

The Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Latin American Public Governance: reflections and conclusions

*O impacto da pandemia COVID-19 na governança pública
latino-americana: reflexões e conclusões*

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Resumo

Ao longo da história, crises econômicas, guerras e pandemias expuseram as desigualdades sociais. A pandemia COVID-19 é um dos maiores desafios que a sociedade enfrenta em gerações. À medida que o setor público toma a iniciativa de responder, mitigar e ajudar a resolver a crise, tomamos consciência da importância fundamental do papel de um Estado eficaz. O objetivo deste estudo é fornecer uma resposta por meio de reflexões sobre como a pandemia COVID-19 impactou a governança pública latino-americana e permitir que conclusões sejam projetadas para a nova normalidade pós-COVID-19. Primeiramente, é feita uma análise do panorama atual, para então determinar 4 desafios que os governos latino-americanos enfrentam: a expansão do teletrabalho e da tecnologia; a fragilidade do Estado e a fragmentação administrativa; o aumento das desigualdades sociais; e, finalmente, o impacto da globalização e da ordem mundial na ALC. Por fim, o estudo apresenta conclusões provisórias nesta etapa inicial com base nos desafios considerados.

Palavras-chave: crise de saúde; governança pública; governos; COVID-19

Abstract

Throughout history, economic crises, wars and pandemics have exposed social inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest challenges facing society in generations. As the public sector takes the initiative to respond to mitigate, and help resolve the crisis, we become aware of the fundamental importance of the role of an effective state. The purpose of this study is to provide a response, by way of reflections, on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on Latin American public governance and to allow conclusions to be projected towards the new post-COVID-19 normality. First, an analysis of the current panorama is carried out, to then determine 4 challenges that Latin American governments are facing: the expansion of telework and technology; the weakness of the state and administrative fragmentation; the increase in social inequalities; and finally, the impact of globalization and the world order in LAC. Finally, the research presents provisional conclusions in this initial stage based on the challenges considered.

Keywords: health crisis; public governance; governments; COVID-19

1. Introduction

The present work begins currently when the whole world is living under confinement due to the current health crisis which has radically transformed our living conditions. Likewise, it has brought multiple consequences, not only in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), but also worldwide, such as health, economic and social problems.

On April 12, 1959, during a speech in Indianapolis, John F. Kennedy used the Chinese term 危机 (*Wei Ji*) translated as “*crisis*”, which is made up of two characters: one means danger and the other, opportunity. In his 1947 novel *The Plague*, Albert Camus points out that the plague has a beneficial action, which opens the eyes, which makes one think!

Both examples are quoted due to difficult times we are experiencing worldwide, but we must see this crisis as an opportunity to review and reformulate a series of paradigms that have been sustained without any favorable perspective for good public governance and thus be able to move forward.

This situation represents a great challenge for the governments of LAC, which have tried to face the current health crisis quickly and cautiously in order to provide protection to their citizens and also to be able to contain the spread of COVID 19, whose outbreak in the region began on February 26 in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

A research report of United Nations (2020) “*Policy brief: the impact of COVID-19 on Latin America and the Caribbean*”, indicates that the present pandemic will bring devastating consequences both of an economic, health and social nature for the countries of LAC, whose health systems are fragile and where there is great inequality in the distribution of income and access to resources and a prevailing informality.

The purpose of this work is to describe, by way of reflections, how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on Latin American public governance, and to allow the projecting of conclusions towards the new post-COVID-19 normality

To achieve this, in the first section, we describe the current situation, as well as address the issue of public governance. In the second section, we describe the challenges that LAC governments already face in the exercise of good public governance, such as: the expansion of telework and technology; the weakness of the state and administrative fragmentation; the increase in social inequalities; and the impact of globalization and the world order in LAC. Finally, we provide conclusions on the actions of governments for effective governance towards the new post-COVID-19 normal.

2. Current situation and Governance

The capitalism, prevailing system of world order, which we believed to be all powerful, has been vulnerable during this time. This is not the first time in its history that capitalism has faced such a crisis. The Great Depression of the 1930s was an example. In times of crisis, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic and its economic, health and social repercussions; public governance is of vital importance.

We can point out that there seems to be a return to the Welfare State, since many LAC governments have demonstrated their limited capacity to face the current health crisis and have chosen to apply state intervention measures, such as social, health and economic benefit policies, to alleviate the impact of COVID-19.

Major crises strike at the core of democracy and governance and therefore pose challenges not only to capacity, but also to the accountability, legitimacy, representation, and ability of citizens to meet their demands for effective way (Dahl & Tufte 1973). Governance arrangements play a key role in countries' immediate responses and are important both for recovery and for building a "new normal" after the post-crisis.

Governance capacity includes formal structural and procedural features of the governmental administrative apparatus but also informal elements, that is, how these features work in practice. (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 888). For the purpose of this work, we will define governance as the relations of cooperation and coordination through mixed networks, both public and private, between state (State) and non-state (private sector and civil society) actors for the achievement of the common good.

We can point out that every health emergency constitutes a significant test for the government and its management capacity to handle it, which urgently requires a public governance mechanism with the participation of civil society actors. Likewise, the immediate responses that governments need to carry out involve the development of agile and adaptive governance. Agile governance is geared towards methods to respond to uncertainties stemming from a — usually natural — environment. On the other hand, adaptivity has a more systemic slant, and can change the environment as well. Adaptivity enhances a government's capacity to deal with change, while protecting society from instability (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020).

LAC governments have had to adapt quickly to confront and slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to a research report of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2020) entitled “*Covid-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: Overview of government responses to the crisis*”, governments will have to change public policies and services to respond to the derived needs of COVID-19 after this one. Now more than ever, it is extremely important to have political coherence since the current crisis has accentuated the value of the digital transformation of the public sectors and governments to ensure continuity in the provision of public services and government functions. In order for post-crisis policies and public service packages to be inclusive and respond to the real needs of people, LAC countries need to put in place participation mechanisms to create a virtuous feedback loop, take advantage of intelligence collective and respond to the needs of the silent majority. Likewise, a research report by the Council of Europe (2020) indicates that the effectiveness of the response to the COVID-19 emergency greatly depends on the level of coordination and cooperation between the different actors involved. It also depends on the active participation of civil society, as regards not only the respect of confinement measures but also the direct involvement in voluntary work aimed at sustaining the response effort.

3. Challenges

Tackling grand challenges requires revitalizing private and public investment, innovation, and collaboration. It is not about more state or less state, but a different type of state: one that is able to act as an investor of first resort, catalyzing new types of growth, and in so doing crowd in private-sector investment and innovation—these are in essence functions about expectations about future growth areas. This requires a new form of collaboration between state and business and is more about picking the willing than picking winners (Mazzucato, 2013).

Regarding the reactions of governments to this crisis, on the dark side, it could become an economic crisis of global dimensions and a long-lasting reversal of globalization. On the bright side, it could be the moment when policymakers manage a common crisis response. They might even manage to rebuild some trust and create a cooperative spirit that helps humanity tackle other common threats like climate change (Baldwin & Weder di Mauro, 2020).

LAC governments are being put to the test as they fight and experience the spread of COVID-19, addressing political challenges in different ways. COVID-19 seems to present new challenges for LAC governments, which will have consequences of various kinds, which will require governmental responses at multiple levels of governance.

Based on what has been discussed, a question arises: *How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the public governance of LAC?*

In some ways, LAC governments were not prepared to handle this type of crisis, although there was an early warning for what was already happening in Europe, but the time was short to develop an adequate management capacity to face it.

In the recent research report of United Nations study (2020), already indicated above, points out that the COVID-19 pandemic is causing the worst health, economic, social, and humanitarian crisis in the region in a century, as proof of this it details the following consequences:

Table 1. Health, economic and social impacts of crisis of COVID in LAC

Impacts	Characteristics
Health impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fragmented and unequal health systems, ill-prepared to handle a health crisis of this scale. ▪ Lack of access to information and quality health care, especially in rural and remote areas, and particularly affects indigenous peoples and rural areas. ▪ Existence of prevailing inequality, with one in five urban residents in the region living in slums, where overcrowding and poor access to water and sanitation increase the risk of contagion. ▪ Dependence on extra-regional imports of essential medical products for the treatment of COVID-19, with less than 4% of imports coming from the region itself.
Economic impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ECLAC estimates that GDP could fall in Latin America and the Caribbean by 9.1% in 2020. The external factors for this are an expected drop-in exports (20% 12), a decrease in remittances to the region (around 20% 13) and lower demand in the tourism sector. ▪ The external shock is aggravated by an internal shock produced by social distancing and closure measures, which mainly affect the service sector, and especially the informal sector, which represents a significant part of total employment in Latin America and the Caribbean. ▪ Limited savings capacity of informal workers to cope with periods of inactivity, as well as lack of access to income replacement mechanisms such as unemployment insurance, associated with formal work. ▪ Disproportionate impact on women, who are overrepresented in informal work, self-employment, and the service sector (transportation, business and social services), which currently employs 78% of women in the labor market.
Social impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The sharp drop-in economic activity is expected to raise the unemployment rate from 8.1% in 2019 to 13.5% in 2020. ▪ The poverty rate is expected to increase by 7.0 percentage points in 2020, to 37.2%, while extreme poverty is expected to increase by 4.5 percentage points, from 11.0% to 15.5%, representing an increase of 28 million people. ▪ The pandemic is affecting food insecurity caused by environmentally driven food shortages, political upheaval, and declining purchasing power. LAC has seen a nearly triple increase in the number of people requiring food assistance. ▪ These trends also imply a rise in inequality. The Gini index is expected to increase with the pandemic by between 1.1% and 7.8% in several countries in the region.

Source: On the basis of United Nations, 2020

The impact of the current health crisis and the measures to suspend activities required by governments to stop it have led to a radical change in our living conditions. These changes have accelerated the transformation of the public sector. The effects are being more drastic, especially in the countries most affected by the pandemic.

Therefore, we must be attentive to problems and challenges that will not lose importance. Based on this, we consider that the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated the expansion of teleworking and technology; the weakness of the state and administrative fragmentation; the increase in social inequalities; and finally, the impact of globalization and the world order in LAC.

3.1 *The teleworking and technology expansion*

In the 1970s and 1980s, Jack Nilles and Allan Toffler predicted that work of the future would be relocated into or nearby employees' homes with the help of technology, called 'Telework' (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016: 195). The health crisis as a result of COVID-19 has imposed this modality for many workers around the world. However, this change presents many challenges for public institutions and their collaborators.

Campos (2020), in her article: "*The future of teleworking in the post-covid era*", points out regarding the circumstances, they are not exactly ideal. In the first place, because apart from the stress derived from the health emergency situation, this forced landing in telework occurs in an environment of coexistence with the family unit, with children and the elderly, sharing electronic work equipment, which does not facilitate its developing. Second, because there was no prior training, a protocol on how to act, many users not used to remote work have had to adapt their work habits to a new situation, with new support and relationship systems. And the changes are not usually well received. Not to mention connectivity problems, digital divide, and lack of digital skills.

Based on this, we can point out the following challenges for public governance:

- Provide the right tools so that home-based workers can do their jobs properly.
- Increased labor flexibility, in these times, working hours require less and less presence at the physical headquarters of the company because part of the work can be done remotely, it is something that will be more and more frequent. Teleworking allows labor flexibility, not only in the distribution of tasks, but also in time management, since previously it was possible to work from a single place, instead, today, thanks to the help that ICT provide us through devices such as smartphones, tools such as zoom, google meet, etc., the work can be done from anywhere and at any time.
- Increased productivity, because by working from the comfort of their homes, workers can dedicate more time to their work as if they were

in the office and it is an ideal place where conditions can be created so as not to receive distractions.

- Reduction of expenses for the employee, for example, in travel and time; and costs for the public entity, since the work can be carried out anywhere, without the need for a physical space.

3.2 The weakness of the state and administrative fragmentation

The current global health crisis has created a wide range of responses from governments at all levels to operate in a context of radical uncertainty and also to face a variety of complex health, economic and social problems, for which there are no protocols of action, for example the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and where people's expectations for decisive government action rise, and there is a greater tolerance for concentration of power and restrictions on people's rights.

The international analyst Moisés Naim (2015) pointed out, in an interview, that power is easier to obtain, more difficult to use and easier to lose. We can demonstrate under the current prevailing health crisis, LAC governments find it difficult to use power, since the ability to guarantee well-being conditions for citizens around the coronavirus crisis is being questioned, and feared, but the lack of responsible political leadership when it is most needed has also been problematic. This is the greatest political challenge facing current governments.

The regional and local impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public governance is highly heterogeneous, with a strong territorial dimension and significant implications for crisis management and political responses. The pandemic highlights different levels of decision-making, intervention, and effectiveness at the national and sub-national levels. This has resulted in a territorial interdependence at all levels of government, since it can be observed that, to solve complex problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the participation of multiple levels of government (subnational, national, world) and of the different state (state) and non-state (private sector and civil society) actors is required.

Regarding fiscal recovery and public investment; fiscal recovery measures should be timely, targeted, and temporary (TTT), and public investment will in many cases be a suitable instrument for kick-starting economic growth (IMF, 2020a). If cuts in investment spending are to be unavoidable, they should be based on transparent criteria and minimize the negative impact on long-term growth (IFM, 2020b). The COVID-19 pandemic is producing an economic crisis that, however, could be reduced if the LAC governments, in addition to making the required spending, compensate the companies and households that are losing with the measures of social distancing and confinement. The problem is that governments are limiting their spending so that public debt does not increase. It should be noted that while the COVID-19 pandemic lasts, governments must provide resources such as protective equipment to health centers, stabilize financial institutions, pay companies to pro-

vide goods and services to employees essential or provide direct monetary support to households; it could be mentioned that it is a temporary state intervention, not permanent.

As part of the urgent need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments, healthcare providers, and businesses have looked to applications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to compensate for the unavailability of human workers. This interest has renewed the debate regarding the use of AI for the automation of work, which has been described as Intelligent Automation (IA) (Coombs, 2020). The power of AI in COVID-19 is that it is being used to generate actionable information—some of which would be impossible without AI, much more quickly than before (Block, 2020). We can point out that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of innovative technologies. AI has accelerated dramatically not only to support work from home but mostly to help humanity to combat COVID-19 (Holland, 2020; Nguyen, 2020). AI benefits from COVID-19 as humanity accelerates AI applications and research to mitigate COVID-19 devastating impacts. Public administrations go digital to facilitate their citizens during lockdowns and social distancing. Some countries had already been digitized before COVID-19 hits. Others have a unique opportunity to transform public administration and make it converge to most developed countries (Chymis, 2020:62). During the digital era, applications will provide a substantial increase in information collected by various devices from different government sectors such as health, education, transportation, among others, which will help governments to perform well in their fight against COVID-19.

Regarding administrative fragmentation, the new administrative capacities are needed for governments to competently anticipate and manage these crises (Roberts, 2020). The repercussions of coherent responses to crises are more than operational, as consistent actions do not allow serious threats to further erode already undermined legitimacy (Carter and May, 2020).

The abrupt and brutal halt of the COVID-19 pandemic has put public service and public servants in a great quandary, forcing them not only to grapple with the fight against its spread, but also to try to manage the accompanying socio-economic consequences. Thus, we see that, on the part of the public service, they have had to find a way to create virtual spaces that facilitate interaction outside of office work and thus respond quickly to the current crisis. On the part of public servants, they have found it necessary to create new routines. Based on this, it should be noted that the great challenge facing public administrations is how to ensure that officials, once the crisis is over, return to their jobs safely and thus be able to reactivate certain services that were outside the context of the pandemic.

We can state that in the first line of battle we find from workers in the health sector to officials of social welfare entities, teachers, sanitation workers, among others, which brings to an awareness and understanding of the fundamental role that the public servant plays in these difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on this, we can point out the main political challenges for public governance:

- Lack of responsible political leadership
- Bureaucratization.
- Territorial interdependence.
- Shortage of human and material resources.
- Low spending on public investment.
- Inadequate logistics, health, industrial and research infrastructure.
- Lack of capacity to solve citizen demands.
- Lack of transparency and adequate accountability.
- Conditions of employment and retirement.
- Continuity of public services.
- Automation of tasks and development of artificial intelligence (AI).

3.3 *The increase in social inequalities*

The role that ICT have played during this health crisis has been fundamental, since it would have been impossible to survive if there were no remote work, virtual education, virtual payments, etc., with the education and health sectors being the best performing have adapted. In health, such as the creation of interactive governmental platforms for virtual medical care such as online appointments, evaluation, etc. In education, the need to continue training processes, the population has tried to adapt to the situation, despite the large gaps that still exist in terms of internet coverage, especially in rural areas. Despite all this, inequality gaps have widened even more in the region as a result of the current health crisis.

Inequalities existed along many dimensions before the health crisis, across the population and between different groups in LAC. It should be noted that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing high levels of inequality, putting additional pressure on governments already facing growing social unrest (Forbes, 2020). Since the onset of the pandemic, the public health response in many countries in LAC, has involved many changes that have brought existing inequalities into focus.

We can point out that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has a systemic scope, since it affects all dimensions of social life, and is projected on a global scale. It will increase the disparity between those who have more and those who have less. It has disproportionately affected vulnerable populations in LAC.

According to a research report of OECD (2020), indicated above, the LAC region faces many social challenges for public governance like the Informality in the labor sector and lack of universal safety nets for informal or low-skilled workers; the deep social discontent of an emerging middle class, and persistent vulnerability at risk of

poverty; the increased scarcity and competition for resources; and vulnerable populations with the highest levels of informality.

Based on this, we can point out the main social challenges for public governance:

- Health conditions and access to medical care.
- Educational and digital gap.
- Loss of work
- Informality in the labor sector and lack of universal safety nets.
- Social discontent and frustrated aspirations of an emergency middle class.
- Increased scarcity and competition for resources by groups or communities who have and those who have not.

3.4 *The Impact of Globalization and the World Order in LAC*

The former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger (2020) in his article “*The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order*”, points out that the Leaders are dealing with the crisis on a largely national basis, but the virus’s society-dissolving effects do not recognize borders. While the assault on human health will—hopefully—be temporary, the political and economic upheaval it has unleashed could last for generations. No country, not even the U.S., can in a purely national effort overcome the virus. Addressing the necessities of the moment must ultimately be coupled with a global collaborative vision and program. If we cannot do both in tandem, we will face the worst of each.

The globalization of the last 20 years is already part of our daily economic and social model. This phenomenon is defined as a historical process that describes the changes that have been taking place in the world, the same that have had both positive and negative impacts and that in turn connect distant societies in a kind of global village. (Guillermo, 2016). Likewise, we can state that the current health crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to the emergence of global risks, what Beck called “*the global risk society*”.

We can point out that these global risks, witnessed during the current health crisis, have led us to a level of total uncertainty in international affairs, which could produce a process of deglobalization. The political and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will be massive, as it will deal a major blow to globalization. Based on this, it faces the following challenges for public governance:

- With the closing of the borders, there has been a resurgence of the walled city, with different consequences for the citizens of each country, which is leading us towards a new world order. We can state that we are “*coronavirus citizens*”, that is, citizens confined in closed governments, with fear and uncertainty.

- There is a high probability that the pandemic will not only introduce new patterns of world trade, but also affect trade relations, with the consequence that some economies will be winners and other losers, since the present crisis is forcing the closure of companies around the world and is restricting the movement of people and goods, which threatens the global trade in goods and services.
- The reduction of interdependence, the crisis has highlighted the risks of overdependence in production and supply chains worldwide, which will result in a kind of renationalization of production, that is, governments will re-evaluate their production policies for certain items and thus not depend on third parties, especially China.
- Return of the strong state and nationalist leadership, since many governments in the region, with an authoritarian past, will be able to use these means to use emergency and national security powers to consolidate and/or abuse power. As a result, democracy, rule of law, and personal liberties will suffer a significant blow. we mean a kind of pandemic populism.
- The international community's lack of capacity and will to address collective challenges has been limited.

Acceleration of the changes that had been taking place in society, but more slowly.

4. Conclusions

Crisis response and management shares an immediate interdependence with (1) public policies, including the content of previously and newly adopted public policies, (2) the interactions of individuals, groups, coalitions, and networks, and (3) contextual conditions, including income levels, local interactions, and global-level decisions (Weible et al 2020:228).

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to rethink governance, where it has forced governments to tackle many new and unprecedented challenges. The role of the state must be redefined for its empowerment so that it can intervene effectively. Likewise, our way of coexistence will change, both within states and among them.

The success of LAC governments in overcoming the current health crisis and its economic and social effects will depend on whether we recognize our real interest in cooperating multilaterally on the great regional problems that we face, only then will it have served a useful purpose.

In dealing with the pandemic and its socioeconomic impact on LAC nations, countries need strong, agile, and well-linked public administrations, not only to respond to this health crisis, but also to continue routine and necessary state functions

under rapidly changing conditions. To achieve this, we can point out, based on what is discussed in this work, the following conclusions:

- Promotion of an innovative administration, adapting various mechanisms of control, regulation, policy design and management of public services to situations difficult to anticipate, such as the current crisis.
- Promotion of public spending for the better development of public services, which should cease to be variables for budgetary adjustment.
- Strengthening public services to meet citizen demands, maintaining resilience, and building a more efficient and responsive public service, allocating resources to improvement policies and giving continuity to the management of public policies.
- De-bureaucratization of public administration at all levels, making administration more flexible and more agile.
- Implementation of artificial intelligence, the same that could enhance the development and capacity of effective governance processes, solving complex problems such as health, education, inequality, etc., overcoming the cognitive gap and incorporating quality human talent.
- More open and collaborative governance, promoting inter-administrative collaboration through a multi-level governance system; more transparent, through accountability and open to social scrutiny, and also self-sufficient and strategic, since the objective of collaborative governance is to bring together and align various public sector bodies from different levels of government and areas of policies.
- Strong, collaborative political leadership and effective government coordination are necessary to handle these times of crisis, since collaborative leadership emphasizes the ability of leaders to gather forms of expertise, leaving aside the traditional, and thus have the possibility of reaching concerted policies in terms of regional governance.
- Preparation for the IV Industrial Revolution, marked by the convergence of digital, physical, and biological technologies such as robotics, teleworking, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, etc.

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Sobre o autor

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