

SPEAKER SERIES

“IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES IN TODAY’S WORLD: PERSPECTIVES FROM ARGENTINA”

Analysis Report



Engineering
Without Borders
Argentina



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INTRODUCTION

During May and June 2021, the speaker series “Impacts and challenges in today’s world: perspectives from Argentina” were held. These talks were possible thanks to the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and implemented by Partners of the Americas in partnership with the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. These talks were held with the aim of creating a dialogue between different views, experiences and careers about challenging topics in the context of the **complexity of today’s world** -affected by the Covid-19 pandemic- but from a local perspective, **focused on the Argentinean context and reality**.

The main incentive that guided the making of this series of talks was to make an impact on some **key topics** that, we believe, were not having a relevant space or enough attention and debate within public agencies, but that are essential to address **the pandemic as a complex social problem** that goes beyond the individual realms and has ramifications for all of society. In addition to highlighting some of the key challenges facing Argentine society, these talks also served as a space to discuss potential solutions, encourage attendees to reflect on ways that they can begin to address these complex issues

The talks were held in three virtual webinars and addressed the following topics:

CLIMATE CRISIS:
FAIR TRANSITIONS

LIVING IN PANDEMIC:
EFFECTS ON
RELATIONSHIPS AND
MENTAL HEALTH

INEQUALITIES
AND COMMUNITY
ORGANIZATION

This series was hosted by Engineering Without Borders Argentina (EWB-Ar), a civil organization that carries out projects related to the **access to basic human rights** such as water, education, and the strengthening of social organizations, with a focus on the common good, collective care, building alliances, and participative work. That was the setting for this series of talks about social issues emerging from today’s world, favoring a perspective based on the reality, the features, and the context of Argentina. From that starting point, the thorough selection of speakers tried to provide a diverse approach and career paths criteria that could heighten the discussion from different disciplines. The proposal took into account the integration of knowledge and action areas -academic, territorial, scientific, and political areas- to encourage representation in voices and topics.

Here, we provide an analysis of the most relevant concepts, ideas, and discussions that emerged from each talk.





CLIMATE CRISIS: FAIR TRANSITIONS

This first talk was held in May 2021, and it had the following speakers¹:

- ▶ **Inés Camilloni.** Academic. Ph.D. in Atmospheric Sciences. Professor, investigator, and author of several reports in the Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change, IPCC.
- ▶ **Agustín Lohigorry.** Graduate in Systems Analysis. Master's degree in Strategic and Technological Management. Academic coordinator of the course "Energy and Sustainable Development" at Engineering Without Borders Argentina.
- ▶ **Laura Maffei.** Civil Engineer. Professor and technical consultant in topics related to green jobs, fair transition, and sustainable development in international trade unions in Argentina and Latin America.
- ▶ **Bruno Rodríguez.** Co-founder and activist in the environmentalist organization "Jóvenes por el clima, Argentina" (Youth for Climate, Argentina). Argentine ambassador at the World Youth Summit for Climate Change 2019.

The exchanges of this first talk were focused on discussing regarding:

- The urgency of the current climate crisis, its impacts, and its relation to the production model;
- The challenges and the necessary transitions in the job market and in the energy mix;
- The impact of social movements and activism on the approach to the crisis.

| KEY CONCEPTS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

Some necessary key concepts were introduced to contextualize the urgency of the current climate crisis, its impact at the local level, and the need for urgent and positioned answers. From a scientific perspective, Inés Camilloni explained some guidelines to understand this global phenomenon:

¹ Introduced in order of appearance.



- Understanding that climate change shows through a **set of risks and dangers** that are capable of causing damages to people and assets;
- Speaking about **impacts and risks** refers both to the effects that have already been produced as well as those that can be produced in the future on natural or human systems; related to changes in rainfall patterns, the occurrence of extreme events, and changes in temperature.
- On the other hand, the concepts of **social vulnerability and exposure** are related to the degree of susceptibility that a human system or a natural system can have in front of these threats;
- Analyzing these dimensions together allows for the creation of **risk maps of the different geographical areas of the country** which are considered essential tools for decision making at the political level.

When focusing on the relationship between climate crisis and the impact of the current production model in Argentina, the speakers stressed the following:

The energy sector, by identifying the impacts that are caused by an energy matrix strongly based on fossil fuels extraction;

The agriculture, livestock, forestry sectors, and other uses of the soil, by pointing out the consequences of the expansion of the agricultural frontier over biodiversity loss, soil erosion, and the changes in water availability.

The reference to these two sectors is not random but it is strongly related to the greenhouse effect gas emissions profile (GHG) -main cause of climate change-, in Argentina: 53% of those emissions come from the energy sector, while 39% are related to land use.

“ To detect these two sectors as central concerning contaminating emissions means that the answers and solutions should bring into discussion how energy is generated and produced, and what use of the soil we make”, expressed Inés Camilloni.

From this analysis, the speakers furthered the historical configuration of the current energy mix and **the need for an energy transition** towards renewable sources.

Agustín Lohigorry expanded on the implications of the Industrial Revolution in the configuration of an energy mix mainly based on burning fossil fuels, justified by the premise of guaranteeing the production of the goods that the population growth demanded, as well as the comfort and increased quality of life, and development understood in economic terms.



This development model began to show its impacts on the environment and people and the need for a comprehensive approach in a more transparent way since the 1970s.

“ We have a challenge that, besides being technological, is political; the transition towards renewable sources has to go with transformations in regulatory frameworks and in consumption levels, as well as in ensuring basic access to energy as a human right”, explained Agustín Lohigorry.

Another main idea of these talks was the need to act quickly in this emergency. We are facing what science calls “**points of no return**” that show **irreversible** impacts on people and the environment, and the need to adopt, urgently and in the short term, **fast, ambitious, and sustainable transformations in numerous different areas.**

| CHALLENGES IN THE JOB MARKET

In the context of those multiple transformations which are imposed by the climate crisis to ensure fair transitions, Laura Maffei identified some challenges in the job market:

- Developing policies to support the growth of sectors related to the new “**green jobs**”, such as sustainable tourism or the new ways of generating energy, supporting the development of new professions and courses of studies;
- Strengthening the creation of “**decent jobs**” in terms of guaranteeing the labor rights and the improvement of work conditions: decent salary, contract and job stability, access to training, social protections, health and safety, and the possibility of union organization;
- Considering **strategies of employment transition in the local context**, that is to say, examining the conditions of the structural inequality that exists in the region, in terms of poverty and unemployment rates, to ensure an inclusive, democratic transition that invigorates local economies.



| ENCOURAGING CHANGE FROM A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Finally, the talk included the role and responsibility of social movements and other activist groups in encouraging and promoting the awareness and the discussion around the link between the climate and environmental crisis, and social injustice. In this sense, Bruno Rodríguez commented on his view of the challenges that the emergency of the ecological collapse demands:

- ▶ Incorporating the **systemic perspective** which is necessary to address complex issues;
- ▶ Carrying out transition processes that consider the rights, the needs, the interests, and the recognition of the **different sectors of society**;
- ▶ Encouraging and promoting the **interaction of the different agendas**: the groups of workers, the social movements of the informal economy, the popular economy, the industrial sector, the academic sector, and the national technical-scientific complex;
- ▶ Addressing the complexity that the topic demand, trying to **engage in a society-wide discussion** ;
- ▶ Creating bonds to encourage the **intervention of socio-environmentalist groups** in the problems of the territories, where people are faced with the main impacts of the environmental and social collapse, and in the spaces where political decisions are shaped.

“ We have the challenge of creating a popular and Latin American environmentalism, set in the context of our region, with the aim of reversing the effects of the environmental crisis and, at the same time, the social inequalities. It is a fight for social justice, human rights, and also sovereignty”, concluded Bruno Rodríguez.

The closure of the talks was guided by the complexity of addressing the climate and environmental crisis; the technological, political and cultural challenge that the transition demands, and the importance of thinking about positioned answers, connected and fixed to the possibilities and the historical context of the country.





LIVING IN PANDEMIC: EFFECTS ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND ON MENTAL HEALTH

This second talk was held in late May 2021, and it had the following speakers²:

- ▶ **Daniel Feierstein.** Ph.D. in Social Sciences, researcher, writer, and professor. He specializes in the study of genocidal social practices as well as in the construction of social representations in catastrophic situations.
- ▶ **Santiago Levín.** Medical Doctor specialized in Psychiatry and president of the Psychiatrists Association in Argentina. Ph.D. in Medicine and professor at the School of Medicine of the University of Buenos Aires.
- ▶ **Claudia Belziti.** Social worker. Master's Degree in Social Service and doctoral student in Social Sciences. Professor and chair of the Department of Social Work at the National Hospital "Profesor Alejandro Posadas".
- ▶ **Florencia Freijo.** Writer, influencer, and political expert. Specialized in gender perspective. Legislative consultant, public speaker and trainer in topics related to gender gaps.

The focus of the talk was the pandemic as a **complex social phenomenon**, and it sought to analyze the following aspects:

- The impact on interpersonal relationships and mental health;
- The strategies and social behavior in the pandemic focusing on the diversity of its manifestations;
- The media coverage from the public health perspective;
- The impacts of the pandemic in Argentina from a gender perspective.

| SOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN THE PANDEMIC PHENOMENON

The talk started with the premise of addressing the pandemic as a phenomenon that exceeds an analysis solely focused on its biological process, but in that it demands an approach connected to the social behaviors it triggers, associated with representations and senses in dispute.

In this first approach, Daniel Feierstein suggested an analysis based on three levels:

² Introduced in order of appearance.



- **An epistemological level:** affected by emotions and judgements that interfere with the definition of the different social behaviors that emerge as devices to act in the face of reality.
- **An emotional level:** characterized by denial and naturalization mechanisms of a society that is not capable of identifying or assuming the risk; and a projection mechanism, when transferring frustration and resentment to another person or group of people to achieve more peace of mind or relief.
- **An ethical level:** in which negative emotions such as shame or guilt tended to come first, instead of positive human emotions, which are the condition of possibility of the practice of responsibility and the capacity of placing oneself in the place of others, such as the health care workers.

“ *In a situation of collective catastrophe such as the pandemic, it can be said that a form of neoliberal subjectivization and a decay of social bonds have prevailed*”, highlighted Daniel Feierstein.

Santiago Levín introduced the topic of the essential tools necessary for the approach of a complex social phenomenon, stressing **the importance of interdisciplinarity**:

Complex phenomena require the interaction of multiple disciplines and knowledge, of multiple approaches on the social character and mental health, and engineering solutions in order to think about the logics of restrictions, the necessary logistics for vaccination, and the interaction of the various needs in the pandemic. Also, of different social sectors; the government, representatives from non-profits, and workers, to find solutions that are well-suited to the context.

| HEALTH INSTRUMENTS IN THE FACE OF THE PANDEMIC

Other main points highlighted by Santiago Levín and Claudia Belziti focused on some of the fundamental health tools in the face of the pandemic; the use of political communication, and the approach to public health as a historical-social construction.

- **The consideration of communication as a healthcare instrument** as specific and fundamental as a vaccine; a tool that, used with that sense and purpose, is extremely effective in achieving social cohesion and the sense of the necessary collective public health;
- **The reference to public health in its political and social dimension**, which has helped to make visible issues such as inequalities in accessibility to the health system and the importance of deploying different healthcare strategies.



“ As for communication, a narrative that invites us to think in plural would have been fundamental; a use of words and metaphors that help us to think that today’s healthcare is based on a possible tomorrow, and not an overabundance of alarming data”, said Santiago Levín.

| WHAT THE PANDEMIC BROUGHT TO LIGHT

Social inequality, the poor distribution of resources, the exploitation of nature and ecological disaster, the predominance of certain minority countries over those of the Global South, wealth concentrated in few hands, the weakness of the healthcare system, and the socio-occupational precariousness, were some of the dimensions that the pandemic made visible as a global phenomenon.

Claudia Belziti highlighted the peculiarities of Argentina:

- The manifestations of inequality and historical **structural poverty**, its deepening according to concepts such as gender, social class and ethnicity;
- The **need for a present State** to regulate and mediate in the different instances: in the distribution of supplies, in the functioning of the healthcare system, in the testing and healthcare strategies;
- The importance of **community soup kitchens**, supported by the State and social organizations, essential to respond to the emergency at the local level.

“ The State had to intervene in the heterogeneities that interconnect with Covid-19 infections: the homeless, the impact on mental health, the worsening of gender-based violence, the different vulnerabilities, and the recovery of public space for the construction of the common in front of a scene of deep individualism”, emphasized Claudia Belziti.

| THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Finally, Florencia Freijo focused on the gender inequalities that were deepened with the pandemic along with the lack of attention to the process of feminization of poverty as a social phenomenon that is known but not often acknowledged:



- ▶ The increase in the feminization rate in occupations and jobs related to domestic service, care, education and health, which are poorly paid and precarious. In Argentina, **women represent 98.5% in the domestic services sector**. In education, the feminization rate is 75.4%, while **in social and health services it is 70%**;
- ▶ The increase in gender gaps in economic terms, gender violence, and lack of representation in political domains;
- ▶ **The lack of collective care structures** (both in regards to infrastructure and public care policies) impacts directly on women's lives, since they usually perform the caretaker role and dedicate twice or three times as much time to these tasks;
- ▶ The absence of diagnoses that incorporate gender perspective from the very design of public policies;

“ If the care sector was monetized, it would represent a contribution of 21% of GDP, above any other sector. However, we have a cultural structure based on gender biases, where the tasks of care, education and teaching are less socially valid. This is not naive but orchestrated”, said Florencia Freijo.

To conclude, they reflected on the psychosocial intervention strategies in the face of the pandemic; the need to study **how society will respond to the effects of the pandemic** in line with the analysis of the social impacts of other orders of domination, such as capitalism. The proposal is aimed at continuing to discuss the social value of health, and what place it is given in our society via public policy. It also underscores the need to understand the fundamental importance of the **notion of community** in the face of the tendency to focus on the struggle for personal freedoms, the unconditional development of desire or the exercise of individual wills above the wishes and needs of others.





INEQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

This third and last discussion was held at the beginning of June 2021 and included the following speakers³

- ▶ **Agustín Noriega.** Anthropologist. Co-creator of the “Gran Chaco” Foundation, of “Redes Chaco” and of the movement “El futuro está en el monte”.
- ▶ **Adriana Díaz.** Primary school teacher and popular educator. She is a mentor of the non-profit “Creadores de sueños”, and director of “Hogar de mis sueños”.
- ▶ **Deolinda Carrizo.** Mentor of the National Indigenous Peasant Movement, Via Campesina, of Santiago del Estero (MOCASE in Spanish). Director of Gender and Equality of the Secretariat of Family, Peasant and Indigenous Agriculture of the Nation.
- ▶ **Claudia Bernazza.** Agricultural Engineer, Master in Education and PhD in Social Sciences. Teacher, writer and social leader. She was a Deputy between 2007 and 2009, and since May 2020 she is a Congresswoman for the Frente de Todos political party.

On this occasion, they talked about the different modes of community organization, both in rural and urban areas, focusing on aspects such as:

- Articulation with the State and the role of non-profit organizations in the creation of public policy;
- The inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic in the different territories;
- The need for a regulatory framework that provides protection to community organizations and caregivers

| NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS IN ARGENTINA

The discussion began by debating **the role and political positioning of non-profit organizations**, based on an exchange among the different work experiences in the territory, in the rural and urban areas, of the three territorial mentors. In this regard, Agustín Noriega stated some key guidelines:

³ Introduced in order of appearance.



- The need to **locate in a specific territory** and define a political position, from the individual and the collective, as a basis and tool to solve and manage.
- The importance of **defining an action framework**, an “argument”, a “reason for being” that can vary according to the work area. Some of those mentioned include the promotion of local production, popular education, community communication, support, and political and technical training.
- The benefit of incorporating the different knowledge bases and the different organizations that already exist in those territories to address these challenges. In other words, **do not assume that there is more important knowledge than others**.
- Work with the horizon of overcoming social inequalities; favor access, the promotion and protection of human rights, knowing the realities of the territory and the community where you work.

“ When an organization is working with a community it is no longer a single truth. For social transformation, it is fundamental to acknowledge and accept that there are different logics and different actors who hold different positions and that they will need to be linked with other knowledge, with other concerns, with other perspectives, and with other interests”, commented Agustín Noriega.

| THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING PUBLIC POLICIES AND PROMOTING RIGHTS

Another of the main points of the discussion was aimed at reflecting on the differences and nuances between “influencing” public policy and “creating” public policy as well as the demands that the pandemic made visible in each territory.

Adriana Díaz highlighted that social organizations play a central role and are as important as the government in the creation of public policies, **because they are part of the social structure** of the local communities, and are continuously in contact with community realities and problems. This collective construction makes it possible to make unfulfilled rights visible and work to ensure that they are guaranteed- this extends to the right to food, education, recognition of the work of women in soup kitchens, the health and environmental emergency.

“ The flag of social organizations is the promotion and protection of rights and it is achieved by coordinating to improve the system, with education as the main tool, empathy with the other and social activism,” said Adriana.



In relation to the particularities of the different territories, Deolinda Carrizo pointed out how the visibility of certain problems together with commitment and collective work can lead to the creation of new public policies. For example, the recognition of the central problem of lack of access to land has prompted the draft Law for the Promotion of Agroecology and the Family Farming Law.

There are collective struggles to influence structural changes that have led organizations to mobilize and work around common problems: generating spaces for support, for political training, and for identification and impact.

In rural areas, in addition to the conflict over access to land and productive resources, the pandemic deepened inequalities such as access to the internet as a means of guaranteeing education, the environmental emergency, and the lack of consideration for marginalized peoples and their often unique ways of life.

Both in rural and in urban areas, the food crisis, the role of women in providing food and the overload of care tasks were also revealed. This results in the need to work on the training and sensitization of young people and adults about the different inequalities, access to rights, and the need for regulatory frameworks and public policies that accompany and guarantee the access to those rights, Adriana and Deolinda agreed.

| THE URGENCY OF A REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZATIONS

One of the final ideas that promoted an instance of reflection among the invited speakers was the **need for a regulatory framework** that provides a setting of protection and agility in bureaucratic procedures for community-based organizations, and people involved in local communities' care. In times of pandemic, this need became more evident in a scenario that has organizations as the main support of the community structure and with a central role in education, support and access to food.

On this point, Deputy Claudia Bernazza mentioned the promotion of three bills:



- An **agenda for “Children and the community”** referred to the need for community responses to the violation of the rights of children and adolescents by the State.
- The creation of a **National Institute of Community Organization** that allows preferential treatment and technical assistance for organizations in their administrative procedures, as a mechanism that facilitates the presentation of subsidies, scholarships or any accompaniment of public programs.
- And finally, a third project to “take care of those who care”, generating **recognition and regularization of community workers**. This bill is in dialogue with the “Cuidado integral” project under the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity, which provides for a chapter dedicated to community care.

“ Community organization is present both in the absence and presence of the State. Because in either case, an organized community, organized neighbourhoods, and organized rural areas are needed to have a better dialogue with the State,” said Claudia Bernazza.

The third and last discussion of the cycle closed with a reflection on the importance of having a national regulatory framework that defines, for the first time, what is understood by community work, considering the special and specific characteristics of this type of activity, collaborating to provide rights and protection to community-based organizations and their workers, recognizing the centrality of the work that women perform in the context of a pandemic, and providing a framework of historical and pending recognition by the national State.





FINAL THOUGHTS

The completion of the speaker series “Impacts and challenges in today’s world: perspectives from Argentina” meant a contribution from Engineering Without Borders Argentina to collective reflection on the social implications of a phenomenon as complex as the COVID-19 pandemic, within the framework of a global environmental, health, and socioeconomic crisis that manifests particularities at the local level.

Each of the meetings wanted to recover, from diverse approaches and disciplines, some of the less visible emerging challenges. Thus, the climate crisis and its impacts, the effects that the pandemic generated on relationships and mental health, and the different experiences of community organization, both in urban and rural areas, were prioritized. In this way, new spaces for reflection and collective construction were generated that facilitated the analysis of current issues that were not in the foreground since the beginning of the pandemic, but that we consider of great importance.

From a situated approach, the talks managed to enrich the debate from the articulation of knowledge, experiences and the diversity of each of the invited speakers. There is still much to think about and to understand about the context that the world is going through and, in particular, Argentina. With the realization of these spaces for exchange and conversation, we reaffirm that it is possible and necessary to write key stories together to transform situations of injustice and inequality into a scenario that requires the participation of different views and paths to overcome such adversity.

