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POLICY REVIEW

Housing policy in Argentina: reflections on a decade of progressive social policy

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In 2003, the federal housing policy was launched in Argentina, marking a new era in housing policy in Latin America's fourth most populous country. The Federal Housing Plan (FHP) sought to improve upon the complex scenario left by the deep socio-economic crisis of 2001–2002 with the most ambitious and progressive housing plan in Argentine history. This paper reviews the design and implementation of the FHP in the city of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires between 2003 and 2014. It focuses on the main characteristics of the Plan, as well as each of its subprogrammes and the paper reflects upon the main challenges encountered during implementation.

Keywords: social policy; housing policy; housing crisis; Latin America

Introduction

During 2003, housing policy was prominent on the Argentine public agenda. After a period of crisis, and with the inauguration of Nestor Kirchner as president, a new era began in 2003. In the guise of the Federal Housing Construction Plan, the new president promised to rewrite the history of housing in the country. The government projected during the years 2003–2010, a volume of new housing development in the Greater Buenos Aires area – the country's largest urban agglomeration – equivalent to all housing developments over the preceding 27 years (1976–2003). This article draws upon policy documents and secondary sources to review and analyse the design and implementation of the Federal Housing Plan (FHP) in the city of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires between 2003 and 2014. The paper is divided into three sections. The first describes the main characteristics of the FHP, the second examines each programme within the housing plan separately, and finally the conclusions draw out the main challenges experienced in attempting to implement the most ambitious and progressive housing plan ever introduced in Argentina.

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The Federal Housing Plan

The FHP aimed to mollify the housing crisis left in the wake of the 2001–2002 socio-economic crisis. Prior to the introduction of the FHP, the National Housing Fund (FONAVI) was the most important housing policy programme in Argentina. It financed housing developments through Provincial Housing Institutes. The FHP displaced FONAVI from its historically central role in housing development: in 2007, only 2 out of 10 social houses were delivered by FONAVI (Cuenin & Moya, 2011).

The FHP was launched in July 2004 by President Nestor Kirchner (La Nación, 2004), with 700 million dollars of financial support from the Inter-American Development Bank. The FHP was intended to reduce the housing deficit and also to revive the construction sector through public works and formal employment.

In Argentina, historically, ‘the state [...] was [...] the main provider of subsidised housing, responsible for the financing, planning and delivery of the projects. Institutions involved were usually a national mortgage bank and a relevant government institution at national level that coordinated all actors (local governments, construction companies and beneficiaries)’ (Murray & Clapham, 2015, p. 6). In spite of this, during the 1990s, the recommendations associated with the Washington Consensus had a strong impact on social and housing policies. Public expenditure in housing was cut sharply, while the redefinition of public policies moved housing issues off the agenda. This was done by decentralising resources away from the National Housing Plan (FONAVI) and the use of expenditure targeting (Murray & Clapham, 2015). Within this framework, and after more than a decade of uncertain results, the irruption of the FHP constituted a real turnover in terms of both housing policy and the resources allocated to the sector.

One of the main characteristics of the plan was its scale. This scale is evident in the objectives of the two stages of the plan, which were launched in 2004 and 2007, respectively. The first stage aimed to construct 120,000 houses and the second stage aimed to construct a further 300,000 houses. A further characteristic of the FHP was the attempt to re-centralise housing policy in Argentina, while retaining strong local level involvement in delivering the homes (Rodríguez, 2012). The FHP linked the National Planning Ministry with municipal level governments by granting the municipalities the privilege of being the main implementing agencies. This was done to speed up the process. This new approach sought to maximise the efficiency of local management for beneficiaries while maintaining a centralised housing policy. In this sense, the plan was a pioneering initiative in housing policy.

The FHP created the following federal programmes: (1) the Federal Emergency Housing Program; (2) the Federal Housing Construction programme (which included the Subprogram of Housing Construction for municipalities); (3) the Subprogram for the Urbanization of Shantytowns and Informal Settlements; (4) the Federal Housing Improvement programme ‘*Mejor vivir*’; and (5) the FONAVI

Federal Reactivation Program. In subsequent sections of this review, each programme is introduced and its implementation and impact are analysed.

Federal Emergency Housing Program ‘*Techo y Trabajo*’

In 2003, the government launched the first programme, the Federal Emergency Housing Program. It was developed to solve both the housing and employment crisis by organising cooperatives to incorporate members of poor households to construct houses. Because the programme targeted low-income people, a 100% subsidy was granted. Housing was constructed using this approach throughout the country, drawing inspiration from a previous experience in the province of Santa Cruz. The programme provided funding for the construction of small units. The funding comprised basic infrastructure, supplies and tools to undertake the work, and salaries for the participants. The cost per housing unit was AR \$6600, although this amount was later increased to AR \$14,100. Nevertheless, because the programme did not provide funds for purchasing land, the location of each project was determined by local governments (and their politicians). The development of the programme in Greater Buenos Aires was slow and uneven.

Municipal authorities created cooperatives in different ways. According to Marichelar (2011), cooperatives were formed from existing social organisations or were created (as in La Matanza) and organised by the municipal government (as in José C. Paz). In those municipalities with a practice of working with social organisations, the programme was far more likely to involve support and leadership from these actors. In other municipalities where such collective movements did not exist, the local government intervened to build up cooperatives. These differences produced deep heterogeneities in the implementation process. In La Matanza, for example, the already existing social organisations *Federación de Tierra y Vivienda*, *Corriente Clasista y Combativa* and the cooperatives existing in Villa Palito and Las Antenas were in charge of the programme’s implementation. As the cooperatives were made up of neighbourhood residents, the involvement of the cooperatives produced an important linkage between the local social actors and the housing problem. In contrast, in José C. Paz the cooperatives were designed as municipal firms to carry out building works. In these cooperatives, the municipality centrally organised purchases, management, planning, and construction management with scarce participation in decision-making by households and their cooperatives.

In many cases, the urgent need to reactivate the economy pushed the government to accelerate the organisation of cooperatives under the *Techo y Trabajo* scheme (Varela & Wagner, 2012). Many cooperatives began operating without much structure and had to adapt to the scarcity of trained members with experience in construction; many of these members had no prior experience in organisations. As a result, the cooperatives were formed of a variety of people and organisations, which produced diverse experiences. Between 2004 and 2005, 56% of all the

planned housing was constructed. After this peak, the programme began to lose strength. Of the 19 municipalities that participated in the programme in the Greater Buenos Aires area, only Florencio Varela, La Matanza, Moreno and Quilmes maintained similar construction rates after that date. Additionally, the participation of social organisations gradually decreased.

The Federal Housing Construction subprogramme

The Federal Housing Construction subprogramme was the programme during this period with the largest budget. It started in 2003 and produced the largest share of the new housing solutions. Its objectives were (1) to decrease the housing deficit; (2) to strengthen the economic recovery of the housing sector and the construction industry; (3) to help decrease unemployment by creating 360,000 new jobs; (4) to establish training programmes to provide necessary human resources; and (5) to improve the quality of life in households.

This programme, which relied on construction companies to build the houses, was directly anchored in the local level, working with non-refundable funds transferred to local jurisdictions. In order to achieve this, a number of agreements were signed between the Ministry for Federal Planning and the different municipalities in charge of coordinating the initiatives in each territory. The Ministry of Planning funded all the construction projects, while the provinces mediated by approving projects and ensuring the projects implemented in the municipalities were technically feasible.

In the first phase, which lasted approximately 26 months, the federal government was to provide the financial resources needed by the jurisdictions to build the new houses. The government intended to fund 120,000 new houses, of which 38,000 were to be located in the City of Buenos Aires and the surrounding 24 municipalities. In total, \$3.9 billion pesos was allocated for this purpose, which sought to create 360,000 new jobs. These resources included funds for the construction of both the houses and the required infrastructure. The initial distribution of the houses by geographical area was provisional and was to be adjusted according to each province's local housing deficit, unemployment rate, and efficiency in executing the programme. In this case, complementary funding from the provinces was also allowed. The national financial resources given to the states were to be used for housing to build according to a set of specifications. Moreover, the provision of the land to build the houses was left to the provincial governments.

The second stage lasted 36 months. The national government's contribution was \$17.4 billion pesos, and the target was to construct 300,000 houses (with 98,500 houses in the metropolitan region) and to create 900,000 new jobs.

The programme represented a great opportunity for local governments, which were able to access large sums of resources. As a result, the local governments also had to restructure their organisational administrations and strengthen their technical

staff in the areas of housing, public works, and social action. Thus, implementation of the programme required the development of internal coordination mechanisms between different areas.

In the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, the programme dramatically increased the demand for land for construction. In a context of scarce urban land – something that characterises the region – the Institute of Housing of the Province of Buenos Aires implemented a federal housing policy under the ‘Land and Urban Project’ that solved the problem of acquiring land for social housing via the market and construction companies. Under this scheme, the purchase of the plots remained exclusively in the hands of the building firms, who jointly would bid on the plot and the project to be developed on it. This process accelerated the implementation of the federal programmes in the area. According to del Rio (2012), 50.55% of the land was acquired through construction companies. These figures reveal the influence of market mechanisms in the execution of the programme. In the 24 municipalities that make up Greater Buenos Aires, as a total, the two stages of the programme’s execution involved an accumulated total investment of \$5.5 billion pesos and the construction of 102 thousand dwellings. By mid-2008, 19,891 units (19.5% of the total planned units) had been either finished or were under construction. Furthermore, execution rates differed among the central and the peripheral municipalities of Greater Buenos Aires (Vio, 2011).

As for the city of Buenos Aires, the implementation focused only on the southern part of the city and faced important problems. According to Ostuni (2012), of the 11,000 houses that were announced for the area, only 4070 houses were being built in 2010. When analysing the process, Ostuni identifies factors that may help understand the challenges encountered. First, the institutional and legal requirements of the city for housing construction stand out because of their detail and more demanding requirements compared to other cities. These requirements included conformance with the Urban Planning Code and Building Code, studies of environmental impact for large-scale buildings, and judicial intervention in cases of conflict. On the one hand, these requisites and quality standards guaranteed that the housing met higher building standards than in other jurisdictions; on the other hand, the requisites created a more complex scenario for implementing the programme in the city. Second, the programme was marked by the shortage of land and the bad economic situation of the construction companies. Third, the dynamics of the Housing Institute of the City of Buenos Aires (the municipal organism entrusted with housing policy) exacerbated problems with execution. The problems with the Housing Institute were longstanding and involved considerable red tape, slow administrative processes, and excessive size of the institution relative to its output. Finally, the gap between the originally allocated funds and market prices was another obstacle that made execution difficult. Once the bids were approved, the assigned amounts were not enough to cover the costs of housing construction and, as a result, often the works did not begin (Ostuni, 2012). As a consequence,

under-execution was much greater in the City of Buenos Aires than in the Greater Buenos Aires area.

Subprogramme for the Urbanization of Shantytowns and Informal Settlements

The Subprogramme for the Urbanization of Shantytowns and Informal Settlements was launched in 2005, and it consisted of national funding to support people living in shantytowns or informal settlements and to promote access to the benefits offered by the city. The subprogramme's activity was geared toward informal settlements located in sites that are not prone to flooding and where the property ownership situation enables land-title regularisation. The programme is centred around the following axes: (1) regularisation of land-titles; (2) infrastructure networks (water, sewers, electricity, and gas); (3) opening internal streets; (4) building new housing to enable the opening of a basic road network and/or the replacement of houses that were beyond repair; and (5) improving existing houses (building nuclei, enlarging houses by building a room, and repairing walls and roofs). The subprogramme has been implemented continuously over 10 years and, according to Bettatis (2012), it delivered one-quarter of the housing built, as well as half of the improvements carried out during the period within the framework of the plan in Greater Buenos Aires.

In terms of its intervention, the subprogramme occupies a midpoint between the new housing construction programmes and the land-title regularisation programmes. While the new constructions enable replacement of originally precarious constructions, other parts of the programme are centred on providing beneficiaries with legal title to land ownership. The programme therefore foresees stages that include the displacement of inhabitants, the demolition of unstable houses, the upgrading and renovation of works, and the settlement of their population in places similar to those of the rest of the city.

As with other subprogrammes, municipalities were responsible for executing the projects. They had to assume responsibilities such as choosing neighbourhoods, evaluating each working area and developing each project, purchasing land and locating houses, managing funds, drawing up terms and conditions and the public bidding process, awarding contracts, and inspecting and certifying the works, among others. Few municipalities had any experience in this area. According to Bettatis (2012), the absence of guidelines for the implementation – either in the form of instructional texts and handbooks or of training workshops – resulted in the emergence of different styles and procedures, depending on each municipality's technical abilities. The municipalities were forced to recruit technical staff and, in some cases, modify municipal structures. This process strengthened the relations between the national and the local levels. Moreover, since 2009, the programme incorporated an Executing Unit at the national level, which allowed for the evaluation of the works financed.

Another factor that effected the implementation of the programme was the prior existence of grassroots organisations: they collaborated during the implementation process and helped optimise the results. In fact, the links between the local governments and the grassroots organisations made it possible to involve the inhabitants, incorporate collective equipment and commercial premises, and develop works for mitigating the environmental problems associated with relocating the population (see Villa Palito in the Municipality of La Matanza).¹

Federal Housing Improvement programme ‘*Mejor vivir*’

The Federal Housing Improvement programme sought to complete, expand, and renovate housing for households without access to credit. The programme’s objective was to reduce the qualitative housing deficit among the poorest quintiles through housing renovation and expansion, as well as the creation of new jobs. In the entire country, between 2005 and 2011, improvements reached 305,790 units. In particular, the programme sought to improve the quality of houses on sites that were not prone to flooding, had a clear land-title, and met at least one of the following criteria: (1) they did not have a toilet; (2) they had no internal provision of running water; (3) they lacked adequately finished floors, walls, and roofs; and (4) they lacked the number of rooms necessary for the residents. Additionally, it was required that potential beneficiaries had built their home on a site they owned (or on State land liable to be transferred to them), with non-precarious materials, and could be refurbished, enlarged, or completed. Potential beneficiaries also needed to prove that they had a minimum income level that would enable them to repay instalments.

This subprogramme had barely any coverage in Greater Buenos Aires, but some works can be identified in the Municipality of San Fernando. This scant coverage was due to difficulties in the implementation of the programme.

The municipalities found difficulties at the moment of structuring the demand and for many officers the decision of carrying it out through building enterprises was a mistake. This was so because it was neither operative nor profitable for the enterprises to attend to a spatially disperse demand and to fulfill the particular requirements of housing improvement. (del Rio, 2012, p. 162)

In the City of Buenos Aires, a series of difficulties emerged during the programme’s execution. In 2008, only 128 houses had been finished within the programme framework, 1953 were under construction, and 1248 had yet to be started (Office of the City Ombudsman, 2008). The slow progress reflected excessive delays in the National government’s administrative processes, among other problems. These circumstances led officials to rethink and reformulate the programme’s objectives, adapting them to the characteristics of the city’s housing stock. The new

objectives were geared towards housing upkeep and building improvements, and less to deficits in sewerage or other more structural conditions. They involve small-scale works, such as installing electricity and gas, plastering, painting, sanitary installations, roofing, appliances, dampness and leakage prevention. Also, the specific characteristics of the housing stock in Buenos Aires determined that not only owners of individual dwellings could apply, but also consortiums of housing owners under horizontal property, who could improve the common parts of their buildings, such as staircases, roofs, balconies, and elevators, among others.

FONAVI Federal Reactivation Program

The FONAVI programme had three main objectives: (1) to reactivate the construction of houses that had progressed very little or not at all; (2) to promote and provide incentives, like the *Mejor Vivir* programme, for revitalising housing with FONAVI resources and the national government's financial support; and (3) to contribute to the generation of employment by incorporating unemployed workers into the labour market. It focused on sectors of the population that did not own a house and who, because of their socio-economic situation, did not have access to private sector credit nor to the official non-subsidised options (population sectors with inadequate resources).

The FONAVI's basic funding was financed from a share of the national fuel tax which is distributed among the provinces according to previously agreed percentages. During the first stage, the programme granted \$300 million pesos to the provinces via the national government. An equivalent contribution was also made to the municipalities. During the second stage, the programme employed the beneficiaries of a social assistance scheme as the housing construction workforce.

During Stages I and II, the Federal Reactivation Program produced housing for 44,000 Argentinean families. Under the umbrella of the Federal Plans, the FONAVI initiatives promoted the execution of mid- and low-density housing projects. It also promoted actions to strengthen and to optimise the recovery of instalment payments from the beneficiaries. It also sought to strengthen the management capacity of the provincial agencies, which over time gained experience and substantially improved their ability to manage the projects.

In spite of this progress, the extremely low funding levels allocated to this funding line considerably limited its scope. Vis-à-vis other programmes within the framework of the Federal Programs, the FONAVI Federal Reactivation Program was clearly relegated to a lesser status. The achievements were circumscribed to articulating the programme with other social programmes that aimed to incorporate unemployed workers and to acknowledging, from an institutional standpoint, the areas where the provincial administrations had made progress with the housing issue.

Conclusions: lessons learned from implementing progressive housing policy

This paper reviewed the design and implementation of the FHP in the city of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires between 2003 and 2014. The paper focused on the main characteristics of the Plan, as well as each of its subprogrammes. These conclusions draw out the cross-cutting challenges which emerged during the implementation of the housing plan.

First, under the Housing Plan local municipal governments were the main executors of the programmes, leaving the provincial governments detached from the operational aspects of the housing construction (project bidding, monitoring, targeting, and housing delivery). At the same time, the provincial governments remained in charge of other important aspects, such as the approval of the development, coordination of infrastructure and social facilities development, as well as support and guidance for the municipalities when adjudicating and granting titles to homes. One can argue that a national re-centralisation of the definition, orientation, and control of housing policy proceeded alongside the decentralised aspects of the programme (Cravino, 2012). The coordination with the municipal level required adapting management structures and the programme's design. Along the same lines, ignorance of different local regulations led to important execution problems, for example, in the city of Buenos Aires.

Second, it is necessary to guarantee proper training for local teams, otherwise lack of expertise can lead to a series of important problems. The lack of guidelines necessary for making local diagnoses, for selecting neighbourhoods, and for designing housing projects led, in many cases, to an under-execution of the planned works. Additionally, this deficit consequently resulted in heterogeneous management procedures that were not necessarily linked to the particular needs of inhabitants and territories. These factors also made later monitoring and evaluation at the national level quite difficult.

Third, another challenge involved the simultaneous effort to deliver housing and employment opportunities. This was not an easy task, since both objectives were not always compatible. For instance, under the 'Land and Urban Project' there was a large transfer of resources towards the largest firms in the construction industry. The process also faced complications when the cooperatives were involved in the execution of the projects: in these cases, implementation became more complex given the intervention of a larger number of actors, the involvement of neighbours who were still undergoing training, and the need to create consensus, which often extended the period of execution. Also, while the programme focused on macroeconomic recovery, it underestimated the importance of the dwelling as a workplace – forgetting that popular housing is also a space for economic production. Although the implementation of the Federal Plans triggered strong economic activity in the construction sector and created employment at a local level, the types of housing

produced did not always satisfy the many uses and needs that buildings fulfil in the lower income population groups.

Finally, the design of federal programmes did not foresee any monitoring and evaluation bodies or form of citizen participation. In this sense, no instruments were developed to enable the follow-up, adjustment, and re-direction of the programmes, and any participatory practices were left to the decisions of each municipality. This led to a situation in which the difficulties that emerged could not be resolved within the programme, and it became difficult for the programmes to advance strongly.

After decades of a notorious absence of policy, this initiative marked a turning point in the visibility and relevance of housing on the public agenda. Under the guidelines and interventions of the Federal Housing Construction Plan, the federal housing policy, inaugurated by the Kirchner government, intended to rewrite the country's housing history. In the municipalities of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, the projected housing construction during the 2003–2014 period was to be sufficient to satisfy needs equivalent to the demographic growth of the last intercensus period, while this volume of housing was also to be equivalent to the sum of the housing interventions carried out during the preceding 27 years (1976–2003). A housing policy of this magnitude and the modalities of its eventual implementation produced effects on the configuration of the urban space and the daily life of its inhabitants. Since it was implemented independent of an integrated strategy to intervene in the real estate market and, particularly, in the market for land, the programme did not fulfil its objective of mitigating deficits. The programme resolved neither the housing deficit nor the fiscal deficit in the city. In fact, the federal housing policy did not break up the market logics in allocating intra-urban residential locations. In many opportunities, its implementation was tied to the availability of municipal vacant land and to the technical–political management skills of the municipalities. In fact, in some cases, the lack of available land for real estate development paralysed the execution.

Note

1. In the neighborhoods where these characteristics may be observed, the organisation process started at the beginning of the 1990s. During this process and until the implementation of the Subprogram for the Urbanization of Shantytowns and Informal Settlements, many housing and work cooperatives were formed in which the neighbours with masonry skills were actively involved in the development of works. This represents a convergence of factors: the active involvement of a neighbourhood organisation that pre-exists the implementation of the Subprogram and a policy that, in this case, enables collaborative work by the population and its leaders. On the other hand, projects are agreed upon with the organisations and involve the masons-neighbours in their development. Also, the organisations assume responsibility for generating consensus at the territorial level to ensure the development of the works and to avoid the entry of new inhabitants in the settlement (intrusion).

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