

THE ERUPTION OF POVERTY IN THE ARGENTINE JEWISH COMMUNITY: STRATEGIES AND REFLECTIONS

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From the Argentinian economic crisis has come a new social group, the new poor, created by the impoverishment of the middle class. The ability of the Argentinian Jewish community to meet the needs of this new group so rapidly was due to the strong partnership between lay people and professionals and the assistance of world Jewry through the JDC and JAFI.

It is difficult for those of us living in Argentina to perceive fully the dimension of the crisis we are experiencing and how it affects our daily lives. We tend to accept as normal things that would be unacceptable in other moments or contexts: being unable to access savings, coexisting with growing social violence and anomy, and the like.

When reviewing the historical data on poverty in our country, we discover that in 1974 Argentina had a poverty index of about 8 percent, while recently released data reveal that 60 percent of the population currently lives below the poverty line. Thus, it is understandable that, until very recently, there existed a deeply rooted belief in Argentine society, and also among the members of the Jewish community that there were no poor Jews in the country.

In order to address this unprecedented challenge of Jewish poverty, it is essential to comprehend the scope of the problem that confronts our community.

POOR JEWS IN ARGENTINA?

The profound economic transformations that have taken place in Argentina have aggravated the situation of society's most needy (structural poor) and have generated a new social group, arising from the impoverishment of the middle class that has been named "the new poor" (Kessler, 1995). The

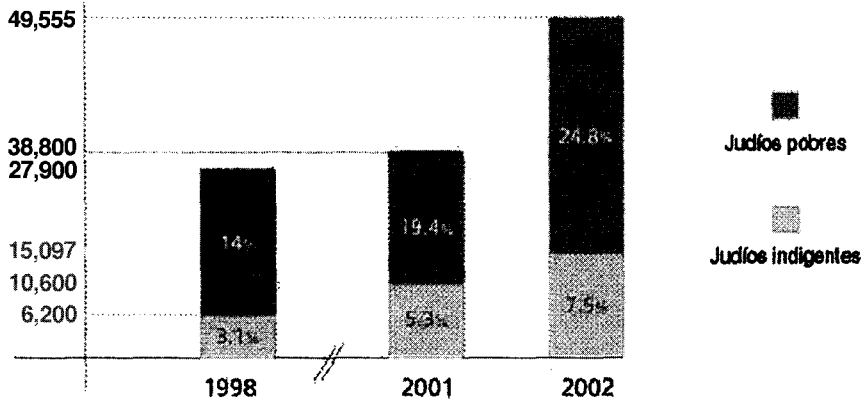
appearance of this new poverty implies an unparalleled increase in the number of Jewish families in a situation of growing impoverishment as well as a series of new problems for those suffering structural poverty (see Table 1). The phenomenon of "new poverty" is particular to Argentina, a nation characterized by a significant middle class. The New poor are people who enjoyed relatively stable employment with certain possibilities of social mobility. However, in the 1990s, they began to experience a profound economic lack of well-being that was the result of loss of employment, salary reductions, and lack of social protection.

These *new poor* are similar to the *not poor* in some socio-cultural aspects such as access to primary and secondary education, number of children per family, certain cultural orientations, and expectations of social mobility. Yet, they share such problems as unemployment, job insecurity, and lack of health insurance with the structural poor. In terms of self-perception, they do not consider themselves poor, even in cases where objectively their situations are extremely precarious.

RESPONSE FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

In September 1997, the Fundación Tzedaká and the American Jewish Joint Dis-

Table 1.



tribution Committee (JDC), in collaboration with other organizations, took responsibility for creating an innovative response to these new problems. The professional initiative to establish a network of Jewish community social protection that would share responsibility for the care of the population affected by the crisis rapidly received support from the lay leadership of the Fundación Tzedaká.

This focus succeeded in integrating institutions, regardless of ideological, political, or religious questions. Undoubtedly, this was the start of a renewed concentration on Jewish community action in Argentina, previously typified by fragmented and competitive institutional life.

Fundación Tzedaká, which had until that time concentrated on fundraising for Jewish culture and education, initiated its social programs with an innovative model that targets two types of populations: (1) The *direct beneficiary population* of Jewish families in situations of poverty and social vulnerability in Argentina and (2) *indirect beneficiaries*, that is, those Jewish community institutions associated with the project (Katzman, 1989).

The Strategy

The basic strategy was to establish Centers of Community Social Service (CASS), which were opened by the Fundación in partnership with various Jewish community institutions, such as synagogues and Jewish Community Centers. By 2001, seven centers

had been created and, after the December 2001 economic crisis, an additional seven centers were opened in Buenos Aires and 17 in the rest of the country.

It is worth highlighting the diversity of the alliances that were formed, which included both secular and religious (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) sectors and Sephardim and Ashkenazim. The Fundación Tzedaká became the common ground uniting these efforts. The professional staff was largely responsible for promoting this new concept of a community foundation that moved beyond the different institutional identifications and for sustaining the necessary equilibrium among different denominations. The success of this new vision implies a change in the organizational culture of Jewish community institutions in Argentina.

Management and Service Model

The CASS centers are coordinated by social workers from the Fundación who are responsible for direct service to beneficiaries and for organizing volunteers. The professional team members articulate these key concepts in the administration of social programs:

- geographical and administrative decentralization
- strategic alliances—working in networks
- cultural and geographic accessibility

- accountability
- efficiency
- quality of services (Grosh & Atkinsons, 1997)
- mix of lay and professional resources
- preservation of the institutional identity of the sponsoring institutions
- reinsertion into the Jewish community

Professional leadership played a vitally important role in taking on the challenge of quadrupling the number of beneficiaries served in only a few months (see Tables 2 and 3).

International Aid

The Fundación, since its creation, has maintained an active relationship with the JDC and with the federation movement in the United States. This connection facilitated the establishment of a relationship built on mutual trust that contributed significantly to the institutional model with which the Fundación developed its community identity.

The crisis unleashed in December of 2001 did not take the U.S. Jewish community by surprise. The JDC in 2002 put into action a vigorous program of assistance and support for our community. Without a doubt, a major part of the aforementioned successes of this year are related to the decisive action and commitment of the JDC and the unique relationship between the professionals from both institutions.

Table 2. Growth in the number of volunteers.

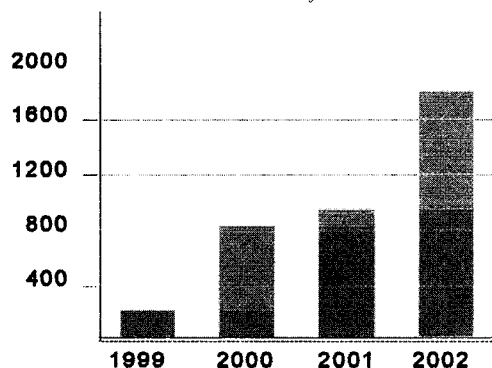
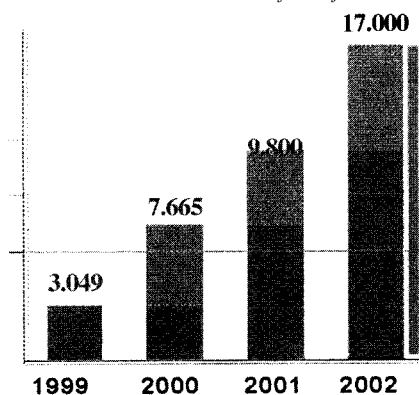


Table 3. Growth in the number of beneficiaries.



INITIAL REFLECTIONS

A year has passed in what has been an exceptional process for all of us, and we can just now begin to formulate the first questions and hypotheses to explain the capacity for rapid response that is demonstrated in the data.

Paradoxically, the limited community experience of the Fundación became a comparative advantage. Being a young institution with only 11 years of existence has allowed it to develop a highly innovative organizational culture that can adapt continually to the changing demands of the Jewish community and national contexts.

Another factor was that both lay and professional leadership were strong partners in meeting this challenge. This created an institutional dynamic that differs from that in most Jewish community institutions in Argentina. The lay leadership recognized the professional as a potential leader, and the professional staff received strong support from the Board to develop a model of service and administration for the new poor that stimulated the commitment of both staff and lay people. This commitment was the foundation of such substantial growth.

The fact that both professionals and lay-people were personally affected by the financial crisis increased their commitment to their work. The crisis affected each person in his or her daily life, increasing feelings of frustration, impotence, and insecurity, while

the perception of being protagonists in caring for those who were suffering the most increased their dedication to their work. The Fundación's lay leaders were successful businesspeople who were struggling in their own companies with uncertainty and the lack of rules and predictability in the nation's economic and political system.

Nonetheless, the first symptoms of burn-out became apparent in those who had the most contact with the "victims" of the crisis. As the distance between one and the other is not that great, the process of identification with the beneficiaries began to be very intense and the self-perception of volunteers and professionals as "survivors" manifested itself.

The frustration generated by the inevitable impossibility of meeting every need is another factor in this syndrome. In this situation, as it is written in the Talmud, "Even when you have nothing to give him, console him with words. Tell him: my soul is with you, although it is all I have to give (Vaylkrah Rabbah 14:15)." To combat burnout syndrome, we succeeded in emphasizing to in the professional staff the value of the act of reparations—*tikkun olam*—when confronting pain and need. This was possible due to specialized work with each team.

One year of crisis has passed, and there is

still no light at the end of the tunnel. During this period, the members of the Jewish community in Argentina have realized the importance of Jewish communities in Israel and the rest of the world. It would be difficult for us to confront this reality without the decisive assistance of the Jewish world. For that, we want to pay homage to all of our colleagues from different parts of the Jewish world and Israel who have supported us in these very critical times.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1965) once wrote, "One who is not a beneficiary cannot be a pioneer." The Jewish community of Argentina has enjoyed a rich and full community life in the past. In the future, we will tell the story of how this community overcame a moment of extreme dependence and rediscovered itself through its capacity for creation and growth.

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