

INTERVIEW

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

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In the context of the political, economic and social impacts that COVID-19 has generated in Latin America, the following considerations are presented:

1. How disruptive do you consider COVID-19 has been in the field of Public Administration?

The COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to plague the world after a year, has led to significant alterations in the field of Public Administration. These alterations, we can particularly highlight closing the provision of all face to face public services. Administrations around the world have been forced to devise new ways of offering public services and to carry out a number of their activities or services in a virtual environment. It is possible to assert that institutions have done their activities essentially in a different way and, consequently, through methods, procedures and means that, until now, were unfamiliar. This disruption, or abrupt interruption, has meant that administrations have done their work especially in a different manner and have sometimes been successful in providing citizens with public services.

The pandemic outbreak took everyone by surprise and consequently become an important motive for public administrations to look for new ways to comply with their obligations towards citizens.

One of the characteristics that can be learnt of public administrations is precisely their acknowledgement of the situation, since all responsible parties have provided attention to citizens' needs in spite of the obstacles, sometimes insurmountable, that the pandemic has represented.

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2. Do you consider that COVID-19 accelerated transformation trends already showing in the Public Administration?

Undoubtedly, the transformations that the pandemic brought, in some cases, have accelerated the digitalization of administrative procedures, the dominance of computer applications (that so far had only been used by experts) and, particularly, the general perception of responsible parties and cadres of public administrators that the seriousness of the situation had to be dealt by performing administrative activities in a new way.

In this sense, we must also underscore the increase in the purchase of technology, in unseen proportions, the growth of online communications and the development of innovative ideas and projects that are already being executed and that certainly will continue to be developed in the future.

3. If your answer to the previous question is yes, could you tell us which ones?

Among these innovative projects, I would highlight the efforts to accelerate online procedures, which we know have already taken place in all 23 member countries of the Latin American Center for Development Administration, the extension of telework, the multiplication of administrative activities subject to evaluation...

I also find it interesting to point out that those responsible for the Ministries and Organizations, whether at state, regional or local level, have become aware that all their officials (no matter their level) provide services demanded by citizens and, consequently, should be subject of greater attention in order to correspond to that demand, which so far has been provided by virtual means with some difficulties.

4. Currently, what routines within the Public Administration have been changed by COVID-19?

It is still too early to reach any conclusions, but I would point out that the main one has been taking into account the importance of activity itself, which has not been abandoned, but replaced by the existing technological means as far as possible.

It is particularly interesting to reflect on the fact that all Public Administrations think of new services not in an in-person manner but mainly in virtual environments. Not only will they try to continue providing services (some-

times following the same delaying and often chaotic routine), but these services will be redesigned precisely so that citizens can access them through technological means.

Those routines that have not changed, because there hasn't been a way to do so yet, are in the process of being transformed. As always, turning our eyes towards private companies teaches us that service providing (banking and all kinds of services) has become something that citizens can carry out from their own homes and, partly, this has already happened with some procedures and services in many countries. This way of providing services will soon be the dominant one and, thanks to technology, it will achieve a greater citizen satisfaction.

However, technological investments will not be enough to achieve this. It will be necessary to train public employees, and to also convince the responsible political parties. Finally, it will be necessary to fight the digital gap, which is more pronounced among the elderly and those who live far from the big cities.

The innovations that this pandemic has accelerated are an advantage for structural changes that benefit public administrations and also reduce the distance between citizens and leaders, improving their trust.

5. What will be the new normal in Public Administration after COVID 19?

Prophecies are rarely fulfilled, but we can anticipate that the new normal will be more technological and more asynchronous. Public administrations will be able to provide services to citizens regardless of schedules and even deadlines. In my book *El burócrata disruptivo* (CLAD, 2021), I state that we must think and act differently in order to face difficulties such as the pandemic. Public administration cannot be oblivious to these changes, but has to lead in the face of them instead.

Probably, we will see less citizens and public employees inside of administrative buildings, while the digitalization of procedures, robotization, artificial intelligence and algorithms will be the daily menu. All of these changes will undoubtedly bring employment problems in some organizations, but there will be a qualitative leap that will allow the creation of new jobs and activities hitherto unknown, as has happened in all industrial revolutions. Undoubtedly, progress can bring problems in the short term, but I am sure that, ultimately, public administrations will become more efficient and effective, more honest and will provide better services.