

With a little help from my neighbors

The Con Vos Network, a pilot test connecting community markets with digital inclusion

UNDP acknowledges the relevance of inclusive language to make gender diversity visible. Thus, the generic masculine and female forms are alternately used in this report.

Co_
Lab



MUNICIPALIDAD DE
CONCEPCIÓN DEL URUGUAY

TODO TRAPO

ARTÍCULOS DE LIMPIEZA

PARA MINORISTA Y MAYORISTA



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VOS

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gestiones digitales
más!



Introduction

The use of digital tools for all kinds of errands and procedures, such as payments, purchases, or the use of applications, is spreading rapidly and takes up an important part of our daily lives. When due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in many places, we were forced to avoid non-essential outings, and banks and public offices reduced their customer service, many of us were able to adapt smoothly.

However, this was not true for everyone. The transition towards digital tools was abrupt and full of obstacles for many people. In an increasingly digitalized world, many daily errands and new procedures remained pending due to the stay-at-home restrictions. The lack of access to a smartphone or not being aware of these digital tools –or not knowing how to use them even if being aware– among other reasons, prevented people from completing important procedures, such as applying for the required lockdown circulation permits, or having access to the public subsidies granted as a remedy for income loss. In addition, because of these inequalities, many people kept doing their procedures in person, putting their health and the health of others at risk by leaving their homes during outbreaks of infections.

We conducted a pilot to test a grassroots innovation searching for alternatives to solve this problem. In collaboration with the municipality of Concepción del Uruguay, we designed and implemented the *Con Vos Network*. The Network consisted of thirty-two stores of different kinds, most of them located between 1.5 and 2 km from the city center, where neighbors could carry out digital procedures at very low cost with the help of store owners. The Network's main objectives are to promote digital inclusion, understood as the possibility for people to go online with more things, to achieve greater decentralization of digital procedures, and to boost community markets. To assess the results of the pilot we measured the number of procedures conducted and gathered relevant information about each customer's profile and their reasons for using the Network. The Network is a model that can be replicated in other territories as well and was highlighted as an example of Community-Organized initiatives in Smart cities by the Handbook of Urban Innovations of UNDP.

The results of the pilot test show that the Network brings benefits both to customers and shopkeepers. During the three-month test, over two hundred procedures were conducted in the participating stores. Thus, they allowed for decentralizing digital procedures and increased the activity of the local convenience stores. On average, each customer saved almost two kilometers and over twenty minutes by completing their tasks in a store near their home, rather than going to the city center to do them in person. The experience



The Network is a model that can be replicated in other territories, and it has been highlighted as an example.

was also positive for the people in charge of the stores since new customers showed up and/or they were able to make additional sales in 2 out of every 3 digital transactions.

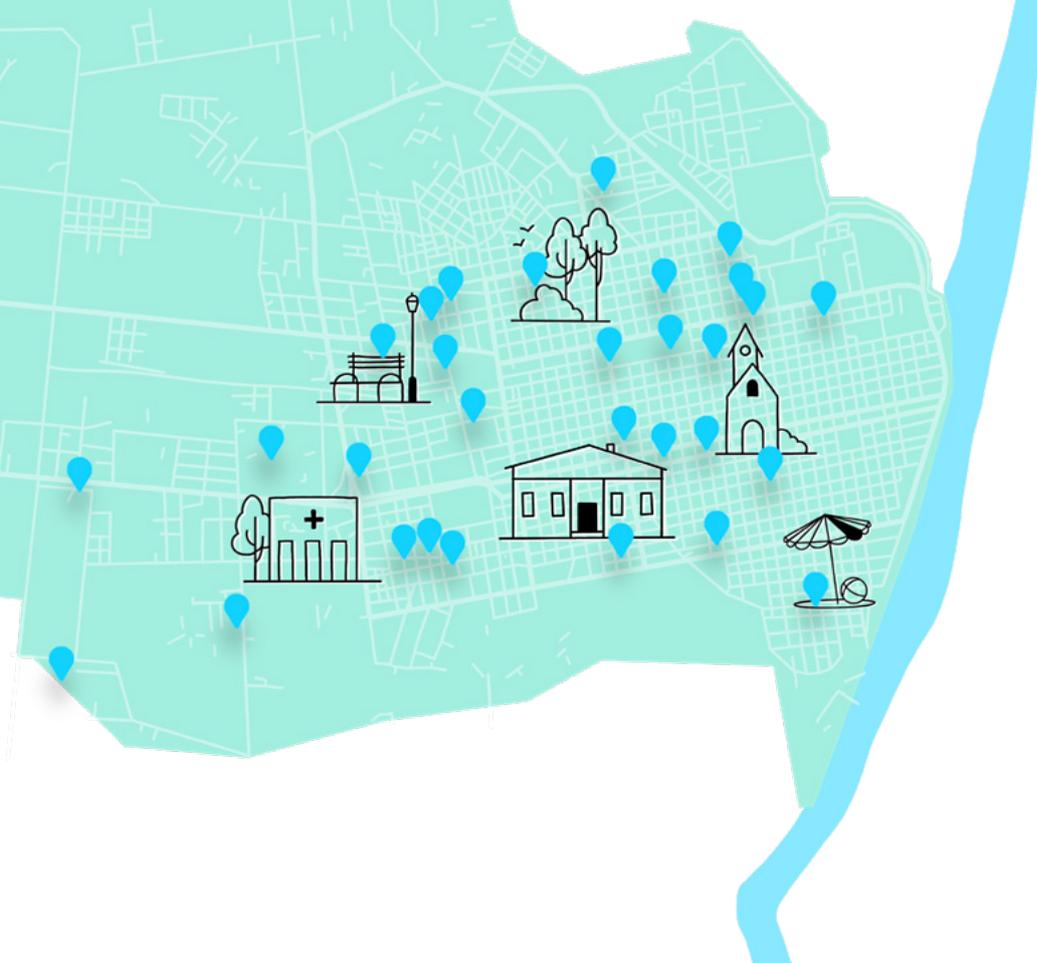
Below there is a summary of the main findings organized under three criteria: profile and motivations of the people who went to the stores to carry out online procedures, Network's results in decentralizing errands and administrative tasks, the promotion of digital inclusion and the effects for the development of community markets.

About the Con Vos Network experience

The *Con Vos* Network was created to test one of the solutions with potential to achieve higher levels of digital inclusion found by the Solutions Mapping of the Co_Lab. It should be highlighted that here by digital inclusion we mean the chance that people do more things online, even if not by themselves yet. The Mapping focused on surveying innovative grassroots solutions, strategies, and tools that people living in low-income neighborhoods implemented during the pandemic to cope with their daily problems. We used these elements as a source of evidence and/or model to expedite our understanding of different issues from a systemic or global perspective. Among the solutions, we identified the experience of a stationary store owner located in a low-income neighborhood in the Greater Buenos Aires area. She began to offer an extra service: she helped her customers with their digital transactions, in exchange for a small amount of money. This case is an example of the central role played by nearby stores in bringing simple technologies to their neighbors, as in the past was the case of photocopiers, call centers or mobile phone card recharging. Thus, they become a space both for meeting the needs of their customers and a means for them to adopt these new technologies.

Such solutions are an excellent source of learning, and, at first glance, this solution seems to have a huge potential. But how can we know if it works beyond this case, would it be possible to scale this experience to other stores?

This is what we did at Co_Lab with the collaboration of the Production Department of the Municipality of Concepción del Uruguay. Together, we created the *Con Vos* Network; to this end, we designed its identity, prepared promotional and informative materials, and created step-by-step handbooks for the procedures, among other actions. All of these were part of the broader framework of an experiment whose results can be read [here](#). This article is a summary of the pilot main findings.



The Network is made up of

32

businesses
from different
areas

Who approached the stores of the Con Vos Network?

- First, we were interested in learning about users' characteristics and socio-demographic profiles.
- Nearly two-thirds of the people who stopped by were between 25 and 54 years of age, followed by nearly 20% of people over 54, and 14% under 25. These results were to be expected if we consider that most of the procedures are aimed at working-age people, who can take care of their own procedures or who carry them out for others who cannot do them by themselves, such as their daughters or elderly people.
- Most of the Network users were women: 58.8% of the customers.
- Most of the Network's customers had finished (54.2%) or unfinished (22.7%) high school studies.

Why do people use the Con Vos Network?

Assessing the Network's performance and understanding what needs it met is crucial to analyze people's motivations for reaching the neighborhood stores included in the Network, rather than completing their transactions online, in another way or just in person, when it was possible due to the Covid19 restrictions.

- The results show customers used the network mainly because they did not have the necessary knowledge to do procedures online on their own. This suggests the Network potential to promote digital inclusion to the extent that people can do a greater number of tasks online thanks to the shopkeepers' help. This support could be the first step in encouraging neighbors to do more things online, first with trusted shopkeepers, and then potentially by themselves.
- In addition to the lack of knowledge, people in the neighborhood approached the Network because it was simpler for them to use this system, they did not have the means (computer with Internet access and printer) and, fourthly, because the store was nearby.
- We performed an additional analysis by cross-referencing these responses with the customers' profiles. We observed that the results are practically the same regardless of the customer's gender, except in the case of the reason "does not know how to handle the online procedure on their own". This response was more frequent among male customers.

Did the Network help decentralize digital procedures?

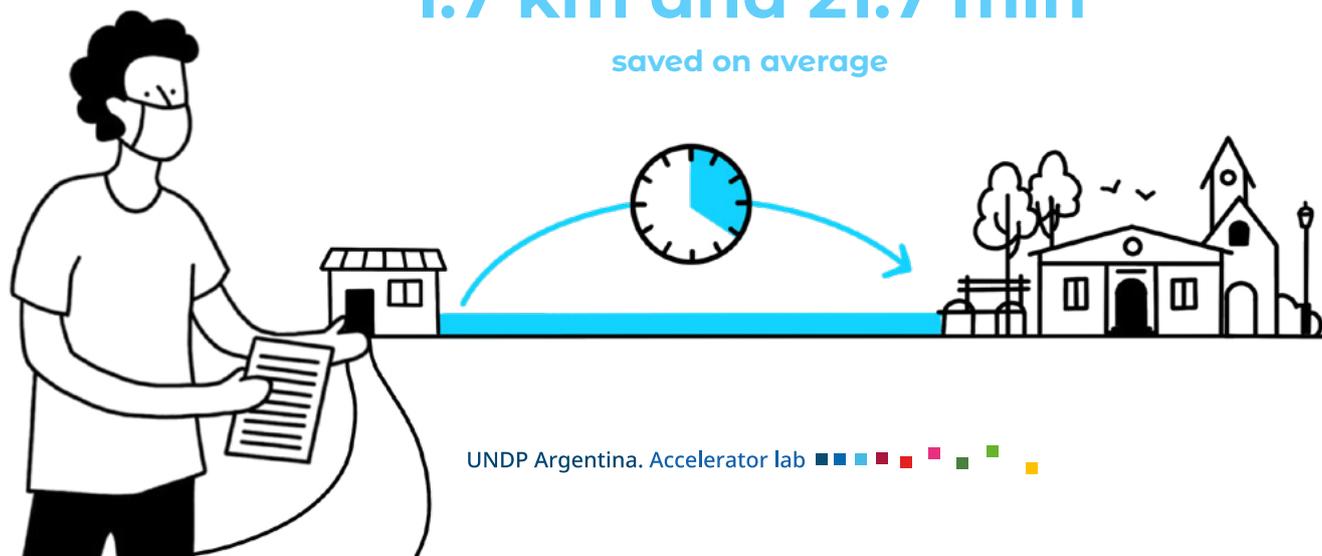


The main idea underlying the Network is to offer the option of completing procedures digitally at the neighborhood level to people who, due to the lack of knowledge or tools, or because they were unaware of these alternatives, used to do them in person. Because face-to-face procedures entail a greater investment of time and, in the current epidemiological context, a greater possibility of putting health at risk while staying in crowded spaces for a long time.

- Going to the Network's stores, on average, each customer saved 1.7 kilometers and 21.7 minutes of their time by not having to complete procedures in person.

1.7 km and 21.7 min

saved on average



- In all, thanks to the Network, users in Concepción del Uruguay avoided traveling 293.7 kilometers and had 637 additional hours available.
- Women saved more distance and time than men: women saved 700 meters and 8.4 minutes more.
- The distance and time saved were consistent for people of different education levels.
- People who reported going to the Network because the store was near their home saved 987 meters more and 12.1 minutes more than people who did not report that reason.



Did the *Con Vos* Network make digital inclusion easier for the citizens of Concepción del Uruguay?

Our original hypothesis regarding digital inclusion is that the people most affected by the digital divide would be encouraged to complete their procedures online with the help of their trusted shopkeeper. This means that if the shopkeeper in their neighborhood, whom they have known for a long time, would help them to complete these procedures easily, they could continue to do them in this way and even do new online procedures. It could also be inferred that, potentially, people could be encouraged to learn, i.e., to do more tasks digitally, as they feel more familiar with this environment or simply by “not being afraid” of making mistakes. However, it is beyond the scope of this pilot test to follow up on each person who completed procedures and find out if, based on their experience with the Network, they were able to perform them by themselves. In other words, we cannot prove the Network’s ability to teach people (indirectly) how to do their procedures digitally. What we can analyze though is the Network’s potential to promote digital inclusion by providing solutions to people who have neither the knowledge nor the tools to complete their procedures on their own. In this respect, the following data are relevant:



- 59.3% of the clients who visited the Network did so because they did not know how to manage their online procedures on their own, did not have the tools to do it, or both of them, which shows the extent of the digital inclusion issue in this place.
- Considering the reasons given for attending the Network, we

put together a digital literacy index giving a score based on whether the users went to the stores of the network because they needed –they did not know how to do their online procedures or lack the tools to do them– or because it was just more convenient for them. The index ranges from 0 to 1, where 1 is the highest level of digital literacy.

- We observed that males have an index value approximately 1.6% lower than females, i.e., they are slightly less digitally literate.
- In turn, we also found that the index increases with age, albeit by a small margin: for a one-year increase in the age of the client attending the Network, the index rises by 0.03%. It is worth noting that only 20% of the Network’s users were over 54 years of age.



Did the Network help local convenience stores?

An indirect but desirable effect of the Network was increasing the sales of participating stores. Thus, we analyzed whether the people who reached the store for procedures were buying at the store for the first time, and whether they bought any products in addition to completing their digital procedure.

- We observed that in 67% of the procedures completed, this goal of promoting the growth of neighborhood stores was achieved. This was because new customers were attracted (15.7%), customers bought more products in addition to their digital procedure (36.6%) or both (14.8%).

67%

of the procedures fulfilled the objective of promoting the growth of neighborhood businesses

15,7%

Were new clients

36,6%

Bought more products

14,8%

Were new clients and bought products



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What lessons does the implementation of the Con Vos Network teach policy makers?

Overall, the *Con Vos* Network experience showed the relevance of mapping and assessing local solutions that already work, and of conducting pilot tests if they are worth to be replicated. Hence it is possible to implement solutions contributing to the development of people and their communities.

This experience has proved effective to raise the levels of adoption and use of digital tools in the context of the COVID-19 emergency when it became essential to avoid physical contact and reduce traveling as much as possible. This was the case at the beginning of the pandemic and is again relevant under the light of the changing epidemiological situation.

The results illustrate the relevance of designing public policies that focus on building upon present networks of support to facilitate the adoption and use of new, many times more complex, technologies; neighborhood stores can fulfill this role. It was observed that the willingness and ease to adopt such technologies varies according to groups, also suggesting the need to tailor interventions according to the different socioeconomic profiles to be addressed. Thus, it will be possible to enhance the potential achievements of these interventions by tailoring them, given that our results suggest different effects by gender, age, and educational level.

Thanks to this new role of neighborhood stores, the advantages of achieving greater decentralization in the delivery of services, particularly public services, are clear since people save time and efforts when they have the alternative of doing such procedures closer to their homes. Furthermore, in times of pandemic, they avoid exposing themselves to the risk of infection when traveling downtown and when they can also complete their procedures online. Likewise, if neighbors are offered and use an easy and accessible solution to do things online, this could offer local governments the opportunity to digitize a greater number of procedures and errands, which would save time for users and resources for the State. Finally, extending the *Con Vos* Network's digital intermediation model could boost local markets thanks to the increase of sales in local stores.

About Us

At Co_Lab, our mission is to become aware of and learn from the solutions that people use daily in their neighborhoods and territories to accelerate our knowledge of complex issues.

We then use these lessons to improve interventions that promote development.

We build alliances with governments and/or civil society organizations to make these learnings grow. In this experience, we used the lessons learnt from a solution mapped in our Lab to design an experiment, together with the municipality of Concepción del Uruguay, to assess if neighborhood stores could be a means to promote digital decentralization, reduce the digital divide, and boost community markets.

Credits

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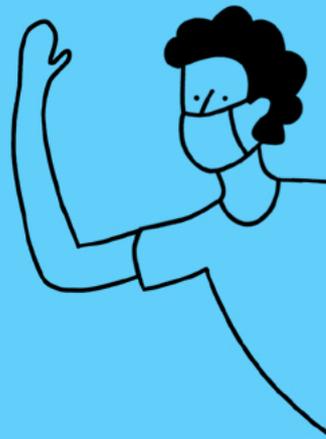
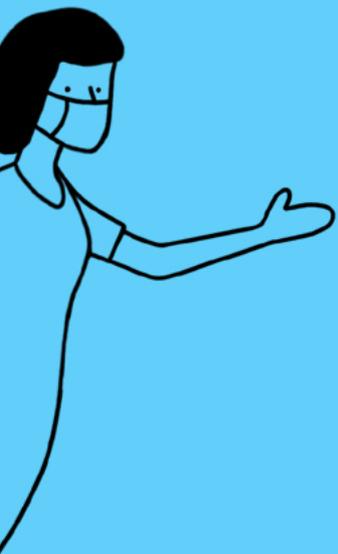
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