I. Introduction and Context

Country Context

Over the last decade or so, major progress has been made in Nicaragua in improving service delivery to the poorest and results are beginning to show. Public expenditures in infrastructure and reforms in social service delivery have been targeted towards rural areas and poorer households. Poverty reduction accelerated in the last eight years with higher impact in the rural areas, with 7 per cent poverty reduction in rural versus 4.1 per cent in urban areas. Inequality has fallen and social indicators are showing steady improvements, with an increase in the income per capita of 11.5 per cent in rural areas. Nicaragua has maintained disciplined macroeconomic policies since 2001 with strong rebound from recent crises, underpinning average growth rates of around 4.5 percent in the last five years.

Sound macroeconomic policies have allowed for moderate and steady economic growth, but increasing productivity is needed to accelerate convergence in income levels with the rest of the
region. While a significant number of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are on track to being achieved, rural-urban disparities remain stark, and other key human development indicators such as educational attainment are still very low.

The Government’s current National Plan for Human Development (2012-2016) highlights science, technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship as key factors to foster the productive transformation of the country. The Plan gives high priority towards economic growth through increasing employment and reducing poverty and inequalities. There is an emphasis in strengthening and developing the Caribbean Coast for its higher integration at a national level, including the development of basic Economic Infrastructure (transport, telecommunications, and electricity).

**Sectoral and Institutional Context**

High broadband prices and lack of on Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) infrastructure are hampering economic development. The World Economic Forum (WEF), through its Networked Readiness Index 2014, identifies ICT affordability in Nicaragua (ranked 140 out of 148 economies) as the main barrier for ripping the benefits of ICTs to promote economic growth and well-being. Fixed internet connectivity prices equal 13.96 percent of the GNI per capita in Nicaragua, far from the 8.82 percent average in the Latin American and Caribbean Region.

Broadband network investments are required, especially in the Caribbean Region. Despite important advances in recent years, including double digit growth since 2006 in the percentage of mobile subscribers with a penetration of 111.98 percent in 2013, access to fixed broadband in Nicaragua remains low, particularly in rural areas. Fixed broadband penetration is only 2.16 percent, significantly lower than the Latin American regional average of about 10.71 percent. There is also an accessibility gap between the capital, Managua with an internet penetration of 22.46% and the Departments of the Caribbean Coast, Department of RACCS (Region Autonoma de la Costa Caribe Sur) and Department of RACCN (Region Autonoma de la Costa Caribe Norte), with an internet penetration of 2.56% and 1.49% respectively.

Nicaragua already plans to make a big investment in broadband connectivity infrastructure. The Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) together with the Korean Exim Bank is planning a USD50 million investment in broadband infrastructure in Nicaragua. However, this investment will not cover in its first phase one of the most undeserved areas in Nicaragua, the Caribbean Coast. These plans do not include either the development of policies or actions to foster taking advantage of the upcoming broadband infrastructure “the demand side of broadband”. Experience shows that, without promoting the use of broadband as a catalyst for economic growth and job creation, the bulk of investment in infrastructure will remain underutilized.

With its immature digital economy and low digital literacy, the country will need to improve ICT usage to fully take advantage of the upcoming broadband infrastructure. The Economic impact of ICTs on new services and products is low. The country ranks 126 out of 148 economies at the overall Networked Readiness Index. SME digital adoption is low (only 15% of all SMEs in the country use the Internet for business purposes, only 20% have a website, while 71.5% have computers). The main uses of computers among SMEs can be characterized as “basic”, focusing on word processing, using spreadsheets, and Internet access, rather than more advanced uses such as e-commerce, databases for specific customer needs or information systems. According to the Networked Readiness Index, Nicaragua has a low individual usage of ICT (basic users), ranking 122 out of 148 countries, and also a low business usage of ICT (advanced users), ranking 113 out of
148. The use of teleworking is low, only 15.2% of SMEs use it. Online banking is used by 34% of SME and only 19.1% micro companies use digital government services.

Although the number of students receiving technical education has increased it is still very low, there is a large gender gap and ICT Specialists have limited skills. Seven of the ten main universities in the country offer Information Technology (IT) related studies with 6,093 students, which accounts for 7 percent of the total enrollment in such universities. However, only 36% of the enrollment of IT careers are women. In addition, research units of Nicaraguan Higher Education Institutes allow few resources for ICT, with 80% of their focus on four areas: production and economics, environment, democracy and rule of law. According to the private sector, the ICT skills imparted to ICT students at universities are not coping with the needs of a constantly evolving industry. There are few or none certified training providers of main Information Technologies. This limits the availability of globally recognized certifications, increasing specialized training costs (requiring travel to other countries in the region), reducing speed for updated courses availability, and limiting the ability of local talent to compete internationally or impact in local productivity. Additionally, ICT specialists are often found to be lacking in communication skills, while the industry often demands a high level of language fluency, reducing significantly the pool of talent that can be employed.

The innovation ecosystem is weak, limiting ICT-based startup creation. The Networked Readiness Index finds that business and innovation environment (where Nicaragua ranks 136 out of 148 economies) is the second main barrier in the country for making the most of the benefits of ICTs to promote economic growth and well-being. Nicaragua ranked 125 out of 143 countries in the Global Innovation Index published by the United Nations in 2014, highlighting weaknesses in the Human Resources and Research area, and in Knowledge & Technology outputs. The nature of the competitive advantage of the country in international markets is mainly based upon low-cost labor or natural resources (not based on unique products and processes) and availability of latest technologies is low. The country has weak linkages between universities and firms and there are no programs that could enable students to apply their skills to provide solutions to real firms’ problems.

However, the Information Technology Services and Information Technology-Enabled Services (IT-ITES) industry, has a large potential for growth if appropriate actions are taken. In 2013, according to ProNicaragua, investments in the outsourcing IT-ITES sector exceeded US$64 million and generated about 6,000 jobs. Local software providers are scarce (only 65 providers identified countrywide), small (the biggest software company identified has 40 employees) and concentrated in Managua (mainly because of talent and service suppliers availability). The biggest component of cost in the IT services and ITES industries is labor, and Nicaragua has a competitive advantage in labor cost compared to global mature players (call center agent - 459 USD/month; IT job - 1,006 USD/month). And at the same time, the industry is attractive for the population since it pays 2.5 times the minimum wage, which is between 50 to 100 percent more than comparable service jobs in Nicaragua.

Rapid job creation in the IT-ITES sector is a government priority. The industry is seen as a key driver for growth and job creation. Investment promotion efforts done by ProNicaragua, are focused to attract IT-ITES companies, mainly Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) jobs since the job profile requires lower training time and expertise. The Caribbean region is a major area of interest for government authorities. An Opportunity Builder event organized in Bluefields, raised interest in
the community towards call center job creation. The most interested were the unemployed (88% of participants were unemployed), youth (average age in participants was 26 years old), and women (62% of participants were women). 40% of participants expected to receive 200-300 USD/month, about half of what the IT-ITES industry is paying in Managua.

Positioning of Nicaragua globally as an IT-ITES provider requires working regionally. As other members of the Association of Caribbean States, Nicaragua is making an effort to be identified as IT-ITES services export player, but given the small scale of the country compared to main players (6,000 jobs compared to 10 million jobs in India) by itself it cannot be considered a global provider of IT-ITES services. Nicaragua isn’t a member of ALETI (Federation of Information Technology Entities from Latin America, Caribbean, Spain and Portugal), therefore reducing exchange and commercialization of technologies in the region. Hence the importance of working together with other countries in the region to shape a solid platform that gives certainty to investments, and to cope with larger projects.

It will be critical to ensure coordination of the multiple government agencies promoting ICT development. There are several government agencies in Nicaragua that are working in ICT, but formal coordination among them is lacking. The telecommunications sector is regulated by TELCOR (Instituto Nicaraguense de Telecomunicaciones y Correos), under the General Law of Telecommunications and Postal Services and the Operation of Public Service Telecommunication Laws. ProNicaragua, the Nicaraguan agency in charge of the promotion of exports and attraction of foreign investment, has identified ITES/BPO as a priority sector. The MIFIC (Ministerio de Fomento, Industria y Comercio) is promoting ICT adoption with workshops for SMEs to increase awareness of ICT use within the companies. MIFIC also coordinated with support from the European Union the development of the PAINT (Plan to support the Nicaraguan ICT Industry), a document that helped in organizing locally based ICT players. The CONICYT (Consejo Nicaragüense de Ciencia y Tecnologia), coordinates the Technical Group for electronic government and innovation, which is working towards the creation of a National Digital Agenda.

Relationship to CAS

The proposed CARCIP Nicaragua is fully aligned with the World Bank’s Country Partnership Strategy (CPS) FY13- FY17 for Nicaragua. The objectives of CARCIP are fully aligned with the CPS, particularly with regard to supporting the strategic area II: “Raise incomes by enhancing competitiveness and diversifying exports”. This is an area of strong demand for World Bank support for which it has extensive global experience. With the right policy mix and clear government commitment, the IT-ITES sector can be developed, thus offering Nicaragua a distinct opportunity to improve competitiveness and generate employment in an industry of high added value. CARCIP will leverage the newly available regional broadband infrastructure to foster employment as well as growth of a robust IT-ITES industry. Human skills development will help the industry to compete globally by raising their productivity and by increasing the quantity and improving the quality of skilled manpower.

One of the main Challenges for Poverty Reduction and Shared Prosperity underlined in the CPS FY13-FY17 for Nicaragua is the low access to telecommunications services, particularly in rural areas of the country. Fixed broadband internet penetration remains at around 2.16%, significantly lower than the Latin American Regional average of about 10.71%. This is a missed opportunity to increase shared prosperity, as recent research shows that a 10% increase in broadband penetration in developing countries can have an impact of close to 1.4% in increase of GDP growth. This GDP
increase can average up to 3.2% in LAC according to the IDB.

There is evidence that higher rates of ICT penetration are associated with greater levels of exports and employment (a recent study concludes that if Latin American countries were to increase broadband penetration to its potential, they could create almost 400,000 new jobs). Improved ICT infrastructure, particularly in rural communities can also contribute to connect and equip government offices in order to facilitate equitable access to information and public services. However, in Nicaragua the proportion of Internet users (15.5%) in the population remain below regional averages mainly due to the under-development of a fiber optic backbone to link populations beyond the major cities at an affordable price. CARCIP can help address this by expanding access to broadband infrastructure in some of the most underserved areas in the Caribbean Coast, bringing down the prices and connecting them to the regional broadband networks.

II. Proposed Development Objective(s)

**Proposed Development Objective(s) (From PCN)**

Increase access to regional broadband networks and advance the development of an IT and IT enabled services (IT-ITES) industry in Nicaragua and in the Caribbean Region.

**Key Results (From PCN)**

The Nicaragua CARCIP will be structured in line with the overall program to take advantage of the regional synergies. The CARCIP regional project will deliver important economies of scale and overall economic benefits to the region, as it will support major public goods, such as (i) a highly interconnected broadband infrastructure; (ii) ICT capacity building; (iii) development of ICT-enabled services; and (iv) institution building to ensure sustainability. All these initiatives will have positive regional externalities that will accrue to the country in much larger measures than if it was to embark in these activities separately.

The Caribbean Broadband Network financed under CARCIP will provide broadband connectivity to at least 48 localities, including their schools and health centers, several universities, and about 10,000 micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and support the creation of a PPP that could expand that connectivity to about 180,000 people in the Caribbean Region. This would significantly increase affordability and therefore access to broadband-enabled services, particularly amongst mid and low income households. The network will also reach interconnection points with regional backbone networks, as part of CARCIP’s regional strategy. Because of the way broadband networks function, adding additional points to the network will only strengthen the regional broadband networks connecting Nicaragua to other CARCIP countries. This will in turn increase the network reach and resilience in case of disasters in the Region.

CARCIP will create rapid middle income jobs by boosting IT-ITES job creation in the Region. This will provide locally generated content on top of the upcoming broadband infrastructure investment mentioned above, and stimulate the demand of IT enabled services and jobs. As a result of the program, the Nicaraguan population, especially in the Caribbean Coast, would have greater access to better quality and lower prices of ICT services, enhanced and diversified employment opportunities, and increased ICT skills. Capacity building activities will be available in different points of the country, leveraging for example the existing network of public telecenters. This will help minimize the barriers of entry and maximize inclusiveness of citizens with less income.
Overall, Nicaragua would see a boost in its competitiveness, social inclusion, and economic diversification by working under this regional approach.

III. Preliminary Description

Concept Description

A regional approach is needed to take full advantage of ICT infrastructure investments, in the Caribbean and Central American Region, and to be able to transform it into job creation and productivity gains. The countries in the region are small, and they need a critical mass of specialized talent to be able to attract long term investments for the IT-ITES sector, and to accelerate ICT diffusion. To achieve this critical mass requires countries in the Region to work aligned and as a unified group. The proposal for Nicaragua to join the existing regional CARCIP program could boost availability of employable ICT talent and help them move towards becoming an Innovation ICT Hub for traditional sectors.

This Project considers a strong collaboration and spillovers in the Caribbean and Central American region, especially with those countries that are already part of the CARCIP initiative (Dominican Republic, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada), as well as others who are not, such as Honduras and Mexico. But the Project is an open opportunity to link more countries in the Region in the future.

All the above mentioned governments are interested in developing their IT-ITES sector and to increase ICT diffusion, but their weaknesses are restraining their ability to meet such goals. To accelerate and facilitate cooperation with the cited countries, the Nicaraguan Government has decided to become part of CARCIP. Through CARCIP it will be easier to have regional synergies, since the Program facilitates a framework of action.

CARCIP promotes regional economic integration, supports the updating of related policies and regulations, while at the same time implements programs that build capacity, and strengthen the institutions involved. CARCIP will deliver important economies of scale and overall economic benefits, as it will support major public goods, such as (i) a highly interconnected broadband infrastructure; (ii) ICT capacity building; (iii) development of ICT-enabled services; and (iv) institutional capacity building to ensure sustainability. All these initiatives will have positive regional externalities that will accrue to the country in much larger measures than if it was to embark in these activities separately. Working as a block of countries under CARCIP will also facilitate cooperation with other countries in the Region such as Mexico or Honduras.

The Nicaragua CARCIP will be structured in line with the overall program, taking into consideration the country specific needs, while prioritizing Regional actions. The Project will consist of the following five components:

Component 1: Connectivity infrastructure

This component will support the reduction of broadband connectivity gaps in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, through the deployment of broadband access to communities, schools, health centers and cooperatives. The infrastructure will enable the general population, productive sector and the local and regional Governments to access the Internet to improve access and delivery of services, purchase and sell goods and connect with relatives and partners in the Caribbean Coast of
Nicaragua. The Project will use fiber optic and broadband wireless network to reach interconnection points with regional backbone networks, as part of CARCIP’s regional strategy.

The Caribbean Broadband Network will provide broadband connectivity to at least 49 localities, their schools and health centers, several universities and about 10,000 SMEs through a Public Private Partnership (PPP). Selection of investors will be done through competitive bidding process using the same methodology of FITEL, the Telecommunication Investment Fund of TELCOR that was successfully used in the Rural Telecommunications Project (P089899).

This component will support bridging broadband connectivity gaps in four areas: (i) connecting communities that do not have broadband access; (ii) extending broadband service to educational institutions (schools, technical education centers, and universities; (iii) connecting health centers and hospitals in RACCN and RACCS and (iv) connecting cooperatives that support productive activities in the Caribbean Coast.

Component 2: IT/ITES Skills and Certifications

The Project is designed to create rapid middle income jobs by boosting IT-ITES job creation in the Region, starting with those that require a medium level of education (i.e. BPO and Animation), while the final scope considers to include more complex jobs such as ITO and KPO jobs. This component is designed to help minimize the barriers of entry to the job market for challenged students, dropouts and unemployed population. It will lead to new and better, inclusive jobs, especially for women and youth, making jobs available to a larger share of the bottom 40% of the population, fostering income, promoting shared prosperity and reducing poverty.

Low cost is relevant while deciding offshore destinations, but having an attractive pool of talent will be the main barrier for the Caribbean countries to become an attractive investment destination for IT-ITES activities. The IT-ITES sector is a rapidly evolving one that requires permanent skills update. High training cost or non-availability of courses limits the scale of job suited pool of talent in the region. Because of the small size of the IT-ITES sector in the Region today, the CARCIP countries, including Nicaragua, do not represent an attractive market for technical training. But by working as a Region, the pool of people to train increases, which improves the Region’s position to negotiate to have access to better training at better prices.

A regional effort to increase availability of English speaking population is needed to have access to premium accounts, which lead to better paying jobs. The Region could take advantage of its already creole English speaking population (i.e. Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada and Santa Lucia) and equip it with the right skills to be employable by transnational companies. A coordinated training program focused in such population could accelerate the Region’s position to attract investments.

Taking into account the above, this component seeks to (i) accelerate the development of skilled manpower required by the IT-ITES sector to boost job creation in the IT-ITES industry, and to (ii) broaden the base of people with digital skills and related soft skills and language skills for intensive ICT users to grow. An effort will be made to secure private sector support and funds to make the activities under this component more sustainable.

Activities under this component will include targeted skills development and certification programs,
training grants, regional harmonization activities, design of courses, finishing school, university curricula alignment to industry requirements, and skill development programs for niche specializations, especially in areas having good market potential (such as digital animation). There will be a special emphasis in capacity building for women and girls, with a specific target of percentage of people trained, that will vary slightly depending on the niche (e.g. at least 50% of people trained in BPO and at least 30% of people trained in ITO will be women and girls).

For ease of implementation all these programs will be administered under a unified umbrella. During the first years of the project, and to improve negotiation power, Nicaragua could partner with a Mexican initiative, known as MexicoFIRST, which seeks to accelerate IT-ITES skills development in Mexico since 2008. MexicoFIRST has already indicated interest in bundling Nicaragua’s demand with Mexico’s, to bring down the prices of common industry certifications (they have already brought down those prices by at least 30% for Mexico’s demand). Once the program is more established, a Nicaraguan spin off of Mexico FIRST will implement the project.

Activities will include capacity building in relevant soft and language skills, and in three categories of ICT competencies: 1. ICT specialists, who have the ability to develop, operate and maintain ICT systems, where ICTs constitute the main part of their job, and they develop and put in place the ICT tools for others. 2. Advanced users: competent users of advanced, and often sector-specific, software tools. ICTs are not the main occupation but a tool. 3. Basic users: competent users of generic tools (e.g. Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint) needed for the information society, e-government and working life. Here too, ICTs are a tool, not the main job.

- ICT specialist efforts should ensure that the labor pool has appropriate ICT skills, industry-specific skills, soft skills (e.g. management, communication, and language training) to increase the volume of suitable candidates for the labor market. Recognizing the global nature of ICT-enabled employment, and especially for ITES/BPO segment, programs should consider language training. Considering ICTs provide an opportunity to promote value-added entrepreneurship since startup investment is low compared to other technology-based industries, training on innovation and entrepreneurial skills will be considered. Target groups will include students, teachers/trainers, out of school youth/adults, general employees, decision makers and management executives.

- Advanced users should focus on SMEs in order to increase ICT awareness and usage at firm level and increase electronic commerce in the region. Target groups should consider not only ICT departments but general employees, decision makers and management executives.

- Basic users will target multiple groups to increase digital literacy. Including students (starting with children), teachers/trainers, and out of school youth/adults.

Component 3: ICT-enabled innovation

To boost productivity gains within the Region, the Project can’t depend solely on export activities. Linkages and interaction among traditional industries and IT-ITES players need to be promoted for the economy as a whole to benefit. Increasing ICT diffusion and ICT-led innovation in traditional sectors in the region can boost productivity gains. A regional approach is needed to overcome limited local capacity of R&D infrastructure (physical and human) as well as to have access to enough ICT suppliers and buyers that could make this a sustainable and successful investment. By focusing on solving regional problems, new markets can be created, especially for new small firms.
based on ICT.

The proposed open innovation approach in this component seeks to provide ICT based solutions to real regional multi industry/company problems to maximize spill-overs. This will be accomplished through ICT solutions designed and deployed linking industry to the academia and young talent within universities.

This component will support activities that: (i) facilitate the implementation of a university-entrepreneurship platform in the Caribbean and Central America, based on a co-creation and open innovation approach; and (ii) enable the setup and development of an Innovation Laboratories (InnovaLabs) Network.

The university-entrepreneurship platform is expected to create a direct link between the students and the industry, through which students will develop Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) solutions for real problems posted by the industry. The Platform will enable multidisciplinary teams composed of students from multiple universities and backgrounds to work on finding solutions for private sector problems provided by industry participating in the program. To promote entrepreneurship, students will retain the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) of the developed solution to obtain earnings from license fees, or by further development of the IPR asset into an ICT startup. The first phase of the Platform would include universities based in Nicaragua (ie. Managua, Leon and Bluefields) and a roll out plan to incorporate other countries to build a regional network to take advantage of a greater pool of talent and R&D infrastructure. Support will include activities such as assessment of the ecosystem, equipment, knowledge transfer, setup cost, network development, and training, among others. Linkage to existent efforts in the Region will facilitate knowledge transfer, access to other markets and reduce learning curve (i.e. Demola Guadalajara in Mexico)

The InnovaLabs program will facilitate access to tools, equipment and spaces that will boost an innovative and digital culture. The laboratories will provide space to perform different stages of innovation, such as ideation, incubation, prototyping and piloting. To nurture the ecosystem support will also be given to provide innovation training, develop challenges (with a special focus on social and gender problems with a citizen centric approach), promote collaborative work, facilitates IT adoption, develop a professional mentor network, and provide seed capital to innovative ICT projects or startups.

Component 4: Enabling Environment.
Technical assistance and capacity building for: (i) development of the ICT capabilities for the country; (ii) identifying gaps and niches on IT and IT enabled services, and designing a roadmap to support country and regional actions and activities; (iii) identifying and supporting activities for the global positioning of the Region and Nicaraguan IT-ITES industry through the increase of their exports and the attraction of foreign investment; (iv) supporting regional coordination activities under the CARCIP program; (v) designing of detailed environmental and social impact assessments and management plans, while monitoring of their effective implementation; and (vi) evaluating after two years of the project implementation its impact, and possible measures that will need to be taken for project sustainability.

Component 5: Implementation Support
This component will provide resources for the establishment and logistic support for a core Project
Coordinating Unit (PCU) staff to administer and coordinate project implementation. It will also support oversight arrangements and capacity building for key policy and regulatory institutions.

The component covers support for: (a) the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Project’s activities, including for: (i) the carrying out of Project audits; (ii) the design and implementation of strategies and other dissemination tools to inform Project stakeholders on the progress achieved during Project implementation; and (iii) the carrying out of impact evaluation surveys to evaluate the Project impacts; and (b) the carrying out of capacity building activities for the benefit of relevant policy and regulatory institutions, including relevant knowledge exchanges.

This component will support the following activities:
• Establishment and hiring of core Project implementation staff, such as the Project Coordinator, a Procurement Specialist, a Financial Management Specialist, a Project Accountant, and a Safeguards Specialist to support Project preparation and subsequent implementation.
• Logistic support for Project Implementation Unit as needed (PCs, office equipment, operating costs, audits, and communication support).
• Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) consultant and surveys to support indicator data collection for the various components.

IV. Safeguard Policies that might apply

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V. Financing (in USD Million)

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