

# Governmental responses to COVID-19 Pandemic

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In response to the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, governments worldwide adopted a variety of strategies that include not just preventive or mitigation strategies adopted to “flatten the curve”, but also interventions aiming to mitigate economic and social impacts of the pandemic. RAP’s special issue gathered 17 reflexive, timely and relevant contributions of different governmental approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper we highlight similarities and differences in governmental responses across countries and regions. We uncover and discuss broad themes covered in the symposium, focusing on: (a) impacts of social distancing strategies; (b) economic-relief responses; (c) the role of bargaining, collaboration and coordination across levels of governance; (d) key actors and their role in the pandemic response; (e) pandemic and socio-economic inequalities; and (f) context, policy responses and effectiveness. The symposium adds to an extensive body of knowledge that has been produced on the topic of policy responses to COVID-19 pandemic offering more diverse contextual and comparative analysis.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; comparative public administration; policy response; pandemic response; governmental strategies.

## Respostas governamentais à pandemia da COVID-19

Em resposta aos desafios impostos pela pandemia da COVID-19, os governos em todo mundo adotaram uma diversidade de estratégias que incluem não somente aquelas de prevenção e mitigação com vistas a “achatar a curva”, mas também intervenções com objetivo de mitigar impactos econômicos e sociais. A edição especial da RAP reuniu 17 contribuições reflexivas, relevantes e oportunas, de diferentes abordagens governamentais frente a pandemia da COVID-19. Nesse *paper*, destacamos as semelhanças e diferenças nas respostas governamentais observadas entre os países e regiões. Apresentamos e discutimos os temas mais abrangentes em debate na conferência, enfatizando: (a) os impactos das estratégias de distanciamento social; (b) medidas para aplacar a crise econômica decorrente da pandemia; (c) o papel das negociações, colaboração e coordenação entre os diversos níveis de governo; (d) atores-chave e seus papéis na resposta a pandemia; (e) pandemia e desigualdades socioeconômicas; e (f) contexto, respostas políticas e eficácia. A conferência faz parte de um extenso corpo de conhecimento que vem sendo produzido sobre o tema das respostas políticas a pandemia da COVID-19, oferecendo uma análise contextual e comparativa mais diversa.

**Palavras-chave:** COVID-19; administração pública comparativa; resposta política; resposta à pandemia; estratégias governamentais.

## Respuestas gubernamentales a la pandemia de COVID-19

En respuesta a los desafíos planteados por la pandemia de COVID-19, los gobiernos de todo el mundo adoptaron una variedad de estrategias que incluyen no solo la prevención y mitigación con miras a “aplanar la curva”, sino también intervenciones destinadas a mitigar los impactos económicos y sociales. La edición especial de RAP reunió 17 contribuciones reflexivas, relevantes y oportunas de diferentes enfoques gubernamentales ante la pandemia de COVID-19. En este *paper*, destacamos las similitudes y diferencias en las respuestas gubernamentales observadas entre países y regiones. Presentamos y discutimos los temas más amplios en debate en la conferencia, enfatizando: (a) los impactos de las estrategias de distanciamiento social; (b) medidas para paliar la crisis económica resultante de la pandemia; (c) el papel de las negociaciones, colaboración y coordinación entre los diferentes niveles de gobierno; (d) actores clave y sus roles en la respuesta a la pandemia; (e) pandemia y desigualdades socioeconómicas; y (f) contexto, respuestas políticas y eficacia. La conferencia forma parte de un extenso cuerpo de conocimiento que se ha producido sobre el tema de las respuestas políticas a la pandemia de COVID-19, que ofrece un análisis contextual y comparativo más diverso.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19; administración pública comparada; respuesta política; respuesta a la pandemia; estrategias gubernamentales.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This RAP symposium about Governmental Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic emerged out of the need to learn from our own and others' experiences. One year ago, not one country leader could have imagined the enormous fiscal, political, and administrative challenges this pandemic would bring. In response to these challenges, governments reacted with a variety of responses in terms of degree of innovativeness, flexibility, bottom-up or bottom-down approaches that include not just preventive or mitigation strategies adopted to "flatten the curve" (Baniamin, Rahman & Hasan, 2020), but also interventions aiming to mitigate economic and social impacts of the pandemic. This special issue aimed to gather reflexive, timely and relevant contributions of different governmental approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic by highlighting differences in responses across countries and regions.

To gather comparative approaches and measures against COVID-19, the call for short papers suggested addressing the following issues. Why do some countries handle the virus outbreak more effectively? What are cross-national, cross-regional, within-regional comparisons? How have specific policies (e.g. massive versus focused testing) failed or succeeded in different contexts? How well did political and administrative leaders handle the COVID-19 outbreak? What has been the role of administrative and crises-management capacities in handling the pandemic? What have been the consequences of the pandemic for vulnerable communities? What have been the impacts of the pandemic on education, public security or economic institutions? What has been the role of specific public institutions in handling the emergency? What have been good local or community level practices to mitigate the spread of COVID-19? What coordination and cooperation mechanisms were used between international, national and subnational governments in responding and handling the health crisis?

Our call for proposals went out in March 2020 with a submission deadline of June 1, 2020. The timeliness of this special issue is crucial to highlight because the selected contributions present governmental responses in the first three months of the health crisis. Some contributors updated the responses during the reviewing process that ended in October 2020. Therefore, we caution the readers that these responses might have been intensified, modified or discontinued during the second half of 2020. The editors of this special issue express appreciation to all the anonymous 95 reviewers, as well as to all authors who responded to our call. We received 140 submissions, covering 26 countries. Space limitations forced us to select only 17 short papers, which cover not only specific countries – Australia (Wallace & Dollery, 2021), Brazil (Barberia, Cantarelli, Oliveira, Moreira & Rosa, 2021) Brazil and USA (Casarões & Magalhães, 2021), Colombia (Bello-Gomez & Sanabria-Pulido, 2021), China (Santos, 2021) Estonia (Raudla, 2021), El Salvador (Durán, 2021), Ghana (Antwi-Boasiako, Abbey, Ogbey & Ofori, 2021), Italy and Switzerland (Cepiku, Giordano & Meneguzzo, 2021), Mexico (Sánchez-Cruz, Masinire & López, 2021; and Renteria & Arellano-Gault, 2021), Netherlands (Sullivan & Wolf, 2021), UK (Resende, Paschoalotto, Peckham, C. Passador & J. Passador, 2021) – but also focus on regions such as Africa (Sotola, Pillay & Gebreselassie, 2021), Latin America (Passos & Acácio, 2021) and the BRICS countries (Puppim de Oliveira, Barabashev, Tapscott, Thompson & Qian, 2021) or larger comparative analysis (Cunha, Domingos, Rocha & Torres, 2021). The more diverse contextual approach of this special issue needs to be integrated with the in-depth approach of the first special issue about COVID-19, published by RAP, about "The response of the Brazilian public administration to the challenges of the pandemic" (Peci, 2020).

This symposium contribution adds to an extensive body of knowledge that has been produced on the topic of policy responses to COVID-19 pandemic offering more diverse contextual and comparative analysis. Powell and King-Hill (2020) find more than 400 articles published in Web of Science on July 13, using the terms “COVID and lessons.” Journals, such as *Public Administration Review*, *Policy and Society*, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* and *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, among others, already have published symposiums on the topic. As we gather real-time knowledge about governmental and policy responses to the pandemic, the comprehension of such an unprecedented crisis becomes challenging. Sanitary, economic and social governmental responses interact with contextual socio-demographic factors in shaping the effectiveness of policies for controlling the pandemic (Banjamin, Rahman & Hasan, 2020). In addition, apparent initial success stories in beating the pandemic are not always sustainable in long term. Complex interactions, whose precise causes and effects are difficult to identify and continuously evolving, make unanticipated consequences of policy actions very likely (Agranoff, 2003) and demand in-depth research. The nature of short papers being published in symposiums limits the reach of the analysis and, specifically, policy drawing lessons (Powell & King-Hill, 2020), yet they still contribute to a piecemeal approach to our systemic comprehension of the pandemic policy responses and their consequences.

Most of the papers explicitly or implicitly define the pandemic as a wicked problem that crosses multiple policy domains, levels of government and jurisdictions and demands action from different stakeholders (see Cepiku et al., 2021). Although the 17 pieces are quite diverse in content, some broad themes were identified: (a) impacts of social distancing strategies; (b) economic-relief responses; (c) the role of bargaining, collaboration and coordination across levels of governance; (d) key actors and their role in the pandemic response; (e) pandemic and socio-economic inequalities; and (f) context, policy responses and effectiveness. The articles included fall short of addressing all possible governmental policies or contextual responses. For instance, they address neither technological aspects, psychological effects, scientific innovation, nor global trade, among other factors. Future symposiums should address these issues. The advent of the badly needed vaccine also will trigger further research about countries' access to the vaccine and administrative logistics to carry out campaign vaccinations. Future research also will tell us whether the World Health Organization (WHO), along with the People's Vaccine Alliance, will accomplish their goal of distributing COVID-19 shots to poorer countries (Kelland & Nebehay, 2020), or whether rich countries will hoard COVID-19 vaccines (BBC, 2020). However, many of the papers published here will contribute to a better understanding of these vaccine-related dynamics since they anticipate a role for political leadership (see, for example, Casarões & Magalhães, 2021) or for the way capacities, competencies or responsibilities are distributed among different levels of government and jurisdictions (see, for example, Santos, 2021 or Bello-Gomez & Sanabria-Pulido, 2021).

## 2. SOCIAL DISTANCING POLICIES

Social distancing strategies were the primary non-pharmaceutical sanitary strategies adopted by several government worldwide to control the spread of COVID-19. The effects of such strategies are discussed in two papers from this symposium, contributing to important findings considering the second wave of the pandemic and new curfews adopted in several contexts (e.g UK). Cunha et al. (2021) focus on the effect of social distancing policies on the new coronavirus dissemination,

specifically on the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 and on contagion velocity. Based on the analysis of dataset with daily information on 78 affected countries, they demonstrate that social distancing policies reduced the aggregated number of contaminated people by 4,832 on average (or 17.5/100,000), but only when strict measures are adopted.

The role of a more complete and coherent set of social distancing policies to tackle the pandemic is also one of the main findings of Barberia et al. (2021). Their study builds on the methodology proposed by the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker to evaluate the effect of social distancing policy on the Brazilian population's mobility. They find that anti-contagion policies had a significant effect on producing higher adherence to remain at home, specifically when a more complete and coherent set of policies was introduced and sustained by state government.

### 3. ECONOMIC-RELIEF RESPONSES TO COVID CRISIS

Despite early adherence to social distance policies worldwide, the multiple impacts of the pandemic have triggered other policy responses, particularly to face the economic hardship imposed by the crisis. Our cases illustrate how existing state capacities, the role of political leadership, the difficulties of including informal sectors that characterize a good part of the developing countries, the pressure of organized political groups among others influenced poor policy designs or challenged the implementation of such policies.

Durán (2021) introduces El Salvador's economic measure to face the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to other initiatives, Salvadorian President Nayib Bukele offered a one-time \$300 monetary transfer to needy families that is expected to reach 75% of households and cost about \$450 million. However, this economic measure lacked clear selection criteria, control and accountability mechanisms. To assess the program's effectiveness in targeting the needy, Durán (2021) conducted a survey of 1,222 recipients and non-recipients and ran a quantitative analysis to identify the demographic and socio-economic drivers of program recipients. His results show family income and education are negatively correlated with the probability of getting the monetary transfer.

Antwi-Boasiako et al. (2021) explain Ghana's government responses to COVID-19 by focusing on three areas: health, the economy and social impact. Ghana's economic measures embrace two programs: the Coronavirus Alleviation Programme (CAP) and the Alleviation Program Business Support Scheme (CAPBuSS). They focused on supporting small businesses, protecting livelihoods and reducing job losses, and limiting the impact on economic life. However, Antwi-Boasiako et al. (2021) note that these two programs left out informal sectors of the economy whose micro-businesses count for about 85% of Ghana's economy. Whether the \$1 billion Ghana Cedis (about USD \$174 million) invested in these programs will benefit the intended beneficiaries and micro-businesses is yet to be seen, although Antwi-Boasiako et al. (2021) highlight some progress despite challenges, such as delayed delivery of monetary benefits.

The Dutch case (Sullivan & Wolf, 2021) provides a political economy perspective to explain the distribution of state aid across sectors in the Netherlands, a traditionally corporatist country. While KLM, the biggest player in the Dutch aviation sector, was granted massive loans (about €3.4 billion), the hospitality sector received much less. Sullivan and Wolf (2021) explain this unequal aid distribution

in terms of politicians' interests and interest groups' power, rather than purely economic reasons. Their findings highlight the need to consider political interests even during crises.

Renteria and Arellano-Gault (2021) present the Mexican case by underlining the economic, political and administrative effects of President Lopez Obrador's *downsizing populism*, which undermines and negatively portrays public servants and public organizations. This negative image serves to justify the fiscal austerity adopted by Obrador, which has reduced the size and salaries of bureaucrats, as well as reduced the infrastructure and number of public agencies. As a consequence, these reforms weakened public institutions and their capacity to handle the crisis.

Finally, Wallace and Dollery's (2021) Australian case describes the fiscal impact of New South Wales local governments' closure of 372 public libraries as a measure to stop the virus spread. Although the temporary closing of public libraries has reduced local expenditures, Wallace and Dollery (2021) note the savings are insignificant compared to the likely losses in tax collection due to unemployed homeowners and struggling businesses.

#### 4. MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE UNDER COVID CRISIS

Other studies of this special issue focus on the role of bargaining, coordination and cooperation among different levels of government, jurisdictions or stakeholders (public, nonprofit or private) to tackle the pandemic.

Santos (2021) rely on a multi-level governance theory as an analytical framework to analyze the Chinese government's actions to tackle the pandemic. The multi-level regime involved actors with asymmetric power and from different levels of government (e.g., city of Wuhan, provinces, and central government entities), private sector, civil society organizations and international organizations. Through content analysis reports by the Chinese government, the World Health Organization and media information, Santos (2021) highlight the leadership role of President Xi Jinping and the premier in coordinating the diverse stakeholders, governmental levels and sectors to contain the COVID-19.

The Colombian case highlighted the need for bargaining, collaboration and coordination across levels of government. At the beginning of the health crisis, hurdles to collaboration and coordination were presented in Colombia due to its unitary but decentralized system that granted greater competencies to municipalities. Tensions between national and subnational responses were evident. However, as time passed, the strong chief executive and presidential system uphold power to make decisions in handling the public health emergency. Further intergovernmental clashes of power ceased, as subnational government started complying with the national guidelines.

Puppim de Oliveira et al. (2021) also stress the role of intergovernmental relations in responding to the pandemic, defined as a wicked problem. To understand BRICS countries' variation in capacity to respond and manage a crisis, Puppim de Oliveira et al. (2021) focus on the nature of intergovernmental relations. To explain intergovernmental relations, three dimensions are examined: (a) the political (liberal democracy vs. authoritarian and state system (federal vs. unitary and levels of government) system, (b) reliance on formal or/and informal institutions, and (c) political alignment between levels of government. Their qualitative analysis concludes that state and political systems are influential in timing response to the crisis. Reliance on formal vs. informal institutions matters for implementation. In settings where coordination among layers of government is left to informal agreements

(e.g., Brazil), the entities are more likely to show ineffective and inefficient results when confronted with wicked problems.

Resende et al. (2021) focus on the coordination and cooperation necessary for Primary Health Care measures adopted by the British government in fighting COVID-19 and Cepiku et al. (2021) also attribute the differences between Italian and Swiss cases to a sound model of governance and interinstitutional cooperation, as well as the development of public-private partnerships of sophisticated health care systems. The authors add to these factors the important role played by citizens' and patients' levels of trust toward the hospitals and health system. The effective implementation of a collaborative approach among hospital, territorial medicine and communities in preventing and fighting the pandemic requires that both sides, territorial medicine and communities need to be well developed and equipped with necessary resources.

## 5. KEY ACTORS INVOLVED IN THE PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Crises management scholarship already highlights the key role of political leadership (Boin & t'Hart, 2003; Boin, t'Hart, McConnell & Preston, 2010; Kapucu, 2006) and our previous special issue also presented evidence about leadership sense-making in time of COVID-19 (see Sobral, Carvalho, Łagowska, Furtado & Grobman, 2020).

Many of the papers of this symposium focus on such a theme. The Colombian case also illustrated the key role of Mayor of Bogotá, Claudia López, in questioning President Duque's decisions and the scope of adopted actions in handling the health crisis, as well as the scope of these actions.

Casarões and Magalhães (2021) underscored the roles of Presidents Trump and Bolsonaro, far-right leaders, in mobilizing "medical populism and alt-science" in their attempts to promote hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 treatment, despite controversial results. We believe their contribution is key to our understanding of current development related to COVID-19, such leadership's narratives and their role in vaccination campaigns.

Renteria and Arellano-Gault (2021) also add to our understanding of populist leadership in time of COVID-19, in comparing the Mexican populist federal government and the non-populist Jalisco state and highlighting how populist beliefs drive the bureaucratic actions taken by a populist government to handle the pandemic.

Besides identifying the key actors involved in the Chinese response to COVID-19, Santos (2021) also explore the roles played by those actors. They highlight the mediating role of President Xi Jinping and coordinating role of the premier, while the other actors work on 'brokering' and 'levering.' The strategy was to involve private actors horizontally, while the different levels of government were involved vertically.

Sullivan and Wolff's (2021) Dutch case perfectly illustrates the role of political actors in assigning governmental aid during COVID-19. Through process-tracing and content of hundreds of national media articles, the case seeks to understand the influence of elected leaders, interest groups and experts. Sullivan and Wolff (2021) report that the political ambition, vote-seeking behavior of the elected leaders of the current coalition, as well as the strength of powerful interest groups, (KLM) influenced distribution of financial aid across the aviation and hospitality sectors.

Beyond the experiences of Colombia, Brazil, U.S., the Netherlands and China, it is also important to recognize the key roles that “crisis teams” have played in each of the covered countries. Their names vary from Presidential Task Force (Nigeria), National Command Council (South Africa), and National Public Health Emergency Operation Center (Ethiopia), just to mention a few (Sotola et al., 2021).

Last, but not least, considering the military role in the Latin American region, Passos and Acácio (2021) brought our attention to the role that armed forces has played in enforcing government measures, such as social distancing and lockdowns across 14 Latin American countries. Based on armed forces’ tasks and involvement, Passos and Acácio (2021) attributed a score to each country, with Uruguay exhibiting the lowest score (8) and Honduras the highest (13).

## 6. PANDEMIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

A key lesson that emerged from the pandemic has been the disproportionate effects across countries, regions, cities, races, socio-economic groups and levels of government. To illustrate, Bello-Gomez and Sanabria-Pulido (2021) highlight Colombia’s challenges of uneven healthcare capacity across the national and subnational governments. This unequal capacity is mirrored through the lack of or deficiency of intensive care unit capacity in regions like the Pacific coast and the Amazon and Orinoco basin (states). Moreover, at that time, Amazonas registered the higher number of COVID-19 deaths per capita compounded by the influx of cases from Brazil. Sotola et al. (2021) also underscore the inequality in testing capacity, number of hospital beds, and the number and quality of health system institutions across African countries. Moreover, when compared to other continents, the African region scores low in its diagnostic tools (Nkengasong, 2020).

Passos and Acácio’s (2021) analysis of 14 countries in the Latin American regions also illustrates how the involvement of armed forces in securing borders, policing stay-at-home orders, managing crisis, logistics, and medical care can lead to human rights violations toward the most vulnerable groups.

The Mexican case also illustrates how the existing structural disadvantages that have limited indigenous communities’ access to academic training have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Due to the shutdown of in-person education, Sánchez-Cruz et al. (2021) examine measures taken by the Mexican government to provide online education, in general, and to indigenous groups, in particular. Sánchez-Cruz et al. (2021) reviewed official websites from UNESCO, the Mexican Ministry of Education, and three states – Oaxaca, Yucatán and Chiapas – with the major number of indigenous people, 32%, 28.9% and 27.9%, respectively. Their findings suggest that TV programs and school booklets in indigenous languages mainly have focused on kindergarten and elementary education with very little material for secondary schools. Therefore, despite the measures taken by the national and state governments, these efforts are still limited and biased in favor of monolingual students.

Despite revealing the exacerbation of racial, geographic, and socio-economic inequalities, Durán’s (2021) quantitative study sheds some optimism when investigating the characteristics of those benefited by a cash-transfer program in the Salvadorian context. Although the program lacked control and accountability mechanisms, family income and education seemed to have negatively driven identification of program recipients. His results show correlation with the probability of getting monetary transfers, indicating the important role for the emergency cash-transfer program for vulnerable communities.

## 7. CONTEXT, POLICY RESPONSES AND EFFECTIVENESS

Recently, public administration scholars have paid more careful attention to the contextual factors and institutional differences which may influence government performance and choice of appropriate policy tools and public management practices (Bertelli, Hassan, Honig, Rogger & Williams, 2020; Meier, Rutherford & Avellaneda, 2017; Milward et al., 2016; Peci & Fornazin, 2017; Suzuki & Hur, 2020). Rather than promoting one universally applicable public management approach or assuming that “all states are alike” (Milward et al., 2016, p. 312), scholars now have more carefully examined what contextual factors lead to specific public sector performance and outcomes. As we have seen so far, governments’ measures and responses to COVID-19 are significantly different across countries. Some of the contributions in this special issue highlight unique contextual factors which help to explain variations in government responses and effectiveness of COVID-19 measures.

Raudla (2021) contributes with the Estonian case. Raudla (2021) praises Estonia’s effectiveness in curbing the spread of corona virus and attributes the crisis management success to contextual conditions, such as political factors, quick policy learning, cooperation with the scientific community, and the existing ICT and e-government infrastructure. Country size favors all these mechanisms. Sotola et al.’s (2021) analysis of South African countries also outlined some of the contextual factors benefiting governmental response to the COVID-19 crisis. Community resilience and support, adoption of timing measures, experience in facing other health crises (e.g., HIV, tuberculosis, cholera, polio and ebola) are among the favorable factors in managing the pandemic. For instance, in Ghana, Rwanda and South Africa, citizens’ engagement and support for governmental measures are evident through social media. Nigeria, Uganda, and Lesotho imposed strong measures despite having no or few cases (Sotola et al., 2021). The existence of a Centre for Disease Control in African countries helped to respond promptly to the pandemic due to the robustness of the existing health infrastructure.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to elected officials, public servants, healthcare workers and citizens. The problems that governments have been facing cover a wide range of areas. In this special issue, we present 17 contributions which focus on the impacts of social distancing strategies, economic-relief responses, the role of bargaining, collaboration and coordination across levels of governance, key actors and their role in the pandemic response, pandemic and socio-economic inequalities, and context, policy responses and effectiveness. Our sincere hope is that contributions presented in this special issue will be used as evidence to further stimulate academic and practical discussion in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of government responses to the pandemic and key factors for successes and failures of government approaches and strategies. We also hope that this special issue contributions shed light on some of the neglected regions and topics on pandemic management and contribute to future government strategies and academic discussions.

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