

A HIGH-LEVEL ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

TIME TO ENGAGE

Mobilizing the Private Sector for Health Emergencies Response and Recovery in the Americas

October 14, 2021 | Washington, DC

For the 2021 Leadership for the Americas Gala, the Inter-American Dialogue convened public and private sector leaders in a high-level roundtable discussion on the topic Time to Engage: Mobilizing the Private Sector for Health Emergencies Response and Recovery in the Americas. In the midst of a historic pandemic, the roundtable offered participants an opportunity to listen to the concerns and recommendations of diverse viewpoints on how to best address challenges facing healthcare systems across Latin American and the Caribbean. The leaders participating in the roundtable concluded that continued dialogue and planning between private business, public institutions at both the national and subnational level, and citizens in topics ranging from data sharing to healthcare investment will be necessary to create a strong and resilient health ecosystem for the future.

This report begins by discussing the challenges and solutions that both private enterprise and governments faced during the pandemic. Then, the report will discuss specific challenges, such as an urgent backlog in patients suffering from non-communicable diseases and other non-Covid 19 related conditions that were prevented access to diagnosis, treatment or palliative care during the pandemic, and a lack of trust between stakeholders, that will have to be addressed to have a more resilient system for future health emergencies in the region. Lastly the report will outline policy recommendations, such as collaborating at both the subnational and global levels, improving data sharing, encouraging dialogue between the private and public sectors to boost trust, and generating new sources of funding for Latin American and Caribbean countries to address a lack of investment in health.

Key Takeaways:

- In the pandemic, the private sector played a key role in developing and manufacturing essential medical supplies, providing valuable data for policymaking, and collaborating with public health services to improve patients' access to care. In future emergencies, the private sector must be prepared to expand production and ensure an adequate reserve of basic medical supplies.
- The private sector will be essential in creating responses to future emergencies and finding solutions to long-term health care issues, as well as initiating a digital transformation of the health sector to improve information sharing.
- Stakeholders should act now to create designs for public and private sector cooperation before the next health emergency, enabling governments to quickly implement effective and collaborative response plans.
- Governments must begin prioritizing soft infrastructure projects in health and education and coordinate world-wide on regulations and priorities. Non-governmental organizations must seek to collaborate at the sub-national level with governments.

Public-Private Collaboration Before and During the Pandemic

Medical and Non-Medical Goods

The private sector played an essential role in developing and manufacturing vaccines, medicines, supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) that were essential for responding to Covid-19. Working with unions and governments, the private sector sought more efficient regulations that helped streamline their production. The private sector also stepped in with donations during the pandemic. For example, in Colombia companies donated ventilators and restrained their use of goods that were in high demand for medical purposes, such as oxygen. Although the procurement process was not perfect, one participant noted that its successes were due in part because the region “had a lot of experience [with contracting to the private sector] with AIDS.... Out of that experience, many countries were able to negotiate lower prices.”

Yet, as discussed by other speakers, some countries faced problems with the production and supply of both medical and non-medical goods ranging from advanced PPE to basic foodstuffs. Addressing these bottlenecks and shortages was, and remains to be, a challenge for both the private and public sector. Additionally, one participant observed that private companies and governments did not always agree on government regulations promulgated during the pandemic, as many companies saw government protocols as hampering their ability to operate. Clearer communication between the private and public sectors, from the local to multilateral level, would have prevented friction and ensured stronger cooperation for businesses affected by Covid-19 mitigation measures.

Information, Data, and Digital Services

Both before and during the pandemic, healthcare data and information were increasingly valuable to a broad spectrum of stakeholders to make smarter decisions and enable communication. As described by several participants, statistics that drove evidence-based policy increased predictability and reliability for citizens, governments, and businesses. Moreover, personalized healthcare data that was readily accessible to patients led to better health care outcomes. However, it was acknowledged

that coordination of information and data had significant room for improvement. Multiple participants alluded to the importance of eliminating obstacles that impeded the transfer of a patient’s data between healthcare providers or to the patients themselves. Similarly, a participant referenced a need to improve international information sharing by “break[ing] down the barriers in having people from different levels speak across borders,” including with non-communicable diseases like cancer.

The private sector became an important partner in providing high-level data and information on the progression of the pandemic and its effect on local health systems. This exchange of data and creation of open, transparent databases often allowed for more effective policymaking. It also facilitated private sector operations, as companies could better understand imminent policy problems and devise solutions to address them. Private companies also delivered technological solutions, such as chat boxes and call services, with medical providers so that patients with chronic or non-emergency illnesses could seek medical attention without visiting the hospital.

It was discussed how Bogota created a data hub as part of the Secretary of Health’s prioritization of the transparent publication of health information. The hub, made possible in part through cooperation with the private sector, allowed to track where the disease was concentrated by neighborhood, as well as the positivity of Covid tests and the number of hospital beds available. This data system made it easier for the private and public sectors to work in a coordinated manner, such as ensuring an efficient and effective distribution of patients across hospitals.

Healthcare Services

Medical services were also provided by both public and private actors, and as one attendee noted, in Latin America the “provision of private healthcare services varies greatly,” from systems with enormous amounts of state control to those that are essentially privatized. During the pandemic, at times the provision was completely uncoordinated with the public sector, which had a significant toll on health outcomes, but in other cases private and public health sectors coordination created a successfully integrated national healthcare strategy, such as in Uruguay.

In Bogota, the Secretary of Health pursued collaboration in the provision of medical services. Although the Secretary’s mandate usually centers on regulation and the direction of the public health system, the Secretary’s

office implemented a tripartite agreement that allowed all citizens to receive care regardless of affiliation with private or public health systems. This ensured that all citizens could be visited by doctors, take Covid-19 tests, and identify cases and close contacts to reduce the spread in the city. Most patients who had mild symptoms were able to stay at home and avoid frequenting hospitals, while those with serious illness could access private and public hospitals regardless of their affiliation status. This ultimately improved the distribution of resources and prevented overcrowding.

Challenges for a Post-Covid World

Preparation for Future Emergencies

Most of the collaboration between the private sector and the public sector was conceived in the spur of the moment, and many of the plans necessary for the private and public sectors to contract and collaborate were not always the most suitable arrangement. This has historically been a problem as well: as a participant pointed out, countries across the Americas have often lacked the instruments and planning to utilize and disburse emergency funding. To be better prepared for future challenges, a speaker contended that stakeholders need to design detailed plans for future emergencies. With these plans in place, Ministries of Health could communicate very quickly as the emergencies arise and implement pre-planned negotiations, contracts, and regulations as necessary.

The Healthcare Backlog

It was recognized that many citizens across the region did not receive their normal regimen of medical tests, surgeries, and treatments during the pandemic, as it was frequently difficult to maintain regular medical appointments due to the health crisis. As one speaker remarked, it will be essential to ensure that “the poorest don’t fall behind and lack access for their chronic diseases.” Multiple participants raised concerns about the enormous backlog of patients affected by non-Covid 19 related diseases, described by one speaker as a *tsunami*, as one of the most pressing issues as the pandemic winds down. Cooperation between governments and private companies that provide healthcare services and medical inputs will be essential to resolve the backlog. Additionally, a speaker suggested that as more innovative diagnostic and treatment solutions are developed by the private sector, and digital technologies are deployed, more options will become available to redress this bottleneck.

Data Quality and Information Sharing

The pandemic revealed the weaknesses in both data quality and information sharing in Latin America and the Caribbean, both of which will have to be addressed to strengthen the region’s healthcare system. As participants discussed, inconsistent and unreliable data can have significant consequences: citizens can lose trust in public authorities, policymakers can make poor policy decisions, medical providers can have greater difficulty in providing more personalized health solutions, and disinformation and misinformation can spread more easily. Regardless of the type of data, it was suggested that it was essential that data is high-quality, abides by international standards, and is secure enough to respect the privacy of individuals while also able to be shared as necessary between relevant stakeholders.

While more data and information sharing can lead to better policy and health outcomes, the greater flow of data and information has also corresponded with a rise in misinformation and disinformation. Many participants stressed the importance of coordination between the private and public sectors to distribute accurate and up-to-date information to the public. Without factual information being widely circulated by private and public actors, the public may have trouble accurately assessing misinformation and disinformation.

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Trust between Stakeholders

Historically there has been a lack of trust and dialogue between citizens, governments, and private enterprise. Many discussants agreed that developing greater trust between citizens, the government, and the private sector should be a high-level priority for relevant stakeholders in the foreseeable future. Participants discussed how, without trust, it will be difficult for stakeholders to communicate and integrate their resources or form private-public partnerships to overcome future health emergencies. As one participant remarked, “if citizens think private firms are just greedy, and the government is corrupt, none of this collaboration... flourishes.”

Solutions for a Post-Covid-19 World

Planning for the Future

Participants suggested that the private sector can play a key role in planning both for emergencies and long-term health solutions. As one speaker remarked, the private sector has a business interest in ensuring the health ecosystem is strong, resilient, and sustainable. When also considering Latin America and the Caribbean’s difficulties in raising funds to strengthen the health care system, planning was also highlighted as a low-cost way to react quickly and build greater cooperation between the public and private sectors in the future. A participant cited the example of Movement Health 2030, a partnership that identifies and addresses the health challenges of the future with scalable, sustainable solutions. Its current work includes improving health budget execution in Peru, reducing waiting lists by improving data sharing in Chile, and improving health data interoperability in Colombia.

Enhancing Trust between Stakeholders

Several participants agreed that dialogue between the private and public sectors was essential to building the trust that is often lacking between the two sides. The World Health Organization (WHO) has urged governments to seek out a whole of society approach that involves this kind of engagement, and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) and other regional actors have begun developing a new framework for engagement to help build this dialogue. Beyond dialogue, reliable data and well-developed regulation will be necessary to convince both citizens and the private sector that the public sector

is a reliable partner. Both enhanced coordination of data and regulation and better regulations can help address this. Regional organizations, including the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), have also focused on improving these regulations to provide greater credibility.

Data Quality and Information Sharing

To improve information sharing, a digital transformation of the health sector will be necessary, both to improve the system in a non-pandemic era and to respond to emergencies. A number of ways to improve data quality and information sharing were suggested, including strengthening the capacity of the private sector to self-regulate and voluntarily provide data, increasing laboratory capacity to ensure the reliability of medical data, and encouraging compliance with international data coding and cybersecurity standards to ensure reliable statistics and encourage confidence in citizens. Participants proposed enhancing patient-specific medical information sharing and interoperability between providers to provide a more personalized diagnostics and treatment regime for patients. One speaker reference Movement 2030 that also focuses on multi-sectoral collaboration to eliminate data silos and improving interoperability of data in Chile and Colombia, an example for the region.

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Maintaining Adequate Supplies

In order to be prepared for future health emergencies, it will be essential to expand production and ensure an adequate reserve of supplies. It was suggested that private-public collaboration was most successful when the public sector was able to make large purchases of goods to fund their manufacture, such as with vaccines. However, it was also remarked that this kind of preparation can be difficult, as it often requires the private sector to sacrifice significant resources to maintain capacity even when those goods and services are in demand. While there are many approaches to address supply bottlenecks, the most successful strategies direct funding towards a product with multiple uses and relaxed quality standards, such as cotton swabs, that can be redirected towards the medical emergency when necessary. Maintaining the necessary inventory and production capacity for special use, high quality items like ventilators is a greater challenge.

Funding and Financing

Several participants were concerned about the financing required to prevent future pandemics and ensure strong regional health systems. It was noted that many multilateral institutions focus on “hard infrastructure” like roads and bridges, “soft infrastructure” like health and education has faced what a participant called “diminished resources.” The lack of attention to these soft infrastructure priorities has created a long-term challenge to the development of low and middle-income countries. One participant suggested a new type of bond structure to provide the needed capital to strengthen regional health systems, although this suggestion was not uniformly accepted. Blended finance instruments, capital markets, and partial guarantees from multilateral banks were suggested as possible options to garner the necessary resources. Several participants also suggested leveraging private-public partnerships, both for their capabilities and for their resource potential. However, other participants commented that countries in the region have high debt to GDP ratios and may struggle with financing instruments that will eventually have to be repaid. They expressed concerns about Latin American and Caribbean countries undertaking additional debt.

Sub-National Coordination

It was acknowledged that sub-national governments might provide an outlet for non-government actors seeking to work in Latin American and Caribbean countries with national governments that have trouble providing for

their citizens or may be difficult international partners. Historically, multinational actors like the IDB have been successful working with sub-national levels of government in federal systems, but they “have not cracked the code” in more centralized nations like in Ecuador or Costa Rica. Greater cooperation with sub-national levels of government, even in more centralized countries, was deemed a “critical and important topic” for addressing future challenges in the health sector. As one participant stated, “sometimes we just think it’s too complicated because there are too many, but it also provides an opportunity.”

Global Solutions

Covid-19 demonstrated how globalization remains a powerful force in the world: the pandemic was an international problem that no single country could unilaterally solve on its own. To better address similar global health challenges in the future, participants discussed how it is essential for governments around the world to coordinate regulations and priorities. For example, it is currently difficult for a doctor or a nurse trained in Latin America or the Caribbean to work in places like Canada or the European Union, so one participant suggested that regulatory regimes in this area could be harmonized. Likewise, there was a desire to have standardized regimes across countries for pharmaceuticals, medical devices, medical services. Further still, another participant maintained that breaking down the borders that hold back cross-border communication on preventing and treating non-communicable diseases, including with new medical techniques and health technologies, was similarly necessary.

One speaker highlighted the success of the University of the West Indies to demonstrate how the Caribbean can provide valuable lessons on collaboration and shared resources. Although the University’s cross-country campuses pre-dated the pandemic, it can provide an example to the world in a post-pandemic era. That said, it was noted that even in the case of the University of the West Indies, there have been anti-globalization pressures for some nations to abandon globalized solutions and look inward. A participant warned that both the public and private sectors ought to be cognizant of these results that can be caused by forces like populism.

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This roundtable has been made possible with the generous support of the Ford Foundation and Roche Pharma Latin America

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