UNITED NATIONS
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

UNITED NATIONS MOLDOVA

COVID-19 RESPONSE

DIGITALIZATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES IN MOLDOVA IN THE COVID-19 ERA

The Impact of COVID-19

It is now six months since the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed our world. It has now become clear that our lives are unlikely to return quickly, if ever, to our previous normality. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed flaws and limitations in our existing systems and norms. Everybody has either witnessed or experienced large-scale lockdowns. And although the world is re-opening now, COVID-19 is still spreading around the world. Our societies will have to adapt to a "new normal" in practically everything we do.

Public services are vital for people's livelihoods. Everyday people need public services to help them access services, register for retraining programmes or receive social benefits. In this "new normal" the government should make long-term improvements to public services, with a focus on filling the gaps in infrastructure and designing personalized public services. Virtual communication and connectedness will not end with the end of the lockdown. Face-to-face communication will still be important in service provision. However, the government should gradually create the conditions when people will not feel a radical difference between virtual (digital) and physical delivery of public services. To achieve this, it is crucial for the Government to bring the spirit of human interaction and connectedness to digital public services. How do we combine all of this and make public services efficient, personalized, trustworthy, human and most importantly safe in the post-COVID era in Moldova? We attempt to address these questions in this brief.

Needs and Challenges

1. Digitalization of public services using a human-centred approach

Health experts say the risk of spreading the coronavirus is lowered when social distancing is respected and non-essential visits to closed public spaces (including governmental institutions) are reduced. Digital public services can be a good means to reduce physical interaction between the population and public institutions. This opportunity is supported by the available data on the use of the internet in Moldova: eight out of ten households in Moldova have access to the internet[1] and most people access the internet while at home (93.4%).[2] Use of digital public services is also steadily growing in Moldova from year to year: from 14.6% in 2014 to 37.4% in 2019.[3] At the same time, about 62% of people willing to use digital public services, while another 15% are undecided between conventional face-to-face visits and online public service delivery.[4]

The Moldovan Government, with the support of development partners through its flagship e-governance institution, the E-government Agency (EGA), has managed to develop sound, reliable IT systems and infrastructure in recent years. EGA has successfully introduced a number of products that both help citizens and businesses better interact with government institutions and support government institutions to provide better services. Some of the most notable products include:[5]

[1] Percepția, asimilarea și susținerea de către populație a e-Guvernării și Modernizării serviciilor guvernamentale Sondaj național annual, 2019, p.8
[2] Ibid, p.12
[3] Ibid, p.25
[4] Ibid, p.22
[5] For a complete list of shared government infrastructure, visit https://egov.md/ro/projects

- The **Public Services Portal**, a one-stop-shop for accessing comprehensive information about 648 public services provided by the central Government (a soon-to-be released new version of the portal will include information about services provided by local governments);
- **MPay**, the unified payment system, which allows citizens and businesses to engage with 57 institutions to pay for 644 services and make various other types of payments (taxes, fines etc.);
- **MConnect**, the data exchange platform, which eliminates the need of citizens and businesses to bring documents issued by other institutions. The platform currently integrates 48 institutions, including some from the private sector (such as banks and utilities), enabling them to also improve private sector service delivery;
- **MCloud**, the shared government platform based on cloud computing that offers a safe, reliable and highly accessible environment for public institutions to host their information systems and e-services.

However, digitization of public services is not a panacea: digitalization alone does not bring good public services in itself.[6] Digital public services can only truly generate the expected social impact after thorough reengineering, whereby public services are tailored to the needs of the public, and are personalized and accessible for the population. It is important to bear in mind that about 59% of people in Moldova only use digital public services with the help of somebody else, or they even ask another person to use public services on their behalf.[7] This category is mainly made up of elderly people, who are more vulnerable to COVID-19 (80% of people aged 50-74 cannot use digital public services by themselves without additional assistance).[8] Often, the elderly do not have the necessary skills and abilities to access digital public services.

Accessibility challenges in public services should be tackled through reengineering based on diversity of inputs and a human-centred approach. Together with the people, government institutions should co-create public services[9] with the final beneficiaries: citizens and public sector employees working on public service provision). Since 2016, Moldova Innovation Lab (MiLab/UNDP Moldova) along with the EGA has pushed forward a human-centred concept in public services, the main principle of which is the redesign of public services for and with citizens. In cooperation with the National Chamber of Social Insurance, UNDP and EGA redesigned the monthly childcare benefit, and reengineered honey export procedures together with the Economic Council. Some services (e.g. material aid redesign at rural level) were redesigned using human-centred design to gain practical insights on how this methodology works in the field and what benefits it brings In addition, EGA applied human-centred design to reengineer public services such as unemployment benefits, driving licences and establishing severity of disability for public institutions. Currently, EGA is working on the redesign of 82 public services with the application of human-centred design to make the services more user friendly and accessible to citizens.

Application of human-centred design methodology not only allows the identification of service bottlenecks, but also answers the question of how to make the services accessible to people, to embrace different categories of people and integrate their needs and insights into the final reengineered product. Importantly, it reveals issues with the services, not only from the front-end (customer perspective) but also from the back end (service providers) as well. Based on these insights, EGA also applies a mix of human-centred and business processes reengineering (BPR) methodology to improve the work in the back office of public institutions. In addition, the State Chancellery, together with the EGA have elaborated a framework methodology for public service reengineering[10] to help public service providers modernize their services and processes based on the needs of citizens.

1. Making public institutions spaces safer in the COVID-19 era

As self-isolation restrictions have been relaxed, we should rethink the design of public spaces to ensure that areas which are likely to have high footfall are safe for the public. The Government has undertaken a range of measures in recognition of the threat posed to people's health from the coronavirus. However, the lack of "human" in the current design of public spaces, including the premises of public institutions, leads to long queues, congestion and inability to keep physical distancing and, consequently, put public health and lives at risk. For example, the recent indexing of pensions made elderly people stay in interminable queues without respecting physical distancing or wearing protective equipment. Therefore, the Government has recently modernized the services elderly people,

[6] "Chasing shiny new technology is not the same as delivering good public services. We start with design. We need technology, but you need to design first', Interview with the director of the UK Government Digital Services and partner in Public Digital, Mike Bracken, https://danskdesigncenter.dk/en/tech-will-not-solve-public-service
[7] Percepția, asimilarea și susținerea de către populație a e-Guvernării și Modernizării serviciilor guvernamentale Sondaj național annual, 2019, p.23
[8] Ibid, p.23
[9] Co-creation in service redesign: from an experiment to a "must", http://MiLab/UNDP.md/co-creation-in-service-redesign-from-an-experiment-to-a-must/
[10] https://cancelaria.gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/metodologia_privind_reingineria_serviciilor_publice.pdf

transforming them into digital public services[11]. However, the pandemic times demonstrated that these actions should have a preventive rather than reactive character.

As such, similar situations can happen at any public institution. In particularly, when data shows that about 35% of people still prefer using public services via physical presence at public institutions.[12] In recent years, the Public Services Agency, the largest public services provider in Moldova, has set up one-stop shops (multifunctional centres) for public service delivery across the country. In parallel, the EGA has developed a policy proposal approved by the Public Administration Reform Committee to set up one-stop shops for public service delivery at local and regional level (Unified Centre for Public Services Delivery). One-stop shops aim to improve the efficiency of public service delivery. However, as they encompass a wide range of public services, they consequently envisage their use by many customers at the same time. Taking all this into consideration, the Government should rethink the current design of public institutions to ensure customer safety at these premises, with focus on measures to reduce the risk of infection spreading. For example:

- Public institutions' buildings should be equipped with signage and communications to remind visitors of distancing requirements. All signage should provide colour and tone contrast to make it easily viewable.
- Public institutions should also enable one-way movement of visitors to maintain at least 1.5 m distancing in waiting areas and at footpaths and reduce the probability of queues in physical spacings.
- Public institutions should use signs and posters to increase awareness of good handwashing technique; to avoid touching the face; and the need to cough or sneeze into a tissue (which is binned safely), or into the arm if a tissue is not available.
- The Government should ensure the safety of civil servants working at public institutions through the installation of plastic barriers and provision of protective equipment (face masks, shields, gloves).
- The Government should consider the needs of persons with disabilities and elderly people, who may not be able to stand for long, in the provision for queuing.

The question is how to implement these measures in an inclusive and comprehensive manner. Since 2014, the MiLab/UNDP has helped public institutions to redesign public spaces via co-creation processes to make them more inclusive, accessible and easy to navigate both for visitors/customers and civil servants. In 2014-2015 MiLab/UNDP Moldova worked to redesign a police station in Chisinau (Buiucani sector). In 2019 MiLab/UNDP, along with UNDP Moldova's Migration and Local Development Programme (MIDL) financed by Swiss Development Cooperation, worked on the redesign of an Employment Agency Office in Chisinau. Physical spaces were examined in tandem with the users of the services – citizens and civil servants – to improve the transparency, accessibility and efficiency of governmental offices.

Human-centred approach and co-creation in redesign of public spaces is critical in pandemic times. Along with making public institutions spaces more accessible, these approaches can make them safer. The best experts in public spaces and public services – users and customers – should discuss signage to make it comprehensible and visible, queue management to prevent crowds and congestion, installation of disinfectants, etc. These approaches should be applied by the public institutions to ensure direct interaction with the population.

2. The importance of data for public services in the COVID-19 era

The COVID-19 era will call the Governments to utilize of all available data – both conventional (administrative and statistical data) and/or alternative (big data, thick data, citizen-generated data of other organizations) – to better understand the uncertainties and trends posed by the pandemic. Due to the high speed at which COVID-19 has evolved, and the lag time between data collection and integration of these data into policy desing, some datasets will lose their value, while others can be misleading, leading to mistaken conclusions and policy options. During the pandemic, some Governments applied dynamic data responses to track the spread of COVID-19 and measure the economic and social impacts. The governments of Singapore and Israel used mobile application tracking systems to reduce the spread of the virus in their countries. Even though these Governments took measures to secure the trust of people using these tools (data encryption and destruction of data after 21 days), authorities should be cautious in leveraging personal data due to privacy concerns. Technological solutions – even those based on data use – are not always a useful contribution to solve complex issues. Without true public engagement, it creates only an appearance that technology solves the problems, including those related to COVID-19 pandemic.[13] The real-

[11] Cu privire la aprobarea proiectului de lege pentru modificarea articolului 33 din Legea nr. 156/1998 privind sistemul public de pensii, https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/subiect24_12.pdf
[12] Percepția, asimilarea și susținerea de către populație a e-Guvernării și Modernizării serviciilor guvernamentale
Sondaj național annual, 2019, p.22
[13] 'When the public is focusing on a technology instead of a holistic solution to address complex policy issues, technology theatre is working', Technology Theatre, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/technology-theatre

time data analysis and oversight technology were critical to understand whether these data could be employed to contain COVID-19 spread at the initial stages. Recovery from the pandemic requires to shift the Government's data focus from knowledge and initial understanding (intelligence) to data that will help to design pandemic response programmes (transformation).[14] This approach will be needed to better understand how the pandemic has affected different categories of citizens, and for analysis the lived experiences of people. Ethnographic research and unlocking alternative data can provide fresh and frequently updated insights to feed into a design of transformation programmes.

Predictably, the experience of pandemic will also require the transformation of public services, including digital public services. In the COVID-19 era, Governments should understand what makes citizens access or avoid public services and what the motivations, barriers and pain points are in the use of public services. Importantly, the Government needs to have frequent data reflecting citizen experiences on use of public services to promptly reply to people's appeals and requests. In 2018, MiLab/UNDP Moldova developed a mechanism for citizens' feedback on the quality of public services being used. MiLab/UNDP Moldova analysed the needs and expectations of citizens to design the services assessment and examined public institutions' structures and processes to integrate the data into operational ecosystem and channel the feedback into the policy-making level. As a result, a Public Services Evaluation Tool (PSET) was developed and piloted with several offices of the National Chamber of Social Insurance and Public Services Agency. PSET can be deployed in all public service delivery institutions and provide access to valuable data amplified by civic contribution.

In the COVID-19 era, Governments need mechanisms to sense citizens' expectations and attitudes towards public services (access to new evidence/data) and enable citizens to become co-creators of the public services. In the current reality, civic engagement is critical in the design of public services and premises of public institutions to make them safe.

Way Forward

- Support the Government to apply co-creation and human-centred concepts in the reengineering of public services and physical spaces of public institutions.
- Support the Government agencies to digitalize public services in order to make them more accessible for all.
- Enhance the capacities of the Government to use alternative data in the decision- and policy-making processes for modernization of public services.

For more information: Dmitri Belan, Research Officer, MiLab/ UNDP Moldova, email: dmitri.belan@undp.org or/and Vlad Manoil, Head of Project & Product Management Department, e-Governance Agency, email: vlad.manoil@egov.md

[14] 'Government as a system' for COVID-19, https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2020/04/22/government-as-a-system-for-covid-19/