

GOLD VI

**Case-Based Contribution
to Chapter 6: Connecting**
*GOLD VI Report on Pathways
to urban and territorial equality*

Digital connectivity and the

COVID-19 “forced experiment”

In partnership with:



Digital connectivity and the COVID-19 “forced experiment”

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CHAPTER

6: Connecting

SUMMARY

COVID-19 is the most data-intensive health crisis civilization has ever faced. Yet at the same time it has taken to the heart of our cities' connectivity. At this intersection lies a unique “forced experiment”. Can digitally enhanced advancements in urban connectivity at the time of COVID-19 leave a lasting imprint on urban life as we know it? Have cities been learning from the value of forced experimentation? Three broad areas in which connectivity, access and city leadership have overlapped in the recent crisis might be telling: 1) Dashboards and public information tools, 2) Vulnerability engagement and support tools, and 3) tools geared toward Modelling, predicting and advising. Reviewing cases of these three, this contribution argues for the value of learning not just from but in crisis.

COVID-19 has perhaps become the most data intensive health crisis civilization has ever faced. Yet at the same time it has taken to the heart of our cities' connectivity, disrupting the ways in which people move and connect. At this intersection lies a unique experiment equally capable of reinforcing our deepest urban divides but also enhancing our shift to more equal and cohesive societies. Information, data and technology has been front and centre in the story of coronavirus thus far, and something many cities across both Global North and South have engaged in sizeably. Can digitally enhanced advancements in urban connectivity at the time of COVID-19 leave a lasting imprint on urban life as we know it? Have cities been learning from this "forced experiment"? Three broad areas in which connectivity, access and city leadership have overlapped in the recent crisis might be telling.

Dashboards and public information tools

COVID-19 has brought about promising innovation in communicating, moving and monitoring cities, as well as in informing urban dwellers and deploying technological leaps. Amongst many, the use of dashboards and information dissemination tools have been common practices in many contexts to link digitally driven data to people's access to information and crisis response. **Singapore** (Singapore)'s much praised "all-of-society, all-government approach" has been deeply entrenched with a digital dimension, from tracking to community mobilization, public information and even telemedicine. This has gone hand in hand with the deployment of trackers, often by the private sector, media and Academia rather than individual cities. Examples of local (rather than national) government on this front

might be rarer but also telling of the attempt to open up access to clear and reliable information for urban dwellers to act upon. **Seoul** (South Korea) has been at the forefront of near real-time updates to its trackers and dashboards, and a variety of apps, like Corona NOW, Corona Map or Corona 100m, link with the city's broader approach embedded in a "citizens as mayors" philosophy for its local government connectivity.

Vulnerability engagement and support tools

Many experiments in connectivity have taken place explicitly in cities with an explicit angle toward community engagement, sentiment assessment and support tools. For instance, in **Turin** (Italy), Torino Social Impact, Nesta Italia and others have set up an open crowdsourced platform, *Torino Come Stai?* (Turin How Are You?) to keep track of the wellbeing sentiments of the city's residents. **Detroit** (USA) has leveraged digitally-enhanced to support a food delivery program aimed at those COVID-19 positive dwellers most disrupted by the lockdowns, whilst at the same time implementing a Detroit Food Resource Finder interactive map for the rest of residents to understand close-by sources of provisions. Of course, much of this has also been delivered by community action beyond city hall in most urban settlements, as with a sprawling activity by mutual aid groups both across the global South and North.

Modelling, predicting and advising

Modelling, predictive analytics and the deployment of advice-oriented trackers has also been a key area of activity throughout the crisis in terms of understanding changing

patterns of connectivity and shaping people's access to their cities. Here the government has mostly relied on knowledge partners. In **Melbourne** (Australia), for example, on the spot modelling has been provided to decision makers by the University of Melbourne as to how the pandemic had begun unfolding across one of the most-chronicled lockdowns of 2020. This real-time analysis of connectivity patterns has not just been contributing to effective local suppression of the virus through data-driven policy advice. In fact, this approach led to the *in-crisis* development of an agent-based modelling system which can prove useful in combating a wide variety of health crises that state authorities may be confronted with in the future. Yet similar innovation has also emerged from existing urban analysis capacity. An example of this comes from the rapid analyses provided to local, state, and federal government by the **Gauteng** City Region Observatory (GCRO) in Gauteng, Johannesburg (South Africa), during the last few months. Essential in this context are two key elements: the availability of baseline information as to the state of a city, and readiness for that knowledge to be translatable into both policy-ready but also public-graspable information. The GCRO has long been playing an important role in taking the 'pulse' of a 12 million-strong urban area and, as the COVID-crisis began to hit the South African metropolis in March 2020, it was able to quickly muster accessible and evidence-based information as to the overall situation.

Overall, the possibilities opened up by the crisis to link information on connectivity, to public access questions and actionable information for city leadership is much promising. Yet, this exciting momentum of experiments in digital connectivity is still underpinned by deep digital inequalities. Only 53.6% of the population globally is actually connected

to the internet, with gulfs between the fastest and slowest connections too. The United Nations already warned in 2017 that the 'digital divide' risks becoming a "digital chasm" and could further deepen inequality in global connectivity. Gathering in a sound and scientific way plenty of information, and pushing for fast technological innovation as the crisis unfolds makes a lot of sense from this perspective, but only if it is done with a keen eye towards avoiding that innovation ends up deepening health inequalities.

COVID-19 affords us a unique opportunity to test new ways to understand how our societies work in crisis and how cities could be built after it. Yet, before we jump to concluding what cities will look like after COVID-19, local and national policymakers should recognize there are plenty of what have been called "forced experiments" in the digital redefinition of how cities work that are currently at play in countries the world over. These temporary redefinitions of the ways in which our cities' connectivity functions, and is governed, from which much could be learnt. The many examples above point exactly in this direction. Tracking and understanding them to learn not just from but *in* crisis, and understanding how vulnerabilities can be addressed in doing so, need to be the central ethos to our response to the coronavirus. Encouraging, then, are not just moves by the tech giants but perhaps even more tangibly the communities of scientists, innovators and indeed grassroots movements – as with sprawling initiatives toward data collaborative projects – emerging from COVID-19. We can hope, and should advocate, that it is from that reality that digital connectivity could truly be the sanitation of our time.

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In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 6 on “Connecting”, which focuses on the role of local and regional governments in increasing urban and territorial equality through improving connectivity between and within cities and citizens through more equitable transport, infrastructure and digital connectivity planning and interventions.

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