

Mexico to set up knowledge commission

CHICAGO: Mexico City is taking a leaf out of India's National Knowledge Commission (NKC) and is taking the help of its chairman Sam Pitroda to turn the megapolis of 20 million people into "the knowledge capital of Latin America."

The initiative has come from Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard who recently hosted Pitroda in the first in a series of visits to help evolve a plan that is expected to be operationalised by the end of the year.

"Mexico City is one of the largest in the world. Fifty percent of all researchers as well as the best universities in Mexico are based in the city. It has strengths that are waiting to be tapped," Jorge de los Santos, Commissioner of Strategic Planning for Mexico City, told IANS in an interview.

He said when former city Mayor Manuel Camacho visited New Delhi and Bangalore he came back convinced that Pitroda's "enormous" success in building India's information and communications technology sector in the 1980s as well as his work at the Knowledge Commission could be leveraged in Mexico City.

"We are well aware of the amount of work Sam Pitroda put in to turn India into an ICT powerhouse it is today. We are also aware of what he is trying to accomplish through the Knowledge Commission. His visit made a big impact in terms of the clarity and practicality of his vision," Camacho said.

"Pitroda's experience is the key to our policymaking. He brings enormous capability. We think with his help and our motivation we can turn Mexico City into the knowledge capital of Latin America," said Sam Podolsky, president of Mexico City's Council on Competitiveness. He said he was hoping that Pitroda would also join the Council on Competitiveness.

The knowledge initiative in Mexico City has the potential to not just transform the country's economy but fundamentally alter its equation with its giant and powerful neighbor to the north, the United States.

Mexicans, who constitute the bulk of America's labor force in farms, construction industry and other hands-on jobs, are often a victim of the politics of immigration. According to government estimates there are some 12 million undocumented Mexican

workers who lead a life in the shadows for the fear of being deported. They migrate to the United States, more often than not using illegal channels, because they do not have enough opportunities at home.

If the Mexico City knowledge initiative manages to effect a turnaround in the country's economy, it can potentially reduce such large scale migration. Mexico City accounts for 25 percent of Mexico's GDP, which makes it the 30th largest economy in the world. The people in the capital also have a higher GDP per capita than most of Latin America. Close to 50 percent of the city's residents have Internet access. There is enough strength in the city to push through the knowledge initiative.

Experts such as Camacho, Podolsky and de los Santos believe the knowledge initiative can have a long-term impact on not just the city but the country generally. They all made it a point to talk about socio-economic similarities between India and Mexico even though the former is much a bigger country than the latter. Camacho said during his visit he was "very impressed" at what India had accomplished despite its limited resources. "Pitroda has shown what can be achieved even with limited resources. We want to draw some lessons from that experience and make it work in the city," Camacho said. "It is heartening to know that some people 10,000 miles away from India have found some merit in what the government of India is trying to do through the Knowledge Commission. It is obvious to me that the Mayor and his team have the drive to make this initiative a success," Pitroda said.

India being the first country in the world to set up a knowledge commission, Pitroda said, it was in a unique position to help many nations in similar socio-economic situation to turn their economies around.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa's is embarking on his first visit to India, as also his first to Asia. It is expected to significantly deepen bilateral ties even as it serves the purpose of positioning the Latin American country beyond its immediate regional context.

Although Calderon and Ebrard represent politically opposing parties, Podolsky said there is enough goodwill between the two to possibly explore setting up such a commission at the federal level.