

BARCELONA AND THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK: LESSONS LEARNED AND OUR WAY FORWARD

Best Practices by the Barcelona City Council to address the Covid-19 outbreak, and the city's approach to economic recovery.



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1. Introduction

With the spread of Covid-19, the world is facing a health crisis with an unprecedented social and economic impact. Cities are at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic, given that they are in the first-line of action and in direct contact with the citizens. Barcelona, like many other cities, has been working hard to make the lockdown easier for those who suffer the most; helping the health system to flat the curve of the contagion, and starting to prepare the city for the socioeconomic crisis in the aftermath of the lockdown.

Since the very start of the pandemic, Barcelona has been in touch with fellow global cities all over the world to exchange practices and lessons learned from the management of the health crisis. Indeed, working through municipal networks is part of the DNA of our city, and is essential in tackling major global challenges such as the one we are dealing with.

As we start preparing for the next phase, this report looks back at the actions that have proven most effective in tackling the health crisis, and sheds light on how we approach the economic crisis.

Covid-19 Situation in Barcelona

On 14th March, the state of emergency was declared in Spain. By then, the daily number of new cases in Barcelona had surged to 520; and in just 7 weeks, the number skyrocketed to 12,799. As this report is being written, the curve has been flattened and now daily new cases account for 187 (as of 23rd April 2020).

However, flattening the curve has been possible thanks to a very restrictive lockdown, from 15th March to 10th May, where children weren't allowed to move from home for 43 days, and shops and restaurants had to be closed – except markets, supermarkets, grocery stores and newsagents.

The goal of the lockdown was to reduce the stress on the health system: at the peak of the pandemic, over 3,000 citizens were hospitalized and almost 600 admitted to intensive care – whereas the average number of beds in the main hospitals of Barcelona is of 900 per hospital).

During the lockdown, the City Council has been helping the citizens of Barcelona, trying to reduce the stress from confinement, and giving specific response to the more vulnerable citizens. The City Council has further provided major support to hospitals and health professionals. Now, that the lockdown is almost over, the City Council is working on the next step: the recovery from the economic crisis related to the pandemic.

Several forecasts on the Spanish economy point to the fact that next year the GDP could be reduced more than 13.6% (during the last economic crisis, in 2009, the Spanish GDP

contracted 3.1%). Being aware of this severe contraction of the economy, the City Council has started to deploy a set of economic instruments to help workers and SMEs as they struggle to survive the economic effects of Covid-19.

Barcelona's strategy

From the outset, the city of Barcelona started to deploy a battery of solutions to face such an extreme situation. The challenge was the need to combine several measures at a different range of intensity. From providing an immediate response for the health system to solving individual needs of vulnerable people. Some of the measures – especially those related to the health emergency – were out of the range of competencies of the local authority. Other measures involved strengthening social services to provide adequate care to vulnerable citizens – with the challenge, of course, to overcome obstacles related to the confinement of both city workers and citizens concerned.

Facing these realities, Barcelona's approach to managing the Covid-19 crisis needed to be multipronged, were, on top of all the measures deployed, the following ones could be highlighted:

- The adaptation of hotels and sports pavilions into medical facilities as a way to increase the number of beds and medical resources available in the city's main hospitals – which saw an increase of 550 beds.
- Increasing public workers' capacity to telework, by enlarging access to the City Council's online work environment and, therefore to maintain their activity.
- Setting up special arrangements to monitor and protect vulnerable groups (homeless people, the elderly living alone, people affected by mental illnesses), combining online tools and physical attention.

Beyond these measures, Barcelona is starting to face the challenge that the economic crisis provoked by the pandemic will represent. Regarding these measures, three should be highlighted:

- A Pact for Barcelona, where, all political parties, and the main stakeholders of the city will work together to define the measures that Barcelona needs to respond correctly to the economic crisis.
- A clear support to SMEs and the self-employed, with a special focus on local retail and the hospitality sector.
- Enhancing strategic sectors, such as the energy one, by implementing an investment fund to boost the generation of renewable energy.

This document aims to review these outbreak-related practices that the city of Barcelona has undertaken.

2. Facing the lockdown¹

Hotel-Hospitals and Pavilion-Hospitals

In preventing the collapse of the city's hospitals and particularly its Intensive Care Units, the city of Barcelona enabled more than 1,700 beds together with resources at the service of the patients of Covid-19. In doing so, municipal facilities such as 4 sport pavilions, and 6 hotels were turned into hospital centres to support actual hospitals in treating Covid-19 patients.

This has been possible thanks to the excellent coordination between the different administrations, namely: the municipal services, the Barcelona Hotels Association, the Municipal Institute of Information Technology and the Barcelona Health Consortium, under the overall guidance of Doctors without Borders.

The first Hospital Pavilions opened their doors to the first patients on 29th March and as these lines are being written, they are still in full operation.

Besides the medically-adapted hotels which support hospitals, a dozen additional hotels have also been set up to accommodate the health personnel on duty, thus avoiding potential spreads to their family members at home.

In order to coordinate all these infrastructures, Barcelona City Council created a Technical Office in charge of all the logistics and material to adapt the different spaces, whilst the health personnel were being taken care of by the Health Department of Catalonia's Government.

If a lesson can be learned from this measure, it is the capacity of cooperation between several partners: hospitals, NGOs, public servants, and private IT operators. The Municipal Institute of Information Technology (IMI) was at the centre of the measure, as it became the core partner that put together the technical needs of the health system with the reality of the assets where the medical resources were deployed (hotels and sport pavilions).

Ensuring the continuity of public services

Protecting public servants

As the city was entering lockdown, the municipality had to decide how to maintain its activity with the public servants staying at home. Regarding this reality, the City Council, first, defined which public services should be considered essential ones, and, it was therefore able to work with the risk of being exposed to the virus. For these workers, the City Council purchased protective material. The result: 12 tons of material: 600,000 IIR surgical masks, 5,000 gowns, 12,000 glasses and 9,600 caps.

¹ The full range of measures implemented by the City Council to address the pandemic is periodically updated and accessible in English here:
<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/relacionsinternacionalsicooperacio/en/international-relations/department-international-relations>

Noteworthy in this area is the opening of the Municipal Fab Labs to produce personal protective equipment with 3D printers in collaboration with the city's 'maker' community. Four weeks after the lockdown started, the count of material produced by the "coronamakers", as they called themselves, was as follows: 730 visors for health centres; 365 simple visors for municipal services and entities; 1,162 polypropylene visors, 87 support material for masks, and 388 door handles.

In addition to this, the Barcelona agency for local economic development, Barcelona Activa, set up a coordinated network of local companies and individuals to make 300,000 cloth masks. It is a value chain with 200 points in a local sewing network, which brings together individuals, textile companies, cutting and sewing companies, laundries and transport. The City Council acquired 17,500 metres of cloth for the production of masks.

Enabling large-scale telework

But besides the essential workers, the rest of the public servants needed to keep their work by telecommuting. In this sense, a plan was drawn up and launched to strengthen the teleworking tools by expanding municipal computer systems so that it was possible to remotely connect for virtually all municipal workers.

To this end, the Municipal Institute of Information Technology increased remote access to corporate services (both corporate and personal equipment) and in this short period it has gone from 200 to over 8,000 potential unique users, out of a total of just over 9,000 municipal workers who have a workstation at work. In addition, the stock of laptops has been strengthened with an increase of more than 450 computers among staff who did not have a device to connect from home.

As a result, the entire municipal workforce is working, of which 57.2% do so in essential services and 63.5% of municipal workers do telework or work remotely. In just over two weeks, the organization has made intensive use of corporate video conferencing systems (nearly 300 weekly meetings that connect more than 2,500 people) while ensuring secure access to critical applications that guarantee the continuity of essential municipal services.

Taking care of vulnerable groups

Barcelona, like the rest of the European continent has an important range of citizens over the age of 65. And like the rest of the Mediterranean societies, elderly people play a central role in the life of cities: they take care of grand-children after school and families are more in touch than in other societies. However, the lockdown broke these relations, and elderly people were obliged to stay home. Considering that Barcelona has a regular population of 90,000 elderly people that live alone, the lockdown has strained their reality. Aware of this, the Barcelona City Council has expanded several services, and created new ones related to elderly people:

- Duplication of the meals distributed by the City Council. Between meals at home (meals on wheels) and the distribution that replaces the soup kitchens for people who need it, the number of meals offered daily by the City Council has gone from 3,700 to 7,900.

- Extension of Telecare which has almost 90,000 users (3,000 daily calls) and the Radars programme (1,600 users) that monitors people living alone with the collaboration of the neighborhood network.
- Extension of the VinclesBCN service (2,400 users) that monitors elderly people and has also created a health channel to address the doubts that these people have.

Digital technology tools have played an important role in increasing the public services related to elderly people during the lockdown. The lesson we can draw from this experience is that the use of digital tools should be enhanced as they allow the number of people attended to be increased, without losing the quality of the services offered.

As the pandemic progressed and confinement measures were adopted, it became clear that ensuring shelter and food to all the city's inhabitants was needed in order to protect lives. To meet the needs of the population in a situation of vulnerability – including homelessness, the City Council has multiplied its efforts to expand social services and aid. This involved enlarging available places for vulnerable people, from 2,200 before the pandemic to over 2,900 places. It also involved ensuring food provision to all the city's inhabitants: the City Council, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and local companies and social entities, created the “Shopping basket against Covid” to distribute 20,000 packs of food products for the elderly, chronically ill and confined patients with COVID-19.

3. After the pandemic, facing the economic crisis

Aware of the major consequences of the lockdown in the economy, the City Council has, during the confinement, prepared several measures to try to reduce the impact of the loss of jobs and earnings of the more vulnerable citizens and firms.

Trying to give a coordinated response to the economic crisis, and even more, trying to implement measures that could enhance the more valuable economic sectors and help the more vulnerable ones to move on to becoming more dynamic in a post-covid economy, Barcelona City Council has created a Centre of Coordination of the Economic Response (CECORE), where all the managing areas related to the economy of the city are present. This Centre aims to monitor the economic situation of the city of Barcelona and to establish projections that allow the best decisions to be made; to monitor the municipal budget situation and develop response actions for activating the economy; to coordinate municipal actions with other economic and social stakeholders, and to establish alliances with other administrations so as to strengthen response actions.

The result of this coordination is that, before the lockdown is over, some measure have been deployed:

The first is that there has been a general relief on the payment of taxes and public prices related to the City Council. Proof of this has been the postponement of the payment of the rent of public housing, and the non-payment of the kindergarten and public sport pavilions during the period of the lockdown. Together with these measures, bars and restaurants have seen the taxes related to the use of public space rebated until after the pandemic.

Besides this first group of measures, Barcelona City Council has created a fund of 25 million Euros to support SMEs and the Self-Employed, with a special focus on local retail and the

hospitality sector. This fund will be deployed in the form of several measures, such as an extra-income of €300 for Self-Employed losing earnings (which is added to the subsidy announced by the regional government), and different initiatives to help the transition into the online market of the local retail. Together with this fund, that should help workers, the City Council has also launched a set of measures to guarantee safety during working trips. With the aim of ensuring a staggered and safe way out of the confinement and the easing of lockdown, mobility measures are being applied to expand the spaces for pedestrians, to improve the bus network and to widen the cycle paths with 20 more kilometers of cycle lanes. The aim is to encourage walking, cycling and public transport and to limit the expansion of private vehicles in the city.

But as previously said the City Council is aware that the battery of measures has to move the immediate responses forward. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, Barcelona's government was planning a future where the economy should be more sustainable, both with the environment, the economy itself and the society. An economy that should create and distribute wealth for all – in short, a society moving to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

The specific plan in economic terms was a Green New Deal for Barcelona – a Barcelona Green Deal. This plan is even more important now, after the Covid-19 crisis, and as part of this plan, the Government agreed with the main political parties of the opposition to create an investment fund with the aim of enhancing the generation of renewable energy by retrofitting buildings and installing photovoltaic panels. This fund, secured with 50 million Euros, will be essential for boosting the economy of Barcelona while transitioning towards the carbon-neutral city we still need.

Finally, but on top of all these measures, Barcelona City Council is aware of the magnitude of the economic crisis and the need to define courageous and innovative measures. To do so, an agreement among all the political parties of the City Council, but also with the main stakeholders of the city, is needed. Therefore, Barcelona's Government has created a Pact for Barcelona, made up of 50 different organizations that will work together to define the measures to be implemented in Barcelona over the next year and a half, and also agree on the definition of the budget that will be needed to achieve these measures.

4. Conclusion

Barcelona, like many other global cities, is facing a set of challenges that have never taken place at the same time: in addition to the new economic crisis and the pandemic, climate change and the digital divide are still there, and now even more so, it is critical how we face all these challenges at the same time.

It is clear that there isn't a plug-and-play approach for cities to effectively respond to the ongoing and rapidly evolving crisis situation. Therefore, it is up to each city to tailor their response in accordance to their local capacities and needs; paying special attention to their health system, urban infrastructure, population density, economic resources and domestic culture. But Barcelona has taken a path where innovation and partnerships are key to trying to overcome the challenges it faces, and even more, to guarantee that the city will not stop.

And to do so, the City Council is not alone. In these difficult times, it has been announced that Barcelona will host again the 2021 Spring edition of biotech and pharma's industry's main gathering in Europe – BIO-Europe Spring 2021. The Mobile World Congress has also renewed its commitment to the city to stay in Barcelona until 2024 – and it is working hard to turn the 2021 edition into a central part of the economic recovery. And the city's scientific ecosystem is at the forefront of international projects to better understand the virus and offer solutions to it.

To slow the growth of the pandemic and protect our people, we have stopped everyday life, leisure, economic and commercial activity, street life, hospitality and catering, etc. That is to say, everything that gives character to the city and is at the same time its source of wealth. But this stoppage is temporary. The City Council is working on defining a "new normal" that will allow the full development of the city's economic, commercial, creative and innovative potential.