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Democratic Innovations Help Fight Covid-19 in Latin America

By Thamy Pogrebinski

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered a multitude of various unforeseen problems, and most governments around the world were unprepared, finding themselves urged to design responses in a very short period of time and under highly uncertain conditions.

In Latin America, where state capacity is characteristically low and inequality high, the coronavirus found optimal conditions for proliferation. In some countries, the sanitary emergency has also been aggravated by the economic crisis, social unrest, and political instability. Five out of the ten countries hit hardest by the pandemic so far are located in Latin America, and about one-third of all global deaths due to the virus have occurred in the region.

While state capacity cannot be built overnight, social intelligence is an unlimited and permanently available resource. In recent years, digital technology has multiplied what has been long called social intelligence (John Dewey) and is now more often known as collective intelligence (Pierre Lévy), the wisdom of crowds (James Surowiecki), or democratic reason (Hélène Landemore).

Taken together, these concepts point to the most powerful tool available to governments facing hard problems and unprecedented challenges: the sourcing and sharing of knowledge, information, skills, resources, and data from citizens in order to address social and political problems.

The Covid-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to test the potential of social intelligence as fuel for processes of creative collaboration that may aid governments to reinvent themselves and prepare for the challenges that will remain after the virus is gone. By creative collaboration, I mean a range of forms of communication, action, and connection among citizens themselves, between citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs), and between the latter two and their governments, all with the common aim of addressing problems that affect all and that the state for various reasons cannot (satisfactorily) respond to alone.

While several Latin American countries have been stuck in the Covid-19 crisis with governments unable or unwilling to contain it or to reduce its damages, a substantial number of digital democratic innovations have been advanced by civil society in the past few months.

Between March 16 and July 1 of this year, at least 400 digital democratic innovations were created across 18 countries in Latin America with the specific aim of handling the Covid-19 crisis and mitigating its impact, according to recent data from the LATINNO project. These innovations are essentially mechanisms and processes in which citizens, with the aid of digital tools, are enabled to address social, political, and humanitarian problems related to the pandemic.

Digital technologies allow democratic innovations to operate as catalyzers of social intelligence, turning citizens into problem solvers as they contribute knowledge,

information, data, and skills to address common problems that should in fact be handled by governments.

Crowdsourcing is one example of fostering social intelligence. It enables the use of social intelligence to solve political and social problems and improve government policies and actions, especially when the state is overwhelmed, as happens in contexts of emergency and times of uncertainty. The latter comprise mechanisms for knowledge-gathering and are effective tools to identify problems, assess their possible solutions, and collect inputs necessary for the successful implementation of the latter. By amassing knowledge from citizens, governments can gather sizeable amounts of information from sources that would otherwise probably not be accessible. Crowdsourcing mostly facilitates the gathering of ideas, expertise, and data. It allows an unlimited number of citizens to participate in and contribute to all stages of the policy cycle.

The great majority of the digital democratic innovations recently mapped by the LATINNO project have been developed by CSOs. Around 75 percent of them have no government involvement at all, which is striking in a region known for implementing state-driven citizen participation as a result of the democratization processes that took place in the late 20th century. Civil society has stepped in in most countries, particularly where government responses were absent (Brazil and Nicaragua), slow (Mexico), insufficient due to lack of economic resources (Argentina) or infrastructure (Peru), or simply inefficient (Chile).

Based on these data from 18 Latin American countries, one can observe that digital democratic innovations address challenges posed by the Covid-19 outbreak in five main ways: first, generating verified information and reliable data; second, geolocating problems, needs, and demands; third, mobilizing resources, skills, and knowledge to address those problems, needs, and demands; fourth, connecting demand (individuals and organizations in need) and supply (individuals and organizations willing to provide whatever is needed); and fifth and finally, implementing and monitoring public policies and actions. In some countries, there is a sixth use that cuts across the other five: assisting vulnerable groups such as the elderly, women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendants.

In a democracy, to exercise power is to “act in concert” (Hannah Arendt). The Covid-19 crisis has been showing that some social and political challenges can only be dealt with if one acts in concert with others and that democracy can only recover from the virus if the cure involves citizens, civil society, and governments alike.

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Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research

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