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Adaptive Crisis Response: Data-Driven Decisions during COVID-19 in Colombia

BUILDING A CULTURE OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

IPA partnered with the Department of National Planning (DNP) in Colombia.

In 2020, IPA partnered with the Department of National Planning (DNP) in Colombia to support the government with timely data to inform its economic and social policy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. IPA conducted three rounds of the RECOVR survey to document the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. Results from the survey were used to inform the government's national economic recovery strategy, which outlines a COP $135 trillion (approximately USD $37.5 billion) investment in the Colombian economy.

The Challenge

As the global pandemic has evolved, governments have needed to rapidly adapt their policies to mitigate public health risks and promote safety, institute emergency economic assistance, and continue to provide services and public goods. But how can a government keep a pulse on the pandemic's immediate socio-economic effects and better anticipate additional potential challenges? How can populations who are traditionally difficult to account for in official statistics, such as informal workers, be reached? What kind of questions and resulting data are necessary to paint a nuanced, in-depth picture of how people cope with simultaneous health and economic crises?

To support governments in answering these questions, IPA designed and implemented the multi-country RECOVR Survey (Research for Effective COVID-19 Responses).

Local Context | In March 2020, the Government of Colombia enacted a national lockdown to help control the spread of the virus, which ultimately spanned until the end of August. Additional measures included school closures, requirements of masks in public spaces, and travel restrictions. On the socioeconomic front, the government enhanced social protection measures to protect Colombia's most vulnerable people and developed various fiscal responses to mitigate economic fallout from the pandemic.

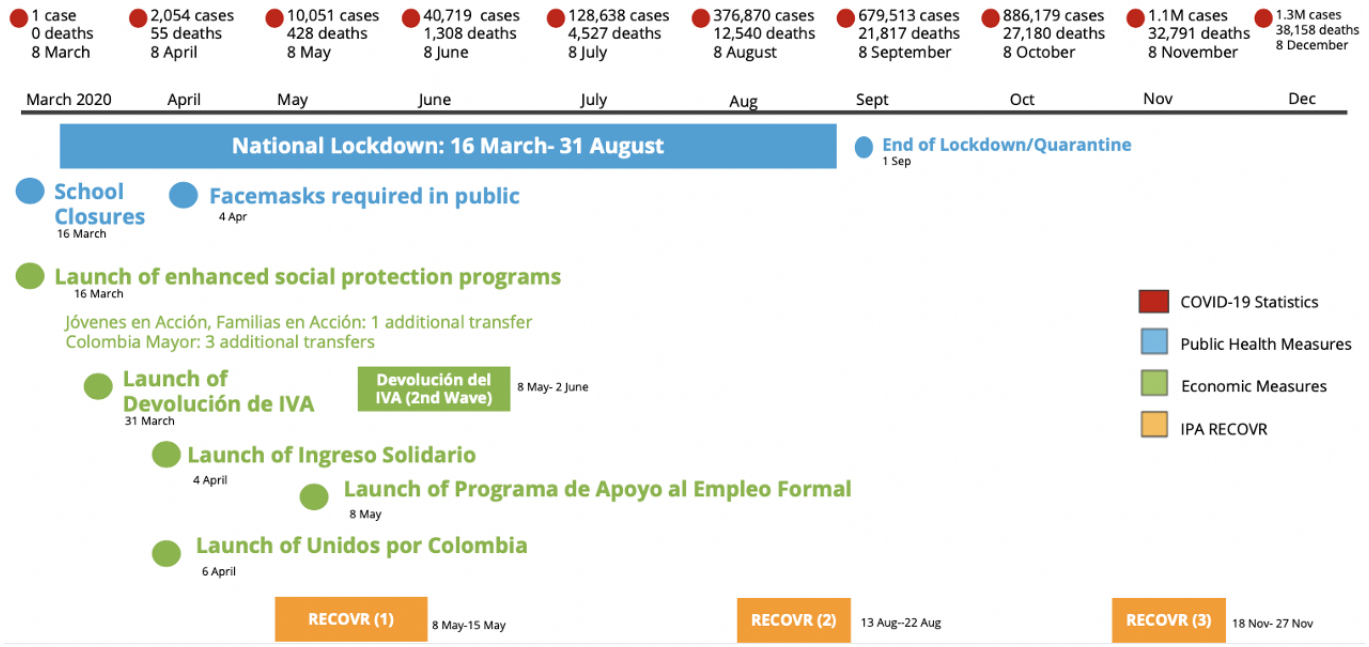
The government launched a series of additional social protection measures and emergency cash transfers through the pre-existing conditional and unconditional cash transfer programs such as Colombia Mayor, and Más Familias en Acción, and the new Ingreso Solidario (Solidarity Income), and Devolución del IVA (VAT Transfer) programs. The Devolucion del IVA had previously been approved in Colombia's 2019 tax reform and was scheduled to be piloted in 2020 and launched in 2021. In response to the pandemic, however, the government accelerated the launch of the transfer program.[1] Prior to the pandemic, Colombia's social protection programs reached 2.8 million families, 1.7 million low-income elderly people, and 296,000 vulnerable youth. By the end of 2020, 2.6 million additional vulnerable families, including informal workers, were covered by these programs.[2]

Colombia's social protection response to COVID comprises a multi-pronged approach:

1. A series of extraordinary payments through the existing Colombia Mayor (COP 80,000/US$20/recipient), Más Familias en Acción (COP 145,000/ US $37/household), and Jóvenes en Acción (COP 356,000/ US$91/recipient);
2. An accelerated timeline and expanded targeting of the Compensacion del IVA to 1 million households that are recipients of cash transfer programs (COP78,454/ US$20/recipient); and
3. The unconditional Ingreso Solidario cash transfer targeting 3 million vulnerable households not registered for other social assistance programs (total COP 160,000/US $130/household).

The government also launched special financing and loan programs for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises through the Unidos por Colombia program (United for Colombia). Such relief programs have also accelerated the country's financial inclusion goals, with over 1.6 million adults opening a credit or savings account for the first time in the first six months of 2020, and another 2.3 million using financial services that had been inactive in December 2019.[3]

Finally, the government also enacted the Programa de Apoyo al Empleo Formal (Formal Employment Support Program), a payroll support program for businesses struggling to pay workers due to the impacts of the pandemic. As of September 2021, over 4 million workers from nearly 150,000 firms have benefitted from the program, which provides partial salary support to employees.



Answering Policy Questions with Data | IPA partnered with the Department of National Planning (DNP) to support the Colombian government's economic response to the pandemic. DNP was a key strategy partner because of its cross-cutting mandate across government: DNP liaises with and confers with planning and policy heads from every ministry and agency within the Colombian government. As such, the reach of the RECOVR survey was significantly amplified through DNP's convening ability. The three rounds of the survey aimed to help the DNP better understand how people in Colombia are coping with the pandemic, particularly with regards to gender, employment status, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.

The timing of the survey aligned with pivotal moments in the arc of the virus and the government's policies: The first survey round was conducted in May 2020, two months out from the initial declaration of the pandemic. The second round took place in August 2020, before the lockdown was lifted. The third round of surveys in November captured the situation a couple of months after the lockdown was lifted.

Policy Opportunity

The partnership with the DNP presented a timely opportunity for IPA to provide the government with data on the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic and engage with the DNP as they leverage these insights to inform policies. By design, the DNP is implementing and evaluating economic relief programs in tandem. To equip the DNP with data to support such analyses, IPA collaborated with DNP's Public Policy Monitoring and Evaluation Department. This unit assesses compliance with policy directives and laws, and studies their impacts to inform future policies. Having this internal "champion" for RECOVR increased opportunities to disseminate results internally and directly inform policymakers' decisions across other ministries and departments.

A partnership based on co-creation | From the outset of the project, IPA created the

survey with the DNP to deliver timely, comprehensive data foundational to their decision-making. To address the multifaceted issues facing people in Colombia, the survey initially included four topics: health and COVID-19 mitigation; social protection, food security and financial resilience; employment and economic activity; and education. IPA also partnered with (and received financial support from) UNICEF Colombia, to inform the fund's programming during the pandemic. Based on additional consultations with UNICEF, IPA expanded the survey to include a module on family relationships and child welfare beginning in the second round.

IPA's approach to co-creation with DNP was centered around the government's policy goals during the pandemic, and the data that DNP needed to advance these priorities across various agencies. By considering the questions "What does DNP need to know?" and "How can this information be applied?" key priorities emerged that were, in turn, reflected as survey questions. For example, DNP was interested in understanding the mental health effects of the pandemic over time, and across sub-groups, so mental health questions form an important part of the health module. In the domains of social protection, food security, and financial resilience, DNP needed to understand the prevalence of skipping or reducing meals, the state of respondents' access to emergency finances, and the reach of the various cash transfer programs. Working to jointly identify DNP's priorities ensured that the survey was designed to produce actionable insights for policymakers.

After each survey round, IPA held a working session with the DNP to present results and subgroup analyses that were of particular policy interest. During these three working sessions, the DNP raised follow-up questions on the survey findings, requested additional analyses, and briefed IPA on ongoing policy discussions within the institution. Finally, the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit presented findings to key decision-makers in the President's Office and planning officers in each of the government's key ministries. The RECOVR results were also shared within the DNP, including with the Director General and Sub Director General, and department heads.

Continuity of RECOVR | The reception and policy-relevance for both UNICEF and DNP of the first two rounds of RECOVR resulted in a third round (originally the survey was only contemplated to include two rounds). Because the first two rounds made salient concerns around childrens' mental health, food security, and parents' perceptions of increased recruitment of organized criminal groups, UNICEF provided critical financial support for the third round. DNP also requested additional questions around vaccine acceptance/hesitancy, so as to better inform eventual public health campaigns on immunization.

Policy Influence

By fostering strong relationships within the DNP and UNICEF, collaborating with technical staff to co-create questions, and sharing results continuously, IPA delivered high-quality, policy-relevant support to inform Colombia's inclusive recovery from COVID-19, which has increased understanding, informed programs and policy, and spurred further research.

Improving policymakers' understanding of who was hardest hit

Daniel Gomez Gaviria, Sub-Director General of the DNP, noted that the RECOVR survey allowed the government to understand the heterogeneous impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on many vulnerable subgroups of the population, such as women and informal workers, along several dimensions including employment, food security, mental health, and financial security.

IPA, UNICEF, and DNP published 7 policy briefs on RECOVR findings on the following topics: key insights, mental health, domestic violence, food security and social protection, child and adolescent recruitment into armed groups, labor markets and employment, and vaccination. These briefs were disseminated to policy and planning departments at key relevant ministries to support continued responses to economic recovery from the pandemic.

Institutionalizing insights into policy

Ultimately, DNP institutionalized insights from the first two rounds of the RECOVR survey into Colombia's policy processes by including findings in the CONPES Strategy No. 4023, the official strategy document from DNP that proposes policies for economic recovery and growth post-pandemic. Specifically, results of the survey on food insecurity and respondents' perceptions of increased child recruitment are referenced in the document. The CONPES[4] is a national council, convened by DNP, whose mandate is to recommend cross-cutting social and economic policies in support of other national strategies and priorities. The strategy calls for a COP $135 trillion investment in the Colombian economy, which, among other key pillars, continues to prioritize social assistance programs to vulnerable populations as part of the country's economic recovery and inclusive growth strategies.

Spurring new research to inform social protection policy

The partnership between IPA and the DNP also facilitated the launch of two new evaluations for DNP and the Department of Social Prosperity to assess the impact of the two highly visible cash transfer programs: the *Devolución del IVA*[5] and the *Ingreso Solidario*[6], which will inform Colombia's social protection programming with rigorous and timely evidence. IPA collaborated with researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles and New York University, and the Inter-American Development Bank, respectively, to evaluate the impact of these two programs, including the effectiveness of delivery mechanisms (cash vs. digital), and this evidence will be used to improve the design of these programs going forward. For example, based on the findings of these evaluations, IPA has provided the Department of Social Prosperity (the agency implementing the transfers) with the latest worldwide evidence on digital financial payments and financial literacy to inform subsequent adjustments to program design.

Sources

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