

Argentina and the role of the gerontologists: Similar or different to the rest of the world ?

Prof. Ramon Gutmann Springer
Buenos Aires – Argentina

gutmann@ciudad.com.ar

In the view of many social and political experts, Argentina is now living through the worst crisis in all its history. I intend here to share with the NEWSLETTER readers some basic information and ideas on the various aspects of the problems of the elderly people in our region that can eventually become a modest contribution to a major discussion among the colleagues of the different countries. At the same time, I guess and hope this can be a way to learn about the different approaches in which professionals face problems, and mitigate old age difficulties, although each of us must find proposals and solutions within our own countries. In Latin America, we have learnt not to make universally general diagnostics any longer, and try instead to get to know as best we can the orientation, the potential and the possibilities of each people's own culture and abilities in terms of solutions, or at least of possible options.

There is a good reason to believe that the huge gap between the poor and the rich is today a catastrophe, even more taking in account that richer people in Argentina usually declare a lower income for tax related reasons, while the poorer people, do not usually hide their income, or even a part of them, declare a higher income under the "shame effect", also paradoxically present in a middle class that is subject to the stress of survival. (in February 2003 almost 60% of our total population are under the poverty level and circa 21% are unemployed).

A regressive pattern of income distribution was established, on account of the FALL OF MIDDLE SECTORS BELOW THE LEVEL OF POVERTY (80% of the new poor has a middle class origin). Such sectors have not been able to maintain their family income over the monthly 120 pesos (currently around 40 U.S. dollars) minimum amount per member.

The social security system presents a dismal picture. Only 32.8% of the population made in 2002 regular contributions to the system, which would entitle them to a retirement pension. This means that around 70% of the population will not be entitled to pension payments upon retirement, and if a small number of them were so entitled, their pension will be very low. In the 2002 budget the 13% cut down from monthly retirement pensions over 500 pesos (U.S. dollars 166) was extended, an absolutely unconstitutional, and accordingly illicit, trimming.

In relation to the private retirement system, at the time it was launched in 1994, according to official statements not less than 75% of the population was expected to adhere to the system. Of 8,800,000 members in January 2002, only 2,600,000, that is, only 29.8% paid their contributions.

Due to the decreasing prices of shares and public bonds as from July last year, the annual average profitability of the AFJPs (Retirement Pension Fund Administrators) was negative by -7.2%.

Such AFJPs charge workers a commission that amounts to around 45% of their individual contributions. I do not know whether such lack of proportion exists in any other country in the world. While the goal of the AFJPs was to strengthen the capital market, more than 70% of the investments they made was in loans to the Government, and used to finance the public deficit. In such a way, the AFJPs came to have in their portfolios 16,000 million dollars in secured loans, which were then "pesified" (that is, compulsorily converted into pesos). In Argentina, "pesification" is the process by which banks forced all the citizens who had made

deposits in American dollars to have them translated to pesos at a \$1.40 exchange rate, recoverable within 10 years in the form of bonds, when the U.S. dollar parity is currently at three pesos, and has already temporarily reached four pesos. A seriously illicit confidence trick, and one that has amazed the world.

In such a way, the 1994 reform of the retirement pension system, intended to remain in force for several decades, has become extremely unpopular in a country where everybody is daily deceived out of their money. The major concern of our current President is to make strident announcements of a social assistance program. Its general guidelines are expressed in bombastic words: all-inclusive salaries to be allocated on a universal basis, direct income redistribution from higher to lower income sectors, unemployment insurance, and work training. But the funds being contemplated are under one billion dollars, an amount already contemplated in the 2002 budget, before the devaluation. Only that now, expressed in pesos, the amount sounds larger. The monthly 50 dollar amount that he says will be distributed to unemployed breadwinners by still undefined mechanisms will be paid on the basis of non-existing population registers, and after a savage struggle among the Nation, provinces and townships. In harmony with a time-honored corrupt tradition, the policy of assigning grants to "friendly parties" will probably survive. The peso devaluation lowered Argentine costs as measured in U.S. dollars. The average income in the country, which before January 1st, 2002, was a monthly equivalent of \$ 506, has now fallen to \$ 168, salaries in the formal economy fell from \$ 735 to \$ 245, and informal, unrecorded payments from \$ 334 to \$ 111. All this led Argentina, which last year ranked first in the Latin American context, to rank tenth by mid 2002 and it decreases almost every month since then. In Argentina, by the end of last year, 99 million tons of basic food products were produced, an amount enough to feed 330 million people. However millions of Argentineans are unable to get indispensable nutrients, and this situation worsens now effectively every month.

I would like to comment on some ideas derived from our field studies and works, which we believe are valid not only for Argentina, but also for other Latin American countries and maybe also other regions in the world. It would be surely interesting to confront it with colleagues. They may be summarized as follows:

1. Elder people as an age group in our society do neither receive nor see any responses that may contribute to create social identity feelings, getting instead vague messages that express some concern in their respect, in the context of an aggressive and uncertain reality.
2. The most frequent positive stereotypes regarding elders, which emphasize values such as experience or wisdom, are seen by them as neither too credible nor consistent, and it is not trustingly that they accept popular beliefs in the positive old-age qualities arising from the sole course of time.
3. Older people trust their own personal resources and capabilities as survival strategies which they have learnt in the course of life, more than abilities acquired through old age.
4. The vast majority of old people are deeply mistrustful of aged people occupying leading positions in senior citizens' organizations, as they generally believe that such people take personal advantage and benefit from their position, in connivance with politicians or government officers that manipulate them, often in an openly manner.
5. They accept to be organized as a social force, but essentially for social, cultural and sporting activities. They oppose strong resistance to any offers to organize them as a political force on the basis of age discrimination.
6. Old-age leaders generally assume leadership positions in our country have rarely been reliable leaders for senior citizens, due to their scarcely significant, and quite often non-existing background.

7. The preceding assertion is usually the most frequently reason mentioned as a cause for the low level of active participation of elders in matters and problems that affect them.

8. Many old people emphasize the confusion created by gerontology experts, who assume a generalizing and universal approach to elders, and offer inadequate proposals to satisfy their needs. No categories of analysis have been identified to determine additional modes of action on the basis of "satisfaction indicators", setting forth particular forms of satisfaction according to both the cultural and socio-political-economical context of the times, the region and the specific culture.

9. In this respect, it is urgent to develop reliable criteria or options on the basis of the social, cultural, economic and political complexity of each geographical region (within the country) in subjects as essential as health, nutrition, housing, income, family relationships, forms of death, and other matters.

10. The major subjects, the proposals and mottoes of the national Gerontology Conferences provide a rich material to examine the manner in which gerontology experts prioritize the problems affecting older people. It may also be interesting to prepare a list of the subjects consistently ignored and avoided in the professional agendas of meetings, symposiums and Conferences.

Though these social issues (amongst which the problems affecting the elderly are a constant) end up by being hot coals on the verge of exploding in the hands of governments. Changes are, nevertheless, rare, whilst the need for new approaches is permanently on the rise. I can mention at least seven aspects, most surely amongst others, that are present in the economic and social context in which the day-to-day life of the elderly in our countries takes place, namely:

1. In Argentina and surely in the other Latin America countries, the elderly, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable, have at their disposal systems devised to protect their interests that rarely work

2. Social and economic systems reflect similar levels of neglect of a sector of the population composed of social beings with scanty possibilities of affecting the operation and interests of these systems

3. The concentration of power contributes to increase the number of people living in submerged social conditions, that becomes increasingly vulnerable populations. These populations do not normally line up with other underprivileged groups simply because they share a similar social destiny. On the contrary, internal disputes often arise amongst the different sectors of the poor population. There are few exceptions to the contrary within the general framework of unemployment and sluggishness of the labor markets

4. As it was said before only a small number of elderly people participate actively in issues and problems concerning the everyday life of the aged themselves meanwhile demagoguery and political manipulation in the field of old age have become increasingly refined and sophisticated in keeping with the growing importance of the elderly as a voting segment of the population, essential to win elections. Many leaders of senior organizations are manipulated. Fortunately, however, many others simply refuse to be manipulated.

5. State-run organizations in Latin America normally show very little creativity in developing programs aimed at improving the living conditions of the elderly. Public officers generally counter requests by mechanically replying that "there is not money", thus frustrating the many or few initiatives that crop up. Similarly, political parties substantially limit the actions

they take in connection with the elderly to the possibility or not of increasing the amount of their pensions.

6. A growing number of elderly people are faced with restrictions affecting their access to social and medical services and this situation leads to a shortened life span and premature death and finally

7. Social security systems handle extraordinarily large sums of money that are far higher than ever before in the past. In Argentina and in other countries of our region, these sums of money are managed by politicians and bureaucrats with dubious political foresight and by economists with extremely questionable sensitivity in connection with social issues.

There are some other general aspects to be pointed out in relation to Argentina, and maybe other regions in the world, if we wish to make advances in the framework of actual restrictions, and build a citizenship of elders that will not be a false, lying or imaginary dream of elder empowerment. We have verified several regular occurrences in a society that has lived many years now under a plundering system where the State is privately owned by the officers in tenure, and international agencies as the International Monetary Fund act as international auditors over an accumulated foreign debt that is choking our country.

After a 19-year long process during different Justice administrations, Argentina is the only country in the world where it has been proven in court that the external debt is illegal, untrue, and where no evidence for it can possibly be provided from an administrative, economic or financial point of view. No documents supporting such debt are kept by the Central Bank. It was shown that when Argentina, years ago, for instance, was said to owe 50 billion dollars, it actually owed 5 billion. The current debt amounts to 160 billion, and all borrowings are designed to pay the interest and service of a debt that has mortgaged the hopes of several Argentine generations. During many years, Argentina became indebted and finally did not grow, and naturally enough, corrupt government officers pocketed a large portion of such funds. In recent years we have frequently seen politicians approaching gerontology experts, and vice versa. Very often second and even third level political officers come between technical experts and top ministry levels, because such officers have their own personal projects in relation to their own increasing benefits. A few years ago, Anthony Giddens said that mature age is a new risk that passes in the disguise of an old one. Getting old used to be a more passive experience than nowadays: a fragile or even decaying body was simply something to be accepted. Undoubtedly, it must be said that in a more active, more reflexive society, getting old has become a much more open process, both in the physical and the psychological spheres.

I think there are some questions that must be posed or posed anew, and they have to be worked upon both in the field of social theory and in fieldwork. Our scientific societies (Gerontological, Sociological, Social Workers Societies, etc.) at least in Latin America have a task to accomplish in this respect. They are societies with a scientific agenda, but also with a social conscience in a dramatic historical period.

No doubt that elder people organizations need to grow in number, look inwards at their own workings, and make a definite stand vis-à-vis political organizations, demanding that their rights be respected, notwithstanding the fact that old people leaders may have a legitimate identification with governing or opposition political parties.

Perhaps we should develop in our minds the habit of looking at elders more as a resource than solely as a problem. This will no doubt lead us into an Old Age that should not be seen as a period of life having rights but no responsibilities.

Have we stopped to seriously debate this, among whom, in front of whom, raising which subjects, and aiming at which goal? May gerontology experts be an effective factor, and contribute to give old age the rank of a state policy issue? May they play a role in the face of the corruption of some officers? Or is it naïve just to think of it? Undoubtedly, among politicians and lawmakers this subject is much more frequently talked about, and gerontologists are called upon more frequently than in past times. But are gerontology experts interested in creating a framework of agreements designed to promote old age programs as an urgent need for our elders? Are they interested in demanding, giving it the rank of a governmental issue, larger budget allocations to ensure the operation of such programs? In other words, to rephrase the question, are gerontology experts interested in senior citizens from a social and political standpoint, or is this to be a subject naturally restricted to politicians and government officers? The simple paradox here is that many people believe that if this subject continues to be restricted to political parties, such parties will mutually attempt to knock each other down every four years on occasion of political elections, and the condition of people will increasingly worsen. And this will be so as a result of the possible deterioration of the Social Security system, both from the decay of the system, and from the differences among the provinces in a country, like ours, where future economic and financial commitments are excessively high. In a country where, for instance, only a very small number of autonomous workers pay their social security contributions, which as we already said can derive in serious difficulties upon retirement, or upon the inability of many people to retire. Also, an increasing number of people are losing their access to the medical care system, which means that their lives are shortened

We would not be too daring if we say that the meetings that senior citizen leaders, politicians, government officers and gerontology experts usually hold are not enough serious in these latitudes, given the manipulating will of some politicians, the personal interests of many government officers, the ambitions of some professionals, and the inclination to accept favors from some elder leaders. But the true and encouraging fact is that all these groups include able, honest, and concerned people, concerned to make from the elderly needs a State issue.

Source: Hoff, A. (2003) Spring Newsletter 2003 of the Research Committee (RC11) on the Sociology of Aging of the International Sociological Association (ISA). Berlin: German Centre of Gerontology, pp. 7-11.