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One major use will be in education: the company building the network, Coatl, will connect an initial 218 rural schools that will provide broadband services to 54,000 students. The country's education minister, Carla Hanan?a de Varela, wants to connect all 1.2 million students within El Salvador's public education system.

Coatl is using open network architecture, working with Nokia to build a wholesale network that will operate at 100Gbps, using a combination of fibre, microwave and radio base stations that use spare spectrum - so-called white spaces - between TV channels.

Nokia and Coatl are working with a California company, Caban Systems, which will provide lithium-ion energy storage batteries in 50 sites to support the deployment of reliable internet connectivity for the country's coastal communities.

Uwe Martinz, president and CEO of Coatl, says the project will "evolve towards solar solutions". Caban's hardware and software will provide standalone or back-up power on any site.

For Martinz, "I always wanted to do what I'm doing right now," he tells me over a slightly wobbly connection from San Salvador, the capital city of El Salvador, a country of just 6.5 million people tucked between Guatemala, Honduras and the Pacific Ocean in Central America. He's worked in Latin America for the past 15 years, much of that time for Nokia in Brazil and Mexico. "I got to know the environment and the challenge," he says.

He's known about the area for longer, ever since his parents moved to Guatemala, when he was a child, to build a school and teach. Martinz went home to Austria in 1990 to study business at Vienna's Wirtschaftsuniversit?t - its university of economics and business - before moving into the telecoms industry.

He worked for the first private mobile operator in Austria, working on the first network with general packet radio service (GPRS), a way of putting data packets on 2G and 3G. "We used a lot of leased line connectivity and I got more and more into engineering," says Martinz.

Crucially, he came to understand the relationship between business planning and technology: "I worked with the engineers. We knew what we were trying to do, and we had to understand how to do it - from a legal, business, financial and technology point of view. If you don't understand it, you can't do something that's different."

And then he came back to Latin America. "There is a huge digital divide," he says of the region. "Not just during the pandemic." It restricts the way people can access opportunities, he explains: "In reality, it's an issue of not being able to develop the country." Widespread internet access "is probably the best way you can

develop the country", he says, listing health and education among the main services on which to focus.

For some years Martinz has worked in partnerships between the public sector and private companies, and this is what brought him to work with the national electricity network, CEL - Comisi?n Ejecutiva Hidroel?ctrica del R?o Lempa. It needed to build communications networks to link substations, the units that convert from high-voltage electricity used for distribution to the low voltage - 115V, as in North America - that is delivered to customers" homes, offices and schools.

The result was a partnership to build a fibre network that all other operators can use. "We have a network for everybody who wants to join us," Martinz says. With the government as the ultimate shareholder in the grid company - albeit indirectly - "it makes sense to use the network to connect everything they need, including healthcare."

That wasn't how it started, though, he smiles. At first every organisation in the public sector wanted its own network - "a kingdom on its own", as Martinz puts it. But Coatl had already started, and then in 2019 the people of El Salvador elected a new president, Nayib Bukele, for a five-year term of office.

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