

Federalism and the COVID-19 crisis: More federalism than ever in Argentina



Author: Matías Bianchi

Matías Bianchi is Director of the think tank *Asuntos del Sur*. He was previously Executive Director of *Instituto Federal de Gobierno* in Córdoba.

The performance of the federal architecture in Argentina in responding to the COVID crisis has been, so far, more than satisfactory. Under these pressing circumstances, the approach taken has predominantly been one of collaboration and cooperation among the different levels of government, which generates optimism about the potential spill-over effect of these practices in the future.

The COVID pandemic is a global challenge. Thus, it is not sufficient to just get a grip on this crisis in our own country, state, or community. Setting aside differences in the level of development, ethnic composition, or ideological beliefs, it is vital that governments and societies work together against this common enemy. We need to collaborate in our use of resources and medical goods; to share best practices and knowledge; and to coordinate healthcare policies, security protocols, and solutions. These measures are crucial to slow the spread of the disease and, eventually, to contain it.

Federalism is a political doctrine founded on those values. It seeks a “unity among diversity”, aiming at “cooperation” and “solidarity” among its constituent parts. Therefore, now more than ever, institutional arrangements like federalism have the potential to provide the infrastructure to develop common solutions for complex global challenges such as the COVID pandemic.

Yet, as we know, these values do not always translate into practice, and the achievements of federalism ultimately depend on what we do with it. In cases such as Mexico, the United States, and Brazil, governors have used their relative autonomy as a defense mechanism against federal governments that have been reluctant, at least initially, to

take decisive measures to contain the spread of the disease. Thus, governors acted unilaterally, many times competing with each other (e.g. in relation to the purchase of ventilators) or ignoring and even contradicting the federal government.

Argentina’s approach to the pandemic has been more promising, with the President activating federal institutions to address key policy responses. From the beginning, President Fernández has been inviting governors to weekly meetings to evaluate the current situation. Moreover, decisions about the extent and duration of the quarantine have been, thus far, made in direct consultation with them.

Moreover, the federal government decided to decentralize the process of COVID testing and create facilities in other provinces when the only lab in the country with the capacity to test suspected COVID-infected patients began to experience serious delays.





At the same time, the governments of the City of Buenos Aires and the Province of Buenos Aires, where 40% of Argentines and 60% of those in the country currently infected with COVID-19 live, are working closely together and with the Federal government. They are coordinating the use of the area's health infrastructure and transportation, helping enforce the quarantine and sharing crucial information about the dynamic situation. For example, the Federal government has taken the protocol for elderly care developed by the government of the City of Buenos Aires and implemented it across the rest of the country. Furthermore, the Federal government, which implemented a price control on essential items, delegated the oversight of this measure to Municipal mayors to increase efficiency in its implementation.

Of course, the approach adopted has not been perfect. Most of these initiatives lack institutionalization and rely primarily on the political will of leaders. Moreover, certain measures have been implemented in violation of the federal constitution. For example, a dozen provinces breached the Federal constitution by unilaterally closing their borders, and one governor expelled foreign citizens from their province. Despite these complications, cooperation among the different levels of government has predominated.

This sets a positive precedent for the country. Historically, cooperation and solidarity has not been the rule of federalism in Argentina, and there is still much work to be done in this regard. Argentina is the most unequal federation in the world. Solutions are needed to address the unacceptable disparities in the level of economic development, education, healthcare and infrastructure that exist across provinces.

In Argentina, we need federalism now more than ever. Hopefully, the practices applied during this pandemic will generate the momentum needed to foster a more solidary and collaborative federal system in other crucial policy areas.

