

# Co-construction of territorial and sociodemographic data in a poor informal neighborhood with high socio-environmental vulnerability in the city of La Plata, Argentina

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**Abstract** This paper presents the results of a census carried out in the largest of the 164 informal settlements currently in existence in the city of La Plata, capital of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The objective is to define territorial and sociodemographic data of this poor informal neighbourhood with high socio-environmental vulnerability, paying special interest to the macro variables related to housing, education and work, as well as perceptions about the neighbourhood and future prospects. Therefore, the aim is to generate co-constructed scientific knowledge in tandem with the community, which in turn recovers knowledge and demands from the territory with a concrete potential for transformation. This work is part of a Participatory Scientific Agenda based on the interaction of the community, political, economic and scientific-technical actors.

**Keywords:** Poor informal neighborhood; socio-environmental vulnerability; Participatory Action Research; Participatory Scientific Agenda.

## **Co-construcción de datos territoriales y sociodemográficos en un barrio popular con elevada vulnerabilidad socioambiental en la ciudad de La Plata, Argentina**

**Resumen** El artículo presenta resultados de un censo realizado en el más grande de los 164 asentamientos informales que existen actualmente en la ciudad de La Plata, capital de la provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina. El objetivo es definir datos territoriales y socio-demográficos de este barrio popular con elevada vulnerabilidad socioambiental con especial interés en las macrovariables relacionadas a vivienda, educación y trabajo, así como percepciones en torno al barrio y deseos a futuro. Así, se apunta a generar conocimiento científico co-construido junto a la comunidad implicada, que recupera saberes y demandas del territorio con un potencial concreto de transformación. El trabajo es parte de una Agenda Científica Participativa basada en la interacción de actores comunitarios, políticos, económicos y científico-técnicos.

**Palabras clave:** Barrio popular; vulnerabilidad socioambiental; Investigación-Acción-Participativa; Agenda Científica Participativa.

## 1 Introduction

This article presents a Participatory-Action-Research process aimed towards the co-construction of territorial and sociodemographic data to nurture a Participatory Scientific Agenda and contribute to the development of public policies with high citizen participation. This paper is based on the results of a census carried out in the Puente de Fierro settlement in 2017. It is the largest of the 164 informal settlements currently in existence in the city of La Plata, capital of the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The survey has three distinctive characteristics. Firstly, its theoretical stance: that of a science that seeks to overcome the instances of diagnosis and criticism to intervene in phases of transformation. Secondly, its methodology, with the participation of the inhabitants of the neighborhood from the very design of the survey instruments. Therefore, both statistical data and perceptions about the neighborhood, its problems and prospects, are produced and interpreted with a comprehensive territorial approach from the very inception of the project. Third, its content, paying special interest to the macro variables related to housing, education and work, as well as knowing more about “identities, needs and dreams” of the inhabitants, by which the title of the survey is inspired.

The path of this dialogic research practice, with a territorial approach and with a strong coexistence of theory and praxis, began in tandem with an interdisciplinary team from the National University of La Plata (UNLP) and the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina (CONICET). Since 2015, it recovers knowledge and the demands of the territory to nurture a Participatory Scientific Agenda which has been carried out since 2016. Said Agenda has its executing arm in what we call Permanent Work Table, a monthly meeting in the neighborhood with the participation of community, political, economic and scientific-technical actors so as to promote the generation and execution of different proposals and projects with possible solutions to the issues at hand.

During the six years of this currently ongoing Participatory-Action-Research process, social and environmental problems were addressed from a multidisciplinary and all encompassing management perspective of territory. Once the objective of a meeting per month over an extended period was achieved, in addition to dozens of inter-table and technical meetings, along with an attitude of respect and attentive listening, the stakeholders managed to build a fundamental bond of trust when it came to cooperative work with the inhabitants, grassroots organizations and their pre-existing networks. In recent years, within this process of participatory action-research, the study and intervention stages began to be carried out simultaneously since it became necessary to continue producing data that constitutes relevant input toward the initiatives and decision making process. Such is the case of the census presented in this article, promoted by the inhabitants of an informal neighbourhood who seek access to educational institutions and formal work as tools for integration and social progress.

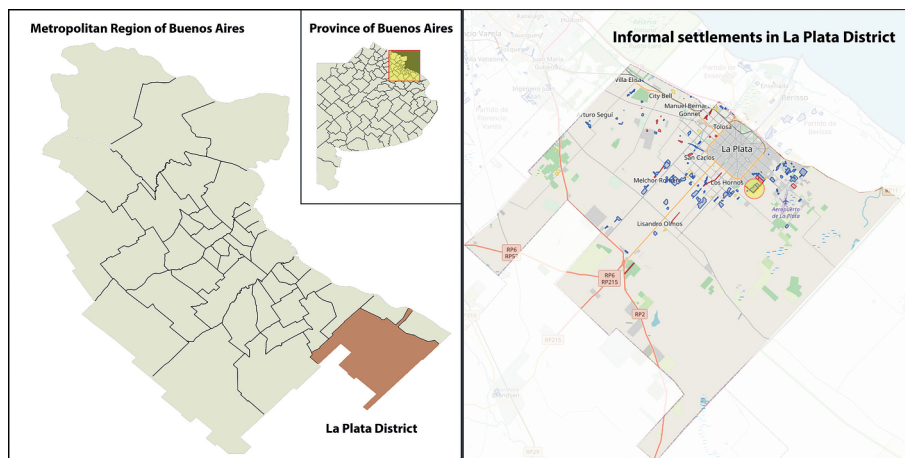
La Plata is in the southern end of a metropolitan region with more than 14.5 million inhabitants (INDEC, 2012), that means this region concentrates 37% of the country's population in less than 1% of the national territory<sup>1</sup>. This makes it the main urban agglomeration in the country, the second largest urban area in South America and one of the twentieth largest in the world (Fernández, 2011). Following the Río de La Plata eastward, we find the municipalities of Berisso and Ensenada which make up the Gran La Plata (Greater La Plata Area),

1 The Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires is an operational regionalisation that since 2003 INDEC defines as the City of Buenos Aires and 40 districts in the Province of Buenos Aires, including the Greater La Plata (La Plata, Berisso and Ensenada).

an urban conglomerate of 799,523 inhabitants according to data from the latest national census (INDEC, 2012).

The case study focuses on the Puente de Fierro neighborhood, located in the Altos de San Lorenzo Community Center, southwest of the city of La Plata. It is the most heavily inhabited of the 164 informal urbanisations in the city (figure 1). It emerged in 1994 as thousands of others did in the 1990 s throughout Latin America based on collective land occupations, promoted in many cases by political, social and religious organisations. This settlement stretches over 50 hectares, and it has more than a thousand homes and 5,200 inhabitants. Furthermore, more than 30 social organisations such as political groups, soup kitchens, co-operatives and religious institutions are located within the neighborhood. These constitute the main network of sociability and political action (Canevari, 2019).

Figure 1: Location of the Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires within the province of Buenos Aires; and a map of informal settlements in the Greater La Plata Area, with Puente de Fierro highlighted (Own elaboration based on a map of the Provincial Public Registry of Slums and Precarious Settlements of the Ministry of Infrastructure of the Province of Buenos Aires).



As it occurs commonly in this type of settlement, Puente de Fierro has a high socio-environmental vulnerability, as to the conditions of living in poverty, the peril of occupying a territory with high water flooding risk is added. Puente de Fierro is located on the outskirts of the city and on the floodplains of an important hydrographic basin, the Maldonado creek basin. This reality highlights the main problem of the countries of the region, which have perpetuated a model of inequity that is produced and reproduced in their cities. Poverty was a constitutive element in a model of urban exclusion (Reygadas, 2015). This exclusion is expressed in the limited possibility for many social sectors to insert themselves into the logic of educational institutions and the labor market. Moreover, this context also translates into processes of segregation, exclusion, stigmatisation of its inhabitants, disregarding their desires and dreams, as if these were not morally valid given the high level of unsatisfied basic needs they suffer from. In other words, there is a double discrimination present that silences and distances them. Therein lies the importance of the collective construction of knowledge,

which involves and revalues the word and the senses built by the very inhabitants of the settlement.

## 2 A context of multiple inequalities

Latin America is the most urbanised region in the world with 80% of its population living in urban areas and it is the most inequitable on the planet, which is manifested by income inequality and the number of informal settlements, with 111 million people living in a precarious housing situation and one in five below the poverty line (UN-Habitat, 2012). This sad structural reality manifests itself spatially in large urban centers and intermediate cities in segmentation and fragmentation dynamics aggravated by the processes of globalization, commodification and privatisation (Ziccardi, 2008; Janoschka and Hidalgo, 2014).

Socio-spatial polarisation precedes globalisation and that it is rooted in pre-existing relations of production (Abramo, 2013), although this does not imply denying the effects of globalisation and neoliberalism on the city, or the impact that the increase in informalisation has in the spatial configuration and urban dynamics. As reported by the Argentine Government through the Socio-Urban Integration Secretariat (2020), in Argentina, 4416 informal neighborhoods were identified -where more than 900 thousand families live<sup>2</sup>, exceeding 4 million inhabitants. In the case of the province of Buenos Aires, this situation is repeated in 1726 neighbourhoods.

The reduction of the inequality of means, opportunities, capacities and recognition, fundamentally, implies a humanistic and respectful view of life, but it also means taking measures towards development. This occurs mainly for two reasons: on the one hand, because it focuses policies on rights and a humanistic vocation and, on the other, because it allows development models that improve productivity, economic and environmental sustainability, the strengthening of democracy and the exercise of full citizenship. There, in the equality of means and opportunities, the possibilities of education and work have a central role. This represents a more equitable distribution of income and wealth, greater participation in the wage bill, equal access to knowledge, competences and skills to undertake life projects that individuals consider valuable, while strengthening the visibility and affirmation of collective identities (ECLAC, 2018). In this regard, various authors have explained the centrality of work in the mechanisms for social reproduction (Bauman, 2000; Feldman and Murmis, 2000; Svampa, 2005). Redistribution of income, education and employment constitute key elements to reduce inequality.

Regarding employment, according to INDEC (2019), Argentine National Institute of Statistics and Census: out of an economically active population of 13 and a half million people, in the second quarter of 2019, unemployment reached 10.6%, the highest figure in the last 13 years. Among the unemployed, almost 45% failed to start or complete their high school education. Furthermore, there is a 13.1% underemployment rate, that is, the part of the population that works for a few hours and would like to work more, but is unable to. As noted, large sectors of the country suffer the effects of unemployment and job insecurity, with

2 The National Register of Informal Neighbourhoods (RENABAP in Spanish) considers as informal settlements those vulnerable neighbourhoods where at least 8 families live, where more than half of the population does not have a land title or regular access to two or more of basic services.

consequences in all areas of family life and in the educational path of the youngest. The destructuring of labour relations was a terrible blow to the social structure, which Merklen (2010) defines as a shift in categories from the worker to the poor, as “(...) victims of a process of transformation that makes them losers in all accounts” (p.74).

In this context, the Greater La Plata Area is at the national average with a 10.5% unemployment and 13.2% of its inhabitants underemployed, and is one of the areas with the most informal settlements in the province of Buenos Aires: 164 neighbourhoods inhabited by more than 132 thousand people. There, housing conditions, deficient basic services, lack of formal educational institutions and unemployment act in combination with natural threats which put lives and material assets at risk. Moreover, an accentuation of poverty fosters more asymmetric and unequal relationships with those who administer public goods; relationships which are by nature marked by discontinuity and uncertainty (Vommaro and Combes, 2016).

### 3 Theoretical foundations

The challenge is to apply an interdisciplinary and participatory research with a transformative teleological perspective (Bozzano and Canevari, 2019). This standpoint is founded upon an emerging scientific paradigm (de Sousa Santos, 2009) applied in Participatory-Action-Research processes based on Orlando Fals Borda (1986). Diagnostics and critical evaluations are of great importance, but often insufficient to contribute to the construction of higher levels of autonomy and of social, economic and environmental justice. Therefore, the theoretical perspective is based on the joint realisation of knowledge construction which stems from working with the community, and praxis oriented towards the promotion of virtuous transformations and “real utopias (Wright, 2014).

In line with De Sousa Santos, in his *Epistemologies of the South* (2009), it is herein proposed to articulate with other types of knowledge more rooted on the local and historical aspects and, from there on, develop critical diagnoses of the present to allow for better decision making in the future. For this, its main premises are recovered: a) All natural scientific knowledge is social scientific knowledge; b) All knowledge is local and total; c) All knowledge is self-knowledge; and d) All scientific knowledge seeks to be constituted in common sense (de Sousa Santos, 2009).

From this approach, this paper is part of a practice of Participatory-Action-Research that recovers the definition of Fals Borda (1986) as “(...) a method of study and action that goes hand in hand with an altruistic philosophy of life to obtain useful and reliable results in the improvement of collective situations, especially for the popular classes” (p.320). It is multi-disciplinary and applicable in continuums that go from the micro to the macro of the studied universes, without losing the existential commitment to the vital philosophy of change that characterises it.

As noted by Wright (2014), this is a social science that provides systematic scientific knowledge about the social world to promote emancipation. The projection of real utopias should be useful to move towards alternatives of more just and sustainable territories. These alternatives are developed and evaluated according to their desirability, viability and feasi-

bility in three stages: a) Phase of diagnosis and criticism of the studied reality; b) Evaluation of viable alternatives; and c) Theory of transformations.

These transformations do not occur only on the material plane, such as the removal of a garbage dumpsite, the construction of sidewalks, a square or a community center in the neighborhood. Transformation processes occur in both, territories and in subjects and subjectivities. In this manner, a simultaneous process of construction of territories and subjects mediated by the construction of projects is articulated (Bozzano and Canevari, 2020), promoting appropriation, valorization, organization, communication and projection following symbiotic, interstitial and disruptive modalities (Wright, 2014).

As a result of the objectification and reflection of this Participatory Action-Research process, which began in 2015, two emerging concepts of praxis were born: the Participatory Scientific Agenda and the Permanent Working Table ((for further development on the epistemological origins of these concepts see Bozzano and Canevari, 2019). Both responding to the objective of carrying out a type of science that approximates people's wishes with public policies in cases of high exemplarity and replicability (Sousa Santos, 2009).

Participatory Scientific Agendas are born from interdisciplinary and multisectoral research. They emerge with the community, and are institutionalised in the scientific system. They are co-constructed among the involved communities, scientists, public institutions, social organisations and businesses. In contrast with the usual compartmentalised and sectoral approach, these Agendas must respond to more comprehensive visions of territory. They are carried out using a multiplicity of techniques and in a planned manner with Permanent Work Tables, at least monthly, uniting both community and science. It is a scientific methodology that builds knowledge and transforms reality, democratising and producing new knowledge.

Diagnostic work, prioritization and planning of actions are part of the work done with the community. These comprehensive agendas, in addition to promoting solutions to the problems addressed, aspire to promote a more plural and democratic governance: "They pursue a vision of macro-transformation -subjective, social, environmental and decisional- beyond the micro-transformations that each one brings about in relation to the activities and concrete actions that are agreed to be executed. The objective is that Agenda topics derive in State Policies or Public Policies and that the participants are co-authors of these policies. It is not a question of taking the role of the government nor replacing its citizens, but rather of contributing with knowledge and decision vectors typical of Transformation Theories, which are often absent from bureaucracy, political partisanship and the business world" (Bozzano and Canevari, 2019, p.33).

For its part, the Permanent Work Table is a space for dialogue and exchange, for the production of knowledge, and for the inception of transformation processes. Seen as a space of communication and popular education, the dialogues of knowledge (Freire, 1996) are very significant. These dialogues begin with the recognition of what Paulo Freire called "vocabulary universes" and "generating words", those challenge the participants to engage in new debates and contribute from their own knowledge, journeys and experiences. In short, the work is done from a problematising perspective instead of using linear and dominating theories (Freire, 1970) that position the other as a passive agent.

The meeting is public and always open to new participants. It is not conceived as a communication space for the annulment of conflicts from a functionalist approach, but to manage complex scenarios as a result of multisectoral convergence. There the word is passed among stakeholders, and by doing so, implementing a way of understanding and exercising

power, in favour of a collaborative and participatory management of matters that run through life in the neighbourhood. Identities, subjectivities and new moralities that were degraded in the world of labour in the post-wage society became the anchorage of the neighbourhood (Svampa, 2005). There, citizenship is built, a way of structuring the popular classes where the neighbourhood constitutes itself as a support point for collective action in the face of the breakdown of work-related ties. The neighbourhood becomes the bedrock of this process, as it is from there that one goes to look for work, to earn a living or to study, and there one returns in search of rest and help. In other words, it is the basis of elementary sociability and solidarity. These are social practices of a sector of society in the face of the disorganisation that mainly caused the disarticulation of employment and social protections.

In essence, it aims at empowerment, achievement of higher levels of autonomy and construction of synergies to project a future of their own. In this regard, these results are not expected to be used, but the passage from *dialogues of knowledge* (Freire, 1996) is merely assumed as part of the investigative process which we propose to call *dialogues of doing* (Bozzano and Canevari, 2020). In this framework, the Agendas condense the first concept, while the Tables execute the second one.

#### 4 Methodological aspects

The rollout of the Permanent Working Table in Puente de Fierro in August 2016 was the result of a year of fieldwork surveying social and environmental problems in co-ordination with initiatives to promote transformation processes. After eleven meetings with different actors in this multisectoral space, a census was carried out in the Puente de Fierro neighbourhood. The objective set by the community was to be able to count on concrete data validated by the scientific system to initiate negotiations with political decision-makers, focusing on habitat, education and employment. Therefore, this census presents statistical data but also specific questions about neighbourhood identity, the consequences of impoverishment, and the expectations of the community as a whole.

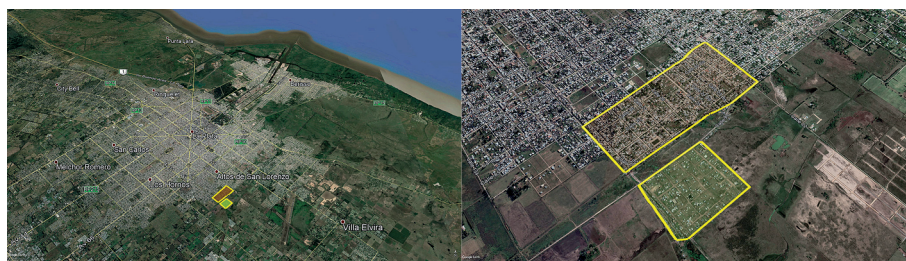
The design of the survey script was the result of six Work Table meetings by applying a participatory workshop dynamic. Regarding the thematic, sample and organisational aspects, the census was carried out block by block and each dwelling was identified by means of a block and lot codification. The head of the household answered the survey, and they were the ones who provided data on the other inhabitants of that dwelling. An instrument with standardised questions was used for the variables on housing and family group data, education and work, and open questions to show what they think about their neighborhood: defining it, how their neighbourhood improved and how it has gotten worse in the last five years and what are their dreams for the future. In the case of the first block, it was processed by means of the descriptive statistical analysis technique using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 23 (SPSS) software. As for the second block, the AtlasTi 8 software was used for its analysis and interpretation.

In order to carry out the census, training was arranged for pollsters and people from the neighbourhood who were willing to participate as companions during the field work. Subsequently, so as to improve polling resources, the authorities arranged the participation of

more than 50 students and teachers from the School of Nursing of the San Juan de Dios Hospital in La Plata, social workers from the Municipality of La Plata, volunteers from the National University of La Plata and the NGO Nuevo Ambiente. House-to-house data collection was carried out with the accompaniment and participation of neighbours and neighbourhood leaders all the time.

The neighbourhood occupies 50 hectares, with a total of 1077 households and an estimated 4055 inhabitants. The survey included 407 households, where data was obtained from 1,852 people. It should be noted that at the beginning of 2017 the settlement expanded over 20 hectares in size, forming what was named as Barrio Evita, where it is estimated that 1,200 people who have not been surveyed live (figure 2).

Figure 2: Location in La Plata of the Puente de Fierro neighborhood and, below, the new Evita neighborhood (Own elaboration based on Google Earth images)



Until February 2020, when the meetings began to be discontinued due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the participating team had carried out 43 monthly Work Tables, where the co-constructed Agenda is carried into practice. It has involved more than 120 work and technical meetings in the neighbourhood and public offices, to a large extent, using the data obtained in the survey whose most significant results are presented below.

## 5 Survey analysis

Out of 1852 people surveyed, 37.6% are between 0 and 17 years old, 59.4% between 18 and 64 years old and 3% are over 65 years old (figure 3). The data reveal a mostly young population, primarily within the economically active population range, that is, one made up of people in working age.

Unlike other more recent land occupations in the city and in the province, the people who inhabit this neighbourhood have largely done so for more than a decade: 40% have lived in the neighbourhood for less than 10 years, 39.6% have lived there for 11 to 20 years, while the remaining 20.4% have done so for more than 20 years (figure 4).

As it was made explicit above, access to housing and overcrowding constitute a structural problem in Argentina. According to the 407 registered households, 43.1% have up to 3 members. The number of households with 4 members represents 22.4% of the total, with 5 members 20.7% and with 6 or more members 36.8% (figure 5).



Figure 3. Population age (Own elaboration)

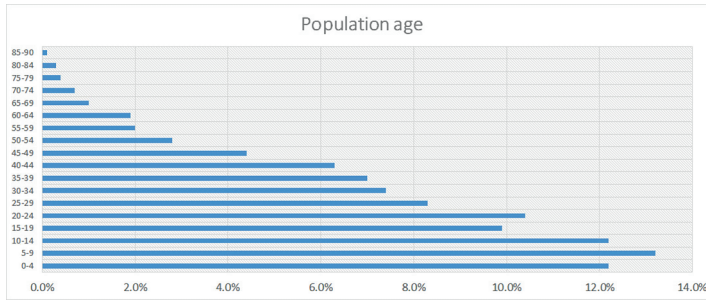


Figure 4. How many years have you lived in this neighbourhood? (Own elaboration)

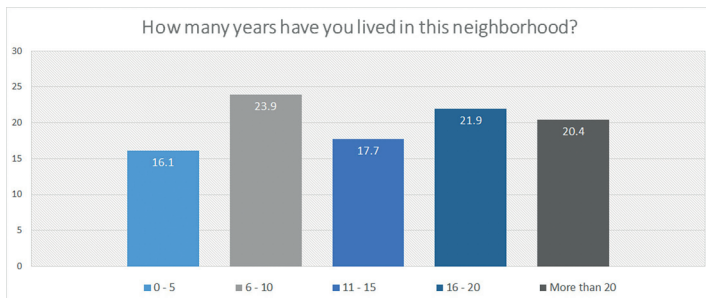
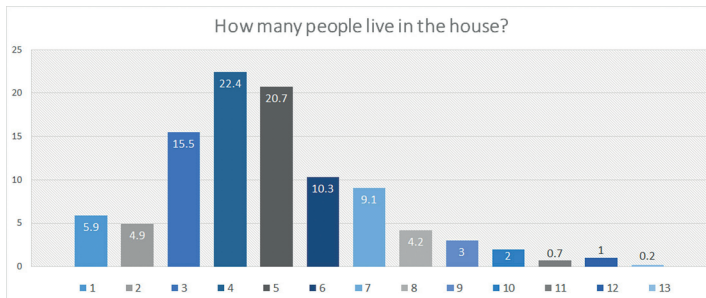


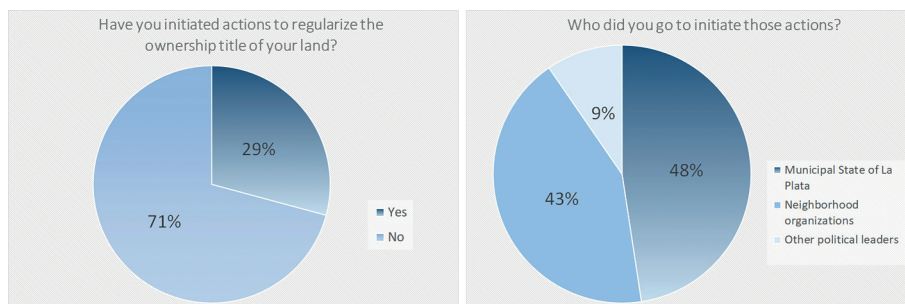
Figure 5. How many people live in the house? (Own elaboration)



In neighbourhoods like the one under study, the informal land market plays a crucial role in satisfying the demand for access to land. This informal market occupies a space where the formalities of public policies and the market are not present or not enough (Abramo, 2013). The lack of legal documents proving land ownership is a common situation for all inhabitants. In this regard, almost 71% of the respondents did not initiate actions to try to regularise the legal situation of their land. Moreover, of the total number of respondents who started some kind of action, they did so to a greater extent from 2007 onwards: 50% from 2007 to 2015, and 40% in 2016 and 2017 (figure 6). Furthermore, the information of those who tried to start the process was verified, and as reflected in figure 7, they attempted to start the process recurring through different paths. These are divided between the municipal delegation corresponding to

the neighbourhood and the Municipal State of La Plata (47.6%), neighbourhood organisations (42.8%) and other political leaders (9.6%).

Figures 6 and 7. Have you initiated actions to regularise the ownership title of your land? Who did you go to initiate those actions? (Own elaboration)



The inhabitants of Puente de Fierro, since the occupation of the land and the creation of the settlement, set out to establish a “neighbourhood”, differentiating it from a “slum”. Therefore, they organised and opened streets trying to follow the guidelines of the urban layout by delimiting blocks, lots and sidewalks. Also, over time, they managed to create their own rainwater drainage system, and manage electricity and water services. Currently, precarious connections continue with open water pipes for drinking water, which are sometimes found next to sewage drains (figure 8). Regarding housing, 49.2% of those surveyed live in solid masonry construction houses (bricks), while 16.3% live in wood and sheet metal constructions, and 34.5% combine masonry with sheet metal and/or wood.

Figure 8: Stream channels, ditches, water pipes and garbage. (Photos by the author)



The self-built drains, the proximity to the Maldonado creek and the precarious housing conditions were part of the reasons that caused serious problems in the neighbourhood when a storm occurred on April 2, 2013. High social vulnerability, due to poverty, in addition to precarious housing (figure 9) conditions made Puente de Fierro prone to be severely affected given its location in the floodplains of the Arroyo Maldonado, which gives its name to one of the main water basins of the city.

In the Maldonado basin, water exceeded 2 meters in height and remained in the houses for an average of 12 hours (Ingeniería UNLP, 2013). The extreme situation highlighted the disinformation and the lack of attention to the problem of water risk, but also the territorial dimension of inequality and disputes on the subject of the representation of the city (Canevari,

Figure 9: Precarious construction of houses and construction on stilts after the 2012 flood (Photos by the author)



2019, 2021). 74.3% of respondents had their house flooded that day on April 2. It is worth noting that half of them (49.8%) said the flood rose above the height of their dining table, between 0.80 and 1.70 meters.

When asked about the most urgent need in the neighborhood, the five most repeated responses were security (20.5%), asphalt (16.7%), sewers (15.5%), street lighting (14.3%) and the legal situation of the land (10.5%). The remaining 22.5% is divided between drinking water supply, food, rainwater drainage system, educational and sanitary spaces, public spaces, housing, buses and bus stops, and waste collection.

## 5.1 Education and employment

98% of cases surveyed who were between 6 and 11 years old are attending primary school. Of those between the ages of 12 and 17 years old, 73% are currently in secondary school, 15% continue in primary school and 8.2% have dropped out. The data presented reveals a high schooling rate among those in school age. The figures vary when analysing the cases of those over 18 years old, where 13.2% did not complete the primary level and only 34.5% completed the secondary level. Likewise, as developed later, the completion of these school instances stands out as one of the main dreams of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. For these reasons, it turned into a central issue of the Work Tables in search of possible actions that maybe adapted to the analysed realities.

With regard to working conditions, 29.3% of those over 18 years old stated that they had a formal job, 10.1% were working in neighbourhood co-operatives (largely dedicated to cleaning the stream, ditches and public roads), 21.5% doing temporary work in minor tasks (known as “changas”), 8.3% receiving a retirement or pension, 18% being a homemaker (unpaid work) and 12.8% not being able to find work.

A central aspect to revisit in the Work Tables and the articulation with diverse pertinent State organisms, is that 90.3% of the respondents agreed that it would be good to get training so as to gain access to a decent job. In the design of the instrument, it was agreed to define a series of twenty possible answers for multiple-choice questions that investigates the preference for training between different trades, resulting in the following order of preference according to the trades chosen by the largest number of respondents: in first place, cooking courses (12.7%), followed by electricity (10.2%), nursing (8.7%) and pastries (8.7%). Then comes hairdressing (8.3%), masonry (8.1%) and bakery (7.5%).

## 5.2 Perceptions about the neighbourhood and future prospects

A section of the survey examines the symbolic level and refers to perceptions about the neighborhood, changes in recent years, interests and dreams. Despite the answers being open, as we are dealing with shared conditions from the same territory and historical moment, in many cases the perspectives coincide. The word clouds plotting the results highlight the most repeated words by size.

When asked to define Puente de Fierro in a single word, the responses were mainly skewed towards negative traits (figure 10). The most repeated associations focused on insecurity: “insecure neighbourhood” and “dangerous neighbourhood”. Crime, poverty, laziness, needs, drugs and oblivion were other responses, with less frequency though. Some responses account for the conditions of uncertainty and resilience in the face of adversity, such as “living day to day”, “suffering” or the blunt definition of it being a “survivors’ neighbourhood”.

To a lesser extent, there were also words with positive connotations that came up in the responses of the inhabitants where they defined Puente de Fierro as a “quiet neighbourhood” or “good neighbourhood”. Also, the sense of belonging is present, as their place in the world, when defining it as “my neighbourhood”, “my place” or “my home”. This accounts for a feeling that is repeated in popular neighbourhoods, where home is a concept beyond the house and it includes also the sidewalks, the corners of their block, squares, a soccer field or other recreational spaces. Other definitions, such as “solidarity” and “progress” highlight strong community ties or the perception of improvement, an aspect that is further elaborated in the following questions.

Figure 10: Word cloud based on the definition of the neighbourhood by its inhabitants (own elaboration).

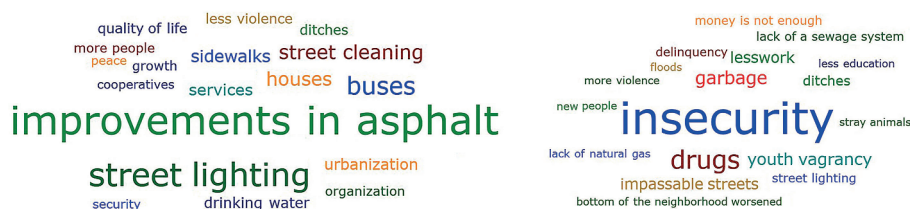


Respondents were asked about their perception of transformations in the last five years within their neighbourhood. The word clouds reflect the definitions of those who believe that it improved (figure 11) and those who maintain that it worsened (figure 12). The perceptions of positive changes refer mainly to street lighting, asphaltting and public street maintenance, the

frequency and route of buses, the completion of new sidewalks and the greater quantity and quality of housing construction.

Conversely, those who perceive that the neighbourhood worsened underline the issue of insecurity, coinciding with the most used words to define the neighbourhood: insecure and dangerous. Some of the concerns mentioned are unemployment, insufficient income to make ends meet, the problem of garbage, drugs and young people without access to a job or education. In the negative side, “new people” and the worsening situation at “the bottom of the neighbourhood” were brought up.

Figures 11 and 12: Word cloud showing changes in the neighbourhood according to the respondents. It is divided between those who pinpoint what has improved and those who indicate how it has worsened (Own elaboration).



The possibility of planning for a future and having dreams is not predetermined but it is strongly conditioned by the reality faced by each person. This survey gathered information regarding the future dreams of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood according to their view. In the systematisation of this variable, the responses were classified into four main groups: education, work, professions and others. Regarding education, finishing school, training to have a profession and having their children study were the most outstanding responses. Finding work or keeping the one they already have; having a salary or own business; being able to retire; and that their children get decent work were the most common phrases found among those who projected their dreams thinking about work related situations. Another type of response was to directly define a profession they dream of having, among which police officer and nurse stand out. Finally, the dream of finishing the construction of their own house, progressing, traveling, ensuring a better future for their youngest ones were the most relevant, and in some cases the dream expressed was: “to get away from here”.

A broad analysis of these dreams shows that the majority of them focused on finishing school, having a job, progressing and finishing the construction of their houses (figure 13). To clarify what this last answer refers to, there were those who expressed it with greater detail: “Leaving my children a house with doors, windows and a bathroom inside.”

## 6 From Agendas to Tables. From the dialogue of knowledge to the dialogue of doing

The data obtained became one of the main contributions to the Participatory Scientific Agenda put in place a year before the census of this neighbourhood. Just as the design and field work of the survey was co-constructed, the information obtained was also presented and debated in



as of 2008 and continues to this day focused mainly on the completion of secondary education. The target is young people and adults over 18 who have been left out of the school system. The constant support and assessment strengthened the existing space and promoted new ones in order to make this programme a reality. It allows studying in a mixed mode and with flexible hours. It is currently held in five venues within the neighbourhood. The difficulty of finding a job is stressed by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Those who occasionally have temporary work (*changas*), those who answered that they are housewives and those self-declared as unemployed account for 52.3% of the population over 18 without stable income. As a first initiative in response to emergencies in terms of education and employment, the members of the Work Table agreed to encourage the development of trade courses in the neighbourhood, emphasising the topics most chosen in the survey. In agreement with the participants, the participation of officials from the National Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Labor of the Province of Buenos Aires was requested. Over time, these and other steps led to the existence in the neighbourhood of twenty job training courses to date.

These courses, with official certification from the province, are offered at the headquarters of local social organisations. This situation renews an old demand regarding the need for a community center to develop these and other activities. An emerging long-term initiative refers to the creation of a fiscal land of 8 hectares so as to obtain the legal ownership before the State Property Administration Agency (AABE) for the creation of a Labour Training Centre with a kindergarten, as well as primary and secondary school annexes. The requests were carried out by the members of the Work Table who met with officials of the AABE, State Prosecutor of the province of Buenos Aires and provincial authorities of the Ministry of Education. Currently, the creation of an NGO is under way with the aim to have all the neighbourhood organisations to become the beneficiary of the lot, as required by the competent authorities to carry out the legal assignment.

These actions are part of a comprehensive management of the territory based on the application of participatory methodologies. These are not linear processes, but spirals of action-reflection-action (Freire, 1970) carried out in 43 Permanent Work Tables in co-ordination with a multiplicity of actors prioritising the identities, needs and dreams of the inhabitants of the neighborhood.

## 7 Discussion and Conclusions

This study combines socio-demographic data with territorial data based on the spatialisation of social life. In Argentina, the low expectation of growth and job opportunities in small and medium-sized cities generate internal migration under very unfavourable conditions, which increase informal settlements in the peri-urban areas of large cities, where they cross multiple dimensions or levels of inequality, as developed in the analysis of different variables in this article. Generally, in the Latin American urban space, and in this case study in the Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires in particular, a differential and inequitable access to the valuable material and symbolic goods that are part of the city is expressed, consolidated and reproduced.

This assumed scientific position implies working on an object of study, but also on objects of intervention. That is, to identify possible problems and also possible solutions. The co-constructed knowledge, the recognition of cultural universes and multisectoral articulation result in concrete strategic actions. In this sense, Participatory Action-Research requires the commitment of researchers to a permanent and systemic process.

The fragmentation of theory and practice is one of the most important obstacles to gaining understanding and also to taking action. The research experience within this article was not made without inertia and obstacles, it does not replace actors or solve all problems. It works on the assessment of micro-agreements and micro-transformations that allow progress. This requires reflecting on medium and long-term perspectives, to avoid being locked into the urgency that usually represents an obstacle to achieving consistent change objectives.

The Agenda is traversed by tensions of reality between what was planned and the unpredictable, between people and institutions, between innovation and resistance to change, between the local and the global. Faced with this, the sustainability of an action research process over time reinforces bonds of trust and allows group action to acquire the routines and rituals that participating actors later make their own. Thus, it becomes a collective way of being and acting that builds its own language and codes.

Among those surveyed and their perceptions arises the concern to resolve situations in their immediate future and the impossibility of planning and projecting, they define the neighbourhood as a “day to day” experience. The dreams expressed by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood coincide with the search for a solution to the main problems revealed in this research: finishing school, getting a job and completing the construction of their homes. The word cloud shows the validity of the idea of progress through study and work. An analysis of relationships presented, in accordance to the survey, infers a sequential path of studying, getting decent and stable employment, progressing and living better.

Throughout the investigative process, the importance of interdisciplinary and inter-actor work is highlighted. Not only does it refer to the interaction and dialogue between scientific disciplines, but also with relevant public agencies in each addressed issue. But mainly, the focus should be placed at the value of the participation with members of the community, which enhances the production of knowledge while allowing the construction of initiatives and projects that turn them into subjects of transformation of their own realities.

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