Live Learning Experience: *Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19*

Local Democracy

Briefing & Learning Note
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*Launched jointly by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and UN-Habitat on March 25th, 2020, the **#BeyondTheOutbreak** Live Learning Experience (LLE) virtual sessions aim at bringing together Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), their associations, and partner organizations to allow and promote meaningful exchange as they find themselves confronting the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining an orderly functioning of public services. Following an initial consultation held during the launching session, the **fourteenth thematic LLE**, held on Thursday, 18th of June, was devoted to promoting a **collective reflection on the relationship between local democracy and the COVID-19 crisis**.*

Local democracy and participation during the pandemic

As COVID-19 spread, local democracy in cities and territories around the world has been increasingly disrupted. Meetings of municipal councils and a myriad of **local governance mechanisms have been postponed, cancelled or reimagined** through virtual platforms. Government routines have been altered, often forcing flexible interpretation of laws and legal frameworks, as in the case of several local elections which have been postponed. Such impact on the governance of institutions poses several challenges: maintaining government accountability, ensuring control of decision-making spaces, and avoiding the restriction of fundamental rights.

The crisis management required fast decision-making, and multi-governance mechanisms were changed due the **need of response to new emergencies**. In resuming daily life and confronting economic and social challenges, it is essential to claim the role of local and regional governments, which must be present in decision-making spaces both during the crisis and in post-crisis planning. It is also crucial that the the advent of new technologies in the fields of information exchange and transparency is not at the expense of **citizens' privacy and freedoms**. Instead strong **local democracy can be the custodian of those values**. The digitalization of participatory decision-making and budgeting places an educational challenge to local government and their networks. In this regard, UCLG and its partners will share tools which enable access and use of technology to leave no one and no place behind.

Nonetheless, despite the enormous obstacles faced by institutions, **citizen solidarity spread rapidly all over the world, with cities being at the heart of a plethora of initiatives of different sorts**. Since the outbreak became global, the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy has been collecting and sharing experiences citizen solidarity and collaboration with local and regional governments to overcome the worst period of the pandemic. The dedicated website includes examples of these activities together with a compilation of resources (articles, manifestos, reports, etc.) on citizen participation and collaboration in order to promote experience exchange and mutual enrichment within the network. Facing the post-COVID-19 era, it is crucial that **local and regional governments, assisted by UCGL and its partners, succeed in crystalizing those citizen initiatives and foster the advent of stronger local institutions** in the context of unprecedented crisis but also major opportunities towards fairer and more equal societies.

Local democracy under strain: Challenges and innovation facing the outbreak

In the context of extraordinary measures to curb the pandemic, they are often to the detriment of democratic mechanisms and procedures. Local and regional leaders warn that **recentralization is looming**: Thembisile Nkadimeng, Mayor of Polokwane, President of SALGA and UCLG Co-President, expressed her concern about national governments undermining local and regional powers in the name of efficiency and security. Likewise, Metropolis Secretary General Octavi de la Varga pointed out that efficient solutions, while sometimes necessary, entail giving up policy. For him, this cannot be sustained over time without the **risk of technocratic drifts**. The speakers agreed on the fact that without decentralization, there is no local democracy but just service delivery. Carola Gunnarsson Mayor of Sala and UCGL Vice-President emphasized the importance of **temporariness and democratic control** of exceptional measures. Deputy Mayor of Barcelona Laia Bonet warned that if local democracies are in danger, then so is public service provision. Annika Silva-Leander from International IDEA shared their insight on democratic regression: according to the latest report (pre-COVID-19) both national and sub-national entities

suffer a decrease in democratic quality, an **erosion they also observed for high-performing democracies**. She signaled that if opportunities after the crisis are not seized, the decline will worsen.

The other main challenge Local and Regional Governments are (and will be) facing is that of **mounting inequalities and subsequent social unrest**. Elkin Velásquez, UN-Habitat Regional Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean, urged to be mindful of the social consequences following the economic downturn. They were precisely Latin American who warned against these phenomena. In this sense, Paola Pabón, Prefect of Pichincha, shared some insight into the reality in the region: **poverty and unemployment are soaring, and the digital gap remains large** at the time when technology is often believed to solve all major problems. Emilio Jatón, Mayor of Santa Fé, and Camilo Romero, ex-governor of Nariño and winner of the 2019 IOPD Award, signaled the same phenomenon: Romero reminded that inequality was already alarming in Colombia even before the pandemic, and warned that in the midst of an unprecedented crisis, governments must avoid authoritarian drifts and be decisive in aiding the most vulnerable.

Leaders and experts on local democracy took the opportunity to share insightful innovative initiatives in coping with the previously mentioned challenges. Most of these measures are focused on helping those who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the economic plight. Johnny Araya, Mayor of San José and Co-President of UCLG also acknowledged the relevance of technological but explained how, in a context of decline of citizen participation, the government committed to reinforcing links with the civil society: in this frame, they opened 4 **shelters for the elderly and the handicapped**, and simultaneously deployed **occupational therapy programmes** to ease the return to normal. In Cocody, Deputy Mayor Nelly Ouassenan exposed that two new **shelters for domestic violence victims and homeless children** had been created. The Deputy Mayor of Grenoble Pascal Clouaire shared three key actions: adaptation of **participatory budgeting to digital means**, release of the **mutual aid platform "*Grenoble Voisins Voisines*"**, and reimplementation of a **citizen jury to fight against the isolation of the elderly**. Similarly, Emilió Jatón exposed that Santa Fé created **neighbor networks** to promote mutual aid and reflection. Other leaders, like Aude's

Vice-President Valérie Dumontet, and Imen Ourdani, Deputy Mayor of Sousse, acknowledged the pivotal role of the young in solidarity actions: both territories have jointly launched the "***Plaidoyer de la jeunesse pour un monde d'après***" programme together with Bobo (Burkina Faso), in order to gather youngsters from all three areas and issue recommendations of participatory actions to help overcome the crisis. Finally, Gennady Ryabov, Chairman of the Public Chamber of the city of Nizhny Novgorod and Imen Ourdani explained that their cities implemented platforms for **providing updated information and retransmitting a series of conferences online**.

Local democracy as a means to overcome the crisis: key messages and ways forward

Facing the multiple challenges of the pandemic for local democratic institutions, participants pointed out several windows of opportunity:

1. **To prevent the rise of authoritarianism and populism, tackling inequalities remains essential.**

All leaders agreed that local governments must be central to ensuring discrimination and inequalities do not escalate. Laia Bonet, Deputy Mayor for Barcelona, explained that **guaranteeing rights is at the heart of the social pact**:

> *"In the face of antidemocratic conditions and populism, I am convinced that guaranteeing rights and combatting inequalities remains the best recipe. I am talking about inequalities that we have known for a long time [...] , but we must also be able to guarantee new rights, linked to realities such as digitalization or climate change [...] that affect even more groups such as women, low-income families, the LGBTQ, inhabitants of urban peripheries, etc. These are also those most likely to be affected by lack of access to basic services".*

Local and regional leaders such as Paola Pabón, Prefect of Pichincha, Camilo Romero, ex-governor of Nariño and winner of the 2019 IOPD Award and Emilio Jatón, Mayor of Santa Fé, signal that the only way out of the crisis is a significant change of the

economic system through redistribution and social economy and exposed specific examples such as micro-financing or farmer networks, in order to allow economics to lay the foundations for strengthening democracy leaving large inequalities and privileges behind.

> *"This is a time for opportunity of the State, especially to rebalance the game with the market [...], and put human dignity in the centre"* José Manuel Ribeiro, Mayor of Valongo.

2. The central role of service provision in the post-COVID-19 era

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public sector has proved to be back. However, the reinvigorated role of institutions comes at the time of record-low public trust. Local and regional entities, at the forefront of service provision including health management, have been deprived of their role during lockdowns. Nevertheless, as UCGL Co-President Thembisile Nkadimeng statend, "*the efforts of solidarity displayed by local and regional governments throughout the pandemic have become a beacon of security, and they should guide the transformations we need*". When entering the post-COVID-19 era, it is **service delivery that plays a pivotal role in ensuring citizen well-being and combating distrust**. But such provision requires strong, decentralized and properly functioning institutions, hence the need for profound transformations and the reinvention of local governance, especially in a context of fragile world economy. As Deputy Mayor of Barcelona Laia Bonet expressed, "*without public services and decentralization, rights cannot be guaranteed*". Mohammed Saddieh, President of the Union of Dannieh Municipalities, UCLG Vice- President also noted that **service delivery for everyone must be the main goal of local authorities** so as to pave the way for a new society without inequality.

Besides decentralization and trust, local democracies require **strong funding schemes in order to fulfil their role as service providers**. Carola Gunnarsson, Mayor of Sala and UCLG Vice-President shared her concern on this issue:

> *"Local and regional authorities have been among those most affected by the decline in economic output [...]. Restricting the ability of local governments to exercize*

their budgetary power does not only lead to the general impoverishment of local communities, but it also has enormous negative consequences on economic growth and employment as a whole".

This is why Gunnarsson emphasized the need of **financially autonomous and resilient local governments** to face this crisis but also better prepare for future ones. This is critical, as local entities often depend on other levels of government to obtain essential resources to then guarantee service delivery. Hence the need for strong voices of LRG in multilateral conversations and institutions, an effective manner to consolidate their role as strong decision-makers and key players in the fulfilment of the global agendas in order to avoid the regress of autonomy and the subsidiarity principle, at the core of local governance.

3. Ensuring participatory democracy to strengthen local governance

According to Valérie Dumontent, Vice-President of Aude, representative democracy needs to be combined with participatory means in order to regain public trust and challenge the rise of authoritarianism while reinforcing local and regional governments. The need for **citizens to be placed in the centre of decision-making** processes was shared by Amalinda Savirani, from Universitas Gadjah Mada (Indonesia):

"It is the moment for local governments to position citizens' first. There are common grounds among governments and mayors in this discussion. This is an opportunity to strengthen local governments themselves. The process through which citizens can reach the state is local governance, as they are the ones who live around us [...]. This is a way to make sure democracy works".

Local governments, in the midst of unprecedented waves of solidarity, must prove to be facilitators of these movements and be able to crystalize this phenomenon and incorporate the citizens' willingness of more just societies in their governance through **participatory mechanisms in order to reinvigorate local democracy**.

4. Digital tools as a cornerstone and facilitator of the phenomena above.

In parallel with acknowledging the digital gap and working towards its mitigation and ultimate elimination with the advent of digital rights, online platforms have shown to play a critical role in facilitating citizen participation, collaboration and solitary on the one hand, and institutional processes together with transparency and accountability on the other hand. This has often allowed local authorities to open new channels of communication and build new relationships with citizens that will remain in the post-COVID-era. In cities and regions around the world, the use of technology allowed democracy not to fall into lockdown during the worst periods of the pandemic. This is why cities must orient themselves towards the combination of "*innovation and inclusion*" in Imen Ouardani's words.

Resources

The Durban Political Declaration:
https://www.durban2019.uclg.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/UCLG_TheDurbanPoliticalDeclaration_EN_.pdf

Manifesto on The Future of Transparency and Open Government:
https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/en_manifesto_opengov.pdf

IOPD Agenda for Local Democracy: https://oidp.net/en/content.php?id=1524

IDEA International: https://www.idea.int/our-work/what-we-do/covid-19-and-democracy

IOPD COVID-19 special site: "Faced with isolation, citizens strengthen their solidarity": https://oidp.net/en/covid19/page.php?id=42

Grenoble Voisins Voisines: https://www.grenoble.fr/1700-voisins-voisines.html

Grenoble Budget Participatif: https://www.grenoble.fr/552-budget-participatif.htm