

# Cash Transfers and Social Protection



**Interview with Irene Novacovsky, coordinator of the programme *Ciudadanía Porteña* from the Ministry of Social Development of the city government of Buenos Aires.**

**IPC:** What are the goals of the programme *Ciudadanía Porteña*?

**Irene Novacovsky:** Before discussing the goals of the programme, it is necessary to explain that it was planned from the perspective of the citizens' rights. This programme is based on the belief that all citizens have the right to receive an income that allows them to fully exercise their citizenship. This is no minor topic, because it will originate consequences both on what is offered in return and on how the exit from the programme is considered. Regarding the programme's goals, first it aims at the reduction of social inequalities and at the development of an income redistribution mechanism in Buenos Aires, since one of this city's main characteristics is its inequalities, with the existence of sectors where both extremely affluent and utterly poor citizens coexist. On the other hand, the programme seeks to establish an automatic, transparent and direct cash transfer system. Other goals of the programme would be to guarantee the exercise of children's rights, which means: to guarantee their right to education at the mandatory levels of school; to decrease both repetition of the school year and dropout rates; to cooperate with the eradication of child labour; to guarantee health care assistance to children, teenagers and pregnant women; to reduce the social exclusion of teenagers; to break the intergenerational cycles of poverty; to create mechanisms that will facilitate the access to identification documents; to support the empowerment of both women who are heads of households as well as recipients of the benefit; and to foster the education of the youth until the age of 25.

**IPC:** How is the selection of these beneficiaries carried out?

**I.N:** The selection process has different stages. The first one involves an open and public registration. The city government of Buenos Aires has a Single Beneficiary Registry (RUB), a department that does not depend on the social fields but on the Presidency of the Ministers' Cabinet. This department regularly conducts surveys, mainly in regions of the city where poverty is more concentrated, in order to obtain a socioeconomic description of households. Once registration is open and programme candidates have presented the requested documentation, the registry of potential beneficiaries is built. Next, information is cross-checked against the RUB database and a survey is carried out in those households that still need to be evaluated. The information obtained in the survey is a socioeconomic characterization of households, which helps build a vulnerability index, that is, a proxy for income that will be used to determine who is eligible to benefit from the programme. It is worth pointing out that three tools are simultaneously used for the selection, because the index is applied and the information is cross-checked against a national database that contains all the information on beneficiaries, social programmes, people's social security, payroll, and real estate or personal property. Therefore we have two tools, one of which is this proxy for income or "test of wealth," as it was referred to today, but it is actually a "non-poverty test". Since we already know that indexes have both a percentage of inclusion and of exclusion errors, when we designed the index we tried to avoid having the exclusion errors so that we could minimize them, thus, running the risk of having inclusion errors. As a result, the margin of exclusion errors is reduced. The inclusion errors can be corrected by cross-checking databases of people's assets, income, etc., as I mentioned before. The third tool used in the process of selection is a survey carried out in households excluded from the programme. First, the household is sampled in order to see if a constant feature is repeated; and then the situation of the household is reviewed to continuing minimizing exclusion errors. To put it in the words of the Uruguayan we listened to yesterday, indexes "punish" single-individual households, disregarding their actual condition,

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which constitutes the most common error of exclusion. If we look through the city of Buenos Aires we will find an additional problem, because indicators related to education are often applied to determine people's entrance into the programme. But in Buenos Aires we find a heterogeneous group within the universe of poverty. First, we have sectors whose living conditions have worsened recently, thus falling below the poverty line. This group cannot be easily characterized by using indicators such as demography, housing or level of education. Consequently, after all these errors are minimized (by means of household visits and by the examination and review of household situations, as I mentioned before) and beneficiaries are selected, possibilities are also offered to people who were not formerly chosen as beneficiaries. They can file a claim, which means that people have the right to have as many interviews as they wish to review their situation. If during these interviews any uncertainties arise regarding possible errors of exclusion, the households are revisited and the situation is reviewed. This is the summary of the identification and selection process for the beneficiaries of the programme.

**IPC:** What are the conditionalities that beneficiaries must fulfil?

**I.N:** The beneficiaries of the programme must fulfil two requirements: the first one has to do with school attendance of children and adolescents from five to eighteen years old, and the second one refers to health assistance for children, teenagers and pregnant women, following the guidelines established by the pregnancy-preventive health care and child health care system. These are inflexible requirements, but this way the programme shows respect for children's rights. Buenos Aires offers both consolidated and good quality services. But we always observe that factors such as the lack of health care control as well as school unattendance are closely related to the difficulties people find when trying to have access to these services, which is an overlooked issue in Buenos Aires. Therefore, the programme somehow serves as a strong encouragement for child health care assistance. We believe that the programme is meaningless if this main requirement is not fulfilled.

**IPC:** Does the programme try to generate exit doors for the beneficiaries?

**I.N:** The programme is not active in generating exit doors for the beneficiaries because it is based on the idea that creating a foundation to set up a minimal income for families is their right as citizens. The ideal model would be that the national government in Argentina could establish a mechanism from the social security, which would let the whole population, particularly children, adolescents and the elderly, have access to a basic income. However, we do not live within the context of this model due to the limitations of the federal government. Argentina has a national social security system used to pay retirement, pensions and family benefits. But in a federal government we find no social security mechanisms; consequently, a programme can be established and approved by law as a citizen's right. Therefore, the answer to the question on the exit of the programme is linked to changes in household's conditions. For instance, this programme fosters a long-term entrance to the labour market, providing enough income to families so that they can step out of poverty. When we regularly cross-check databases every three months, using all social security databases, we observe that about a 10% of the households are slowly entering the market due to a fair income that results from the changing conditions in Argentina. Of course, we wait until a maturing process has taken place; that is, from the moment we observe that a household has entered the market and that it has enough income, we remove it from the programme. Obviously, we wait for a period of time to make sure that the job is stable and that it will allow the family to have a minimal income.

**IPC:** What does the component *Estudiar-Trabajar* refer to?

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**I.N:** This is a new component of the programme. We adopted some measures arising from both the quantitative and the qualitative evaluation of the groups interviewed; and we created this component that refers to the support of poor young people within the educational system. Thus, a special fund is raised so that they can resume their studies in case they have dropped out of school and are willing to continue with their higher education. This is important as they are at an age in which, in theory, they should have finished secondary school. Thus, this programme is broad for young people who could not finish primary or secondary school. If they have finished secondary school and are willing to pursue higher education they are allowed not only to resume their studies but also to support their education until the age of 25. Regular attendance to a formal system of education (the only one we accept) and promotion are other requirements they must fulfil. The latter refers to the minimal number of courses college students must pass every year. For secondary school students, promotion is also required.

**IPC:** Thank you very much.

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