

ARGENTINA EXPOSURE TRIP

JANUARY 8th to 19th

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JAN 8 – Arrival Buenos Aires

We were met at the Buenos Aires airport by Jaime, our translator and by Susanna and Guillermo from the NGO called Fundacion Vivienda Y Comunidad (FVC).

Our first cursory impressions of the city were very different from what we had expected. Reports from the media and from FCY and its grassroots affiliates had led us to anticipate highly visible signs of poverty.

The scale of modernised urbanisation exceeded our expectations and the visible manifestations of poverty – barrios, street children, beggars, slum neighbourhoods – were there to be seen, but not nearly on the scale we anticipated. This led us to assume two things:

* The impact of the financial crisis has been acute but that the Argentine economy was previously robust and that its collapse caused poverty that was acute in Argentinean terms but that this remains less profound than the poverty in poorer Southern Countries, including urban poor neighbourhoods in SA.

* The impact of the crisis was probably felt most acutely (in relative terms) by the middle classes who now carry the added burden of being conditioned to suffer their poverty in denial - with a class compulsion to maintain appearances of bourgeois wealth.

It needs to be noted that these observations were based on a drive from the airport and a two-hour walk through the city centre. We are yet to visit the communities in the barrios.

In the course of our walk, we came across two visible signs of the resource struggle that underpins the economic crisis. The first was the obvious, now internationally familiar and prevalent sight of Banks with shuttered doors and windows, spray-painted with graffiti denouncing them, politicians and the neo-liberal system.

The second was a mass assembly of hawkers who, over the past 3 days, have had their informal stalls demolished and who have been prohibited from trading outside retail shops. While the public gathering was going on, public and private police with batons, guns and dogs were patrolling the main pedestrian walkways to make sure that there was no illegal trading.

In the evening we had our first interaction with FTV and CCC – the two grassroots organisations that are hosting us. This was a very interesting meeting in which the different strategies and approaches of the participating South African and Argentinian organisations came out into the open.

The first obvious difference was the fact that the Argentine delegation of 15 people was made up of 13 men and 2 women. The South African delegation (excluding our cameraman) was made up of 2 men and 2 women (which is a rare situation for us since women normally outnumber men on exchanges by 4 to 1).

The other obvious differences came out in the discussions - with the Latin Americans focusing on macro issues, since they see a struggle against neo-liberalism as the highway to social and economic transformation, with pragmatic, deliverables as small trunk roads that are necessary for mobilisation but that are not regarded as political tools in their own right.

The imagery presented by the South Africans was starkly different. In their minds a multi-pronged approach rooted in community practices is seen as the most appropriate anti-poverty strategy. From the SA point of view, (but articulated in the language of the Argentine hosts) “neo-liberalism” was within the people, not only a macro master plan, not only an ideological and material juggernaut

descending on the poor from above. For the South Africans the way to combat the global domination of the rich and the powerful was

1) to root transformation and delivery strategies in the communities and

2) to bring hundreds and hundreds of self-conscious communities together to create a critical mass that could influence resource flows and the policies that underpin them.

The meeting was intense but the mood was cordial and concluded with both parties being better informed about the context and the histories of one another and therefore better able to understand their respective imageries and practices around development and transformation.

JAN 11 – Buenos Aires

Three days in the settlements of Buenos Aires have given us a lot to think about. We have seen communities that are extremely well organised and united. We have seen how this is all built around committed, courageous male leadership that is at the same time hierarchical, political, highly ideological and inextricably linked to the trade union movement. We have seen settlement after settlement secured by means of occupation and protest.

But we have also seen local level organisation that revolves around the tired and worn out project practises of baking, sewing, jumble sales and the like. We have seen collectivism and solidarity of a very high nature, but we have seen male leader after male leader at every level of the two organisations (FTV and CCC) who zealously believe that there is a silver bullet that can cure all the ills of poverty. This apparent remedy is a state that functions in the interests of the people.

Are we in a position to judge? We were the first in SA to move away from the silver bullet vision of transformation. We did not expect the post apartheid state to transform society in a way that eradicated poverty. Instead we tried to build deep, community level democracy with the use of savings and with a pragmatic approach to state power.

While this approach initially yielded dividends it has not been sustained, and the extensive mobilisation did not always result in strong communities run by strong and committed and honest leaders who applied themselves to the success of our local systems with the same zeal and dedication as the Buenos Aires leaders have done.

The Argentinian's social programmes are under-developed. There is no real mobilisation and empowerment through savings. And yet the communities have a cohesion and solidarity that with a few exceptions SA Federation linked communities are struggling to maintain.

It is clear that this has a lot to do with externalities. Ironically the Argentinians benefit from the fact that the state has lost all legitimacy and that the poor expect absolutely nothing from it. The South Africans are hampered by a paternalistic state that delivers enough to undermine community level solidarity – seeing it as a threat to party political allegiance. But it is more than this, surely? It also has something to do with the scars and the deep damage caused to poor communities in South Africa by the relentless racial oppression of more than 300 years.

The issue is: do we build a link with the Argentinians? Do we invite them to SA? And more importantly do we look to the rights-based mechanisms of mobilisation – as LPM and TAC have done? It is clear that this approach lacks the coherence and the potential for profound outcomes that the savings model has proven in Thailand, India and in Southern Africa. But the South African Federation is struggling with change. It is not likely that it will alter its methodology in any significant way, but the Argentine movement can help to strengthen the new leadership that is coming to the fore in South Africa.

The South Africans might be able to return the compliment by assisting the Argentinians with meaningful (not lip-service) empowerment of women, with a more pragmatic approach to

development and with a capacity to more effectively mobilise community based resources and knowledge.

JAN 12 – Sante Fe

Successive populist governments in Argentina have responded to pressures from the urban poor by actively encouraging land occupations on the fringes of the major cities – especially Buenos Aires. This strategy served many purposes. First it protected the Peronists' important lower class vote bank. It created deeply entrenched systems of clientilism and patronage. Through these systems of clientilism, other social grants were channeled to urban poor communities.

In addition to cementing loyalty to the Peronists this also enabled the ruling elites to minimise expenditure on infrastructure development and on social programmes. Instead of state driven and state subsidised regularisation of occupied land, the state encouraged or at the very least enabled organised occupations by community loyalists to result in de facto security of tenure for the poor - who were then allowed to get on with upgrading the emerging settlements at their own cost. As far as social grants were concerned (such as the current heads-of-household grants) this meant that instead of these grants being universal, they were limited to communities whose leadership was locked into the systems of patronage and clientilism.

A year ago the Argentine economy took a nosedive and people of the middle and lower classes responded with an outpouring of popular anger. Five Presidents were thrown out by mass action in the space of two weeks.

In the settlements an equally profound shift occurred (it had started before December 2001 but got a huge push by the economic crisis). Community organisations that had been loyal to the state and leaders who had been complicit in the setting up and greasing of the lines of patronage reneged on their loyalty to the Peronist Government and began a real process of autonomous self-government in these settlements.

They also were skilled in the use of various mechanisms developed by the clientilist state (including piquetering, ironically enough) and now used them to extract entitlements but without any concomitant commitments of loyalty. At the same time workers whose factories had been closed, chose to occupy them instead and to keep them running in a manner seemingly similar to the autogestion of the Algerian factories in the 60's.

These autonomous movements of the urban poor – previously clients to the populist government – were soon being wooed by the workers movement, that over the years had shed some, but by no means all of its ideological baggage. Without rejecting its new and still fragile focus on strategic and pragmatic interactions with the state - based on local social, political and economic autonomy - the movements of the urban poor began to respond positively to the overtures of the unions. At the same time the unions began to recognise that the underclasses – previous vassals of the Peronists – were a potentially critical aspect of the emerging political landscape and began to include them as a sort of union of the unemployed.

In the process the diluted, but still prevalent Latin American pre-occupation on seizure of the state began to impact on the urban poor movement. Having embraced autonomous self-management and the rejection of the state as an outcome of the crisis of 2001, the urban poor movement now talks and plans and acts in terms of a kind of re-constituted Leninism that envisages a solution to poverty through a "genuine Government of the People".

Nevertheless the seeds of autonomy and local self management are very much alive – although very fragile – with the gravest risk to their survival coming, irony of ironies, from a Lula type Government that may emerge within the next five years (not at the next election this year in spite of optimistic expectations from the cadres in the union and urban poor movements).

These manifestations of a local, community-based response to the current contradictions, articulated best, but very imperfectly, in the survival strategies of the women, are playing second fiddle – by a

long way – to the ideological struggle and to the most recent Argentinian expression of Latin America's seemingly endless rendition of spectacular ritualised contestation of the state, the heroics of the Piqueteros.

It is this fragile outgrowth of community level self-reliance that is a tantalising attraction to the SDI network. Although it has already been institutionalised in predictable project form (with a decades long pedigree), such as sewing, baking, day care centres and the like, it is throwing up many women leaders who are networking with one another and getting back-handed credit (much like women did in the early days of NSDF) for their lead role in community work, family survival and even head-on challenge to the state.

Jan 13 – Rosario.

Our hosts are Fundacion Vivienda Y Comunidad (FVYC), a small, respected NGO that provides various forms of technical assistance to a social movement of the urban poor, known as Federacion d'Tierra con Vivienda (FTV).

FTV was formed in 1998 at an anti-poverty conference attended by grassroots organisations throughout Argentina. At the conference it was decided that land and housing were pressing issues and that they were the appropriate mechanism for forging a movement of the urban poor. (This is a direct parallel with the SAHPF).

Luis D'elia community leader from La Matanza, a major slum in greater Buenos Aires was chosen as leader of FTV. Delia made three key strategic decisions.

The most significant one, as far as he was concerned, was forging a direct link with CTA, one of Argentina's major Trade Union Movements. This led to the representation and mobilisation of urban poor people as adjuncts to the workers movement – in effect as workers who were out of work. The trade off for this reductionist perspective was a high public profile and close links to organised contestants of the Peronist Government and the neo-liberal economy.

The second decision was to adopt piquetering as a strategy to demand entitlements from the state. This extraordinary practice of camping entire communities on major roads in the city for days on end continues to bear fruit for FTV and many of its members. The activities of the Piqueteros result in the State making agreements with FTV (and its ally CCC) to provide heads of household grants (150 pesos per month) to members of the movement. Those who receive these grants are the piqueteros themselves, those who run the organisation and those who manage its projects (baking, creches, feeding schemes and so on).

We all chuckled at the rich irony here. The South Africans and other SDI affiliates are known for their pragmatic non-confrontational approach towards the state. The Argentinians (and most Latin American social movements) are known for their non-collaboration with state institutions and their pride in "autogestion" (self-management). And yet the South Africans and their allies in SDI build their organisation through savings and the aspiration for financial (and other) autonomy from the state, while the Argentinian movement survives because of resource injections that come directly from the state.

This realisation helped us immensely to crack open the steel curtain of stereotypes and realise that many of the differences (and similarities) between the SA and the Argentine initiatives were constructed in our respective discourses and refuted in our respective practices.

From this moment onwards we set our ideologies aside – even though the South Africans continued to preach savings and the Argentinians continued to harangue us with their neo-liberal critique. The members of the two Federations began to seek one another out as human beings faced with the same burdens of poverty and dispossession and began to focus on what united them and what they could learn from one another's diverse experiences.

This was a watershed moment – not only for this exchange, but for SDI strategies as a whole. Suddenly we felt confident to engage rights-based organisations without feeling a need to defend or reject our own strategies. We saw commonalities first, and when we saw differences it was not without a critical eye, but it was with the hope of learning and adaptation, instead of scepticism and rejection.

JAN 14, 15 – Buenos Aires

After an exhausting and relatively unproductive 48-hour chase to Rosario and Santa Fe, we returned to Buenos Aires. This time we were exposed to barrios and shantytowns in the capital city itself. In the course of the two days we gained a slightly better understanding of one of the interesting paradoxes in this city – a paradox it shares with most cities on earth.

Those communities who have illegally occupied land on the peripheries of the metropolitan area have generally been able to find security without legal tenure (see above) while those who live, legally as well as illegally, in the inner city are significantly more vulnerable and regularly face threats of eviction. This is the case in La Boca, where we visited families in the disused Donizetti factory, and in shanty towns no 24 and 31, as they are known in the city.

Typically these communities were much more interested in what Liz and Charlotte had to say about savings and what Thami and I had to say about pragmatic approaches to the state. Typically the male leaders were even more vociferously ideological than their counterparts in the settlements in La Matanza etc. (although the iconography and the rhetoric were less prevalent). But even these male leaders responded with interest eventually to our discussions about enumerations and about mobilisation through the gathering of information.

We were all taken aback by the abominable living conditions in the Donizetti Factory down by the harbour, where fifteen to twenty shacks have been built within the factory building itself. The community leaders indicated that there were more than 10,000 families living in similar conditions in La Boca, all indirectly facing eviction as a result of the intention of the city authorities to gentrify the neighbourhood.

It was clear to me that this was fruitful terrain for SDI intervention. Enumeration of vulnerable families in La Boca is not only a vital mobilisation tool but sets the stage for a more public reflection on the plight of the poor in the city. Similarly an enumeration of the poor in La Boca would be a way to strengthen ties between the Argentine groups and SDI leading actors like South Africa, Zimbabwe, India and Kenya.

Savings is probably a more difficult process to integrate into the current structures of the Federations in Argentina – although I am sure that some women's groups in some communities can be easily formed. In fact had Charlotte and Liz had more experience we would have set up several groups on this trip. In hindsight, though, it is better that this did not happen, since we were on an exposure to learn about the Federation's in Argentina, not to set up savings groups.

JAN 16

In SA we call it a mass meeting. In India it is a Mela. In Argentina it is called a Festival.

A massive gathering of members of the Federations was called on the second Thursday of our stay – more or less as a climax to our visit. At least 5000 “souls” were in attendance.

There is a great deal in terms of form and content that the SA Federation could learn from the Argentinians, but if they were to take away one thing only, I would hope that it would be how to run a mass gathering. In spite of valiant efforts to the contrary, mass meetings in the SA Federation have become long, drawn out, tedious and repetitive affairs, with politicians and Federation leaders and People's Dialogue staff competing with one another to be more banal than one another and more condescending to the people in the audience.

Not so the Argentinians. Their focus on contestation means that populist leaders are at the head of the movement and know just how to use the public platform to best effect. In South Africa only Patrick really has this skill. The festival lasted a short and sweet two hours not five or six hours as is now the norm in SA. People packed into the football stadium to be treated to forty-five minutes of folk music, followed by a star performance by Luis and Juan Carlos (FTV and CCC leaders) who screamed slogans and rhetoric at the crowd for a thankfully brief twenty minutes. This was followed by another hour of music, culminating with a group sing along by several leaders on the stage, including Luis and Juan Carlos.

The content of their speeches arguably rivalled speeches at similar events in South Africa, but the usual emotive bombast was all the more impressive for being short, well choreographed and book-ended between two equally short musical performances.

JAN 17 and 18 – Seeing the city.

By the time the exchange was over we were a tired but highly energised small group who had come to visit acquaintances and now were preparing to say goodbye to close friends. Not since the heady days of the India - South Africa exchange did such warm, rich inter-personal contact evolve as the foundation for future interaction. Of course with the Indians we had few differences of strategy to navigate, and for the South Africans we found and effectively used a partner that enabled us at home and internationally to punch above our weight. The inter-personal with the Indian alliance rapidly grew into a very deep and important partnership where learning, shared experience and mutual approaches drew us closer and closer.

The relationship with the Argentinians will be different – as it should be. The warmth of the contact between us and the Foundation and the Federation leaders, ensured that we would find ways to continue to explore our differences and find commonalities.

The team returned to South Africa with little doubt that we had found a bridgehead to Latin America for SDI. (Yes we are in Colombia, but in scale the programme there is little more than an isolated housing project). In Foundation we found a dependable link NGO, with capacity for strategic planning and lateral thinking and with a reality on their hands that requires an approach that embraces experimentation and innovation. In FTV we found a real mass movement, still fighting the good fight and using strategies we tend to identify with our CO alter egos in places like Kenya (Mazingira) and the Philippines (UPA). Nevertheless their willingness to create links to urban poor groups in Asia and Africa (especially) and via us to engage the UN (and the Bank?) means that they are open to learning from us and sharing with us their experiences and their challenges.

Finally we discovered that raising funds for future interactions will not be easy but will not be impossible. Old practices continue. With a few rare exceptions funders continue to fund programmes because they fit in with their agendas, instead of funding resources to meet agendas on the ground. We will just have to keep on searching for a donor who just happens to be interested for the moment in funding exploratory visits between urban poor groups in Latin America and Africa. If the brief history of this exchange is anything to go by, donor fatigue now sets in after about six months.

Be that as it may, the South African delegation felt at liberty to invite the Argentinians to prepare to send a group to South Africa and India by midyear. A South African team will accompany the Argentinians to India and the Argentinians will visit Zimbabwe on their way home. This is the next important step in exploring new possibilities for SDI. A new country, a new continent and a new challenge: to engage a process where the needs are the same but where the structures to address those needs are different.

The stage is certainly set for an interesting turn of events.