



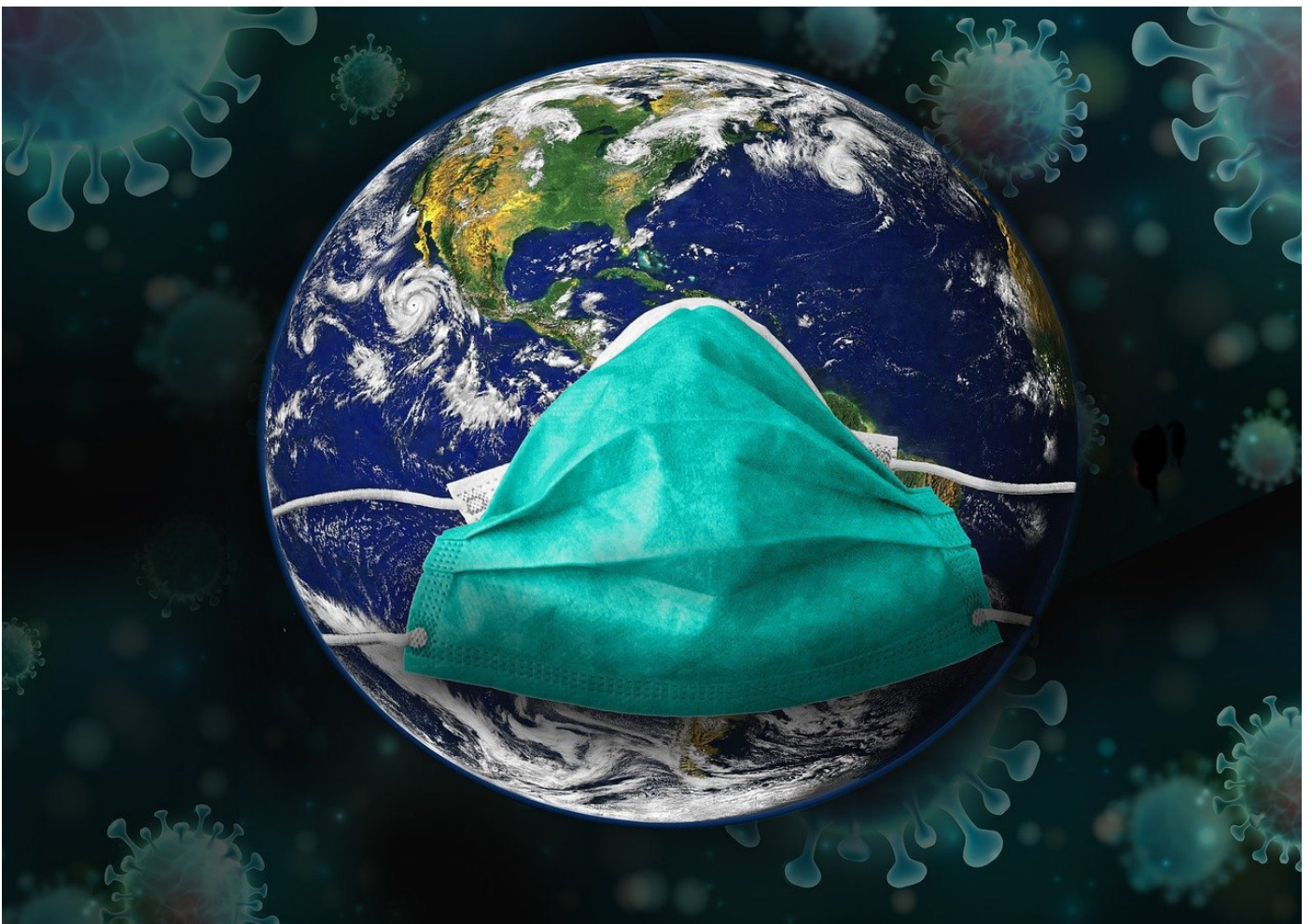
DEMOCRACIAABIERTA: INVESTIGATION

Might social intelligence save Latin America from its governments in times of Covid-19?

Digital democratic innovation as a response to Covid-19 puts on the table the need for governments to rely on society to advance solutions to new and complex problems.

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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 countries with low state capacity and high social inequality, the challenges have been even greater.

Government responses have been limited by lack of resources, infrastructure, and knowledge, in addition to the burden of having to immediately handle long-standing social fissures that quickly revealed that not all are equal before the virus.

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.

No response could have been rapid enough to address centuries-long problems such as political exclusion and social inequality, or effective enough to circumvent the deep-rooted lack of accountability engrained in political institutions. But had actual political leadership not been absent and had governments taken proper action – which was definitely not the case in several countries – much could have been done to prevent the pandemic from swiftly becoming pandemonium.

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In such scenarios, it seems relevant to acknowledge the limits of the state to deal with huge and unpredictable challenges and thus the need to resort to civil society. State capacity cannot be built overnight, but social intelligence is an unlimited and permanently available resource. In recent years, digital technology has multiplied what has been long called social intelligence (Dewey) and is now more often known as collective intelligence (Lévy), the wisdom of crowds (Surowiecki), or democratic reason (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. These comprise institutions, processes, and mechanisms that rely on digital citizen participation as a means to address social and political problems – and, more recently, also problems of a humanitarian nature.

Crowdsourcing

The problem-solving nature of democratic innovations consists of identifying needs and issues that require a political decision or action, in addition to enabling citizens to take part in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of such decisions and actions. 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.

What is generally called crowdsourcing comprises the most successful combination of social intelligence and digital technology known to date. 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.

Mechanisms for knowledge-gathering are effective tools to identify problems, assess their possible solutions, and collect inputs necessary for the successful implementation of the latter. Crowdsourcing thus 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.

Digital democratic innovations

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.

Citizens engage in and contribute to three levels of responses, which are based on information, connection, and action. About one-fourth of these digital democratic innovations clearly rely on crowdsourcing social intelligence.

The great majority of those digital innovations have been developed by CSOs. Around 75% 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).



When the state acts in concert with civil society, and resorts to it in order to address concrete problems, democracy is the main winner.

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.

The five main uses of digital democratic innovations designed to handle problems resulting from the pandemic become clearer as one observes how social intelligence, with the aid of digital tools, operates in four dimensions, or moments, each of which concerned with the following activities:

Identification of Problems:

- Identification and geolocation of needs, shortages, deficiencies, and demands
- Identification of limitations in public service delivery and institutional performance
- Identification of groups, communities, and neighborhoods with greater or special needs

Generation of Knowledge:

- Production, collection, and aggregation of data from citizens
- Crowdsourcing of knowledge, information, ideas, resources, assets, and skills
- Fact and data checking and dissemination of verified information

Design of Solutions:

- Collaborative design of alternative solutions from and within civil society
- Integration of citizen and CSO contributions to government responses

Implementation of Responses:

- Collaborative implementation of responses
- Direct involvement of citizens in service provision or supply generation

Although empirically observed during the Covid-19 crisis in Latin America, these four dimensions, or moments, of social intelligence are expandable to any situation in which citizens and CSOs step in to make up for state deficiencies, handling challenges that cannot be properly and satisfactorily resolved by their governments alone. When applied to the sanitary crisis, the activities listed above are translated into quite specific goals that aim at addressing different problems related to the spread of the virus in the region, as summarized and exemplified in the table below.

Dimensions	Actions	Examples of Cases
Identification of Problems	<p>Mapping of existing health infrastructure and available medical services</p> <p>Tracking lack of medical supplies and doctors in hospitals and communities</p> <p>Singling out individuals, families, and communities in vulnerable conditions</p> <p>Figuring out related infrastructure and service delivery, such as access to potable water</p>	<p>Argentina: Caminos de la Villa COVID19</p> <p>Bolivia: Bolivia Solidaria</p> <p>Brazil: Mapa Corona nas Periferias, Rooms Against Covid, Atados Covid19</p> <p>Dominican Republic: COVID.do</p> <p>Ecuador: Colaboratorio Ciudadano, En Qué Ayudo</p> <p>Mexico: #MiBarrioMeRespalda, Apoyo Mutuo Mérida</p> <p>Paraguay: AyudaPy</p> <p>El Salvador: Lab-Dat-Iniciativa COVID-19</p>
Generation of Knowledge	<p>Creation of datasets to track numbers of cases and deaths, as well as their evolution across time and space</p> <p>Creation of datasets on government responses</p> <p>Data sharing and cross-comparing to assess effectiveness</p>	<p>Argentina: Alerta mobile app, Observatorio de Compras COVID-19, COVID19 y derechos</p> <p>Brazil: MonitoraCovid-19, Mapeamento de Campanhas contra o Covid19, Desviralize</p> <p>Dominican Republic: Citizen Oversight Commission</p> <p>Peru: Lupa sobre las transferencias</p> <p>Transnational: #PorUnaDemocraciaSaludable</p>
	<p>Setup of hackathons and internet platforms to address health needs and deficiencies collectively and enable onsite government responses</p> <p>Collaborative campaigns to enable home schooling and remote learning</p>	<p>Argentina: Hackatón El futuro cuenta con vos, #LoHackeamosEntreTodos</p> <p>Brazil: Desafio Recode</p>

In its pragmatist origin, the concept of intelligence is closely related to those of action and creativity. Social intelligence is composed of creative actions of citizens and their organizations. When the state acts in concert with civil society, and resorts to it in order to address concrete problems, democracy is the main winner.

In a democracy, to exercise power is to “act in concert” (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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