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Angel Iglesias, Roberto Barbeito

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Strengthening European local governments to address global health crises and their consequences¹

Angel Iglesias² & Roberto Barbeito³

Abstract

The crisis generated by Covid-19 is a product of global interconnection, but its impacts are manifested locally in a differentiated manner. This text assumes precisely that local governments, as the administration closest to the citizens, are a key instrument to face the effects of this and other global risks in a more democratic and effective way, because they can provide differentiated and more adequate responses to the concrete needs of the citizens. Moreover, if decisions taken at a local level are widely participated and deliberated by the population, they are more legitimate, and this makes it easier for citizens to accept measures that restrict freedoms, such as those imposed worldwide by the public health measures taken in response to Covid-19. In line with these assumptions, in this policy paper we highlight the need to strengthen European local governments by giving them greater resources and more autonomy. Our position is consistent with the recommendations made by international bodies during the current pandemic, but it is also supported by the evidence the authors have gathered from their participation in a European research project within the H2020 program (COST Action IS 1207 LocRef). Based on the results of this research, a series of practical recommendations are proposed for the European Union and the member countries to grant increased resources and a greater degree of autonomy to local governments.

Introduction: Covid-19, a window of opportunity for local governments

Crises arising from global risks are a threat to our lifestyle and even our survival as a species, but they also open up opportunities for the implementation of new ideas and forms of collective organization. Thus, Covid-19 has shown that complex problems can only be solved through the cooperation of the different levels of government to which multilevel governance refers, regardless of the degree of centralization of political and administrative structures. This is the view of the most notorious international bodies, such as the UN and WHO secretariats, but also of others of a very different nature, such as the OECD or the IMF.

Unexpectedly, the pandemic has shown the resilience that communities and local governments can exercise, as they have been forced to manage a considerable part of the health, social and economic

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² Ángel Iglesias is Professor of Political and Administrative Sciences at the University Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid. His research focuses on issues of local government with regard to Spain and in a European comparative perspective, with particular attention on local democratic innovations and local public management. He holds the Presidency of the Spanish Research Committee on Political Sociology (CI8) at the Spanish Federation of Sociology (FES).

³ Roberto Barbeito occupies a post of ‘Profesor Titular’ (Associate Professor) of Sociology at the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, University Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid. He holds the Executive Secretariat of the Spanish Federation of Sociology (FES). (correspondent author)

consequences of the pandemic, despite having very scarce resources and little legal room for action. In fact, local governments seem to have revealed themselves as fundamental actors in solving the most immediate problems of precariousness that affect the quality of life and well-being of their most vulnerable citizens in this catastrophic context. For this reason, Covid-19 has opened up an opportunity to rethink the role of local governments in multilevel governance systems and to redesign their possibilities so that they can contribute to addressing global problems in a more democratic, effective and legitimate manner. This opportunity presents itself after a decade marked by the international deployment of austerity policies and structural reforms. Although applied in an unequal way, these policies have reduced the capacity of public services in Europe, deeply weakening the Welfare State. The same budgetary austerity has resulted in a hard blow to the social protection services provided by municipal governments, although this coincides with the remuneration of some local public services as a counterpoint to the excesses (in cost, inefficiency and loss of citizen control) caused by the privatization of local services which, however, was advocated by the New Public Management paradigm (Wollmann & Iglesias, 2016).

An unimaginable effect of the pandemic has been the recognition by the European Union that rebuilding our societies after the pandemic requires increased public spending. Should this be done, the current budgetary restrictions that have so far limited the capacity of local governments to take action in most European countries should be eased. This would provide with an opportunity to reinforce the incipient trend towards reorganization and remuneration of essential local public services, revitalizing local public policies on public health, as well as the services of the local authorities.

Local governments as an antidote to the crisis of liberal democracy

Covid-19 has highlighted the complexity of global governance even for European democracies. In mid-March, they seemed to be overwhelmed by the advance of the pandemic. The European partners were then absent, engrossed in their own difficulties. Lacking healthcare materials, they displayed an image of lack of solidarity and unfairness, and even competed on international markets for supplies, which increased shortages, pushed up prices and undermined the quality of products (Barbeito & Iglesias, 2020). This first response to the crisis by European countries was national and centralized. However, both the European Union and national governments now seem to admit that neither decentralization nor austerity policies can be an effective response to the consequences of the pandemic in the medium and long term. Rather, they seem to be aware that responses require strong public policies to address the specific conditions of each locality.

The difficulties evidenced by representative democracies in managing the complexity of the pandemic and other global problems sum up to almost two decades of growing disaffection among citizens towards democratic institutions (Foa, 2020). The increase in the number of votes for populist parties and the rise in citizen protests over the past decade are eloquent examples of this disaffection. In a context where representative democracy has been hard hit by the economic, social and cultural effects of decades of neoliberal globalization and almost blunted by the recession and the consequent austerity policies that were applied under the pretext of overcoming it (Barbeito & Iglesias, 2020), Europe now faces an unprecedented task of reconstruction and risk prevention.

Although greatly weakened by austerity, local governments seem to be saved from the general disaffection towards political institutions. Surveys sponsored by the European Commission (the Eurobarometers) repeatedly show that local governments are an institution that inspires strong trust among citizens. This circumstance makes local governments the best political institution to introduce democratic innovations, favoring more legitimate and effective public decisions (Dahl, 2014).

The results of the pan-European research COST Action IS 1207 LocRef also suggest that local governments constitute a crucial space for strengthening democracy from the point of view of both legitimacy and effectiveness (Denters, 2017). The closer this level of government is to the specific problems of citizens, as well as its proximity to voluntary associations, the more likely it is that citizens will become aware of common problems, get involved in their management and see short-term results. Therefore, if they have sufficient autonomy and resources, local governments are spaces of resilience in the face of crises that are very appropriate for taking the measures that are best suited to the needs and possibilities of each locality. Hence the importance of neighborhoods and city design for social interaction and sustainable economic growth. Finally, the above-mentioned research suggests that participatory and deliberative instruments favor the legitimacy of local governments and that decisions that take into account citizen participation reinforce satisfaction with representative institutions.

The strengthening of local governments must be done in relation to other territorial powers, and providing resources to local public policies in education, health, security, social services, housing and environment, among others. It must also include the mobilization of civil society (NGOs and neighborhood associations) to strengthen social public action. The response to the crisis caused by Covid-19 is thus an opportunity to redefine the priorities of local public administration and, additionally, its organizational and procedural structures and its service delivery models.

Conclusions: the importance of the local for effective crisis management and democratic recovery

This text has defended the role of local governments as an effective democratic instrument to deal with global risks, including Covid-19. In line with this, we encourage empirical studies to test the extent to which there is a positive correlation between greater local autonomy and a better response to the crisis caused by the pandemic. Such studies would complete the evidence already available supported by the research results of the LocRef project (covering 31 European countries), according to which citizens prefer to accept measures in which they have participated rather than measures decided by distant instances (Schwab, 2017). The same evidence argues that local governments and communities are able to combine effectiveness and efficiency with democratic innovations by involving citizens in the design of local public service delivery and its co-production, including preventive health services in neighborhoods. This is due in part to the social capital that spontaneously emerges in small population groups, which implies a clearer knowledge of nearby problems and the development of empathetic skills to solve common problems (Denters, 2017). It is certain that this civic implication is possible only if citizens have the necessary time to be able to dedicate it to the matters of their community, and this will only be possible if that time is financed monetarily (Barbeito & Iglesias, 2020).

The crisis prompted by Covid-19 should impel central governments to effectively recognize the decisive role of the local levels, reinforcing their autonomy and resources through reforms that hardly require normative changes. They should also encourage local governments to promote citizens' initiatives that favor the emergence of solidarity networks in the neighborhoods, as these would be an ideal tool for identifying and helping the most vulnerable or underprivileged neighbors. By connecting communities, such networks could better address the effects of inequality, fostering social and economic cohesion, revitalizing public space and building resilience.

Furthermore, local governments are responsible for the provision of basic services and personal care that directly affect the safety and health of citizens. The services provided by local governments (transport, citizen safety, home care, cleaning, waste treatment, water supply, etc.) have proven to be essential during confinement. Furthermore, local governments are essential within the fourth pillar of the Welfare State, i.e. social services for the care of dependent persons and educational services for children. Strengthening these services would lead to the creation of local employment and, in some countries, such as Spain, it would also help prevent the depopulation of rural areas.

Policy recommendations for practitioners

a) Rediscovering the local level. Citizens value efficiency in local service delivery, but also local democratic processes. That is why reforms must be implemented to facilitate citizen participation in decision-making processes, but without neglecting transparency and accountability. Each local government should be allowed to design its own governance strategy combining democratic aspects with those of improving public management, under the assumption that there are no "best practices" that can be applied out of context. Local governments are dependent on the path laid down by their historical tradition, political culture, socio-economic conditions, needs and demands of the different social groups in their community.

b) Establish mechanisms of deliberative democracy, such as participatory budgets (Kersting, et al. 2016), as they provide opportunities for citizens to participate in debates regarding the design, implementation and evaluation of local public policies. This requires the institutionalization of democratic innovations that allow citizens to have a direct and binding influence on decision-making processes for the development of local public programmes and policies (Barbeito & Iglesias, 2020).

(c) Strengthening institutional and financial capacities. In particular, ensure that local governments have sufficient financial resources for the provision of public services and to address health crises and their negative impacts.

d) Adopt strategies for inter-territorial cooperation with regional and central governments, as well as inter-municipal collaboration, accompanied by internal reorganizations to optimize service delivery chains. The spectrum and scope of cooperation will depend on the specific context of each municipality and the services it provides, as well as the intergovernmental and inter-administrative relations derived from the principle of subsidiarity.

(e) Redesign administrative structures and processes according to the specific needs of each municipality, following the principles of good local governance and cooperating, where necessary, with the private sector or local civil society through the co-production or provision of local public services or through partnerships or other models of cooperation between the local public and private sectors, coordinating actions with the appropriate territorial levels of government and ensuring, in such cases, that control and accountability mechanisms are put in place.

All these recommendations can be implemented without any substantial changes to the constitutional or regulatory framework. Nor do they require a significant increase in public spending. For these reasons, we believe that European states cannot afford to ignore the important role that local

governments and communities play in the effective reconstruction of European societies after the pandemic.

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