

LEARNING FROM INNOVATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Learning from Innovation in LAC is a thematic knowledge brief series jointly developed by the UNDP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean and the UNDP Accelerator Labs. It seeks to advance our understanding of key structural development challenges in LAC by capturing emerging lessons learned from innovative approaches to tackling these issues in countries across the region, with an emphasis on the work being done by the [Accelerator Labs](#).

THE CHALLENGE OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN LAC

Successfully achieving the SDGs will require simultaneously tackling challenges of effective governance. For example, achieving goals such as reducing poverty, promoting growth, or increasing access to education will directly depend on the kinds of policies that countries decide to put in place and how they decide to implement them—which, in turn, will depend on countries' underlying rules for how these policy decisions are made. We can think about the site where these decisions are made as “the policy arena.” Ensuring that citizens' voices are heard in the policy arena is critical for ensuring that policy outcomes reflect collective interests and that policy processes are considered fair. In the LAC region, however, citizens broadly agree that both they and their interests are systematically excluded from the policy arena. According to data from Latinobarómetro, in 2020 almost 3 in 4 people in the region felt that their country was governed by a few powerful groups in the pursuit of their own interests rather than for the good of all.¹ In order to accelerate and sustain progress toward the SDGs, it is thus critical that LAC countries continue to invest in building and strengthening mechanisms to listen and respond to citizen voices.

INNOVATION AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN LAC

Traditionally, when we think about citizen engagement, we think about four standard mechanisms through which citizens can overcome collective action problems and increase their relative power in the policy arena: voting, political organization, social organization, and public deliberation.² These mechanisms can look very different depending on who citizens' primary counterpart is (i.e. other citizens or state actors) as well as their goals in regard to the existing normative framework (i.e. whether they are seeking to change or to operate within this framework). Depending on the combination of these factors, this could lead to citizen engagement efforts that serve to influence policy processes, reshape cultural norms, hold state actors accountable, or improve service delivery. In a regional context where citizens are increasingly losing trust in state institutions and growing disillusioned with democratic forms of governance, we must rethink how existing engagement mechanisms (and, importantly, their strategic combination) can work better to more effectively collect and project citizen voices—and to hold governments accountable for responding to them.

1 Latinobarómetro (2021). Annual Report 2021.

2 World Bank (2017). Governance and the Law.

The UNDP Accelerator Labs offer a unique opportunity to advance the way that we think about opportunities for citizen engagement in the region—to rethink both who is being listened to and how they are being listened to. Many traditional approaches to citizen engagement often struggle to go beyond one-off top-down consultative approaches that “extract” data from citizens. However, in their role as agile actors working with local communities to pick up signals from the ground, the Labs have been able to experiment with innovative approaches for eliciting “voice” from citizens in ways that also seek to build trust and empower local constituencies. Across various contexts, the Labs have been working to build constructive and respectful spaces to listen to citizens’ voices and to document citizens’ perspectives for the purposes of policy dialogue and to identify solutions to development challenges. In particular, the Labs’ focus on “collective intelligence” provides a new lens through which we can view more traditional mechanisms, and in a way offers a reboot of citizen engagement for the 21st century. Simply defined, collective intelligence refers to “the enhanced capacity that is created when people work together, often with the help of technology, to mobilize a wider range of information, ideas and insights.”³ For example, collective intelligence methods such as citizen-generated data and crowdsourcing can be powerful tools for turbo-charging more traditional citizen engagement mechanisms by catalyzing their ability to enable practices such as distributed problem solving, engagement with complex systems, or real-time monitoring.

In the LAC region, Accelerator Labs and UNDP team in twelve countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay) are working on innovative approaches to citizen engagement. These initiatives cover a broad range of development policy areas (from waste management to family health to energy and extractives) and seek to engage a broad range of citizens (from youth to indigenous groups to women) using a broad range of tools (from mobile apps to digital platforms to multi-stakeholder workshops). Table 1 provides brief country-specific descriptions of these various initiatives.

TABLE 1. Selected UNDP innovation initiatives related to citizen engagement in LAC

Argentina

The Lab is working on citizen engagement in the context of tackling disinformation and promoting environmental policies. In the former, they focused on testing a participatory digital tool so that people can flag harmful content on the internet. In the latter, they worked on exploring new participatory data sources of air quality created using open hardware, mapping citizen science projects that could contribute to innovative national and local policies, and evaluating household waste and aquatic ecosystems through participatory experiments.

Bolivia

The Lab is working on catalyzing mechanisms to facilitate citizen participation, oriented towards effective decision-making, based on the co-creation of solutions, using technology and information, reducing the technological gaps that allow citizens to be the center of their own development and thereby moving towards an inclusive city with effective governance mechanisms. They are also working on the generation of data and use of information for development planning in the municipalities.

Colombia

The Lab is working on several citizen-engagement related initiatives, including: developing a system to better enable communication both to and from communities, developing tools to compare and contrast what citizens are saying on the streets with what they are saying on social networks, developing challenges to gather collective intelligence from citizens related to various themes (including public health in the context of COVID-19 and informality), and developing tools to empower citizens to navigate misinformation.

4 UNDP Accelerator Labs (2021). *Collective Intelligence for Sustainable Development: Getting Smarter Together*.

Dominican Republic

To build trust between citizens and institutions, the platform *Espacios* was established to connect neighborhood councils with their constituents and with municipal level institutions was created to document and measure progress on priority action areas.

Ecuador

As part of the Lab's strategy to promote open innovation as a mechanism to accelerate SDGs, four Innovation Challenges have been implemented through the digital platform Thinkia-Lab. These innovation challenges have allowed more than 200 people to learn about youth labor informality, plastic pollution and bycatch fishing in oceanic environments, child chronic malnutrition, and climate change. Citizens have acquired new skills by engaging with innovative methodologies like design thinking, systems thinking, and behavioral science. This experience allowed UNDP to provide technical assistance to implement a Citizen Lab at the national level in the framework of Ecuador's Open Government Partnership, now Thinkia-lab is in a transition to become a Citizen Lab. Additionally, the Lab has been working on the project Minga de innovación comunitaria (grassroots innovation challenge) with four markets in Quito, engaging vendors, students, municipal officers, and herbal healers. They are adapting design thinking with popular education tools and expect to create solutions, prototype them and develop a pre-product to solve common challenges to market vendors. Another project is "Flowers in the Air" which involves families who lost a daughter, sibling, niece, to femicide. They mapped routes of memory and (in)justice.

Guatemala

The Lab is currently co-designing a transition plan to implement the latest national solid waste management regulations (launched in August 2021). They are facilitating a participatory process to come up with a set of actions that will be necessary to ensure compliance with the regulations from the perspective of citizens and local governments. The Lab is also engaging volunteer organizations in development activities.

Haiti

The Lab is working on waste management. Throughout their journey in addressing this challenge, they understand that the country might not be able to achieve waste management objectives without the engagement of citizens at large.

Honduras

UNDP Honduras has worked to engage youth in the context of the Human Development Report. The country office involved youth throughout various stages of the report's creation and led several report-related initiatives such as gathering data on youth perceptions, promoting the participation of youth on a national development council, investing in the training of young people, and facilitating young people's role in the co-creation of policy proposals.

Mexico

The Lab has led citizen-engagement initiatives related to several lines of work, including: public consultations as a better space for constructive dialogue related to consultations for development and mining projects; promoting social ties to contribute to the recovery of the COVID-19 crisis at a neighborhood level; identifying collaboration opportunities between citizen initiatives and Mexico City's Department of Integral Risk Management at different stages and types of risks; and conducting a series of regional dialogues with women to inform a feminist foreign affairs stance with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Panama

The Lab used citizen science to monitor and analyze marine debris on beaches of three Panamanian districts. The initiative also served to educate and empower citizens, influence national public policy towards further reducing marine debris, and contribute to the information base for monitoring the achievement of SDG 14.

UNDP Panama has worked to promote a more inclusive and participatory, bottom-up, and citizen-centered approach to decision-making processes. In line with this concept, *Ágora* (a digital platform for citizen participation proposed for the Bicentennial Pact: Closing Gaps) was developed. This platform promotes representative citizen participation, seeks out public policy solutions, and gives Panamanians a voice in redefining the country's social contract.

Paraguay

The Lab is experimenting with a program to strengthen the capacity of family health units to engage the community in their planning processes. They have also designed and facilitated a series of participatory dialogues with civil society on themes related to science, technology and innovation policies. And finally, they are exploring the relationship of social capital with collective action and vulnerability, with a focus on community participation in managing community commons.

Peru

The Lab is working on two initiatives related to citizen engagement. First, they are helping with [Redpública](#), an ecosystem for citizen political participation that is collecting proposals from the population for the creation of an inclusive Citizen Agenda, with a special focus on youth, women and indigenous populations. Second, as part of their core process in the Lab, they are creating a tool ([Future Ahora](#)) for young change-makers to develop and share SDG-related project proposals and to connect with other citizens.

Uruguay

Many of the Lab's initiatives have involved citizen participation, including: a Crowdfunding Campaign in which more than 150 people from 15 countries donated trees to restore Uruguay's native forest; a tactical urbanism pilot in which neighbors, activists and children co-designed and implemented a public intervention to achieve inclusive and sustainable mobility; and a Climate Promise event in which more than 200 teenagers gave their views on climate change. Additionally, the Lab is embarking on a deep listening process that will seek new formats to connect and dialogue with citizens.

EMERGING LESSONS

Learning is central to the process of innovation. While each of these innovative initiatives has resulted in a unique set of context-specific lessons learned, many of these lessons share common elements. In particular, the following four key lessons regarding citizen engagement are emerging across multiple country contexts:



1 | MOVING FROM CONSULTATIVE TO COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

Engaging citizens as an ongoing and co-creative process rather than as a one-off transaction

The knowledge being generated by the Labs points to the reality that effective citizen engagement requires approaches that embrace citizens as co-creators throughout the entire lifecycle of a decision-making process. This requires not only consulting citizens for approval or input after decisions are made but investing the necessary time and resources to develop processes of engagement throughout the planning, design, and

implementation stages of a project or policy. Citizen participation during earlier stages of decision-making processes can help to ensure that plans are better adapted to the local context and more responsive to the needs, perspectives, and desires of the local population. This requires working within a citizen engagement paradigm premised on the idea of working *with* citizens rather than *for* citizens—with an ultimate goal of supporting work led *by* citizens—acknowledging that many times citizens already have the solutions for their own community's problems. There exists a vast wealth of untapped ideas and innovative solutions that could help to advance progress toward the SDGs if citizens were to be engaged as equal partners.

The work of the Labs has reinforced the idea that earlier engagement of citizens can lead to better policy outcomes. For example, a learning cycle on positive deviance of public service delivery in **Paraguay** revealed that a key reason why public servants in family health units perform well is their capacity to engage local communities during the planning stages of their services. The work of the Labs has also shown the potential adverse policy consequences of failing to engage citizens early on. For example, in the context of developing a waste management transition plan **Guatemala**, it has become clear that a lack of early engagement with citizens and local governments in developing a new strategic plan for waste management has led to wide gap in the rules on paper and the capacity for compliance with the rules in practice. Moreover, the work of the Labs has shown the potential of sustained open and active channels of communication with citizens for ensuring that projects can effectively adapt to dynamic and changing realities. For example, in the context of the initiative Barrio Intercambia in **Mexico**, the creation of a permanent WhatsApp group with the community allowed for citizens to continuously identify and share opportunities, changes, questions, and challenges as they arose in real-time. Similarly, efforts in **Colombia** are working to develop new systems and tools to better enable open channels of communication to communities, from communities, and bi-directionally with communities.

Moreover, moving from consultative to collaborative approach requires going beyond a model of isolated workshops and instead creating spaces that allow for deep listening and community immersion. For example, a project in Ecuador working with families of victims of femicide to identify routes of memory and injustice revealed the importance of factors such as intimacy, trust, rituals, and care for fostering open spaces of dialogue.



2 | STARTING FROM A CITIZEN-CENTERED PERSPECTIVE

Taking into account multi-dimensional citizen needs and historical citizen experiences with the state

The knowledge being generated by the Labs suggests the fundamental importance of designing citizen engagement processes from a citizen-centered perspective. This demands approaches based on empathy that take into account citizens' historical experiences with the state and their related emotions that may shape how they interact with the state.

Contemporary citizen engagement initiatives cannot be neatly disentangled from a longer a history of efforts that shape citizens' trust and expectations. This also demands creative approaches that embrace the complexity and multi-dimensionality of potential citizen concerns rather than constricting engagement to very specific siloed issues. Unlike state institutions, citizens' daily experiences are not divided by sector, and thus citizens often have multiple concerns that involve multiple institutional actors which do not fit neatly into previously defined schema.

The work of the Labs points to the fundamental importance of taking into account historical experiences when designing contemporary interventions—in particular, the role of emotions in shaping the nature of state-citizen interactions. For

example, in an exploration regarding community consultations for the approval of mining projects in **Mexico**, the work of the Labs showed how emotions such as fear, uncertainty, violence, shame, desperation, rage, indignation, and sadness played a role shaping how citizens approached engagement with certain public and private sector decision makers. In contexts where, historical interactions have fostered frustration or resentment, it is critical to first build back trust. Another project in **Mexico**, working with Mexico City's Department for Integral Risk Management, suggests that a key initial step to overcome these types of barriers is establishing a common ground where both parties can feel aligned and motivated. Moreover, the work of the Labs suggests that creation of engagement spaces that are sufficiently broad and flexible enough to adapt to the complex reality of citizens' multiple concerns is another factor that matters for ensuring credibility and trust in the process.



3 | COMPLEMENTING ENGAGEMENT WITH EMPOWERMENT

Investing in developing the relevant tools, skills, and information needed to help citizens to make their voices heard

The knowledge being generated by the Labs reminds us that effective citizen engagement requires investing not only in building mechanisms for engagement but also investing in ensuring that citizens are equipped to use them and that their surrounding environments enable them to do so. This means thinking seriously about the role of complementary capacity-building efforts. Importantly, this means going beyond the creation of new tools to also consider citizens' potential barriers to using those tools. This is particularly relevant in the context of digital tools that can further exacerbate participatory inequalities if they are not also accompanied by analog efforts to expand digital infrastructure or teach digital skills.

Information is a powerful tool for shaping citizens' views of what policies should look like as well as their ability to monitor the efficacy of those policies. The work of Labs suggests that in the context of citizen engagement, citizens should not only serve as a source for data to be extracted but they should also be empowered with data themselves—to both create and use data. For example, the use of citizen science to monitor and analyze marine debris on beaches in **Panama** showed how the collective creation and analysis of evidence by citizens could help to not only fill policy information gaps but could also serve to educate and empower citizens to voice their opinions about policies in new ways. The work of the Labs also points the fact that in a global context of pervasive mis- and dis-information, promoting citizens' access to information is not enough. For example, efforts in **Argentina** to combat misinformation related to COVID-19 vaccines through the Healthy Internet Project show the importance of also investing in broader informational environments. Across countries, the work of the Labs and country offices have revealed the powerful role of new technologies in enabling more direct and immediate forms of engagement with citizens. This is evidenced, for example, in the context of the Agora platform in **Panama** which saw a very high rates of participation (10% of registered voters), facilitated by digital platforms accessible by mobile phones, tablets and personal computers. Similarly, the Thinkia-Lab platform in **Ecuador** has allowed citizens to engage directly with multiple stakeholders across a multitude of topics ranging from child malnutrition to climate change to ocean conservation. However, while digital tools carry vast potential to create new opportunities for direct mass citizen engagement, many citizens still do not have the skills to effectively make use of these tools—raising concerns for further exclusion. For example, the efforts in **Bolivia**, in the context of the Barrio Digital initiative to train citizens on the use of various digital tools (such as email, video calling, ecommerce, and messaging platforms) have shown the importance of this type of capacity building for inclusion—particularly in the context of COVID-19 when social distancing demanded new ways of interacting.



4 | BUILDING IN COMMITMENT

Ensuring that the expectations generated by listening to citizens are met by responsive state actions

The knowledge being generated by the Labs underscores the importance of ensuring that efforts to engage citizens also incorporate some sort of binding mechanism for states (or other relevant actors) to commit to act on the information generated as a result of that engagement process. Processes of citizen engagement, to which citizens contribute their time, effort, and insights, generate a set of expectations among those citizens that their inputs will be taken seriously. If these expectations are not met, this can actually result in further distancing citizens from the state—potentially eroding trust and de-legitimizing the process. Too often, citizen engagement processes are not accompanied by clear commitments to act on results or even clear communication over how the collected inputs will be used. Ultimately, effective citizen engagement requires deeper shifts in the broader legal and institutional context to ensure that these processes have “teeth.” This means both institutionalized mechanisms for participatory processes as well as a judicial environment that can work to ensure that these processes are respected and that stakeholders are held accountable to acting on collective agreements.

This can take shape on a variety of levels. Most simply, actors can commit to better communication with citizens, ensuring that information is easily available, accessible, and actionable. For example, during consultations in the Tehuantepec Isthmus in **Mexico**, the Lab distributed posters with illustrated visualizations of the process and agreements of the public consultations in the communities. A strong communication foundation can help to encourage long-term commitments and ensure continuity. Another important way that this can take shape is through the institutionalization of channels of participation, ensuring that citizens have an ongoing

and direct channel to influence policy discussions. For example, in the context of youth and the Human Development Report in **Honduras**, UNDP Honduras went beyond simply gathering youth perceptions data and actually worked to secure the participation of young people on a national development council as well as facilitated their role in the co-creation of relevant policy proposals.

SUMMING UP

The knowledge being generated by the Labs and the country office innovation initiatives supports the notion that effective citizen engagement requires rethinking how traditional mechanisms can work better—with an emphasis on building trust and fostering legitimacy. While digital technology can help to transform some of these mechanisms, it must be accompanied by principles such as co-creation, empathy, empowerment, and accountability. As highlighted in this brief, the experiences of innovation efforts in the region point to four key emerging lessons: (i) effective citizen engagement requires going beyond one-off consultations and embracing more continuous and collaborative approaches; (ii) effective citizen engagement needs to start from a more citizen-centered perspective that takes into account citizens’ multi-dimensional needs and their historical experiences with the state; (iii) effective citizen engagement requires complementary investments in citizen empowerment, through the development of relevant tools, skills, and information that can help citizens to make their voices heard; and (iv) effective citizen engagement should build in commitment devices to ensure that the expectations generated by listening to citizens are met by responsive state actions.