is no exception in this respect. One way in which vocational training in the region pays homage to its own past, is in the strong persistence of a tradition of highly original and distinctive development.

When trying to analyse –even succinctly, as in this paper– the changes occurring in any field of activity (like the organization and management of vocational training in the region), it is essential to look first at those things that have varied in the context within which that activity takes place.

Many other studies have concentrated previously on what might be called the “macro-context” of changes, that is to say, the repercussions that processes like the new forms of globalization of the economy, opening up of trade, economic readjustment, technological development, new models to channel countries into the economic mainstream, as well as historical and recent challenges regarding the distribution of wealth, integration, and social cohesion, have had in the field of vocational training.

This paper will not touch upon such aspects, which have already been thoroughly covered. We have chosen a more “modest” goal, that of vocational training itself,

dealing with aspects of it that have undergone transformations, with what is understood for vocational training, who are interested in it and take part in it –to a greater or lesser extent– , what types of links vocational training establishes with other social policy areas. We try to shed some light not only on what has changed in the organization and management of VT, but on why such changes have occurred.

Vocational training at the centre of national debates

It cannot be denied that Latin American societies gave great importance to vocational training policies throughout at least the second half of the last century. A sign of it is that, sooner or later, most countries of the region decided to create national vocational training institutions (VTIs), and endowed them with considerable and stable financing and management systems ensuring the efficient accomplishment of their mission: providing skilled and semi-skilled manpower, in the first place for their expanding industries, and later for commerce and services and the rural sector as well.

Perhaps owing to the priorities that had been assigned to vocational training, it was generally assumed that it was the exclusive province of specialised institutions. This happened despite the fact that in most cases care had been taken to involve diverse players in their management, like Ministries of Labour, entrepreneurial chambers and trade unions.

By contrast, one of the main characteristics of vocational training at present (and in the last ten years) is that it lies at the centre of national debates. Proof of it is the prominence it has acquired in various national agreements and pacts –generally tripartite but sometimes also bipartite– on productivity, wages, employment, working conditions or social equity. Another symptom of that centrality is the more frequent and concrete presence of vocational training in a number of collective labour agreements by branch or sector of activity, signed in different countries during the 1990s.

There are, however, other areas where this renewed interest in training by other actors than the specialised institutes themselves is also evident. Ministries of Labour in all countries of the region currently have specialised training units or services, and are increasingly concerned with the design of active labour market policies that –over and above their natural differences due to the specific situation of each country – always include training as a basic and strategic aspect. Both corporate and trade-union actors show a growing interest in influencing decisions on public training policies and controlling and managing funds for that purpose, either in the

VTIs themselves or in the new training bodies that have emerged in Labour Ministries at national, regional or local level.

Advent of the society of knowledge

The fact that vocational training have attained this position is to a great extent due to the advent of the so-called “society of knowledge”. This term tries to synthesise one of the clearest and strongest trends of our times, namely, the growing importance of knowledge in the new forms of labour organization and management, as well as the new rules of global competition.

Knowledge has nowadays a similar importance to that formerly attributed to the land, capital goods, even technology. In the race to increase the value added to products and services, to achieve differentiation and compete efficiently in the new global context, only knowledge as expressed through the applied capabilities of workers in their respective organizational, productive and labour situations, seems to be a decisive incremental factor for attaining productivity, quality and competitiveness objectives.

Just as in the past ownership of the land and of the means of production were the mainstays of society, both economically, socially and politically, nowadays access to knowledge has become the divide separating full members of society from excluded minorities.

Consequently, in order to achieve the economic objectives of productivity and competitiveness, and to prevent social disintegration and exclusion, access to knowledge becomes crucial. Education in general and vocational training in particular gain special importance as privileged instruments for acquiring knowledge. Their potential contribution to economic, social and political objectives make them attractive for the different partners in the social scheme.

This explains to a great extent why a topic like vocational training, that was formerly circumscribed to specialized institutions, is now attracting other participants like Labour and Education Ministries, employers’ and workers’ organizations, etc.

Training and labour policies: vocational training as bargaining point and space for negotiation

It seems an almost natural conclusion that vocational training, as a potential contributor to various goals and an area of confluence of different interests, should have become both a bargaining point and a space for negotiation.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the areas and experiences in which vocational training is an object of negotiation have gradually increased in number and diversity. It is so among States in regional integration processes, and within each State in matters of education, with a greater stress on productive and labour realities. It is a subject of bargaining for governments, employers and workers, and sometimes only for these last two players. Vocational training is negotiated at national level, but also in regional, sectoral and local areas.

Also in contexts where social dialogue and conciliation are difficult concerning aspects like employment, wages, labour laws and social security, vocational training has proved to be an area where agreement is comparatively easier, even starting from opposing views.

However, the fact that vocational training should have conquered a leading role in labour policies, and should be increasingly seen as a strategic space for negotiation is not just due to its importance in accessing and disseminating knowledge. Regarding this, two comments are in order:

- Firstly, the evidence that vocational training may significantly help in the attainment of various goals, representing differing interests. It can at the same time be an instrument for productive policy and social policy. It contributes as much to raising productivity, quality and competitiveness as to social integration and cohesion, to equal opportunities. Training not only prepares people for work but readies them for communal life and the full exercise of citizenship. When actors with different interests come together they will naturally tend to impose those interests, and to prioritise the principles and objectives they favour. Mechanisms for social dialogue and negotiation geared to vocational training appear then as the most adequate way for reconciling diverging interests and striking a balance ensuring appropriate use of it as a tool.
- Secondly, vocational training is not only a labour matter in its own right, but is also closely related to all other important aspects that are negotiated in the labour field. It is linked to employment, as one of the main channels for achieving the competencies currently required in the labour market. It is connected with wages because through its contributions to productivity and competitiveness (labour aspects as well) it boosts returns and entitles workers to a voice in their distribution. The links of vocational training with working conditions and environment, with safety and health at work, are as obvious as they are vital. This means to say that negotiation of vocational training goes far beyond training itself. It necessarily leads to other subjects and may even afford new views and strategies for the convergence of interests and efforts.

Training and scientific and technological development policies

The close relationship between vocational training and the world of production and work makes it necessary for training to keep conceptually and operationally abreast of scientific and technological changes taking place in that area.

The historical development of this process of technological adaptation has had its ups and downs in Latin American VTIs. Nevertheless, in the final analysis they all achieved a satisfactory degree of technological updating, particularly as compared with other spheres of regular education, in particular secondary schools. This does not mean that there is no backlog, but they are the only institutions where systematic and cumulative efforts have been made to co-ordinate vocational training with processes of innovation, development and transfer of technology.

Furthermore, the relationship between vocational training and technology has several sides to it. In the first place, due to the fact that training itself is a process of technological transfer to workers and trainees, and through them to firms and enterprises. This implies a challenge for all vocational institutions, policies or systems: the need for training contents and methods to be technologically up to date, to ensure their relevance to the concrete productive and occupational contexts of each country, sector or company.

The second important element is that training constitutes the foundation upon which scientific and technological development policies rest. It is indeed difficult to think of active labour market policies without a training component; no technological development policy is complete without the adequate training both of the persons directly concerned with devising innovations, but also those in charge of their operational implementation and adaptation to concrete work situations.

There is yet a third dimension in which the intertwining of training and technology is essential. Integral training is only possible when fully imbedded in processes of innovation, development and transfer of technology. This has been taken up by several VTIs of the region which, as they continue to expand their training offer, endeavour to complement it with technological services to productive sectors and enterprises. This approach has a number of advantages:

- It promotes the already mentioned technological updating of training institutions and centres;
- It offers productive sectors and companies a wide range of services meeting their overall needs – not just their demand for skilled labour – and endows training services with greater relevance;
- It facilitates learning of the skills and competencies in greatest demand by novel approaches of labour and production management, wherein workers are no

longer mere performers of prescribed tasks, but individuals capable of understanding technological changes and relating to them, grasping and handling innovations and getting involved in processes of constant improvement.

Training and educational policies: lifelong education

Nowadays both the regular education system and the various training schemes are facing a new context that poses them vast challenges. The greatest of them is probably to adapt and update curricular contents and certifications to the new occupational profiles that have emerged as a result of transformations in the realm of production and the new realities of employment.

Undoubtedly, the situation affects regular education more than training, that has traditionally been closer to productive and labour developments. This is one of the reasons for the gradual coming together to the two systems, as well as for some of the most innovative initiatives in the region to standardise the training and education offer in line with current occupational competency profiles.

In any case, there is nowadays wide consensus in political and social spheres, in the sense that the education and training offer has to be sufficiently flexible to meet diverse and changeable qualification demands. The initial store of knowledge acquired in early youth is no longer expected to be sufficient for life, as the rapid evolution of the world requires constant updating of knowledge, and the basic education of the young tends to prolong itself. Education and training are in effect undergoing mutations. The possibilities of learning outside the schoolroom offered by society are constantly multiplied, and the idea of specialisation in the traditional sense is being replaced in many modern sectors by evolving competencies and adaptability.

It is a basically qualitative change. If it was formerly sufficient to impart certain technical knowledge and manual skills for individuals to go into a job that was awaiting them, it is now necessary to teach a whole range of competencies that were not emphasised before: initiative, creativeness, a capacity for undertaking, relational and co-operative skills. These must be also accompanied by some new technical skills that are relatively less specific than in the past: languages, computer literacy, logical thinking, a capacity to interpret and analyse various codes, etc.

It is then a priority to give people the means to manage their own educational and occupational career: find a first job, look for a new one, start a personal undertaking, retrain through courses and in general keep up a constant education, either employed or unemployed, at home or in the workplace.

2. Links between training, productivity and decent work

The contribution of training to productivity and competitiveness

The productivity-competitiveness twosome is repeatedly quoted as a key element in efforts to build up successful economic and social development schemes in countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Productivity is generally defined as the relationship between the output of a production or services system and the resources used to obtain it. It can also be described as the correlation between results and the time taken to obtain them: the shorter the time consumed in achieving the desired objective, the more productive the system will be.

Although some strategies based on favouring labour intensiveness are not infrequently used, they generally result in meagre productivity increments. The essence of productivity lies in working more intelligently, not just more intensively.

Despite the fact that there are different approaches and types of programmes to improve productivity, there is basic agreement that it is not possible to introduce or utilise any new technique or modern plan for the purpose unless well-trained personnel is available at all levels.

It is quite clear, on the other hand, that any productivity improvement will depend on several factors, and not only on the training of workers. Aspects such as technological innovation and production and labour management schemes are no doubt fundamental in that respect. Although improvements (or deteriorations) in productivity can be measured and compared, it is not so easy to establish the specific contribution of each factor in obtaining some results. Nevertheless, from whichever angle we look at it, and even in the impossibility of quantifying effects, training plays a significant and absolutely indispensable role in any genuine strategy to raise productivity.

The term **competitiveness**, for its part, in its most literal sense refers to the capacity to compete or contend in the economy that an enterprise, a sector or a country may have. Although this meaning has been true in all ages, it acquires special significance in the current context of economic globalization, when processes of trade opening more evidently show the strengths and weaknesses of economic agents.

There are however, different views as to which are the most adequate strategies and, above all, what combination of measures may be most effective. On the one hand, there are examples of strategies based mainly on measures to abate pro-

duction costs, such as decisions on exchange-rate policies, tax exemptions or reduction of labour costs (wages, severance indemnities, etc.). On the other hand the need is stressed to make efforts (that do not necessarily contradict the preceding) aiming at a strategic perspective that has been called “systemic competitiveness”.

One of the main differences between these two approaches to competitiveness lies in the varying time-scope of their policy propositions. The first method is generally adopted in order to obtain more or less immediate results in the face of unfavourable conditions. By contrast, the systemic competitiveness approach aims at the long term. It does not depend on a limited number of relatively simple measures, but on a complex range of policies that, acting jointly, would result in a globally more competitive position for the whole economy. Some of the most typical instruments suggested by this approach are investment policies for the development of public and private infrastructures, the integration of sectors and productive chains, investment in human capital (education and training), etc.

It is within this second approach that vocational training has a clearer and more important role. It is here taken for granted that investments aimed at upgrading people’s qualifications are of themselves measures to improve competitiveness, and also reinforce the effectiveness of other complementary policies.

The current regional diversity that exists regarding ways of organising training supply shows, among other things, different forms of going after the objectives of higher productivity and competitiveness. This involves aspects such as the coverage of training systems, the quality of the training dispensed and its consonance with the needs and demands of the labour market and society in general.

All the above raises a number of questions that the various training institutional models endeavour to answer in their different ways.

Regarding coverage: Should wider coverage be sought after, endowing official training bodies with greater resources? Or should training markets or networks be developed to make more efficient use of the many training resources that already exist?

As for the quality of training: Can it be effectively controlled and ensured within the framework of specific institutions and their training centres? Or should mechanisms to ensure quality be devised reaching all the public and private training supply in the country?

In connection with updating and adaptation to demand: Are training bodies in a position to implement effective strategies in that direction? Or should decisions on

specific training be left to firms and enterprises for better adaptation? How is training demand to be defined?

Decent work requires decent training

Decent work has been described as a concept under development, all embracing and with a profound ethical content. The ILO –organization that has been strongly promoting the notion– describes it as fulfilling at least five essential conditions:

- productiveness and safety
- compliance with labour rights
- providing adequate income
- providing social protection
- ensuring social dialogue, union freedom, collective bargaining and participation

A supplementary aspect to the currently prevailing concern with the shortage of employment may be here underlined, namely the need for an effort also to improve the quality of work. The concept of decent work has constituted an important turning point by introducing and emphasising the ethical content of labour. It has thus complemented the quantitative analysis of work with its qualitative dimension.

Generating more job opportunities and endowing them with the characteristics of decent work is no doubt a challenge calling for the use of various instruments. In all reason we believe not only that training is one of those instruments, but a particularly powerful one.

In the first place if, among other things, decent work guarantees respect for labour rights, it must undoubtedly comply with the workers' essential entitlement to vocational training. As already underscored by Cinterfor/ILO in previous documents, the right to vocational training is not only recognised by comparative legislation, national Constitutions and international agreements, but is also one of the essential or fundamental human rights. Nowadays it is beyond discussion that "education and training are a right of all persons", as established by paragraph 8 of the Resolution Concerning Human Resources Training and Development adopted by the 88th Meeting (2000) of the International Labour Conference.

Also considered a fundamental right are equal opportunities regarding work and income, in connection with which the positive (or negative) effects of openings and access to education and vocational training have been proven. In that respect, the link that exists between qualification and income levels is well known. Also well known is the existence of unequal income structures that are due, among other things, to imbalanced access to knowledge. We may consequently infer that adequate training improves workers' possibilities of making satisfactory earnings,

and that equality of access to training favourably influences their access to satisfactorily remunerated jobs.

The goal of productive work, as already mentioned in the preceding paragraph, necessarily depends on vocational training contributing to it both with its contents, methodological approaches and organizational forms. It is also clear that productivity improvements cannot be achieved risking the lives and health of workers; safety and health at work can only be effectively attained through vocational training.

The prominence of training among instruments tending to offer greater labour and social protection is nowadays widely recognised, inasmuch as labour markets are increasingly afflicted by uncertainty and lack of stability. There is evidence, on the one hand, that higher qualification levels improve workers' chances of finding a job, keeping it or finding a new one, in other words, of reaching stability in the labour market. However, in restrictive contexts like the current one, in which new jobs are scarce and quality employment even scarcer, the sole contribution of training might at best modify the "queuing order", or ensure fairer waiting lists for jobs, but would not provide an overall solution to the problem.

This sort of situation seems to require an effort to rethink not only vocational training but also the economic and social policy areas to which it is related. It is quite obvious that a merely reactive training strategy in the face of current problems can at best only be remedial, compensating or "relieving" the most distressing effects of the inadequate functioning of the economy and the labour markets. In order to attain its highest effectiveness, vocational training must necessarily be conceived in strategic terms going beyond the narrow limits of short-term expectations.

As mentioned earlier, institutional models of organising vocational training had several virtues in the past, among others that of being in tune with certain economic and social development strategies. Such strategies –apart from the limitations they subsequently encountered- were also characterised by setting themselves long-term targets, according to which they made their policy arrangements, vocational training plans included.

Therefore, it is not only essential to conceive vocational training in strategic terms; all other policy lines must behave likewise, in accordance with long-term political, economic and social goals making up authentic "country projects". The difficulties of such a task are obvious, specially in view of the narrow margins for autonomous behaviour national states and governments enjoy. But the task cannot be tackled without consensual projects developed as veritable state policies.

The achievement of more stable labour situations depends –as do other aspects– on more foreseeable future scenarios. Investments in training –as in other areas– require a visible horizon and a certain amount of certainty. This affects firms and enterprises, workers and all economic and social actors involved.

Within that framework, social dialogue appears to be the best possible path both for building that strategic view at national level, in the different areas of public policy and in business enterprises through collective bargaining. In that respect vocational training has a great deal to contribute on the basis of its past and present experiences in social dialogue and participation, and as a “learning observatory” to extend social dialogue to other areas.

In summary, vocational training has a significant role in the achievement of decent work for all. In the first place, because no decent work is possible without complying with that fundamental right, and secondly, because vocational training is essential to accomplish the dimensions that characterise decent work. However, all this will only be possible insofar as institutional forms of organizing vocational training may bring about conditions that make decent training available to all.

3. Vocational training institutions face the challenge of change

It seems almost natural that an organizational model of training like that of the national VTIs, that started to emerge in the 1940s in the region and continued well into the 1970s should have had both hits and errors, virtues and defects, achievements and shortcomings. But we can now look back on chronological events spreading over some six decades. Our critical view is further enriched from two angles: the emergence in the late 70s and early 80s of new organizational approaches in vocational training, and the subsequent implementation of projects and policies along those new lines. To be noted specially, is the capacity for self questioning and transformation of the original VTIs themselves.

Latin American vocational training institutions were not only capable of adapting and changing in the past. The fact that they continue to do so in the present is evidenced by a number of aspects that we analyse below.

New schemes of institutional organization

One of the most recurrent criticisms levelled at the national VTI model is its size and “heavy” structure. The fact is mentioned in this connection that some of these institutions were used as instruments for the promotion of public employment, that they adopted excessively complex organizational structures with the consequent

bureaucratic overload and centralised management. Sometimes the excessive weight of administrative personnel in their total payroll was pinpointed, slowness in decision making and implementation were noted, or too many political appointees on their boards of directors, in a long list of faults. Some of these criticisms were not only valid when they were first made but continue to be so, and have sometimes led to the demise of an institution in its original guise, or its rebirth under direct private management.

Does the above mean to say that VTIs did not take note of such censure, or react to these pleas? Quite the contrary: there are numerous examples that illustrate conclusively the deep transformation processes launched by national vocational training institutions. Many of them are eloquent proof that they can reformulate themselves and meet current challenges. Such successful institutional reforms involved their organizational and administrative structures at national / state / provincial / departmental level, their operational units (centres), their planning (strategies and programmes), their technical / pedagogic management (methodologies, techniques, teaching materials), and their personnel training and development (technicians, instructors, directors).

One initial effort by the national training bodies of several countries has been, precisely, the revamping of their organizational structure. From a multiplicity of hierarchical levels they passed over to more “supple” or “horizontal” structures, doing away with a number of departments and intermediate sections. A bureaucratic organizational approach was gradually replaced by arrangements based on separate processes: attention of the user, development and technological services, administration and finance, training services, etc. This was complemented with modern management methods, like equipment for the constant improvement of services, efforts for the partial or total certification of the institution by ISO Standards (several VTIs have obtained ISO certificates).

The second line of action has been to alter the centralist philosophy of most of these institutions, a trait they shared with other public departments and services. Reforms were then implemented to de-concentrate and decentralise management. In this way regional and local units or services are given more competencies, attributions and resources; they are thus in a position to look after their respective demands more efficiently, and especially in a more relevant manner. Likewise, adopting a sectoral rather than geographic or political-administrative view, several VTIs have reconverted their multi-sectoral training centres into specialised ones aimed at particular areas or productive chains. In this way, they have met demands more closely, kept technologically updated and diversified their services.

The third tendency or line of transformation, that we shall discuss in more detail in the following paragraphs, has been the forging of alliances, co-operation agreements and complementation with other organizations and agencies.

A new institutional mission or the search of new roads to achieve it?

The answer to this question would show that both things have taken place: institutions have redefined their mission and have also been trying out new ways to achieve it.

In the past these training bodies normally considered that their purpose was to qualify individual workers for the labour market. They played a double role: facilitating the access of workers to employment and meeting the demands of employers for skilled or semi-skilled manpower.

Although those objectives still subsist nowadays, training institutions tend to adopt another mission: meeting the needs both of the population and the productive sector in a timely and efficient manner, taking into account on the one hand the objectives of social integration and improving workers' employability and working conditions, ensuring equal opportunities in the access to labour and training, and on the other hand raising the productivity of enterprises, productive sectors and national economies. This means that whilst individual workers continue to be a priority object of attention, other equally important targets have emerged: firms and enterprises, seen both as productive organizations and employment generators; productive sectors and chains; enterprise incubators; industrial and technological parks, etc., are all new clients for the VTIs that have been reformulating their task.

But as pointed out earlier, vocational training institutions have been exploring new ways of carrying out their all encompassing mission. As in other areas, a change of strategies has been preceded by a conceptual modification. To put it briefly, the public policy of individual training and its self-contained logic have been set aside, in favour of a view of training as a higher and crucial component not only of productive and technological policies, but also of social ones.

The already mentioned training approach focusing on productive sectors and chains, the diversification of services (specially in the technological area), the establishment of co-operation agreements and alliances with universities and technological institutes, even the setting up of training centres in technological and industrial parks, are some of the strategies with which VTIs are trying to make an effective contribution to productive and technological development policies.

Coordination and co-operation with Ministries of Labour in the framework of new active labour market policies, the use of flexible, non-schoolroom teaching modes and strategies like public workshops or mobile courses, alliances with social and non-governmental organizations and the search for contacts with regular education systems, are all part of the effort of vocational training bodies to become fully integrated into the national social policies implemented by governments.

Continuity of their already traditional openness to social dialogue, reinforced now by new activities at local and sectoral level, not only turn these institutions into adequate tools for accomplishing a renewed mission, but validate them as meeting ground for various diverging interests that must necessarily come together to approach large national issues that await solution.

Joint management

Special mention must be made of the reformulation of their role in the national scenario of vocational training by some VTIs of the region. One of the characteristics of the national model of training institution was not only that they predominated in the overall training offer, but also that they covered all stages of the process: detection of training needs and demands; design, planning, management and implementation of training actions.

This concentration of functions, added to their quasi monopoly of the training supply, faced some of these bodies with growing problems and criticism. They were questioned in particular because despite having large infrastructures, personnel and budgets their coverage was insufficient, as most of the active population was left out. Criticism also reached qualitative aspects of their services, such as how they could meet an increasingly heterogeneous demand from various productive sectors, traditional and modern sectors, social groups with differing requirements.

The basic question that training institutions of the region had to answer was: Was it possible to solve current problems and at the same time keep national leadership regarding vocational training policies?

Part of the response consisted of analysing which were exactly the fundamental purposes and functions of a vocational training institution. VTIs that made such studies came to the conclusion that there was a number of functions that represented the basic "guidelines" for training policies. In summary they were:

- Laying down minimum quality standards for courses offered and mechanisms to ensure that quality, e.g. accreditation services for training centres and activities.

- Carrying out a detailed analysis of training demand, i.e. taking into account not only the open demand of persons and enterprises but also potential needs (from a social, economic and productive point of view) that hardly take shape as demand.
- Implementing activities in relation to curricular design and development of teaching aids and materials.
- Training of trainers, technicians and managers of training centres.
- Searching for new forms of coordination between training processes and innovation and technological development.

Direct implementation of the training, instead of an essential aspect of institutional policy, is now seen as a function that need not be performed in an exclusive manner. Novel schemes have emerged whereby VTIs have started to share training delivery with other actors. Courses offered by the institutions continue, but other possibilities are added with resources provided by society and the market place. They may be joint activities, collaborating centres or projects and programmes implemented by other agencies or partners (companies, trade unions, private institutes, social and non-governmental organizations), to which the VTI lends technical assistance, or supplies instructors and teaching materials, among other alternatives.

In this way public vocational training policies can widen their scope and look after sectors and groups with special needs. Vocational training institutions validate their role insofar as they strengthen certain strategic aspects that other entities or actors can hardly assume with a similar degree of capacity and experience.

4. Ministries of Labour in the centre of the scene

A new role for the State

A tendency has consolidated in the region during the last decade for Ministries of Labour to play a leading role in the scene of public vocational training policies. There is a whole range of experiences in this respect. Although Labour Ministries have specialised training units or services in all countries, their predominance varies.

We might say that in general terms action by Labour Ministries has endeavoured to assign a new role to the State in training markets and policies. It has been in a way a reaction to criticisms of the traditional forms of State intervention, when all components of public training policy were concentrated in specialised institutions.

This new role implies giving up or withdrawing from certain tasks or functions, but also incorporating and developing new ones. In this approach the State abandons direct implementation of training actions, that is taken over by market forces and society in general through various players and organizations.

However, as indicated previously, the State takes on new functions.

Firstly, it manages public funds for financing vocational training policies, either from external sources, the national budget or contributions by employers and/or workers.

Secondly, it implements a number of actions aimed at developing and strengthening both the supply and demand of training, by means of tax incentives, public tenders for the execution of projects and programmes, and training schemes for the actors and agencies that will deliver the training services.

Thirdly, it takes corrective action to make up for shortcomings or biases of the training market, in particular regarding the attention of vulnerable sectors that run the risk of social exclusion.

Fourthly, it specially promotes social dialogue on vocational training and provides spaces for the management of public training policies and the funds to support them.

Looking for partners to attain wider coverage

One of the basic assumptions of training models promoted by Ministries of Labour is that the market and society in general have a multiplicity of available resources which, if the State persists in a monopolistic approach (for example, through national VTIs) will be inevitably wasted.

The challenge of attaining wider coverage, reaching a significant proportion of the active population then brings up the question of how to mobilise the resources available in firms and enterprises, training institutes, technological centres, trade unions and non-governmental organizations, among others.

In this strategy the State tries to tap those resources in a concerted manner, for which it basically uses three lines of action:

- Deploying the already mentioned measures to encourage the supply and demand of training, so that the various actors and organizations may begin to see

the rendering or use of training services as an opportunity in terms of investment and returns (in the various meanings that both may have).

- Establishing a general framework to ensure a minimum consistency of overall actions – a set of “rules of the game” that may be a national training plan, or a statute or law governing procedures for the utilisation of training funds or incentives, and the delivery of training services.
- Sharing out political decision-making and giving its social partners access to control mechanisms, especially employers’ organizations and trade unions, ensuring their co-responsibility in the implementation and results of public training policies.

Setting up “training networks”

The notion of “network” is perhaps the one best suited to describe the new vocational training scenario that Labour Ministries are trying to set. Reference is also made to a “training market”, but even if we accept this as valid we must admit that it would be a market highly dependent on the State through incentives, subsidies and public programmes. It would be more legitimate to use the concept of network, a sort of economic and social fabric held together by “nodes” with different resources and capabilities, and coordinated through a common logic.

Such a policy network would have a main node performing management and policy guidance functions. It would normally be identified with the Labour Ministries themselves, through their specialised unit, with a tripartite organization made up by governments, employers and workers, or with both things simultaneously. Although a large proportion of decisions are adopted by that type of body, many of them are decentralised to regional, local, sectoral or enterprise levels.

There are in consequence different locations for decision-making, and different ways of delivering training services. Responsibilities such as the training of trainers, curricular design, the production of teaching materials and others can either be spread out widely or concentrated in one node (enterprise, chamber, trade union, etc.). Complementation is sometimes sought through alliances and co-operation agreements.

Some outstanding issues

The models here enumerated, connected with Labour Ministries, have had a number of beneficial consequences for vocational training in the region. This has been due to the progress they brought about with their policies, and the way in which they have shown up the shortcomings of traditional models of organising and man-

aging vocational training, encouraging the processes of transformation and adaptation in quite a few national VTIs.

There are, however, some aspects that despite the progress made remain unsolved and imply risks.

The first of them is an excessive fragmentation of the training scene. Although the mobilization of more available resources and capabilities is a positive element, as well as the loosening of the centralized control of the past, the adoption of excessively slack rules may lead to a multiplication of lines of action difficult to assess as to their quality and internal consistency in the network, or to a point where multiplication may become overlapping and lack of coordination.

The second one is the nature and origin of the funds that finance public training policies in some countries. In some cases they come from the contributions of employers and workers in the formal sector of the economy, as a levies on the companies' payrolls. The relative loss of weight of that sector vis-à-vis the non-structured or informal sector, combined with the difficulties afflicting the economies of the region and causing a decline in revenues, undermines the stability of those funds, which are often used not only in active policies that include vocational training plans, but also to finance unemployment insurance. Once again, when the funds are most needed, they become scarce.

The third aspect is the political stability of policy models of this kind. As opposed to the model of national training bodies, that were nearly always created by special laws establishing clear-cut and stable management and financing mechanisms, these new policies tend to depend on the thinking of a given administration. Joint management arrangements and social dialogue can help to turn certain lines of action into State policies, but this is still to be confirmed in the countries where the model has reached its greatest development.

The fourth and last issue is how efficient these models can be, (devised as they were as networks and with more diffuse control or direction than that of VTIs), to tackle duties and responsibilities that have historically required stable institutional environments with a capacity to store and accumulate knowledge. Once again in this connection we can mention aspects like the training of trainers, curricular design and development, production of teaching materials, the integration of training and technology, maintenance of quality standards, reading and interpretation of demand, etc.

5. Search of a synthesis of models for the organization and management of vocational training

The history of the organization and management of vocational training in Latin America and the Caribbean can well be seen as that of a region that for several decades opted for a certain paradigm: national vocational institutions (VTIs). As happens with all paradigms, particularly when they have been tried out and used for a considerably long time, this one started to show faults and shortcomings.

While no alternative paradigm appeared in the region to compete with it, the failings of the old one were glossed over. But a new model emerged and grew precisely as a result of the shortcomings of the old one, presenting itself as a substitute capable of solving all the problems the previous formula was unable to deal with.

In the initial stages of the clash, when implementation of the new approach was just beginning, the VTI paradigm was quickly losing ground. It was the comparison between a reality and a promise, and it is a well known fact that promises hold more illusion than hard realities.

But we are now at another crossroads. The new paradigm is no longer so new, and has had the opportunity to prove itself in action, revealing both its virtues and its initially not so apparent faults. And on the other hand, vocational training institutions have also rallied, so that the comparison has to be readjusted.

Not only have the terms of the debate changed; the debate itself seems to have entered a more seasoned stage. If at a given moment a clash was apparent, an excluding conflict where we had to choose one model or the other, now all efforts seem to be in the direction of a resolving synthesis, profiting by the accumulated learning of so many years of joint efforts.

Just as in certain periods the most frequently used term in training was “institution”, or “network” in others, nowadays the word in vogue is “system”, referring to everything that is about to be developed.

The idea of a vocational training system is more open than that of an institution. It is also sounder than that of a network or market, and offers greater possibilities of integration and accumulation of experience.

It implies a form of management or guidance that has been validated by society. The whereabouts and structure of the system's guidance will depend on each country's concrete situation, and its achievements will no doubt be the result of a necessary process of dialogue and negotiation.

It involves the notion –widely proclaimed both by Labour Ministries and the now reformed VTIs– that existing resources and capabilities in the economy and society have to be tapped and coordinated. It also presupposes that no single actor or institute can meet unaided the challenge of far-reaching and variegated training needs.

Although it may grant more leeway for decision-making and action through decentralized schemes, it still clearly assigns certain strategic functions to given bodies and organizations.

Finally, the challenge of a lifelong education makes it necessary not only to open the field to new actors but also to expand the historical boundaries of vocational training. The idea of a system –in more concrete terms of an ongoing education / training system– entails the merging together of elementary education (needed by all and everybody’s right), with regular education, secondary technical schooling, higher education and vocational training. Rather than institutional apportionments, we would have subsystems consisting of training tools and clusters for given populations and sectors, adequately responding to the changing training needs of persons, companies and the economy at large.

It eventually aims at enabling all persons to build their own occupational and life career, making available to them a sufficiently versatile and flexible system guiding them in a learning itinerary through life. All this without the restraining barriers of institutions and with due recognition by society.