Practitioner Perspectives

COVID-19 as a Public Administration Challenge: How the City of Palmira (Colombia) Implemented a Coordinated Strategy Based on Evidence

Alejandra Rodas-Gaiter
Daniela Reina
Óscar Escobar

Abstract: Scholarship has discussed the importance of coordination, evidence-based decisions, teamwork, and preparedness for successful public administrations. The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented chaos and instability to governments. In Palmira, a medium-sized city in Colombia, COVID-19 forced the municipality to decide on substantial matters before the national government provided any guidelines. One of the main challenges for public administrators was the lack of preparation and technical information describing the implications of the virus and its evolution. For this reason, it was necessary for the government of Palmira, which had been in office for less than three months when the pandemic started, to establish the required administrative capacity while transmitting its new style of government characterized by active two-way communications with citizens and the use of technological aids.

From a practitioner's perspective, this document describes how Palmira established a coordinated scheme for its cabinet focused on four fundamental aspects: health, economic reactivation, social, and rules compliance. The main contribution of this document is to show how a new government, without the necessary technological resources and information sources, in a city with already many social problems, was able to face the pandemic and be recognized by the national government for its good practices.

Government of Palmira: The Transition to a Transparent and Modern City

Palmira is a medium-sized city in Colombia located in the southwestern part of the country. Most of the inhabitants live in the municipality’s urban area and are characterized by a medium-to-low-income level. One of the biggest challenges the city has faced in recent years is insecurity. Its location, strategic for logistics processes, is also attractive for criminal groups, making it one of the cities with the highest homicide rates in the world. When designing and implementing public policies, this combination of inequality and insecurity represents a more significant challenge for local authorities. Furthermore, these social conditions became a challenge when making decisions in response to the pandemic due to its differential implications for the most vulnerable populations.

Colombia is a presidential regime where cities democratically elect their mayors every four years. Mayors in Colombia are the head of the local executive branch and are responsible for political and administrative functions (Avellaneda 2009a, 2009b, 2013). They must...
execute and enforce the normative framework, preserve the public order, administrate the municipalities, and implement national and local policies and programs (Colombian Constitution, 1991).

The last local elections were held in October 2019 and resulted in a change in the governing party in Palmira, breaking a 12-year trend. On January 1, 2020, the new government took office. According to campaign statements, this new government sought:

"... a change for Palmira where the Public Administration is at the service of citizens without the need for levers or intermediaries. We will promote an open and participatory government, where the community is the main generator of solutions. We will learn from those who suffer and recognize the most felt and real needs, and we will involve them in the search for solutions. We will connect knowledge with territorial pains. We will deconcentrate the power of the Municipal Administration building, and we will take it to the entire territory." (Escobar, 2019, Page 4)

The change in government was reflected in a renewal of 98% of the municipal cabinet and in the construction of a plan to implement the promises made in the campaign. In addition to this turnover of most of the senior employees, there were two additional aspects. First, a complex transition process did not allow the new government to be informed of ongoing programs and management indicators. On the other hand, the change in the workforce was not only at the senior levels. A large part of the city hall staff changed with the entry of the new government.

COVID-19 in Palmira: When an Advantage Works Against

Since December 2019, we started to see from a distance how a new disease was gaining more and more relevance in China. As had happened previously with SARS in 2003 and H1N1 in 2011, we saw how countries were making decisions hoping that they would stop the disease from reaching them. However, in March 2020, we realized that it was no longer a question of whether the new Sars-CoV-2 virus would arrive, but when and where. One of Palmira's main competitive advantages is its proximity to Colombia's main port on the Pacific and the fact that it has the most important international airport in the southwest of the country. However, at this point, it became a disadvantage. Palmira was one of the first cities with positive COVID-19 cases in the country.

On March 7, 2020, an inhabitant of Palmira that was coming back from Spain became the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the city. Due to the lack of knowledge, the person did not isolate himself, infecting his family group, including a nine-year-old child. As a result, this case became the first outbreak involving one school and a large group of inhabitants. This situation quickly forced Palmira's cabinet to work on strategies to interrupt the chain of contagion. As one of the first cities in the country, even in Latin America, to have confirmed cases of COVID-19, there were no explicit references on the steps to follow. At that moment, Palmira, based on the information provided by the city's health and epidemiology team, decided to cancel in-person classes as an extreme measure to stop the rapid spread of the virus. Hours later, the national government ordered the rest of the mayors to suspend in-person classes until further notice.
COVID-19 Strategy: How to Organize the Government to Face a Significant Challenge in Public Administration

In a short time, Palmira's cabinet went from thinking only about initiating multiple transformations because a new administration had just sworn in into office to facing one of the most relevant public administration challenges of the last decades. Without any prior reference and awareness of the limitations of access to information, we initiated a strategy directly led by the mayor to address the pandemic. In retrospect, it is possible to see today that a special task force was needed to face this new reality. Thus, what at one time was thought to take only a few days or weeks out of public officials' agendas, took up a large percentage of time over the first four months of the pandemic. It was necessary to diagnose the situation and its implications, outline a work plan to respond to the immediate needs, and propose a transition process to resume the life of the people of Palmira.

Figure 1: Pandemic Response Coordination Plan

The COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example of a wicked problem due to its complexity. It could overload public and private systems' institutional capacity and lead to complex dilemmas between public values (Sanabria, 2020). This is the reason why, based on the recommendations of the World Health Organization, we established a plan that considered the coordination of different government levels, as well as areas other than health, such as education, transportation, tourism, public works, economy, agriculture, social protection, and environment (WHO, 2020). In Palmira, we established an intersectoral team in which we addressed different needs of the population and made decisions based on the available data and evidence. It is worth noting that due to the reasons stated above regarding the pandemic nature, the final work scheme resulted from learning by doing lessons. As a result, the final COVID-19 model of attention in Palmira had four sectorial axes (health, economic reactivation, social, and rules compliance) and one cross-cutting axis (see figure 1).

The first axis was health. Palmira had a deficit of ICU beds, which was a worrying situation to face the pandemic. That is why the necessity to expand the capacity of public and private hospitals in the city became a priority. The key actors in this axis were the health secretariat and the municipal hospital. During the four months, we held daily meetings (led by the mayor) to monitor the progress of the disease, the isolation of confirmed cases, and detailed follow-up of plans to expand the hospital's capacity. Palmira's hospital capacity expansion plan resulted in an 85% increase in hospital beds (from 240 to 445 beds) and a 221% increase in ICU beds (from 19 to 61 beds) in a period of four months. In order to achieve this last objective, we obtained resources from the national government and private organizations.
Given the socio-economic conditions of the city mentioned above, the social axis was central to the strategy. The pandemic did not affect us equally; the populations with the greatest needs and who did not have stable income sources could not simply wait for the reopening. For this reason, we began a characterization and aid delivery process to mitigate the negative aspects of the quarantine. The first social problem the city faced at the beginning of the quarantine was food insecurity.

For this reason, after a prioritization process, groceries were delivered to selected households. For this purpose, the social welfare secretariat created a software that allowed citizens to apply for assistance and cross-check the information with the selection criteria. Between March and July 2020, the government (local, regional and national) delivered 24,583 food subsidies using public resources and coordinating aid from private companies.

On the other hand, one of the most affected populations was school students. Since the closure in March, schools have had to continue providing their education virtually. However, in order to guarantee continuous education, the Secretariat of Education had to deliver internet to the schools and students, providing internet to almost 6 thousand students and tablets and laptops. Moreover, the above was reinforced with constant information to principals and teachers who had to adjust their educational schemes to this new reality.

At the same time, the third axis described the team focused on identifying the economic groups affected by the shutdowns to establish reactivation plans following the epidemiological situation in the city. Since April 27, the national government has authorized the opening of some commercial establishments in compliance with specific guidelines and protocols, that municipalities had to oversee and monitor. This opening process was progressive, and only until June 1 did most of the economic sectors were opened. For this reason, initiatives were taken to support businesses such as restaurants, shopping malls, and small businesses. For this, the mayor's office developed a website where companies and workers registered with basic information and uploaded for approval their opening protocols. In less than 24 hours, officials of the Secretariat of Commerce approved these protocols according to the guidelines of the Secretariat of Health. As of July 31, 3,603 companies had been authorized to open, and 2,023 were in process. The authorized companies had almost 43,000 workers. This initiative was accompanied by visits to the establishments and accompaniment with workshops on innovation and strengthening business models and conditions for the opening during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the last axis is control. There was a team focused on enforcing regulations. Although the decisions made by the local and national governments sought the welfare of all, it was not easy for all citizens to comply with the rules. Following national regulations, the municipality and police teams fined 5,123 inhabitants of Palmira, 39 daily violations for non-compliance with curfews, agglomerations, and drinking liquor in public spaces.

Finally, City Hall's back office supported other sectors with the necessary support. In this sense, the legal, planning, finance, human talent, communications, and technology teams focused on enabling the government to continue to function remotely and provide the necessary answers. This transversal axis (see the outer circle in Figure 1) played an important role in decision-making and implementation. These actors allowed the execution of the decisions that were made in
compliance with the style of the new mayor's government: close, innovative, modern, technical, and transparent. As mentioned in some of the previous examples, part of the strategies was based on technology, such as creating websites oriented to special populations or providing internet to schools. On the other hand, communication played a fundamental role, which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

**How to Maintain the Essence of Governance? Evidence-based Decision-Making**

One of the main challenges we faced was that we did not have the information we needed to make decisions. Since we were campaigning, we realized that the city needed to modernize its information systems and track its population and programs. In this regard, we also had to push the plans for the first year and make them in the first quarter of the government's term. It was essential to have data on the evolution of the disease: number of cases, the development of positive cases, number of tests, test positivity, hospitalizations, ICU beds, deaths. However, this was not enough for us. We wanted to have information about Palmira's population, the municipality's capacity, and a dashboard to monitor the progress of the disease and the government's efforts.

For this reason, parallel to establishing the first steps of the action plan, the government focused on defining critical indicators for each plan's axis and reporting a daily progress to the mayor's office to have a consolidated dashboard. This process was not easy and required the expertise of the cabinet and its team. For example, the team responsible for the social approach encountered problems with the population databases. For this reason, they had to coordinate with the IT area and develop an application where citizens with specific needs could register their data and thus enter the process to identify whether they were eligible for government assistance. The above was an example of how the actors worked in a coordinated manner to achieve results: the secretariats combined their public policy expertise with the IT area knowledge to develop tools close to the citizens, which allowed them to have reliable data and indicators.

This team effort was essential to measure the evolution of the disease, see which programs were working or had bottlenecks and establish on-time corrective actions when necessary. This information was the primary input for the daily meetings of the work team. It supported the implemented measures according to an informed analysis of what was happening in Palmira. Finally, these data were the primary source of information for coordination with the national and regional governments since it was possible to provide them with a real-time diagnosis. It also facilitated the work with the private sector, which helped citizens and required reliable information to focus their efforts.

**Maintaining Constant Communication with Citizens: How to Remain Open During a Pandemic**

One of the characteristics of this administration that was the hallmark from day one was the level of clear communication with citizens. A two-way dialogue where the government is accountable to the citizens and tells them its plans, but at the same time listens to what they have to say. It is a government near to the people and characterized by reaching every Palmiran's household. However, at first sight, the nature of the
The official communication did not allow us to continue with that style.

First, the knowledge about Sars-CoV-2 changed rapidly. Medical organizations discover new features every day that cause preliminary information to become unreliable or change. Therefore, we as the government also had many of the citizens' doubts. Especially at the beginning. How is the virus transmitted? Why are some people sicker than others? What should I do if someone close is positive? When should I get tested? These are some of the questions that today have a straightforward answer for most of us but that no one was clear about at the beginning of the pandemic. In times of uncertainty, citizens turn to governments and experts to point them in the right direction in some cases. And yet here we were all in the same situation.

Moreover, we were also part of those at-risk citizens worried about getting ill and making our family members sick. Many of the citizens' fears had also been our fears.

The other challenge we faced, resulting from the first, was the amount of fake news that began to be spread around. People searching for certainty believed in different theories, conspiracies, and miracle remedies that were untrue. However, these made our role as government more complex and increased society's level of uncertainty and fear.

Finally, the disease's nature did not allow us to continue with our style of being on the street “shaking people's hands”. We were all locked-up, and the farther the distance, the better. So how could we maintain close communication with the people of Palmira despite these difficulties? We quickly became aware of the importance of keeping fluid and constant contact. The longer we let time pass between official communication, the greater the uncertainty and false news appeared. For this reason, the government's two-way communication with citizens played a decisive role in the strategy. A team of specialists in strategic communication accompanied the measures taken in the different axes. Furthermore, concrete actions were implemented to change citizens' behaviours and make them aware of the risk of the virus to their lives.

The first approach was to deliver all the verified information to the citizens. In this sense, the strategy had three focuses: social networks, a Q&A telephone line, and collaboration with neighbourhoods' leaders. We made daily reports to the citizens to let them know that the official information was easily accessible. At the same time, each official communication was followed by an online space where the mayor and his cabinet answered questions from citizens using technologies such as Facebook lives. Finally, there was a call centre where citizens reported cases and symptoms, non-compliance of the national lock-down, and consulted information. This call centre also followed up on COVID-19 positive cases to support and monitor patients. These strategies sought to make reliable information accessible and increase the transparency of the mayor's decisions. Each of the decisions was informed before being implemented, and they have feedback time for comments in order to incorporate citizen views and concerns into the new municipal regulation.

On the other hand, when the gradual reactivation began, it was evident that the government had to go to the streets and be wherever most people were to educate and prevent possible contagions. For this reason, we identified the most crowded places and established specific plans. The dynamics of the
city turn the downtown area and the public marketplace into some of the areas with the highest traffic of citizens, especially the elderly. In this sense, we recognized a possible risk and developed a strategy that focused on providing information to citizens by using appealing characters. On the other hand, we reinforced the concept of social distance and the use of the mask using signs that congratulated or called people's attention, depending on their behaviour. Finally, we made markings in the streets and pedestrian spaces to reinforce the message of social distance. These behavioral science-inspired actions, which were adjusted based on experiences from other cities, allowed for a friendlier and more communicative approach to implementing the national government's rules. These strategies aimed to show citizens that complying with the regulations was an obligation as citizens and a way to take care of ourselves as a society. A similar approach was taken in the city's central marketplace.

Conclusions and Takeaways

When the government began, we knew we had a challenge ahead of us to fulfill the promise we made during the campaign, always face the people, and transform Palmira. However, we never imagined that we would face a global pandemic at the beginning of the government. That most of the questions we would have to answer to citizens are whether they can go out today or not. We believe this was not even in any ruler's nightmares. However, COVID-19 forced us as a team to get organized and achieve many of our promises in the first six months of government and left other priorities behind as we focused on the attention of the crisis. It challenged us to innovate in how we did things, face people in difficult times, point a certain way to find solutions, and maintain the style that characterizes us.

Today after two years, we can see that the described roadmap worked for us in Palmira. We were recognized on different occasions by the president of Colombia, and we were also able to control and avoid different scenarios that sadly happened in other cities. Although we had peaks of the pandemic, and hospital capacity has been stressed to the limits, no people had died for lack of attention, and we were able to leave some improvements in the health sector required decades ago. The national government acknowledged the scheme of work since we were able to implement measures that took more time to implement in other cities, as in the case of selective isolation of confirmed cases of COVID-19 with follow-up from the municipal government. Palmira's experience was taken as a national pilot and later extended to the rest of the cities. This shows that although the town had critical behaviors in terms of infection indicators compared to the national average, the ICU occupancy rate during these first months did not exceed 80%. On the other hand, as the disease evolved, the local government transformed the strategy into mass vaccination plans and one of the first cities in the country to have in-person classes.

The main lessons learned from this experience are 1. Communication is fundamental. The only way to know what inhabitants were concerned about was to open two-way and multichannel communication mechanisms to be able to explain the policies and receive constant feedback. For this purpose, different strategies were used, such as websites, social networks, public employees in the streets, and telephone lines. Technology helped in this proximity process. 2. In such uncertainty and with populations in economic need, prevention cannot rely solely on control. Although the mayor's office had the legal obligation to
enforce the national law, we implemented accompaniment, training, and awareness-raising strategies. This allows for a balanced approach from the government. 3. When quick and sometimes difficult decisions must be made, it is important to form a team that is led by the head of the organization. This shows the issue's relevancy and, at the same time, provides the necessary coordination to get the job done. A transparent and explicit scheme, with responsible people acting as policy brokers, allows overcoming the limitations that may hinder the implementation of public decisions.

References


Colombian Constitution. (1991)
