1 Introduction

The *Fourth Workshop on Mechanism Design for Social Good* (MD4SG’20) was held online on August 16-19, 2020. The authors of this report co-chaired and organized the workshop.

The goal of MD4SG’20 was to highlight research where techniques from algorithms, optimization, and mechanism design, along with insights from other disciplines, have the potential to improve access to opportunity for historically underserved and marginalized communities. The workshop featured five keynote presentations, forty contributed talks including problem pitches and demos, two poster sessions, a panel discussion, and networking events, with a focus on *bridging research and policy*. To this end, participants included researchers as well as practitioners in various government and non-government organizations and industry. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshop was fully virtual, taking place on the online platforms Zoom and gather.town.

The current workshop was the fourth annual workshop (since 2017) in a series of workshops on *Mechanism Design for Social Good* (MD4SG). This was the first independent MD4SG workshop, as the three previous iterations of the workshop were organized alongside the annual ACM Conference on Economics and Computation. All workshops were organized as a part of the larger MD4SG initiative, which is a multidisciplinary and multi-institutional online research initiative, which promotes research at the intersection of computer science, operations, economics, humanities and other disciplines, with the mission of bringing together a range of expertise to tackle problems impacting disadvantaged communities around the world. Since its foundation in 2016, MD4SG has grown to a community of more than 1,000 participants and organizes workshops, tutorials, colloquium series and seven working groups covering topics such as bias, discrimination, and fairness, developing nations, environment and climate, data economies, inequality, civic participation and Asia-Pacific region group.

1.1 Workshop Objectives and Main Contributions

Through the main program of the workshop and the novel practices we adopted, our goal was to organize a workshop that is *multidisciplinary, diverse* and *thought-provoking*. More specifically, the workshop focused on and achieved three objectives:

- **Multi-disciplinary research for social good.** Following the tradition of the MD4SG initiative and the previous workshops, MD4SG’20 brought together researchers, policymakers
and other domain experts and professionals interested in improving equity and developing solutions for problems in a variety of application domains such as education, labor, environment, healthcare, algorithmic fairness, and digital platforms. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, MD4SG’20 attracted a very diverse and large group of members with backgrounds in computer science, AI, operations research, economics, public policy and humanities, while a great number of papers combined methodologies and insights from multiple fields.

Beyond science, policy, and humanities, the workshop also explored the intersection between art and mechanism design for social good. Our keynote speaker Stephanie Dinkins, Artist Fellow at the Berggruen Institute, talked about her practice as a transmedia artist working with AI, which “employs lens-based practices, emerging technologies and community engagement to confront questions of bias in AI, consciousness, data sovereignty and social equity”.

- **Bridging research and policy.** Our workshop emphasized the application- and policy-oriented character of mechanism design for social good by including four different tracks which ranged from technical content (AI/ML, Theory, Empirical Studies and Policy) to more practical applications (Problems and Demonstrations).

As a particular novel highlight from our main program, we encouraged, reviewed, and accepted law and policy papers. Joint research at the intersection of law, policy, economics and computation is underdeveloped. Our session on Technology, Law, and Policy included work from law experts on topics such as privacy, security, and gender equality.

Several of our award-winning papers focused on policy design, by presenting policy-oriented research on topics such as feminicide in Latin America, educational policies for admissions at University of California or school choice in Peru and San Francisco, HIV prevention methods for homeless youth, and discrimination in labor markets.

- **Diversity and inclusion.** One of the main goals of the workshop was to reach out to a broader audience and be inclusive of underserved communities in academia. Such inclusion, especially with regard to gender, racial and geographic diversity and inclusion, has always been a core value and strength of MD4SG.

This year’s workshop achieved a record number of submissions (138), attracting more than double the number of submissions in 2019, and more than 700 registrations from 59 countries around the world.

The workshop successfully reached out to communities and institutions in Africa and Latin America and Caribbean (LAC). More specifically, 20.9% of our registrants identified as Black, African American, or African, while 18% were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Out of 138 submissions in total, we received 7 and 22 submissions from authors based in Africa and LAC respectively.

One of the novel practices of the workshop was linguistic diversity. A significant barrier for the participation of Latin American communities in similar initiatives has been the language. We released the call for participation both in English and Spanish, and our Spanish-speaking Program Committee members reviewed and shepherded 6 submissions written entirely in Spanish. In addition, our plenary speaker Natalia Ariza Ramírez (Economist at National University of Colombia and former Vice Minister of Education in Colombia) gave her plenary talk in Spanish, and conducted a discussion panel with experts from LAC entirely in Spanish. We provided real-time interpretation from Spanish to English for the two events in Spanish, and from English to Spanish for the remaining plenary talks.
For many of our participants, including students and attendees from the Global South, finances were a barrier to attending this workshop. To assist such participants, we provided financial assistance in the form of registration fee waivers to 190 participants and 21 data plan scholarships to participants without Internet access. 18 of the data plan scholarships were awarded to participants located in Africa.

We hope that our outreach to Latin America and Africa will set a positive example for other conferences and research initiatives like MD4SG, and have a long-term impact on increasing the representation and the participation of Latin America in computer science, operations, and related fields.

2 Program Highlights

The main program of the workshop (on August 17-19) ran for three days and included 5 keynote talks, 40 contributed long and short oral presentations, a panel discussion, and two poster sessions. We also organized 4 networking events, starting with an informal reception on August 16.

2.1 Keynote talks

The workshop hosted 5 invited presentations focused on a wide range of topics connecting research for social good and policy design: markets without money, civil liberties and extremism, technology in support of care-giving, educational policies in Colombia, and the dialogue between art and artificial intelligence. Each talk was followed by a short presentation and an open discussion with the participants led by invited discussants. The talks were as follows:

“Research and Policy Challenges in Implementing Colombia’s Ser Pilo Paga Program,”
Speaker: Natalia Ariza Ramírez (Economist at National University of Colombia and former Vice Minister of Education in Colombia)
Discussant: Juan Felipe Penagos (Researcher at Universidad de los Andes);

“Community, Craft, and the Vernacular in Artificial Intelligence,”
Speaker: Stephanie Dinkins (Artist Fellow at the Berggruen Institute)
Discussant: Manuel Sabin (Postdoctoral Researcher at Radboud University);

“Tech in Support of Caregiving: Innovation Opportunities and Ecosystem Challenges,”
Speaker: Deborah Estrin (Associate Dean for Impact at Cornell Tech)
Discussant: Jon Kleinberg (Tisch University Professor at Cornell University);

“Maximizing the Social Good: Markets without Money,”
Speaker: Nicole Immorlica (Senior Researcher at Microsoft Research)
Discussants: Illenin Kondo (Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Notre Dame) and Sera Linardi (Associate Professor of Economics at University of Pittsburgh); and

“How to Fight White Supremacist Extremism While Protecting Civil Liberties: A Multidisciplinary Approach Using Technology, Research, and Policy,”
Speaker: Anjana Rajan (Chief Technology Officer at Polaris)
Discussant: Roya Pakzad (Founder and Director of Taraaz).

2.2 Discussion panel

On the second day of the main program, the workshop highlighted topics from Latin America. To that end, we also hosted a discussion panel in Spanish (with live interpretation to English) which
followed after the keynote talk by Natalia Ariza Ramírez and the session on Education in Practice. The focus of our panel was the intersection of policy and academia within the scope of education in Latin America. Our panelists were Natalia Ariza Ramírez (Economist at National University of Colombia and former Vice Minister of Education in Colombia), José R. Correa (Professor at Universidad de Chile), and Rafael Obregón (UNICEF Paraguay). The engaging discussion introduced the MD4SG community to new policy-oriented problems and relevant experts, and helped the participants understand the unique challenges that policy makers and researchers face with respect to the educational system in Latin American countries, in comparison to the rest of the world and the United States in particular.

2.3 Contributed talks

The workshop received 138 submissions. The final program included 12 long talks, 28 short talks, and 75 poster presentations. The 10 sessions for contributed talks represented the wide range of topics and application domains of interest to the MD4SG community, the combination of novel and diverse methodologies as well as the strong connections of many papers to policy design. In spirit with the workshop theme of bridging research and policy, and to encourage the academic exchange of ideas between law and mechanism design for social good, we included a session dedicated to non-technical papers on the connections among law, technology and policy.

The workshop sessions were the following: (1) Education Policy and Diversity, (2) Technology, Law and Policy, (3) Labor Markets, (4) Environment, Agriculture and Food Consumption, (5) Education in Practice, (6) Healthcare, (7) Fairness and Inequality, (8) Algorithms for Policy and Governance, (9) Online Platforms and Civic Participation, and, finally, (10) Information.

2.4 Awards

The workshop included three categories of awards: paper awards, poster awards, and participant awards.

Three subcategories of paper awards were given to authors for exemplary work. Related to the workshop theme of bridging research and policy, the award-winning papers highlighted new research directions for policy-oriented work in the MD4SG community. They spanned various critical application domains such as education, labor, healthcare, and criminal justice in the United States and worldwide, successfully combining different methodologies in a novel manner. The winning papers that equally shared the Best Paper Award were:

- “Top Percent Policies and the Return to Postsecondary Selectivity”, by Zachary Bleemer, and

Both papers focused on the design of effective educational policies and demonstrated exceptional, policy-driven research that can have a positive impact on the lives of thousands of students from less privileged backgrounds. The former paper used novel data from a “Top Percent” admissions policy implemented by University of California to analyze the impact on barely-eligible applicants on their university admission and future career outcomes, while the latter studied the role of peer preferences in school choice and the design of optimal assignment policies using data from elementary schools in Peru.

The Best Student Paper Award was equally awarded to two papers with student leading authors:
The paper by Wilder et al. focused on the issue of HIV prevalence in homeless youth and the design and successful implementation of a related clinical trial, with a particular highlight on community engagement and informational bottlenecks. The other award-winning paper by Okafor developed a theoretical labor market model with referrals and showed that the combination of homophily and different group size can lead to disparities across different social groups.

This year, we also introduced the **New Horizons Award**, to highlight promising, ongoing work in an emerging area of research. Two working papers shared this award:

- **“Feminicide and Machine Learning: Detecting Gender-based Violence to Strengthen Civil Sector Activism,”** by Catherine D'Ignazio, Helena Suarez Val, Silvana Fumega, Harini Suresh, Isadora Cruxen, Wonyoung So, Maria De Los Angeles Martinez and Mariel Garcia-Montes, and

- **“Modeling Assumptions Clash with the Real World: Configuring Student Assignment Algorithms to Serve Community Needs,”** by Samantha Robertson, Tonya Nguyen, and Niloufar Salehi.

The former paper highlighted a highly relevant topic to the Latin American region by adopting machine learning tools to understand the complex issue of feminicide and inform policy at all levels. The latter paper studied how the theoretical guarantees of the San Francisco Unified School District’s student assignment algorithm can differ from the practical behaviour of parents using the algorithm.

Furthermore, the workshop featured awards for papers accepted for poster presentation. Based on participants’ votes, three papers (one written and presented in Spanish) shared the **Most Popular Poster Award**:

- **“Laboratorio de Derecho y Política Local, propone: Red de Monitores Derecho para Todos,”** by Lorayne Finol Romero, Cecilia González Jeria and Maximiliano Núñez Gómez,

- **“Guaranteeing Maximin Shares: Some Agents Left Behind,”** by Hadi Hosseini, Andrew Searns and Sawyer Welden, and

- **“A Comparison of Living Standards Across the States of America,”** by Vegard Nygaard and Elena Falcettoni.

Finally, participant awards included three **Best Tweet Awards** given to participants with the most engaging tweets or most active social media coverage of the workshop.

### 3 Outcomes and Statistics

#### 3.1 Workshop Growth

Together with the whole MD4SG community, the participation at our annual workshop is also growing year by year.
The first MD4SG workshop took place at the 18th ACM Conference on Economics and Computation (EC ’17) at MIT in Cambridge, MA in 2017 and had 20 submissions. The workshop continued to grow with 30 submissions in 2018 and 65 submissions in 2019. Our virtual workshop MD4SG’20 received more than double the number of submissions in 2019, reaching the record number of 138 submissions and exceeding our initial expectations.

3.2 Submission Statistics
The call for contributions specified four (4) tracks of interest, based on the type of submissions. Out of the 138 paper submissions at the workshop, we received:

- 33 submissions in the AI and Machine Learning track;
- 39 submissions in the Empirical Studies and Policy track;
- 32 submissions in the Theory track; and
- 34 submissions in the Problems and Demonstrations track.

Many submissions in the Empirical Studies and Policy track were position or law papers. A great number of papers also focused on policy interventions informed by empirical methods, as well as the empirical validation of policy interventions. The Problems and Demonstrations track targeted papers from government and policy, as well as non-government organizations and industry, and included white papers documenting open problems or demonstrating prototyped and/or deployed software systems and mobile platforms.

Out of the 40 papers accepted for oral presentation, we had 4 AI/ML papers, 15 empirical studies, 7 law/policy papers, 11 theoretical papers, and 3 demonstration presentations.

We also analyzed the topics studied by the accepted papers at the workshop. As Figure 1 shows in greater detail, the most common research area was fairness in algorithmic design and resource allocation settings, followed by papers in the intersection of law and policy.

With respect to geographic diversity of submissions, we received 7 submissions from authors based in Africa and 22 submissions from authors having affiliations to institutions within LAC.

In terms of linguistic diversity, 6 submissions from LAC-based authors were in the Spanish language. Thanks to our Spanish-speaking program committee members, we were able to review and shepherd those papers. Our shepherding process was applied to papers that needed major revisions to fit the format of the workshop. Notably, we were able to shepherd submissions that were originally in Spanish to help the authors create English posters. This process involved members from the program committee who anonymously provided feedback and guidance to authors regarding their posters and final submissions.

3.3 Participant Statistics
The workshop received more than 700 registrations, out of which 650 registrants responded to our pre-registration survey. Based on the survey responses, we report several useful statistics.

In terms of geography, our participants came from 59 countries around the world, with most of them coming from the following countries, in order of participation: United States, Ethiopia, Mexico, India, Nigeria, Canada, United Kingdom, and Tanzania. Figure 2 illustrates.

Given the time constraints of any online workshop, MD4SG’20 managed to have a good level of representation around the world, especially from Africa and Latin America. Figure 3 includes the relevant statistics for each geographic region.
From the responses to our pre-registration survey, we also collected some useful demographic information about the workshop registrants. Regarding the diversity and inclusion outcomes of the workshop, some statistics are particularly encouraging as Figure 4 illustrates. For example, in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, we had 20.9% registrants who identified as Black, African American, or African, while 18% of registrants were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. With respect to gender diversity, 37.5% of our registrants identified as female. Furthermore, the registrants consisted mostly of younger individuals, with 74% being less than 34 years old. As Figure 5 shows, 38.2% of our registrants were graduate students while 7.5% were undergraduate students.

One of our main goals at MD4SG’20 was to highlight work that can have a significant impact on policy design. To this end, we encouraged the participation of non-academic individuals with policy design experience and domain expertise. Indeed, a significant percentage (11.7% in total) of our registrants had a non-academic, non-research affiliation while many reported that they work in policy or research positions in government or industry.

Finally, the online nature of the workshop introduced several technical challenges. For example, the software platforms (Zoom and gather.town) that we used for the workshop did not allowed us to collect detailed statistics about real-time participation at the workshop. However, at every session of the workshop, the average number of participants on Zoom was 124 (fluctuating between a minimum of 66 and a maximum of 180 users online), while the average number of participants on gather.town was 114 (fluctuating between a minimum of 75 and a maximum of 177 users online).
3.4 Financial Assistance Statistics

The total number of paid registrations was 481. We received 190 registration fee waiver requests and 87 data plan scholarship applications. The most common reasons for applying for some form of financial aid were:

(1) loss of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and

(2) being a student in a developing country and/or without personal income.

We granted all 190 registration fee waivers, while we also purchased and provided 21 data plan scholarships (of 20USD each, in the form of local mobile data) to participants without Internet access; 18 of the data scholarships were awarded to individuals located in Africa. More information about the geographic region of participants who requested financial assistance is provided in Figure 6; our collected data showed that almost half of the financial assistance applications came from the African continent.

Providing financial assistance was possible thanks to our sponsors ACM SIGAI and Schmidt Futures, and ticket sponsorships generously provided by other participants. We collected 923USD in donations from 53 participants at MD4SG’20. The donated amounts ranged from 1USD to 100USD.

4 Novel Practices and Lessons Learned

Under the current backdrop of the global COVID-19 pandemic, most academic events such as MD4SG’20 have been forced to migrate to a virtual setting. From an infrastructural and logistical perspective, we have learned similar lessons from other communities in this same scenario: presentations and plenary talks can be successfully delivered over video platforms such as Zoom,
and a relevant social component can be recreated with software such as gather.town. Although the specific details of effective implementation are important in their own right, we would like to highlight what we believe to be the most salient aspect of our experience: the very virtual nature of the MD4SG initiative (which has held year-round virtual events since its inception in 2016) along with targeted outreach massively increased the degree of diversity and inclusion we could foster. We intend to host virtual events well beyond the pandemic to continue to engage with academics, local stakeholders and relevant policymakers who may otherwise be unable or less willing to attend in-person events.

MD4SG has traditionally had strong representation from international communities (in particular from within the African continent), and for many such members, attending our flagship workshop in the past has been difficult due to: the large financial burden induced by transportation and registration costs; the logistical difficulties in travelling long distances to workshops; and/or visa difficulties when preparing for travel to events that tend to occur in the United States. Given the virtual nature of MD4SG’20, these issues were either minimized or eliminated completely, paving the way for increased participation from communities that make MD4SG unique as an organization.

4.1 Financial Assistance: Registration Fee Waivers and Data Plans

We were mindful of financial constraints and learned that registration infrastructure and financial assistance can amplify the increased participation achieved in virtual events. Although we set a 10USD registration fee, this was mainly to prevent possible spamming attacks, as have happened at other virtual events. We provided financial assistance in the form of fee waivers, and data scholarships which provided individuals with 20USD in the form of local mobile data to participate in the workshop. Ultimately 190 individuals applied for waivers and 87 for data plans. We ultimately delivered registration fee waivers to all those who applied as well as 21 data plan scholarships.

Furthermore, a key innovation within MD4SG’20 registration was the functionality for paying participants to donate towards registration waivers of others in need of assistance. We were taken aback by the generosity of the MD4SG community, as we obtained 923USD in donations, many of
Figure 4: *Diversity and Inclusion*: Demographic information about the MD4SG’20 registrants.

(a) Race

- Other: 3.8%
- Mixed race: 13.3%
- Middle Eastern: 1.0%
- Black/ African American: 20.9%
- Prefer not to say: 4.5%
- White: 32.7%
- Asian: 23.8%

(b) Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin

- Yes: 18.0%
- Other (non-academic): 3.3%
- No: 78.7%

(c) Gender

- Genderqueer/non-binary: 2.4%
- Female: 37.5%
- Male: 58.5%

(d) Age

- 18-24: 22.3%
- 25-34: 51.7%
- 35-44: 14.5%
- 45-54: 7.2%
- 55-64: 2.3%

Figure 5: *Registrant position*: Information about the academic and non-academic positions of registrants at the workshop.
which came in small amounts from other individuals within the very international communities we were striving to include.

4.2 Cultural and Linguistic Inclusion

One of our key goals for MD4SG’20 was to foster participation in the workshop and the research organization as a whole from within the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) community. Early on we noticed that a language divide often creates a barrier for participation for individuals from LAC. In order to engage the LAC community and bridge this divide, we made some key changes to the agenda as well as the promotion of the workshop to expand its inclusiveness for presenters as well as attendees.

For example, prior to the event, we translated our call for papers to Spanish to enable Spanish-speaking participants to share their submissions with us. We also ensured that all our marketing materials for the event were bilingual to encourage further awareness and participation from the community. Not only did this result in us receiving 22 submissions from authors affiliated to institutions within LAC regions, but we also received 6 papers entirely in Spanish—a first for a major technical workshop like MD4SG’20. Many of these submissions addressed key issues in education and policy in LAC, opening up a new spectrum of perspectives to all the workshop participants. Correspondingly, we arranged for the submissions to be reviewed by Spanish speaking members of our Program Committee to ensure that they were impartially and accurately reviewed.

Several of the Spanish submissions were shaped into poster presentations via a shepherding process involving mentorship from the Program Committee. Each poster had an associated lightning talk, the material of which was presented in both, English and Spanish. The sessions were recorded and hosted on YouTube to increase visibility.

From a social perspective, we tried to enhance the participation experience of our Spanish speaking attendees by providing social spaces for Spanish speakers within the Gather platform.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we engaged an official real-time translation and interpretation service to ensure that all our plenary sessions and panel discussions were live-translated from English into Spanish (and vice versa). Feedback from participants was highly positive, and indicates that this sort of initiative is not often observed in events within our community.

Once more, we note that these outreach efforts alongside the virtual nature of MD4SG’20 allowed us to increase participation from the LAC community to an unprecedented degree. We
hope that other established academic events adopt similar practices to decrease linguistic barriers. Such practices have the long-term potential to drastically increase the inclusion of underserved communities in STEM.

4.3 Academic Inclusion of Other Disciplines

One of the key pillars of MD4SG is fostering participation from a variety of disciplines to ensure well-rounded perspectives on the key issues that our community works on.

A big step towards this in our workshop was the inclusion of a number of participants from different backgrounds—most notably, law. To this end, we held a session with four contributed talks on the intersection of Law and Computer Science which was well-received by participants. While there was scope to further align the content of these talks to the backgrounds of the vast majority of the participants, we believe this session was a step in the right direction towards bringing these two fields together.

In the future, we would like to further work alongside our participants from other disciplines to ensure that their work translates more effectively into the language of our community.

4.4 Partnerships and Collaborations Developed

The workshop helped MD4SG solidify our existing partnerships with relevant organizations such as: Schmidt Futures and SIGAI who so kindly helped fund our event. Furthermore, the engagement we received from individuals from LAC has persisted in various ways. First of all, many working groups have increased their membership to include individuals from LAC countries who were previously unaware of MD4SG research. This is especially true of individuals from academic institutions which were heavily represented in the submission process, such as the University of Chile (who’s authors led 4 different submissions). In addition, the success of the LAC outreach from MD4SG’20 has created enough momentum that existing members from MD4SG are currently preparing a work agenda around LAC to create a dedicated LAC working group in the coming year.

4.5 Overall Lessons

The current pandemic is a situation completely unforeseen by all of us within the community. In the midst of these difficult times, we have also learned how valuable the social angle of a workshop like MD4SG’20 can be. A common remark on our user survey is that participants enjoyed the social nature of the gather.town platform driven by the social events prepared by our workshop chairs. MD4SG is currently in the process of providing a similar social space on a regular basis for MD4SG members throughout the year.

5 Conclusion

The 8-month process of preparing, executing, and finalizing the workshop was a unique opportunity to give back to the MD4SG community and further hone the organization’s goal to improve access to opportunity at a global level.

We believe that the workshop was successful in its goals of sharing recent work from our domains as well as further exposing our community to research from other disciplines. We hope that the main program and other activities at the workshop sparked collaborations across fields that have the potential to bridge the political, social and technical facets required to solve the various complex socioeconomic problems that MD4SG’20 highlighted.
Finally, we believe that our efforts to promote inclusiveness were innovative and contributed a great deal towards strengthening ties between various diverse groups within our community. All in all, these efforts combined resulted in a highly successful and enriching workshop for everyone.

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