

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

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Operational team

Valeria Betancourt (APC)

Alan Finlay (APC)

Maja Romano (APC)

Project coordination team

Valeria Betancourt (APC)

Cathy Chen (APC)

Flavia Fascendini (APC)

Alan Finlay (APC)

Leila Nachawati (APC)

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Maja Romano (APC)

Project coordinator

Maja Romano (APC)

Editor

Alan Finlay (APC)

Assistant editor and proofreading

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Assistant proofreader

Drew McKeivitt

Publication production support

Cathy Chen (APC)

Graphic design

Monocromo

Cover illustration

Matías Bervejillo



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COLOMBIA

DIGITAL ADAPTATION UNDER COVID-19 – ONLY A REALITY FOR A FEW



Colnodo

Marcy Hernández
<https://www.colnodo.apc.org/>

Introduction

Two years after the dynamics of public and private organisations around the world began to be transformed by the health emergency caused by COVID-19, it is of great importance to review the implications of these new circumstances for civil society organisations (CSOs) in Colombia.

How did the prevention measures adopted during the past two years affect the development of programmes and projects? How were digital solutions incorporated into the new dynamics of organisations? And what were the implications of these changes for what we call the “integral security” of communities – or the context and capacity of communities to enact their rights both online and offline? These are some of the questions that guided the conversation with CSOs and allowed an understanding of the main challenges they face in the midst of such a particular and unexpected context.

The impact of COVID-19 was felt globally, and the world of work was no exception. However, for organisations that run social and humanitarian projects in different regions of the country, the preventive isolation measures and the cancellation of face-to-face events meant great changes in their internal dynamics, in the methods of interacting with communities, and in the perception of the privacy of their information. This had implications for the integral security of children, young people, and leaders and activists working for the defence of human rights.

CSOs in Colombia: Diverse contexts and particular challenges

In order to understand what COVID-19 has meant for CSOs in Colombia, we approached people from different organisations¹ that ran social, educational, economic,

food and humanitarian assistance projects in different regions of the country, including in urban and rural areas, and in ethnic communities. Many of these projects relied on the participation of communities themselves. The organisations explained the immense difficulties they faced when they started the confinement measures in March 2020 and the changes they implemented to continue their institutional programmes so that they could fulfil the objectives of their projects.

Waiting time, uncertainty and internal adjustments

The organisations experienced the arrival of COVID-19 in Colombia and the beginning of preventive isolation in a very similar way: a completely unexpected situation that, in principle, forced the vast majority of people to work remotely, and which required the optimisation of digital tools, particularly tools for communication and interaction, to maintain team dynamics.

What began as a temporary contingency measure became a permanent dynamic in a new institutional context that implied fundamental changes. The waiting period to return to “normality” became a time of uncertainty and constant questioning; a time characterised by profound reflections, adjustments and structural transformations that allowed the entities to continue implementing their programmes and projects within the framework of a new reality.

That first few months of the pandemic resulted in an unprecedented effort by the CSOs to adapt to the sudden change. It demonstrated their strength and social commitment to keep the projects going and to propose alternatives in the development of activities that prioritised face-to-face activities and in which human contact was fundamental for the achievement of project objectives.

For many organisations that have lived through these past two years between uncertainty and opportunity, ICTs have allowed them to digitise training, participation and advocacy processes. This has

partnership with UN Women and the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), in the department of Chocó; Lucy Cardona, lawyer and project coordinator for the AVP Foundation for Social Development; Genith Quitiaquez, a representative of the Pastos Indigenous community in the department of Nariño (during the two years of the pandemic she served as governor of the Gran Tescual Indigenous Reservation, one of the Pastos people's 25 reservations); and Luisa Fernanda González, vice president of the Schools of Peace Foundation, in charge of pedagogy and knowledge management, and a member of the Women and Peace Summit movement.

¹ Persons interviewed: Sandra Saenz Sotomonte, member of the coordinating team of the Women's Network for Economic Empowerment in the Province of Vélez, department of Santander; Liliana García, coordinator of the project “Response to the emergency situation and the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women's lives” carried out by the Lutheran World Federation in

involved improving skills in the use of technological tools and also being more aware of the risks to which they are exposed in the digital world.

For example, for organisations like the Women's Network for Economic Empowerment in the province of Vélez, which runs the Escuela de Formación por el Derecho de las Mujeres a la Ciudad y el Territorio y las Escuelas de Paz (Training School for Women's Rights to the City and Territory and the Schools of Peace), digital tools allowed them to advance in the development of educational programmes. They managed to decentralise and expand the participation of people in different parts of the country, and also to optimise the reuse of resources such as time and travelling costs needed for face-to-face meetings that were usually held in capital cities.

In this sense, CSOs have valued the workshops and advice they have received from Colnodo during this time on digital security issues, with the purpose of guiding them to safeguard their privacy and protect their personal and institutional information. They have also had the opportunity to share this knowledge with children, young people and community leaders, promoting good practices in using the internet.

However, this process of redesigning projects highlighted a great paradox of the digital era. For some organisations this time meant a learning experience; for others, the reality of lack and precariousness. The experiences were as gratifying for some as they were devastating for others.

For some organisations, remote interaction was insufficient because the reality of the communities essentially requires direct face-to-face work. This includes, for example, organisations working on food security, basic sanitation, or attending to violence and psychosocial support in communities that have historically experienced state abandonment. In these communities, the precariousness of living conditions is enormous and, of course, technological devices are very scarce and internet connectivity is deficient.

For organisations working in these communities, remote work within the organisations was a minor change compared to the greater challenge of implementing activities remotely with the communities in the different regions of the country.

Challenges faced by communities

Talking about integral security in the framework of rights implies reviewing the particular conditions of communities and their capacity to exercise autonomy to guarantee their well-being or a good life, both in the physical and digital environment.

While a situation like COVID-19 puts food security at risk, especially in cities that depend to a large extent on centralised distribution channels, the pandemic and the measures implemented to deal with it affected the

daily life of communities, their social and family ties, their productive activity, their economic income and, of course, their physical and mental health. In contexts of precariousness and exclusion these effects were undoubtedly much stronger.

For organisations that experience a reality of deprivation and exclusion, the main digital rights that are violated are not having access to technological devices, quality connectivity and training opportunities. Although this does not seem to be a high priority when compared to fundamental rights related to the guarantee of life, such as access to food, drinking water, health care and the prevention of physical or emotional violence, the fact is that the appropriation of ICTs can facilitate access to other rights.

In this regard, the pandemic forced the redesign of projects and budgets by CSOs so that they included the purchase of tablets, payments for connectivity services, and even allocations for transportation, so that people could travel to places with a better internet signal and thus connect to virtual sessions run by various initiatives. This was an important effort on the part of the CSOs, as these expenses were not initially budgeted for in their projects.

A great example of the capacity for adaptation and appropriation of technologies happened in the Resguardo Indígena Gran Tescual (Gran Tescual Indigenous Reservation), which is located in the south of the country and is home to the Pastos Indigenous people. The project team managed to implement a virtual training strategy aimed at the more technically skilled people in the communities, who received technical training from experts who could not travel to the territory due to isolation measures. This knowledge was then shared with families in the region through in-person visits, strengthening community ties.

However, under COVID-19 preventive measures, CSOs also saw setbacks in some of the processes that were being developed in communities. An example of this is the strengthening of criminal paramilitary gangs in the department of Chocó in the west of Colombia. Here the presence of humanitarian organisations implementing initiatives with the community had been respected, but unfortunately the preventive isolation limited their institutional presence in the region and made it possible for the armed groups to occupy or make their presence felt again in the territory.

Violence against children and women increased, given that they had to be confined under the same roof with their abusers, isolated from their wider family or community support network, and subjected to the conditions laid down by the breadwinner. It is important to mention that women were the first to lose their jobs: for the October-December quarter in 2020, unemployment among women reached 18.7%, compared

to 10.2% for men. And it is also women who dedicate more hours to household chores and unpaid care activities – an average of 28.4 hours per week, while men only dedicate 12.3 hours to these tasks.²

In communities that did have connectivity, many expressed fear of the risks posed by the uncontrolled use of digital tools by children and young people in particular. This includes the personal and family information that they may share with strangers, the sharing of intimate images and the consequences that this entails, cyber-dependence, social isolation, loneliness and mental health problems. All of these are situations that concern CSOs and they consider that they deserve to be addressed. Some educational initiatives have been launched by CSOs in this regard, especially including families and groups of young women. However, this concern requires further consideration and advice from expert organisations.

It is also evident that due to the scarcity of resources and the barriers to accessing virtual education, many young people abandoned their studies in the department of Nariño, also in the west of the country, and bordering Ecuador. Instead they dedicated themselves to collecting coca leaves to contribute to the economic support of their families. As Genith Quitiaquez, a member of the Indigenous Pastos community, put it, “We can no longer recover these young people.”

Conclusion

Dealing with the impact of the health emergency caused by COVID-19 has been a very demanding and exhausting task for CSOs. It has implied profound transformations both in their internal dynamics and in their outreach to communities. This is a learning path that is just beginning, and relies on an openness to change and redesigning work models that strategically combine face-to-face and virtual activities, and which include training to strengthen digital skills, to prevent risks, and on the responsible use of ICTs in communities. This also involves consideration of better ways for people in the regions to access devices and connect to the internet.

It is necessary to listen to the demand for face-to-face activities in particular contexts. In projects related to food security, basic sanitation, violence and psychosocial support, and especially in ethnic and peasant communities, it is very important to prioritise face-to-face activities that ensure a differential³

and gender approach. In addition, for the privacy of information and security of leaders and activists, it is preferable to address sensitive issues in person and not through digital media.

With respect to virtual activities, it is essential to explore new digital tools, innovative methodologies and participatory dynamics that make these spaces much more enjoyable and attractive to those who are not familiar with information and communications technologies (ICTs).

For CSO management teams, it is necessary to establish a relationship of active listening with professionals working in the territories, and to design strategies for fluid communication that allow for a focus more on the quality of the processes involving the communities and less on administrative protocols. It is also important to implement an ethical concept of care that takes into account their well-being in relation to the risks they experience in the territories.

Finally, it is important to mention that the level of understanding and flexibility that donors show in a contingency situation is key to allowing CSOs to propose viable alternatives in the redesign of their activities, so that the objectives of their projects and the requirements of the communities are met. Exerting too much pressure to achieve goals within specific time frames, without taking into account the context, generates emotional exhaustion and frustration in project teams and can also affect the quality of the process.

Action steps

The following considerations are suggested for organisations that are launching digital projects in Colombia, particularly in disadvantaged communities:

- Include a training component in basic digital skills in the design of the projects for those who require it.
- Share best practices in the responsible use of ICTs and tools for risk prevention in digital spaces.
- Include solutions for access to technological devices and/or internet connectivity for people facing these as barriers to getting online.
- Strategically and creatively propose virtual and face-to-face methodologies according to the realistic potential of the communities to participate, taking into account the nuances of their context.
- Consider the concept of care as a cross-cutting ethical framework for all of an organisation's processes. This should include communication, safety, physical and emotional well-being and care of the communities where work is being done.

² Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE), 2021.

³ The differential approach identifies the diverse conceptions, meanings and logics of life and collective and personal thinking shared by people in order to enhance differential actions that materialise the effective enjoyment of their rights. It makes it possible to understand and make visible the dynamics of discrimination and social exclusion, so that from there, actions for transformation to equity and human development can be established.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2021-2022 Report
www.GISWatch.org