How easy or difficult is for autistic individuals to access and use assistive technology in Latin America? What are the main barriers?

Thanks to my work in autism I have had the opportunity to travel and get to know different countries and realities in Latin America. The access to assisted technologies is scarce in its diffusion and knowledge, this scarcity increases dramatically in the economically less favored sectors. The causes, broadly speaking, can be summarized as follows:

1. Lack of knowledge and support from the government: although progress has been made in the last ten years in terms of knowledge, awareness and respect for autism, we still have a long way to go and we will not be able to achieve a genuine quality of life for autistic people without real public policies. In my country, Peru, we have (using world statistics since we do not have any census) approximately three hundred thousand autistic people. The official figures do not register more than five thousand cases. If this is the level of detection, let's imagine the weight that the State gives to autism.

2. Lack of trained professionals in the use of assistive technology: most speech therapists and psychologists have no knowledge of the principles of general communication, so their vision is entirely fixed on oral language. Many autistic people, especially the non-verbal ones, suffer long years in speech therapies with no results without being taught some system of augmentative alternative communication. The pan-linguistic vision leads to these people not having access to a communicative code according to their needs and possibilities, excluding them as autonomous and independent subjects and from the government of their own lives.

3. Ignoring the needs and demands of the autistic population itself: autistic people are not seen as people who can decide individually or collectively. The motto "nothing about us without us" is not incorporated into our societies. There survives a paternalistic vision that infantilizes the autistic person in their needs and desires. We believe that access to assistive technology would reverse this undesirable situation.

Is Assistive Technology part of inclusion and human rights policies and culture of acceptance in Peru and other countries in Latin America?

We are far from seeing the rights of so-called "disabled" people in a genuine way as part of people's fundamental rights. From the point of view of neurodiversity we know that the concept of "disability" must be overcome, emphasizing on giving an adequate solution to the needs of each individual giving way to the full development of their capabilities and potentialities. Assisted technologies level the disadvantages of the environment and allow access to the free exercise of rights and freedoms in equity with other citizens.

The vision of inclusion that exists in Latin America, unfortunately, is far from a view of "coexistence" that should exist at the foundation. The "included" person is seen from a "normalizing" point of view, where he/she is the one who must adapt to the environment. We are far from making adjustments to the curriculum, to evaluations, and to the creation of individualized educational programs. There is no acceptance of the other, of the autistic person in this case, as someone with whom we must learn to live together in respect for their particular way of perceiving the world and interacting. In the current debate on autism in our countries, autistic people are systematically excluded from discussions about their needs and future.

STATEMENT:

We live in a world dominated by information technologies. Gone is the scribal world where many of us grew up in, where knowledge and the way we gave meaning to the world was found in books. Today, our electronal world has changed the way we perceive and relate to each other. The electronal media have made a series of skills emerge in us, along with communication abilities, those of connectivity, of thinking in proximity, of the privileged search for deep interests: all this correlates with the wiring of the autistic mind. It is not idle, therefore, to note that in areas of large technology production - such as Silicon Valley - the rate of population in the spectrum and births of autistic people increase exponentially. The neurodivergent mind, the autistic one especially, has created a new era where diverse people find better access to inhabit the real and virtual world.

Assisted technologies are the tool for millions of voiceless people, deprived of the possibility of claiming their rights, expressing their emotions, conquering their desire; electronic, written, spoken, typed, graphic voices that expect from us, from the neurotypical world, the empathy of listening to them, reading them, deciphering them, and the struggle for them never to return to silence to those who still condemn obsolete methods and prejudices of the past.

We must give the choice about which methods and technologies should be used to the families of autistic people but above all, to them. We must bring down the figure of experts who believe they know more than those who live autism from within. We must embrace the techniques that allow us to live together in respect for the free choice of how to communicate as a space for dialogue and no longer for imposition. The technologies of our electronic world are allowing us to create a life for all voices: let us dare to listen starting today and forever.

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