



DIRECTORIO
LEGISLATIVO

FORTALECEMOS
LAS DEMOCRACIAS
DE AMÉRICA LATINA

STRENGTHENING
DEMOCRACIES
IN LATIN AMERICA

Presidents' advisors on COVID-19

June 1, 2020

**Who is involved in
determining the responses
to the pandemic?**





Executive Summary

The quick spread of COVID-19 has forced governments to design and implement rapid responses across an array of areas and sectors covering health, social, economic, labour and education.

This report by Directorio Legislativo identifies and analyses four types of 'spaces' that have been created for consulting on, designing and communicating government actions in response to the health, economic and social emergency.

The study is based on a survey of official journals and public statements, conducted between March 15 and May 31, 2020 in 19 Latin American countries.



Government challenges in their comprehensive response to COVID-19



Health expert units



COVID-19 general coordination units



COVID-19 Sectoral coordination units



Fund Management Units for COVID-19



Participation of non-governmental sectors - or lack thereof



Participation of national legislators



Openness in the management of COVID-19

The fast spread of the pandemic has forced governments to respond rapidly across different sectors - health, social, economic, labour and education.

This has led to decision-making becoming concentrated in the Executive branches of government. How are decisions reached? Who advises the presidents? How do governments coordinate actions to address the multiple health, social and economic imperatives?

Several administrations have turned to specialists in making critical decisions such as mandating preventative isolation, suspending schools, closing shops and, more recently, moving towards reopening. However, expert health advisors are not alone in contributing to the planning, design and communication of government actions.

A survey conducted by Directorio Legislativo in 19 countries of the region identifies **four types of 'unit'** (working groups, committees or councils) **that currently play a role in this process.**

Approximately **20% of these units operate informally.** This means **there is no decree, resolution or provision** officially governing their members, how they are appointed, what suitability and probity requirements they must meet, and how they are accountable for their actions.

Many of these aspects are also not clearly specified in the advisory units that do have an official underpinning, which makes it difficult for citizens to monitor their activities, as well as for them to be held accountable.

In view of these difficulties, this report does not attempt an exhaustive mapping exercise but rather gives an overview of how governments are working to design and develop future scenarios and strategies as part of their efforts to tackle COVID-19.



Health expert units

This table shows the committees, councils, or working units or groups that **provide expert advice to governments from a health or epidemiological standpoint**. It includes those officially created and those that work informally through meetings with high-level officials. Of the teams surveyed, 7 are made up only of experts (health system, academia, consultants), 6 of experts and public officials from health areas and 1 solely of public officials. At least four of the teams include a WHO/PAHO representative.





This table shows the committees, councils, units or task forces that convene **officials from different government areas** (health, economy, social development, labor, security, defense, among others) **or from different government levels** (national-subnational) **to agree on or coordinate actions or provide advice for decision making**. Of the teams surveyed, 8 are made up solely of government officials and 2 also include representatives from other sectors.





This table shows committees, councils, units or **working groups dealing with the crisis in specific sectors of the economy or society** (employment, MSMEs, tourism, agriculture, telecommunications, banking and financial system, transport). These spaces appeared more recently and respond to the need to develop strategies that consider how the crisis specifically impacts different sectors of the economy or society (for example, formal or informal workers, or vulnerable households). Among the teams surveyed, 6 are made up solely of government officials while 2 also include representatives from other sectors.

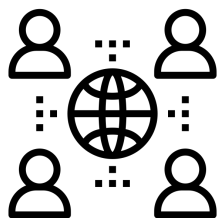




This table shows the committees involved in **the management of funds for the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic**. As part of the declaration of the emergency, governments streamlined the processes of contracting goods and services, established direct contracting procedures or created specific funds. In some cases, the control and evaluation of these processes is the responsibility of specific units made up mostly of government officials from different areas. Of the teams surveyed, 3 are composed exclusively by government officials and 1 also includes representatives from other sectors.



From this mapping it is clear that the participation of non-governmental sectors, with the possible exception of academia, is minimal:



30% of the committees, units or groups surveyed in this report include representatives of the academic sector. However, only in three cases - Argentina, El Salvador and Honduras - was the permanent participation of civil society organizations noted.

The analysis of the few units that do include representatives of non-governmental sectors on a permanent basis shows that some of them have experienced difficulties in their rapport with the governments, whether due to obstacles in access to public information or other kinds of disagreements. This situation ultimately led to resignations from the COVID-19 Data Table in **Chile**, the Multisectoral Committee for Management Supervision of the Emergency, Recovery and Economic Reconstruction Fund in **El Salvador**, and the COVID-19 Advisory Working Group in **Peru**. (For further information, please request the full report).



Participation of private sector representatives on a permanent basis was observed in only four cases in Peru, El Salvador and Honduras. However, **governments are increasingly calling for the creation of discussion forums with the business community**. This foreshadows a stage in which the decision-making process - until now strongly centralized in the Executive and guided by epidemiological expertise - could begin to include other actors. A concrete space for advocacy can be found in the elaboration of sectoral protocols. (For further information, please request the full report).



Another common aspect when analyzing the composition of the committees, units and groups surveyed in this report is the absence of representatives of the Legislative branch or members of opposing political forces:



Only one of the units surveyed in this report provides for the participation of legislators on a permanent basis.

As this situation unfolds, special legislative committees were created in several countries to monitor the implementation of health emergency measures. To name a few examples:

Brazil - Bicameral COVID-19 Committee to monitor the fiscal situation and the budgetary aspects of emergency-related measures.

Colombia - Ad hoc Committee to study the report on the State of Economic, Social and Ecological Emergency due to be presented by the National Government.

Peru - Special Committee to monitor and evaluate the actions taken by the Executive Branch to address the COVID-19 pandemic.



In **Argentina**, the institutional precedent for the newly created General Coordination Unit was a commission established as a result of the 2007 influenza pandemic which included two legislators. This feature, however, is not mirrored in the Unit set up to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.



Openness in the management of COVID-19

When it comes to decision-making processes, a declaration of a health and economic emergency does not simply refer to a state of affairs. Rather it invariably also means an increase in Executive branch discretion to make decisions. Even though there are differences among countries, **under 10% of the COVID-19 related measures that have been surveyed by Directorio Legislativo stemmed from the Legislative branch.**

In times of uncertainty, when the presence of the state becomes so pervasive, it is crucial that decision-making processes meet open government standards: transparency, probity, accountability and access to public information.

For governments to meet those standards, they must:

Proposals from an open government perspective

- Ensure the proactive and accurate disclosure of information on the activities of the areas responsible for the development of diagnostics, scenario planning and strategies.
- Increase opportunities for citizen participation in the areas responsible for the design, preparation and evaluation of medium and long term plans.
- Encourage dialogue with representatives of the different political spaces over actions to address the health, economic and social effects of COVID-19.
- Ensure purchases, contracts, and budgets are traceable; transparency in real beneficiaries and the management of special interests, and approaches with a gender and diversity perspective.
- Introduce transparency standards in the selection of experts who advise governments to ensure they fulfil qualifications criteria and to prevent conflicts of interest.
- Promote further interaction between the special units created within the Executive branch and the legislative committees set up to monitor government actions during the public emergency.

To see the full report (only available in Spanish)
or share comments, contact:
info@directoriolegislativo.org

More by Directorio Legislativo #ForHealthyDemocracy

1



Economic and social
measures in Latin
America, the first 50
days of the pandemic

2



An image of power,
power of an image.
Report on presidential
approval ratings in Latin
America

3



COVID-19: The
challenge of adapting
and strengthening the
role of parliaments



Directorio Legislativo is an independent, non-profit organization working to strengthen democracy and make law- and policy-making in Latin America more transparent, representative and participatory. We achieve this by improving access to public information, and through the creation of spaces for legislators and politicians to engage and be influenced by outside specialists, civil society and the public at large.

Buenos Aires
Av. Entre Ríos 258 3E
(1079), Argentina
Phone. + (5411) 5218-4647
directoriolegislativo.org

Washington D.C.
1110 Vermont Ave, NW, Suite 500
Washington DC 20005, USA
Phone. + 1 (786) 828-0675