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**POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ECONOMY OF CARE:
ARGENTINA RESEARCH REPORT 1**

**Historical context: economic, demographic and social
structures and trajectories, and social policies
in Argentina**

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Introduction

This report analyses the principal developments—political, economic and social—in Argentina over the last 30 years. Approaching the social and political economy of care in the country requires an understanding of the national context and the major changes that have occurred over the period in question. Childcare is a critical element in understanding the social, political and economic organisation of care, and this is particularly true in a country such as Argentina, where social differences have increased alarmingly. The guiding research question here concerns the extent to which social inequalities are shaped by different social and institutional childcare arrangements, and whether what is involved is not one, but a number of “care diamonds.”

Families and their childcare strategies do not exist apart from political, social and economic surroundings. Families are both a central pillar of welfare regimes and a “cushion” to soften the impact of changes affecting the other pillars (most importantly, the State and the market).

The structure of Argentine society, which was once relatively egalitarian by Latin American standards, now features pronounced inequalities and poverty. Beginning with the military coup of 1976 and a series of regressive economic and social programmes, the country has experienced numerous crises that affected the structure and dynamics of the labour market, workers’ incomes and, consequently, family welfare. The crises did not cease with the restoration of democratic institutions that began in 1983. The implementation of neoliberal policies sharply increased unemployment, poverty and social inequality, and the democratic system was not capable of translating widespread popular demands for social welfare measures into policy. Following the most recent, and severe, crisis of 2001-2002, economic recovery began to accelerate and showed high growth rates. However, the economic improvement has not yet succeeded in changing the structure of a society that is characterised by far more inequality than was present 30 years ago.

Argentina’s successive crises were cushioned in various ways by families and their members. At the same time, the Argentine society was undergoing cultural changes in terms of expectations regarding women’s participation in paid and unpaid work. In this context, childcare and access to it have been shaped by social differences that affect the ways in which families arrange for care, as well as by the role of markets and communities and the extent to which government-provided services reach different population groups.

This first report is divided into two sections. The first section describes the principal socioeconomic features of Argentine society and how they have changed over the last 30 years. It provides an overview of the political and economic processes that were most significant in shaping the impoverishment and inequality that typifies the country today, analysing changes in the labour market and women’s place within it. The second section

describes the country's socio-demographic patterns and how they have evolved, presenting population and household data, while emphasising certain factors that show how social inequalities affect reproductive behaviour, participation in education, and the composition of families and households.

This report was prepared by Eleonor Faur, who would like to express her appreciation for the support and review Valeria Esquivel offered during the course of the research. Sara Niedzwiecki assisted in gathering secondary information, and Mariana González provided special tabulations.

I. Historical context: political and economic structures and trajectories

Principal political and economic features (1976- 2001)

The social structure of contemporary Argentina is characterised by far more inequality and poverty than was envisioned not only at mid-twentieth century—as the welfare state expanded—but up until the 1970s.

During these years, the country lived under a harsh military dictatorship (1976-1983). In 1983, the process of restoring democracy began. Various economic strategies were implemented, resulting in irregular cycles of growth and recession that created a social structure with increased inequality and poverty. Of prime importance in these changes was a sort of “offensive against labour” (Cortés and Marshall, 1993). Peaks of economic crisis occurred with the hyperinflation of 1989 and the economic and institutional crisis of 2001. In the periods before and after these crises, a variety of policies were implemented, some with positive effects on GDP growth, but none adequate in terms of human development, labour structure or the protection of social rights. Some of this history will be examined below.

The percentage of poor households in Argentina rose from 4% in 1974 to 45.7% in 2002. It then began to decline, reaching 19.2% in 2006 for urban households.² Fluctuations in the poverty level have been a constant feature of the landscape since the mid-1970s, when the process of pauperisation began and social inequality burgeoned. What 30 years ago were relatively isolated “pockets of poverty”³ today include 1 out of every 5 households, 1 of 4 individuals, and nearly 1 of every 2 children, though there are major regional differences.⁴

In a cultural sense, in terms of family dynamics, and in the dynamics of social cohesiveness, poverty was gradually being internalised. The inflection point was the military coup of 1976. The dictatorship radically transformed the country’s economic

² The information on poverty and the labour market in this document is based on the Current Household Survey of the National Institute of Statistics and Census (Encuesta Permanente de Hogares del Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, or EPH-INDEC), except where otherwise indicated. It should be noted that in 2003, the methodology used by the survey to gather information was changed, as it moved from being a periodic survey to an ongoing one. This affected slightly the comparability of data but does not prevent one from gaining a general view of the situation.

³ Minujin (1992) applies the “pockets of poverty” image to the urban slums of large cities, which were seen as falling *outside of the social reality*.

⁴ Taking as a basis the World Bank’s definition of poverty as those living on two dollars or less per day, 16% of Argentina’s population was poor as of 2005. Using the poverty line defined by Argentina, the figure was 45% (Perry et al., 2006).

structure, strengthening the financial sector, liberalising the economy and destabilising the base of industrial production.⁵

From that point until the crisis of 2001, the various stages through which the country's political and economic processes passed share a common denominator: the reduction in formal labour (Cortés and Marshall, 1999, Beccaria, 2001). This, combined with periods of high unemployment and the declining purchasing power of wages, shaped a society in which social inequality was an integral structural feature, with the rich becoming richer while the poor became poorer. Nevertheless, the different political periods (1976-1983, 1984-1989, 1990-2001, 2002 to the present) have featured different economic and social strategies, and have had rather different impacts in terms of inequality, social development and poverty.

Until the mid-1970s, Argentina, along with its Southern Cone neighbours, differed from the rest of Latin America by virtue of high educational levels, low indices of underutilisation of the labour force, and relatively low wage dispersion. Bayón and Saraví (2001) explain this as the result of two factors. On one hand, the formal economy represented a major part of the labour force. Between 1963 and 1978, urban unemployment was only 5.6%, and poverty affected only 5% of households in Greater Buenos Aires. A social welfare system was in place that aspired to universal coverage, particularly with regard to health and education (Bayon and Saraví, 2001).⁶

The military dictatorship's emphasis on engagement with the international market entailed abandoning the import substitution model. Meanwhile, regulation of the labour market sought to ensure favourable conditions for capital accumulation by reducing labour costs. This was the first "offensive against labour". It created systematic wage cuts by keeping wage increases below the inflation rate, and by giving businesses more freedom to determine wages. It also systematically reduced the power of unions, eliminating collective bargaining (Beccaria, 1992, Cortés and Marshall, 1993). In the reigning context of high inflation, these policies were reflected in households' quality of life.

Politically, 1983 marked the beginning of a process of expanding political and civil rights. Social and economic rights, however, continued to erode. The reality was that the return to democracy did not mean a return to policy as it was before the military coup. The economic strategy of this period consisted essentially on heterodox stabilisation plans to combat high inflation and balance of payments problems. The strategy failed, however, because it proved impossible to simultaneously achieve fiscal and foreign trade balance, due primarily to the onerous foreign debt.

⁵ This strategy enunciated both economic and political objectives regarding the dismantling of social organisations, including workers' organisations and business organisations (See Novaro and Palermo, 2002).

⁶ For a more extensive analysis from a historical perspective, see Beccaria and Carciofi, 1993.

Between 1976 and 1989, gross domestic product (GDP) declined at an average annual rate of 1.4%. The gross industrial product declined by 25% between 1974 and 1990, as industrial employment fell 40%, and the share of the national income attributable to employee wages dropped from 45% to 32% (Bayon to Saraví, 2001). While the manufacturing sector contracted, certain assessments argued that wage increases had been the principal cause of inflation. Based on this analysis, new wage adjustments were made, affecting the distributive structure (Beccaria, 1992).

In 1989, hyperinflation and increasing poverty hastened a change of government. The exit of the period's first democratic president, Raúl Alfonsín, occurred in the midst of a highly conflictual economic environment, and led to the election of Carlos Menem, who remained in the presidency until 1999.

As the 1990s began, Latin America's economies exhibited three basic characteristics: the highest inflation rates in the world, the highest indebtedness in the world, and the world's most unequal income distribution (Bustelo, 1992). Argentina was no exception, though other countries (such as Brazil) had even higher rates of inequality.

Neoliberal policies became stronger throughout the 1990s. They focused on controlling inflation, but significantly increased unemployment and social inequality in the process. The prevalent economic policies in this period included the Convertibility Plan, which established a currency board that strictly controlled the issuing of money, reduction of the fiscal deficit, deregulation of markets, and widespread privatisation of State enterprises. The period's ideological context, from a political perspective, was in line with the "Washington Consensus," which mandated macroeconomic reform, amendments to foreign trade schemes, and promotion of the private sector.

The vulnerability associated with convertibility and external shocks led to a series of economic expansions and contractions during this period. Between 1991 and 1994, the stabilisation programme succeeded in halting inflation, leading to a period of growth and a short-lived increase in employment. In 1995, the economy was hit by the repercussions of the Mexican crisis, which interrupted the flow of foreign capital. Between 1995 and 1998, there was a new cycle of expansion, until a contraction and decline in production began in 1998 (Beccaria, 2001).

During the 1990s, the economy experienced relatively high growth rates. GDP grew at an

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