Geraldo Samor, from Rio de Janeiro

President Lula approached the little girl standing quietly in a corner and asked, “Are you happy with your computer?” She said she was. Lula insisted: “And what did you gain with that?” Without hesitating, she answered, “I’ve gained wisdom.”

Lula was touched. He declared that his visit to Piraí, a town of 25,000 inhabitants 100 km from Rio de Janeiro, had changed his mind. Partly inspired by that visit, on a rainy day on July 31 this year the President gave instructions for the creation of a working group to design a National Broadband Plan. He gave it 45 days. The deadline expires in November.

Contrary to what happens in “Any Little Town” in Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s poem of the same title, what Piraí has to offer is far from a “meaningless life.” For at least five years the town has entered the radar of admirers of technology and lovers of good public policy thanks to the Piraí Digital Project, which uses public infrastructure to offer free broadband to everyone in the municipality.

In Piraí all public buildings are integrated into the network and offer Internet access. There are digital learning laboratories in all schools and day-care
centers. Self-service terminals connected to the Internet have been installed in medical centers, in the bus terminal, and in the public squares.

On any normal day in one of the 12 Piraí tele-centers, it is possible to see a mother doing a search on the Internet while her son stands beside her, or a group of Avon representatives holding a meeting, each in a different tele-center. In the Arrozal district, small farmers visit the tele-center to check produce prices. The tele-centers, part of the Piraí Digital Project, are part of a local area network (lan). The project has been given many awards and has become a reference internationally; since it was introduced, life in the town has never been the same.

Plugging in
By ordering that a national plan be drafted, the president — once again using his intuition — has captured the spirit of the times. In mid-October Finland declared access to broadband to be a universal right of its citizens in a law that will enter into force mid-2010. A day after the Finland declaration, the São Paulo administration launched the People’s Broadband Program in partnership with the phone company, Telefonica. The São Paulo administration has eliminated the 25% ICMS (VAT tax on goods and services) on program services, and Telefonica in turn has cut the price to the end user by as much as 40%, to R$29.80 (US$17.50) a month.

The presidential order put the bureaucracy in gear: The working group has been created. The lobbyists have taken their positions. The companies are asking themselves what is at stake for them, and tax incentives are being discussed. But very little is yet known about the content, the premises, or the progress registered in the debate within the working group.

Based on public declarations from the parties, there seems to be some tension between two currents within the administration: One current is led by Rogério Santanna, secretary of logistics and information technology at the Ministry of Planning. Santanna advocates for the government to use Telebrás — a dormant but not extinct state telecoms company — to manage the national broadband network. He suggests that the networks of Petrobras (oil company), Eletrobrás (power company), and other state-owned companies be integrated; he also seeks some role for Serpro and Dataprev, the state-owned information technology companies. The idea is to show that the state has some muscle in the area, in the conviction that private initiatives will follow suit.

The other current is advocated by Helio Costa, the Minister of Communications, who argues for greater involvement of the telecommunications companies and the private sector in achieving whatever the national plan is designed to accomplish. Among other things, this debate involves tax incentives and financing from the National Bank for Economic and Social Development, the BNDES.

What both sides have in common is considerable emphasis on infrastructure and (as far as can be deduced) very little attention to human capital, to preparing society to deal with and benefit from this technology.

Lesson
It is here that peaceful Piraí, the small town along the uneventful waters of the river from which it takes its name, has a lesson for the political will emanating from Brasilia. More important than infrastructure, Piraí Digital has a pedagogical approach to disseminating digital culture, so that technology is effectively transforming the lives of the people.

Franklin Coelho, the project coordinator, claims that the major impact of Piraí Digital is the higher self-esteem of the town’s citizens and the enhancement of local human resources. “We work with the concept of digital inclusion beyond the issue of access,” he

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In Piraí, technology is effectively transforming the life of the population.

points out. “We think in terms of the right to information, the right to knowledge, information as a public good.” Thanks to that approach, a gardener in the town has become the producer of free multimedia software, and the designer of Piraí Digital is a former gas station manager.

The federal debate about Telebras and tax incentives gives access priority over investment in human capital. However, “a broadband network is only a road,” says Luis Cuza, executive president of TelComp, the Brazilian Association of Competitive Telecommunications Service Providers. “You still need cars, drivers, and maintenance. Today the debate is centered too much on construction of the road.”

Perhaps the most relevant criticism of the administration’s plans, one that explains all the deficiencies critics of the plan have pointed out, is that the very debate lacks transparency. When you are dealing with public policy, form is as important as content, because form may help mold the policy. In other words, to be an effective plan with lasting results, the broadband plan should be society’s plan rather than government’s. That calls for the involvement of Congress.

“It is impossible to build a plan of this magnitude in 45 days,” says Cuza. “It is not reasonable, particularly in a country as diverse and as large as Brazil.” He suggests that Congress hold public hearings to elicit the views of society and establish guidelines for drafting a national plan. Then Anatel, the telecommunications regulator, could set targets for the country — targets related to deadlines, the width of the band, price, and geographical coverage.

The way out
Piraí Digital was created as an answer to the economic crisis that affected the town in the late 1990s after Light, the power distribution company that was the most important employer in town, was privatized. In the process 1,000 of the company’s 1,100 employees lost their jobs.

“To attract other businesses at the time, we had to offer a better, intelligent network,” says Luiz Fernando Pezão, mayor of Piraí at the time and now deputy governor of Rio de Janeiro. “City hall had just two computers and two telephone lines.” To start with, he trained nearly 600 local government personnel, teaching them how to deal with information technology. That was the seed of Piraí Digital.

To be sure, implementing a project like this in a small town is much easier than doing it in a country as diverse and complex as Brazil, not every solution that worked out in that microcosm will work at the national level. But the real lesson is that if even a small town had to invest significantly in training, just imagine what must be done for the entire country!

When he visited Piraí, Lula had an inspiring thought: “I have always feared that computers could isolate people excessively. I feared that a child would spend the entire time looking at a computer screen and would come out of school without getting to know the child sitting next to him. I had to come to Piraí and walk into a classroom to see the children working with a computer, exchanging ideas, helping each other. Then I changed my mind. This image will remain engraved in my mind. It took away a prejudice I had about computers.”

The National Broadband Plan is a typically intuitive response by the president to the problem of income distribution in Brazil. If successful, it could transcend administrations and become part of his legacy. For that to happen, however, Brasilia needs to emulate the children that charmed the president in Pirai: work together to exchange ideas. Without prejudice.

1 The account on Lula’s comments is by Hayle Gadelha.