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# (Re-)Thinking a Collaborative Research Model After Covid-19: Introducing Colabora.Lat\*

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# IDS Bulletin

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## **KNOWLEDGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS: TRANSFORMING RESEARCH-TO-POLICY APPROACHES**

Issue Editors **Andrea Ordóñez Llanos** and  
**James Georgalakis**



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# (Re-)Thinking a Collaborative Research Model After Covid-19: Introducing Colabora.Lat\*

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**Abstract** Colabora.Lat is a project that examines the promise and the utility of collaboration for crafting better public policy in response to dynamic, complex problems such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, in addition to being a project on collaboration, we found that the project itself was best carried out with our partners in a collaborative way. In this article, we identify four lessons that we learned as we sought to oversee a project on collaboration in a more collaborative way. These lessons should be applicable to any context that, like a pandemic, is unstable and dynamic in nature.

**Keywords** collaboration, collaborative governance, pandemic policy, policymaking, public policy, Latin America.

## 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic produced a major disruption in every aspect of our lives. Governments around the world were forced to act in a context of great unpredictability, straining state capacity and aggravating existing situations of vulnerability. Although global in nature, the pandemic affected Latin America disproportionately (ECLAC 2022). In response, granting institutions sought to better understand how a global pandemic interrupted 'normal' policymaking in Latin America.

Along these lines, Asuntos del Sur, an organisation dedicated to promoting political innovations that can foster more equal, inclusive, and participatory democracies, received a generous grant from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to analyse governmental and non-governmental policy responses to the pandemic. The primary goal was to learn from those responses as a way to identify more effective governance strategies for other problems that are equally as complex as a



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pandemic. This article details our experiences as managers of a multi-year, multi-actor, multisectoral project.

In our project, called *Colabora.Lat*, we chose to study collaboration as a potentially powerful approach to pandemic governance. It was also a **means** for carrying out the project – a tool, in other words, for approaching project management in general. The following pages outline some of the lessons learned as we sought to navigate a project on collaboration in a more collaborative way. In section 2, we speak to the role that collaboration played in the policymaking processes we studied then in section 3 we address how collaboration became, ultimately, vital to how we **managed** the project during a pandemic. In section 4, we identify four lessons regarding the utility of collaboration for undertaking a project in a complex environment such as a pandemic. We end in section 5 with some concluding thoughts.

## 2 Centring collaboration as a policymaking tool

*Colabora.Lat* was founded to understand how countries in Latin America responded to the Covid-19 pandemic, especially when it came to their most vulnerable populations. We asked the following questions. Were governments effective in protecting citizens in situations of extreme vulnerability? What type of response had the most impact? Could this response be modelled such that governments could replicate it when dealing with problems as complex as a pandemic, including climate change or forced migration?

An obvious concern for the project initially was finding a central theme or phenomenon to anchor the multi-year, multi-country, multi-actor project. Approaches to policymaking are multiple. As we began reading the literature and exploring initial cases, we identified one approach – collaboration – as a potentially vital tool for producing effective policy responses to the pandemic. A collaborative approach to policymaking – called collaborative governance – brings together multiple actors from distinct areas, including but not limited to different levels of government, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, and social organisations, to share the difficult work of crafting policy. In a collaborative governance model, each actor should have influence; any perceived positional hierarchies should be mitigated; and all participants should be there of their own volition.<sup>5</sup>

Collaborative governance is particularly well suited to treat a 'wicked' problem such as a pandemic (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). Like other wicked problems, the pandemic was and is complex and multidimensional. It has affected multiple policy areas, including health, education, and the economy, and has crossed jurisdictional borders both within and across countries. We hypothesised that more effective policy responses to the pandemic would involve bringing together distinct actors

**Table 1 The communities and geographic areas under consideration in Colabora.Lat**

Country	Institutional affiliation of research team	Geographical area(s)	Community/group
Argentina	National University of San Martín	San Martín, Tres de Febrero, Quilmes, Avellaneda	N/A – territorial focus
Bolivia	FES Bolivia	La Paz, El Alto	Women street vendors
Chile	University of Santiago de Chile, Catholic University of Chile	Renca, Cerro Navia, Maipú, La Pintana (Metropolitan region)	N/A – territorial focus
Colombia	Icesi University	Cali, Puerto Tejada, Buenaventura	Afro-Colombian youth
Guatemala	Diálogos	Mazatenango, Cobán, Amatitlán	Urban youth
Mexico	Nosotrxs	Mexico City, northern border	Migrants, domestic women workers

Note FES – Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Source Colabora.Lat.

associated with each policy area and jurisdiction. Each actor could offer unique resources, interests, and expertise as policies were negotiated. Working collaboratively, we thought, policymakers could forge more nuanced responses to the pandemic that would be better attuned to the challenges that communities in situations of vulnerability face. A collaborative response is therefore best positioned to respond to the pandemic.

Our intuitions about the importance of collaboration were sustained by the literature (Ansell and Gash 2008; Bingham 2011; Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). The project, consequently, sought to examine the role of collaboration in the different responses to the pandemic. Did collaboration matter? To what extent were government responses collaborative? Were those collaborative responses more effective? What did communities do when faced with a weak government response? Did collaboration matter in **their** efforts? Our initial quantitative analysis suggested that there was a relationship between collaborative policymaking and a reduction in the worst health outcomes associated with Covid-19 (Cyr *et al.* 2021). Nevertheless, we did not understand **how** and **why** collaboration took place, **who** were the actors involved, and **what** the challenges to collaboration might be.

To answer these more substantive questions, we worked with teams of researchers in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico. Each team was tasked with identifying communities in situations of vulnerability in their country and then talking to community members, national and local government officials, civil society, and the private sector to

assess governmental and non-governmental responses to the pandemic and the extent to which collaboration helped shape those responses. Table 1 summarises the different groups and geographical areas studied in each country.

While the project still has one year left to go, Colabora.Lat has completed data collection and undergone an initial analysis of the policy responses to the pandemic. In general terms, the six case studies revealed that the pandemic disproportionately affected the selected communities. Additionally, government responses targeting those communities were weak or non-existent. Collaboration was rarely pursued in the (few) governmental policies designed to address the specific needs of the communities we studied.

The general lack of a government-led response to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups has meant that these communities struggled during the worst of the pandemic to access necessary goods and services, including preventive health care and educational resources. This was the case especially compared to the rest of the population in each country. Yet, collaboration by non-governmental actors **was** consequential in assisting groups in vulnerable situations. Often, these collaborative efforts emerged in the absence of a government-led response and were driven by the need to pool resources across different groups. These examples of **social collaborative governance** (Cyr *et al.* 2021) appeared in all six countries.

Colabora.Lat will yield conclusions about the potential and the limitations of collaborative governance in a region such as Latin America, where institutions tend to be weak and government resources are scarce. These conclusions will principally be derived from the extended data collection process that took place over several years in the six countries listed in Table 1. One question, implicit from early on, was how to create and oversee a multi-year, multidimensional project that benefited from the expertise, knowledge, and interests of each of the consortium members, while also privileging a set of previously defined themes that were central to the overall project. In addition to being the substantive focus of the project, collaboration ultimately became crucial to our approach to project management, as we outline in more detail in section 3.

### 3 Managing our project collaboratively

Colabora.Lat is made up of a team at Asuntos del Sur as well as researchers from universities and/or thinktanks in six different countries. We organised the team formally into a consortium, where Asuntos del Sur serves as the executive coordinator of the project and the consortium's legal representation. Colabora.Lat also has an Academic Board, where several internationally renowned scholars are available to consult on the overall research design of the project.

From the beginning, we wanted Colabora.Lat to be collaborative in nature, but we also recognised that this kind of international development project inherently includes hierarchies that would limit the 'democratic' or deliberative nature of the collaboration that takes place. For example, the funder's goals necessarily become the project's principal objectives. These goals are typically not open to discussion or feedback. Collaboration on the overall arc of the project is not typically possible. Moreover, although a project may strive to treat partners as equals, in practice, only some individuals actually manage the project. Those individuals are responsible for ensuring that the terms of the project are fully realised and must, consequently, work to keep partners on track as months and years go by.

Given the impediments to adopting a comprehensively collaborative approach – what Ramirez and Kora (2020) might call an 'integrative' approach – to our project, the Asuntos del Sur team sought to incorporate collaboration where we could. This involved, for us, establishing a channel of constant communication and exchange with the other consortium members. We worked collectively to determine how we would achieve each of the project's principal objectives. We solicited feedback and discussed problems as a group. We invited our partners to serve as peer reviewers of each other's work. Ultimately, we strived to ensure that all research participants felt invested in the project's goals and the work we collectively produced. We sought to ensure that everyone had a voice. Ultimately, our project included many of the indicators associated with a 'collaborative arrangement', as outlined by Ramirez and Kora (*ibid.*).

In our attempt to flatten the hierarchies underpinning our project, we took away four lessons that will undoubtedly shape how we think about collaboration moving forward. These lessons should allow us to more easily apply a collaborative approach to project management for other types of complex, multidimensional problems in the future. Collaboration can breed collaboration, providing a kind of institutional readiness for those groups that work to establish collaborative relationships.

#### **4 Lessons learned**

##### **Lesson 1: Collaboration is vital for project management during a pandemic**

Our research has revealed that collaboration can be incredibly useful for crafting effective policy responses to a pandemic. Our work on the project suggested that collaboration can also be vital for managing a project during a pandemic. This was our first key lesson. We initiated our project in August 2020, during what we would later call the first of multiple 'waves' of contagion. At that time, however, we did not know how the pandemic would evolve. Indeed, research during a pandemic is marked with unpredictability.



Nevertheless, we began our project with the idea of undertaking more traditional, face-to-face data collection, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups, as soon as the 'worst' of the pandemic had passed. The pandemic raged on, however, and we came to understand that talking to people on the ground was going to be ethically and practically unfeasible for an unpredictable amount of time. What data collection, we asked, could be done during the first year of our project without risking the health of our team and also the communities we sought to study?

In a (virtual) meeting with the consortium, we discussed how to adapt the first year of our project. Asuntos del Sur arrived at the meeting with a proposal to undertake a cross-national study of 18 countries. We subsequently assigned three different countries to each of the six teams and asked them to analyse the vaccine acquisition process. Our goal was to systematically compare and understand why some governments in those 18 Latin American countries were better than others at obtaining vaccines. In discussion with our consortium members, we ultimately decided that each member would carry out more intensive case studies not only on vaccine acquisition, but also on vaccine distribution and in some cases vaccine development. They would do this in one country, not in the three we had originally proposed.

Collaboration was crucial to this early adaptation to our project. Asuntos del Sur wanted the consortium members to undertake a new activity that was not included in the original terms of agreement. Without a consensus on the proposed change to the project, it is not clear that the adaptation would have been successful. Collaboration, we argue, was crucial to obtaining that buy-in so early on in our project.

It is difficult to predict the obstacles that might emerge while overseeing an international development project. The pandemic, however, raised the level of uncertainty considerably. The context in which we were operating was extremely volatile.

Quarantine policies, including the rules for travel or for simply circulating in one's own community, were in flux. Our collaborative approach to Colabora.Lat provided a space where we could work through this unpredictability collectively.

## **Lesson 2: Collaboration requires trust. Yet trust is harder to build in a pandemic setting**

Our research with vulnerable communities in Latin America revealed the importance of trust for forging collaborative relationships between different actors. A lack of trust, in particular, was a key impediment to fruitful collaborations between state and non-state actors. For example, conversations with community leaders in Chile, Guatemala, Colombia, and Mexico revealed that they were sceptical of collaborating with their

government. The state had, for so long, seemed incapable or unwilling to work with them and to address their needs. Why should they, as community members, believe that collaboration in response to the pandemic would be any different?

Trust is vital for collaborative project management as well. Partners must feel safe in a collaborative space to communicate their opinions, express disagreement, push another member on a point, or hold someone accountable. During a pandemic – where mobility is restricted – it is harder to build the kind of trust that is necessary for partners to participate fully in a project. This is because, among other reasons, more conventional mechanisms for fostering trust are unavailable.

For example, social interactions and face-to-face encounters between consortium members were not possible during the first two years of our project. Virtual communication was the sole channel for interactions of any kind. Indeed, virtual communication became the cornerstone of how we operated at Colabora.Lat. To compensate for a lack of face-to-face interaction, we set up multiple channels of virtual communication. We organised monthly virtual meetings, for example. These helped us communicate advances in the project, and allowed consortium members to ask questions, share experiences, and resolve any issues they might have. The regular meetings represented moments, not only for checking in, but also for articulating suggestions, expressing doubts, and modifying plans.

We also set up a WhatsApp group, where we could share individual accomplishments or circulate news items or articles associated with our project. We made time for bilateral meetings with each consortium member. We encouraged different members to work with each other on facets of the project. Finally, we created a monthly newsletter for sharing our work and to include project-specific announcements and deadlines. For better or for worse, the computer screen became the primary site for trust-building in Colabora.Lat. We decided to open up multiple channels for communication in the hope that more spontaneous interactions and collective sharing might take place in at least some of them.

Despite these efforts, building a sense of trust and community amongst the consortium members was not easy. Virtual encounters are not really conducive to bonding, building friendships, and communicating more spontaneously. This was especially the case with those partners with whom Asuntos del Sur had not worked in the past. With these partners, we had no previous relationship or experience to indicate how our collaborative relationship within Colabora.Lat might unfold. We had to take a sort of collective leap of faith that we would all be equally engaged and dedicated to the project, and we had to work to make that happen once everyone had signed on to the project.

Given the difficulties of building trust in complex, dynamic contexts such as a pandemic, project managers that seek to work collaboratively may reasonably decide to work with partners with whom they have already successfully worked in the past rather than forge new relationships with well-qualified but unknown individuals or groups. And, just like the community members in Chile, Guatemala, Colombia, and Mexico, who resisted collaborating with the state during the pandemic given their previous negative experiences with government, project managers will likely **refuse** to engage with actors or organisations with whom they did not easily work in the past. The restricted opportunities for trust-building during a pandemic may, over time, impede the creation of new and potentially fruitful partnerships. On the other hand, the pandemic may help to consolidate existing relationships, enabling partners to more easily activate and collaborate on problems in the future.

**Lesson 3: The virtual realm, while vital for research during the pandemic, must be viewed as one of many tools for the successful development of a collaborative project**

During the pandemic, virtual spaces were indispensable for working through and carrying out our collaborative project. Indeed, the pandemic revealed the real advantages of carrying out at least some development work online. Project teams can organise a meeting with relative ease, regardless of each individual member's location. They can bring together notable activists, leaders, researchers, and so forth, without incurring outrageous costs or investing much time or energy in logistics that are particular to an in-person activity.

Indeed, virtual events can be a useful format for meeting new people. For example, we held the first regional (virtual) event of Colabora.Lat, at the end of the first year. Our Colombian partners invited two scholars to the event who spoke movingly and compellingly about the specific challenges that Afro-Colombians faced along the country's Pacific coast. We later recruited one of those scholars to write about a successful instance of collaboration that emerged in response to those challenges, called the Pacific Task Force. If that event would have been in person, it is unlikely these scholars would have attended. The virtual space can be hugely impactful in eliminating distance and bringing different types of actors together. Indeed, moving forward, it is likely that research projects in general will retain some sort of hybrid modality.

Nevertheless, online fatigue is real, and the internet, while expanding some opportunities in access is also, ultimately, limited in its reach. A wholly virtual approach to a project would inevitably exclude individuals and groups who lack access to the internet. Given these challenges, project managers should carefully consider how much of a project can and should be carried out online. This seems especially germane to collaborative

projects, which depend upon the participation and engagement of the entire team and also strive to be inclusive.

Indeed, while virtual spaces are crucial for coordination and collaboration, especially during a pandemic, the value of face-to-face contact for creating community and solidifying common goals should not be underestimated. In Colabora.Lat, the pandemic limited the extent to which we could organise in-person activities, as mentioned above. Despite our best efforts to open up lines of communication with and for our members, our inability to meet in person earlier in the project likely stunted our ability to coalesce as a group.

Our inability to meet in person also likely stymied the progress we achieved as a group. For example, well into our second year of the project, our consortium partners, in a monthly meeting, raised questions about the definition of collaboration we were using in the project. This was not a small issue, given that our project was on collaborative governance. Yet the consortium had grounded its early research in the literature on collaborative governance, where definitions are explicit. Moreover, circulating a definition prior to actually measuring how collaboration worked on the ground seemed unnecessary – and even counterproductive – to our goal of inductively developing a conceptualisation of collaborative governance for Latin America. Nevertheless, after some discussion as a group, we agreed to write up, circulate, and solicit feedback on an explicit conceptualisation of collaborative governance with which we would work moving forward. That short document became a valuable reference tool for us – indeed, it would have been useful to have had it sooner. If we had had opportunities to meet and socialise in person during the first years of the project, it is possible that lingering, unspoken, but ultimately shared concerns would have been revealed and resolved sooner.

Given the limitations of virtual work, a more comprehensive collaborative approach to project management may only be possible with at least periodic, in-person encounters that allow member relationships to grow and connect beyond the specific exigencies of the project. Indeed, as pandemic restrictions lifted, Asuntos del Sur began to make short site visits with consortium members. These in-person meetings were vital for creating (face-to-face) moments of negotiation on process and outcomes. They also shortened the distance between actors and added much-needed humanity to our largely virtual relationship.

#### **Lesson 4: Membership autonomy is key to collaborative project management during a pandemic**

Collaboration works because each actor brings their resources, expertise, and knowledge to the table. A collaborative management style must work to maximise that diversity. It is key to accessing the gains that collaboration provides. In practice,

how this diversity is maximised is likely to depend on the people involved and the context in which a project takes place.

In Colabora.Lat, it became clear that a certain amount of membership autonomy was the best and perhaps sole way to nurture the different skillsets and expertise of our consortium members. On the one hand, the pandemic demanded that we relax any sort of organisational hierarchies we may have attempted to impose as a way to effectively oversee the project. Our consortium members lived in six different countries, with six distinct (and often dynamic) sets of quarantine rules. They operated under very different levels of contagion threat. Their personal levels of risk acceptance varied. Additionally, given that we could not meet directly with our partners on the ground, it made sense to embrace membership autonomy from the beginning.

But our members also clearly valued autonomy from a research perspective as well. Asuntos del Sur could provide a set of general questions for members to keep in mind as they spoke with people on the ground. We could remind our members of the issue areas we had decided to prioritise as we studied policymaking. Beyond that, however, it made little sense to manage or oversee how each partner actually carried out their part of the research project. Different members had specific research interests and areas of expertise that they (quite reasonably) sought to utilise for this project.

For example, rather than work with **groups** in situations of vulnerability, our Chilean and Argentine partners chose to study **municipalities**, leveraging their expertise in, among other things, territorial politics. This choice required the project managers to rethink how all six cases – four of which studied groups plus two that studied geographic areas – would cohere. We also had to adapt our expectations regarding with whom these research teams would speak and in terms of the overall scope of their findings. In the end, the project has clearly benefited from the geographic focus that the two countries adopted. Because their focus was less on groups and more on jurisdictional units, the conclusions that were drawn shifted away from government responses to unique community problems (which we sought to understand initially) and turned to more general findings, such as the role that schools played as spaces for social contention and how intersectionality was key for elaborating any kind of response to the pandemic.

## 5 Concluding thoughts

Colabora.Lat is a project that has strived to incorporate collaboration **as a tool** with which the project might more effectively study collaboration **as an end goal** when it comes to more responsive governance. Over the past few years, we have learned valuable lessons in terms of how to approach project

management and also how to approach policymaking in the face of 'wicked' problems, such as a pandemic. Yet, the four lessons presented in section 4 are likely to apply to any project that takes place in more dynamic, unstable contexts, such as a pandemic.

As we have suggested above, collaboration can be a useful tool for project management in these rapidly changing contexts. Collaboration works through an explicit engagement with the individual expertise, knowledge, and resource-set of all the actors involved. This kind of 'crowdsourcing' becomes incredibly useful in less stable and more fluid contexts, which are often unpredictable and may require adaptability, such as when we had to delay traditional data collection during the first year. In a more collaborative set-up, the burdens of unpredictability and adaptability can be shared. Collective responses to these burdens will benefit from the wisdom and experience of all involved. In this sense, the sum of a collaborative project, such as our consortium, can be greater than the individual parts.

### Notes

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- 5 For more information, see the [Colabora.Lat website](http://Colabora.Lat).

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