

“Too soon?, too soon?” or the dilemma of reopening centralist countries in the times of COVID-19

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As time flies, every country must face the unknown regarding the balance between social distance measures and reopening the economy safely. Some countries are windows to the future, but the experiences of our neighbors are best suited to anticipate some aspects of our reality in a few weeks. Some hard-hit areas in the United States, where social disparities explain the huge inter-racial gap of mortality from COVID-19, are clear examples of how inequality can divide the trajectories of different population groups in the same country. Furthermore, the gruesome images from Guayas (Ecuador), Manaus (Brazil), or Loreto (Peru) showed the world the consequences of years of low health-care investments when a pandemic strikes in the most vulnerable areas.

As Colombia reaches the 10.000th confirmed cases, some of these disparities are starting to emerge, which shows that a one-size-fits-all approach is not possible. Let us put this into perspective: Kennedy district, in Bogotá, has more cases than the entire city of Medellín; Leticia, the small capital of the department of Amazonas, has more cases and deaths per 100.000 people than all of the cases mentioned before, and their health infrastructure is in tatters, even for our country standards. These different realities start to unravel as the country enacts new decrees and guidelines for the reopening of the economy, but its compliance in those different contexts can have broad consequences.

Colombia was one of the first Latin American countries to enforce strict social distancing measures to slow down transmission and flatten the curve in the first weeks of the epidemic. As new decrees for reopening were published, social mobility data showed that people at the end of April started to circulate around workplaces, transit stations, and public spaces. As new working sectors emerge from quarantine, it is hard to say which of them contributed the most to increasing infectious contacts. Additionally, as airports, interstate roads, and bus terminals are jurisdictions of the central government, each region has limited power to control these points of entry. Some vulnerable regions with few cases and few resources will not have the contact tracing capacity to deal with the influx of potential new cases from cities experiencing community transmission. Eventually, the non-controlled opening of borders between municipalities and departments could cause epidemic curves to approach each other in time between nearby cities, stressing public health offices as they scramble to locate resources, supplies, and personnel

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where they are needed most. The additive outcome from infectious contacts from both workers released from lockdown and people coming from other regions could have devastating effects on regions of scarce resources. With limited capacity to start testing selected asymptomatic groups and high-risk workers, Colombia is following the example of more advanced economies in terms of reopening. However, without testing, the situation now is that our country is flying partially blind.

One of the central issues to confront this pandemic as society is the trust of citizens in their governments. Countries like Brazil, and the United States, whose leaders minimized the impending risk in the first months of the crisis, now start to face some blunt responses from different sectors of society that criticize their actions. As this tension starts to build in the coming months, it will be increasingly difficult for citizens to accept the government's recommendations, therefore, how governments handle the end of lockdowns will be of paramount importance for the months to come: one botched intent of reopening could derail the entire country's strategy.

How could governments end lockdowns without losing the trust of their citizens? There are four core principles to achieve this purpose:

1. Each region has its particularities, both in the current phase of the epidemic, as well as the capacity of the health system and economic priorities, among others. All plans and guidelines should be developed considering these issues, even when these guidelines seem at odds with some central government provisions.
2. Each region must define an alert system that allows estimating when social distancing measures should be increased. This system must be adjusted to the region's hospital capacity to avoid overwhelming the healthcare system and must be understood by the citizens as the means to evaluate the collective result of all individual prevention actions.
3. Businesses and economic sectors must invest together with governments to increase diagnostic, contact tracing, and healthcare system capacity. Each ICU bed installed, each contact-tracing team enabled is an increase in the number of days free from a lockdown.
4. As the pandemic progresses, responsibilities in democratic countries must be transferred from governments to individuals; people stressed by the turmoil of stay-at-home orders must understand that the responsibility is now in their hands: not to follow hygiene and social distancing guidelines during the reopening only bring us closer to a new lockdown.

When is too soon to open a country? The answer to that question lies in the hands of each region, and the success of any reopening plan lies in the actions taken by each and every one of us.