

Social innovation and experimentation to demonstrate alternatives of development



Francisco Pons

Responsable de Exploración - Laboratorio de Aceleración - PNUD Uruguay



Álvaro Pena

Responsable de Mapeo de Soluciones - Laboratorio de Aceleración - PNUD Uruguay



Paula Mosera

Responsable de Experimentación - Laboratorio de Aceleración - PNUD Uruguay

The pandemic has accentuated the need to do things differently, set common goals and accelerate the necessary transformations in the face of social, economic, and environmental challenges. In this way, the new [Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#) of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) seeks to optimize the impact of development through strategic innovation, supporting governments and communities to build a better future.

In this context, demonstration processes that show an alternative logic of development are necessary to expand possible and desirable futures. For these reasons, we have started a "[Deep Demonstration](#)" process in Uruguay within the UNDP "[Innovation Facility 2.0](#)" framework managed by the Strategic Innovation Unit and supported by the Government of Denmark. The objective is to promote innovation and experimentation processes in departmental governments to address complex challenges of the territories.

These actions will be carried out in partnership with the [Agirre Lehendakaria Center](#) (ALC) Social Innovation Laboratory of the Basque Country. ALC has extensive experience in change processes in different cities, integrating citizens with social innovation platforms that complement (and do not replace) traditional participation channels through community listening, collective interpretation, and co-creation processes. The processes enable a set of interconnected actions to be activated, incorporating a complex system perspective into management, which respond in real-time to existing perceptions in the community.

In this regard, as the UNDP Accelerator Lab, we also have a lot to learn and understand about the influence of culture in innovation processes and how an approach that integrates deep listening, that contemplates the narratives, perceptions, and values of each community can be engines of change for systemic transformation.

The process will begin in the two Departments with the highest population concentration in our country, Montevideo and Canelones, where the highly complex challenges of developing sustainable cities gain particular visibility. On the one hand, in Montevideo, socio-territorial segregation is presented as an initial challenge, where not only the distribution and access to housing must be understood, but also its link with education, employment, the environment, inequality, etc.

On the other hand, in Canelones, we will start covering the creative economy (economic systems in which value is based on new imaginative qualities) and food as a complex challenge with its different dimensions that cross the territory: production, market, consumption, regulations, sustainable practices, and services such as tourism and gastronomy.

Besides, we understood that depth is not only vertical but also horizontal, seeking a sustained change over time in how we operate when intervening in complex development challenges. An example of this type of challenge is socio-territorial segregation, where not only the distribution and access to housing must be understood, but also its link with education, employment, the environment, and inequality. At the same time, this depth is stressed by the urgency and the need to demonstrate new development possibilities in a tangible way in the short term.

Social innovation comprises the successful implementation of an idea, or different arrangements of ideas, that generate shared (public) value. This concept invites us to ask ourselves what would be a successful process for us in a deep demonstration. We understand that it would integrate, at least: 1) demonstrate in practice that a systemic approach of advanced experimentation in public policies is possible to address complex challenges; 2) that the UNDP can be a great ally of public policy when developing experimentation processes for territorial transformation; 3) learn and unlearn enough to share the experience in all its dimensions; 4) that different areas of UNDP can be involved in the process in all stages; 5) that we can develop this experience in other territories in the future.

New ways of working based on collaboration, creation, and collective intelligence are required to achieve this. For this reason, UNDP is promoting methodologies that allow deep immersion in the communities - in their values and behaviors - to achieve better and more effective solutions, designing collaboratively, based on the intelligence of each territory, to generate new transformative narratives and based on the common good. UNDP's differential value lies in being a reliable actor for counterparts and its links with citizens, the national government, and other organizations, safeguarding the process to achieve advanced experimentation.