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NEWS

Local governments around the world respond with creativity and determination to the COVID-19 crisis

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As the world moves from the early stages of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic into a new phase it is time to identify emerging lessons from the various governance initiatives that city and regional governments have introduced over the last six months. For this reason, the "**Emergency Governance Initiative for Cities and Regions**[1]" (EGI) has launched it first Policy Brief. Local government officials from some of the Metropolis' members - Barcelona, Bogotá, Seoul and Gauteng - provided critical inputs to this publication about the **governance innovations** they have been trialling **as part of their emergency response efforts**.

The EGI Initiative - which was jointly launched in June 2020 by Metropolis, UCLG and LSE Cities- investigates the **institutional dimensions of rapid and radical action in response to global emergencies**. EGI publishes quarterly Policy Briefs, along with other materials, focused on providing propositional commentary

on reform agendas and governance innovations.

This Policy Brief #01 - based on interviews conducted with prominent local government officials involved in the emergency response and additional desktop research - provides **a first-hand account of experiences governing the COVID-19 emergency** over the past months and draw out lessons that may be of relevance for other local governments - in some concrete policy dimensions that have proven to be key to emergency governance.

> "The pandemic was an opportunity to make it clear why it was important to have a deeper involvement of citizens in public affairs", Luz Amparo Medina Gerena, Director of International Relations for the Capital District of Bogotá

Some recurring themes that emerged across our testimonies include the importance of working closely with local communities, not just to ensure that new policies are responsive to local needs but also to engender a sense of ownership for new measures being implemented to contain the spread of the disease. As explained by Luz Amparo Medina Gerena, Director of International Relations for the Capital District of **Bogotá**, this city has framed its **COVID-19 communication strategy** around a new public policy approach known as **'citizen culture' that aims to empower citizens to become part of the solution to the city's problems**. It focuses on sharing information and data in a transparent and accessible way while prioritising listening to and learning from citizens.

Another common theme was the flexibility that local governments have shown in adjusting existing institutional structures to effectively support new emergency governance measures, drawing on pre-existing expertise within government to find solutions to new and rapidly developing challenges but also openly **engaging new stakeholders from the private and third sectors**. Local governments are stepping up in significant ways, but also recognising that the magnitude of the health, economic and social crisis means that they cannot do it alone – the pandemic is a shared problem that requires shared responsibility and shared solutions.

> "Even in a very difficult situation, we have found an opportunity to learn and experiment", Laia Bonet, Deputy Mayor of Barcelona for the 2030 Agenda

In an interview conducted with Laia Bonet, Deputy Mayor of Barcelona for the 2030 Agenda, Digital Transition, Sports, Territorial and Metropolitan Coordination, and International Relations, she explained that to guide its COVID-19 recovery strategy Barcelona experimented with a **new form of consensus-based decision-making**. The Barcelona Deal has afforded different stakeholders the opportunity to sit together at the same table and agree on common objectives from different sectors and perspectives.

> "COVID-19 has made it possible for people to put aside their political party ideologies and instead focus on responding to the problems that we are faced with as a country and as a region", Mduduzi Mbada, Head of the Policy Research & Advisory Services Unit, Office of The Premier of Gauteng Province

The importance of high-quality data and analysis was also repeatedly highlighted, not just to track the disease but also to understand the effectiveness of specific measures and the needs and concerns of individual communities. For instance, Gauteng has successfully established a new operational model for multi-level emergency governance that addresses the challenge of **coordinating the coronavirus response across a heavily decentralised system of governance**. This approach is innovative in that it supports a cohesive and unified strategic direction at the provincial level while still facilitating context-sensitive local-level implementation, as Mduduzi Mbada, Head of the Policy Research & Advisory Services Unit, Office of The Premier of Gauteng Province, declared.

> "The use of data has always been one of the big pillars of our governance, so it was very logical for us to make use of our expertise in data and technology as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic began", Ji-hyun Kim, Manager of the Smart City Division of the Smart City Policy Bureau, Seoul Metropolitan Government

From its side, Seoul took advantage of institutional flexibility and the absence of excessive bureaucracy to adapt existing technological capacities and structures and develop a rapid, accurate and transparent contact tracing strategy in response to the COVID-19 emergency. By using **big data**, collaborating closely with other spheres of government, and engaging the public via **innovative technologies**, Seoul has managed to keep transmission of the virus under control, as explained by Ji-hyun Kim, Manager of the Smart City Division of the Smart City Policy Bureau, Seoul Metropolitan Government.

This Policy Brief also includes lessons from the Live Learning Experiences, which were hosted by UCLG, Metropolis and UN-Habitat over the initial months of the current crisis and resulted in more than 40 hours of conversations, featuring 268 speakers from 97 cities and regions across 50 different countries. What emerges clearly from the Live Learning Experiences is that we need greater clarity on **what constitutes an emergency** – a question that the Emergency Governance Initiative will directly address.
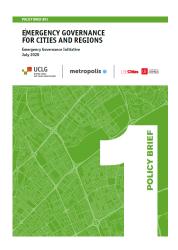
The publication also includes a summary of **global COVID-19 monitoring initiatives and insights** from a scoping survey, highlighting the emergency governance domains where the greatest degree of innovation is currently taking place alongside an identification of the specific demands by cities and regions for more information on emergency governance - information here is based on the Analytics Notes #01 and #02 - the latest has also been launched this week- of the Emergency Governance Initiative.

Lastly, the Policy Brief complements this analysis with a thought-provoking commentary on "urban sovereignty in the time of pandemics" provided by Diane Davis of Harvard University and Graham Denyer Willis of Cambridge University.

To sum up, some of the conclusions that we can draw from this Policy Brief is that local governments around the world have responded with creativity and determination to the COVID-19 crisis. They have both **repurposed existing institutional structures to tackle emerging challenges**, and also pioneered **new ways of communicating and decision-making**. It remains to be seen how many of these governance innovations will survive the immediate emergency and become more permanent features of urban governance.

Read the **Policy Brief #01**:   Read the **Analytics Note #02:**

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[1] The Emergency Governance Initiative aims to provide city and regional governments with actionable information, suitable frameworks, knowledge and resources to navigate the new demands of leading emergency responses. More information here.

For further information, please contact Mr. Oscar Chamat, our Research and Policy Officer at the Secretariat General