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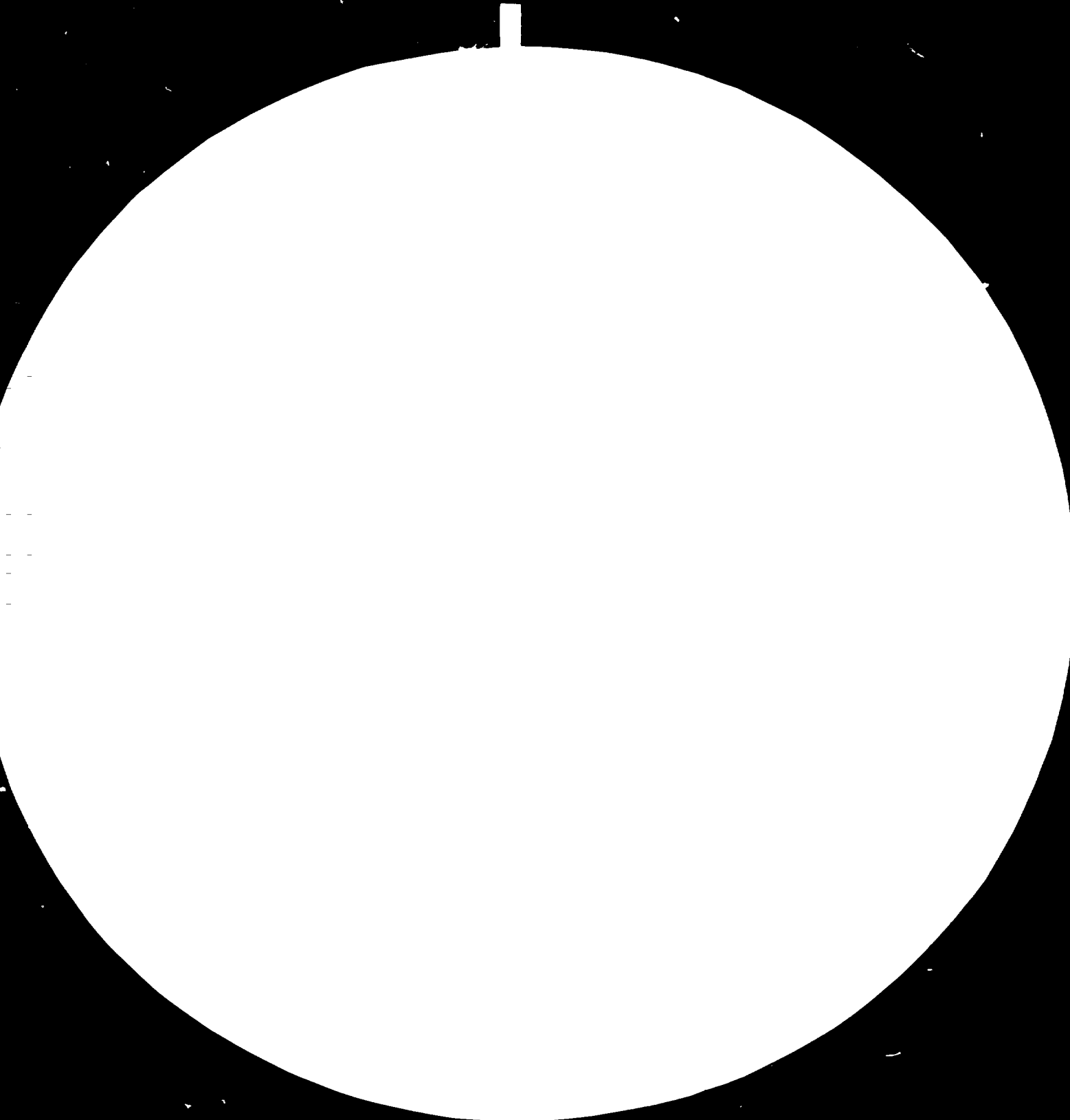
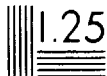UNITED NATIONS INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION

MISSION TO BRAZIL RITLA

SI/RLA/81/802/11-01

by

E. Martindale

12 - 24 July 1982 (split Mission)

To assist in the establishment and implementation of
a technical/commercial information network within
SELA (Sistema Economico Latino Americano) involving
the seven LA countries at present affiliated to
RITLA (Red de Información Tecnologica Latino Americana)

1. This paper is written in the hope that an independent analysis of the situation in which RITLA now finds itself will provide the basis for a more effective approach to the problem of developing a L.A. technical information network.

2. RITLA is one of the 5 programmes of activity initiated by the Council of SELA at its 5th meeting in Caracas on 30th January to 2nd. February 1979. Article I of the Act setting up RITLA, which has now been endorsed by Brazil, México, Peru, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, states that;

> The objective of the Committee
> [of the RITLA Action Committee]
> is to establish a Latin American
> Network of Technical Information,
> RITLA, as an instrument of
> cooperation, designed to contribute
> through [the exchange of] information
> to regional technological development
> and to reduce the degree of technological
> dependence of the Member Countries of
> SELA in respect of other countries.

3. An Action Committee was set up to oversee the development of RITLA and the Committee was given 2 years to produce results. These 2 years are up in September 1982 and unless the remit of the Action Committee is extended the future of RITLA must be in jeopardy for the obvious reason that no network or networking activities have been established or indeed are likely to be established in the near future.

4. Where did RITLA go wrong. In fact 2 years is not an excessively long period for the development of a network particularly a multinational network covering such a large geographical area. But perhaps what is more important is the question of communication. · The Action Committee met for the first time in September 1980 and has met only 3 times since that date. The function of the committee was of course to provide policy guidance to RITLA and to approve projects and programmes submitted by RITLA This they did and indeed an analysis of the papers generated by the Action Committee leads inevitably to the conclusion that there was probably too much policy guidance, too many projects and programmes and too little action. To be fair on this point it should be noted that at no time did RITLA have the necessary resources to develop effective technological networking activities.

5. The SELA initiative which led to the setting up of the Action Committee and RITLA was no doubt motivated to some extent by political considerations but nevertheless soundly based on the worthy concept of cooperation and mutual self help. The concept is not in question but translating political ambition into a practical reality, particularly in a complex area such as scientific and technical information,does demand a high degree of experience and professionalism and no illusion about the problems and the resources involved in creating effective networking activities.

6. There is little doubt that the Action Committee must accept responsibility for approving policy objectives, projects and programmes which were totally beyond the capacity of RITLA to pursue. The significance of this point is that though the policy objectives emanated mainly from the Action Committee the projects and programmes were initiated by RITLA itself. Professional advice was taken from a number of sources, perhaps too many, and this led to a proliferation of ideas and proposals most of which should have been discarded and the committee

encouraged to accept more modest and practical aims.

7. The situation now is that after 2 years there is still a great deal of confusion regarding the work of RITLA. This is infortunate. The basic concept is sound. The original terms of reference of the Action Committee (see para 2) are quite specific and at the same time would not inhibit any reasonable initiative. But SELA quite rightly, will demand results and there is little time left to produce a convincing argument or initiative to ensure the survival of RITLA.

8. The options would appear to be:

   a) allow RITLA to die

   b) pursue the present series of
      projects and programmes as presented in
      SELA/C.A. RITLA/IV O/DT Nº 1

   c) present a new initiative to the next meeting of
      the Action Committee

9. There is considerable justification for option a) but it would   be most unfortunate if the demise of RITLA persuaded the member countries of SELA to abandon the Action Committee or to abandon its interest in developing cooperative activities in the field of technical information.

10. Option b) holds little promise of success. Approval of the 4 projects and 3 programmes in SELA/CA RITLA/IV O/DT Nº 1 would necessitate a massive increase in resources for RITLA which would be difficult to justify and though the projects and programmes presented are relevant to technological development in member countries the prospect of building them into cooperative networking arrangements appears to be remote.

11. Option c) is only valid if the Action Committee stays
in business as is suggested in option a) above. It cannot
be assumed however that the life of the Action Committee
will be prolonged indefinately and the two senarios which
follow are designed primarily to demonstrate as quickly
as possible what potential exists for the development
of cooperative technical information networks in Latin America.

12. The first senario would take the following form:

    i) the Action Committee would commission a general study
       to identify the networking activities already operating
       in Latin America in particular to record the scientific/
       technical/economic areas covered by such arrangements
       and the structure of the individual networks;

    ii) an analysis of this information would provide the committee
       with a more practical base on which to plan its future
       activities;

    iii) those existing networks which came within the area of
       interest of the Action Committee may be given encouragement
       and support and embryo networks struggling to establish
       themselves may be sponsorred.

13. In the second senario:

    i) the Action Committee would select an area (or several areas)
       of industrial/economic activity in which the majority
       of member countries of SELA have an interest but which are
       not known to have formal cooperative agreements in respect
       of technical information (see Appendix E of report by
       UNIDO consultant dated Feb 1982);

    ii) member countries would be invited to send 2 or 3
       representatives (Director level) from technological institutes
       or organisations with a specific interest in technological
       development in the selected area. (There would be separate
       meetings for each area selected);

    iii) a conference paper would be prepared setting out
the various forms of cooperation which might be
pursued and a second paper outlining alternative
methods of setting up and maintaining a cooperative
network.

    iv) free discussion would be allowed over 2 days and
a record maintained in as much detail as possible
of the pros and cons in respect of a cooperative
network and in particular the types of networking
activity and the organizational structure preferred
or rejected

    v) given a positive response the information acquired
in iv) above should provide a sound basis for
planning a network.

14. There is a body of scientific and technical opinion which
regards Regional technical information networks as
unnecessary and it is certainly true that any attempt to set
up a network which duplicated the output of one of the
international systems such as; CA, AGRIS, MEDLARS etc. etc.
would be difficult to justify. But these international systems are
concerned almost wholely with published sources of information and in
any country but particularly countries in the process of
development, it would be most unwise for them to rely only on
this form of information transfer.

15. A network should be a mechanism, a flexible mechanism, to
promote and encourage the exchange of technical information between
institutes and individuals who have a common interest in the
subject area of the network and a common desire to cooperate
to their mutual benefit. It should be designed to encourage
the flow of information in respect of any form of cooperative
activity related to technological development from the
preparation of cooperative translations indices to users
surveys of laboratory equipment.

It may encourage the exchange of research programmes or produce details of the availability of analysis and testing facilities and many other activities which are common to all institutes and organisations directly concerned with technological progress and which seldom if ever figure in the published literature.

16. It should be obvious that International information systems and Regional or local information networks are not or should not be in competition. They are in fact complimentary and their relative importance depends on the value which the user places on the service provided.

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