

### 3 **The Social and Ecological Dimensions of a Decentralisation Process: Participation by Social Movements in the Sustainable Management of Urban Solid Waste in Buenos Aires**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the governance dynamics involved in a decentralisation policy aiming to tackle the environmental, economic and social problems linked to waste treatment in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires City. The 'Sin Desperdicios' programme intends to generate a 'social model' for waste management, by encouraging productive networks that include municipalities and social organisations. These networks will manage *social plants* for solid waste selection and classification. We focus on the process of negotiation related to the setting of one of these social plants. This process was led by a social movement that organised the population living near Buenos Aires' main sanitary filling. Since this particular project concerns a multiplicity of heterogeneous actors, it is of strategic significance to analyse the complex processes of interaction involved in democratic decentralisation policies. The hypothesis we explore here is that the actual impact of these decentralisation policies depends on the outcome of the conflicts and negotiations between actors' different logics. In order to assess the consequences of such policies on livelihoods, government legitimacy and waste management, we explore the governance processes that inform their design and implementation. To this effect, we first discuss the relationship between decentralisation and governance. Then, departing from the analytical framework of governance, we shed some light on the logic of actors' decisions and action and the social dynamics involved in this process of decentralisation.

**Keywords:** Governance; social movements; waste management; democratic decentralisation policies; sustainable environmental regulation; cardboard pickers.

### 3.1 Introduction

Waste management is one of the most serious environmental problems in big cities. Every day, tons of industrial and domestic garbage are generated, involving serious risks to public health and the urban environmental balance.<sup>3</sup> In the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires City<sup>4</sup> (AMBA), rubbish collection, treatment and sanitation are the responsibility of Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado<sup>5</sup> (CEAMSE), a public enterprise whose directors are designated by Buenos Aires Province and Buenos Aires City authorities.

CEAMSE was created in 1977 with the purpose of implementing a new system of urban waste management, based on sanitary filling. Filling came to replace the previous form of waste treatment, which involved incineration in public furnaces and household ovens (Prignano 1998; Suárez 1998).

CEAMSE's creation in the context of the then military dictatorship also implied an authoritarian centralisation of waste management for AMBA. Its directorate was composed of representatives<sup>6</sup> from the governments of Buenos Aires City and Buenos Aires Province in equal proportions. Previously, the municipalities in the vicinity of Buenos Aires had been directly in charge of waste management, but the 9111/78 Provincial Act obliged them to dispose of all collected residue exclusively in CEAMSE's sanitary fillings. This act also forbade all recycling activity and any other kind of residue treatment (Gorbán 2005). Thus, since the approval of this law, CEAMSE has had a monopoly on the final disposal and treatment of waste.

Another aspect to be considered here is that one explicit objective of CEAMSE's creation was to put an end to informal waste selection, classification and selling activities. In effect, commercialisation of residue has always been an important subsistence resource for many poor families in AMBA (Suárez 1998; Schamber and Suárez 2002; Gorbán 2005). For instance, *cartoneros*<sup>7</sup> collect rubbish in the streets to sell for recycling; *quemeros* gather waste material from sanitary fillings and illegal dumps for the same purpose. The new policy was intended to put an end to such practices.

The authoritarian attempts of the military government in the late 1970s to eradicate *cartoneros*' and *quemeros*' activities soon proved to be a failure. In the context of the socio-economic crisis that Argentina has faced in recent years and the consequent growth of extreme poverty, the number of families

selling rubbish to survive has even increased. At the same time, *cartoneros* and *quemeros* began to organise themselves, with support from foreign and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as recycling cooperatives composed of workers and as social movements.<sup>8</sup> Thus, social conflict has increased as a result of the government's establishing of regulations on waste management without considering these groups' interests and needs.

This situation highlights the political dimension of the problem. Since waste management involves such a multiplicity of actors and conflicts, government agencies are obliged to strike a balance between different perspectives. Given the lack of legitimacy of representative democratic institutions in Argentina,<sup>9</sup> every step of the implementation process had to be measured and carefully negotiated. However, social movements seem to be the more critical actors to consider, since their repertory of action includes open conflict and their low degree of institutionalisation makes it difficult to establish negotiation strategies in the long term.

Faced with this scenario, the provincial government of Buenos Aires began to promote a decentralisation policy in November 2004, the 'Sin Desperdicios'<sup>10</sup> programme, the primary objective of which is to generate 'social management' of waste treatment. This also implies a new way of addressing the environmental problem of residue disposal, namely recycling the material for industrial use.

Thus, this programme involves the development of *social plants*<sup>11</sup> for urban solid waste selection and classification, financed in cooperation with the national Ministry of Social Development<sup>12</sup> and built with the technical support of CEAMSE. The programme aims to encourage productive networks including municipalities and social organisations to manage the plants.<sup>13</sup>

It is foreseen that these social plants will involve classification, for later commercialisation, of such elements as plastic, pasteboard, glass and aluminium. These activities will be carried out by *cartoneros* and *quemeros*, in an attempt to ensure their social inclusion. The plants are storehouses equipped with a conveyor belt (where classification tasks are performed) and a hydraulic press for selected compacting of material. This process will make it possible to reduce the volume of waste to be buried in sanitary fillings. The plants will also have rotary processing filters to deal with organic products.

The present article focuses on the process of negotiation and decision-making related to the setting of one of these social plants; this process was managed by a ‘picketing organisation’<sup>14</sup> that we call ‘21 de septiembre’.<sup>15</sup> This movement organises the population living near CEAMSE’s main sanitary filling in order to build a ‘network of neighbourhoods’<sup>16</sup> to participate in the ‘Sin Desperdicios’ programme.

The plant in question is expected to employ around 100 persons, the majority of them *quemeros*. Its construction is to be financed by the national and Buenos Aires Province administrations, while CEAMSE is to donate the land and provide technical advice. Some foreign and national NGOs are also part of the project, providing technical advice and supplying machinery.

This particular project is interesting because of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the actors concerned. Accordingly, we consider it to be of strategic significance to analyse the complex processes of interaction involved in democratic decentralisation policies. In fact, the participation of community-based organisations and social movements adds a new dimension to the dynamics of decentralisation. The hypothesis we want to explore here is that *the actual impact of these decentralisation policies depends on the outcome of the conflicts, negotiations and arrangements between actors’ different logics*. Therefore, in order to assess the consequences of such policies on population livelihood, government legitimacy and waste management – as a key aspect of sustainable environmental regulation – it is necessary to comprehend the governance processes that inform their design and implementation. Governance refers to the effects that interactions among multiple social and political actors (not only governmental ones) have on the design and implementation of public policy. Hence, it is useful to explore the complexity of political life in post-industrial society, with its loss of state centrality and its plurality of political actors.

Therefore, an analysis of governance processes will be the main task of this paper. To this effect, we will first discuss the relationship between decentralisation and governance. Then, departing from the analytical frame of governance, we will shed some light on the logic of the actors and the social dynamics involved in this process of decentralisation. This will allow us, third, to examine the hypothesis we have proposed.

The discussion is based on data collected in the context of an action-research project.<sup>17</sup> Its principal objective was to develop schemes of training advice

and coordination for productive experience to be gained by ‘picketing movements’ and ‘recovered factories’,<sup>18</sup> in order to establish productive networks oriented towards generating sources of employment. To reach this goal, our research group<sup>19</sup> worked with different organisations, one of which was ‘21 de septiembre’. This organisation asked us to become involved in the process of negotiation and also in the consolidation of the ‘neighbourhood network’. In this context, we organised several workshops in order to foster reflection, discussion and construction of basic agreements by participants. In addition, we accompanied organisation leaders at various meetings and in negotiations with governmental and non-governmental representatives.<sup>20</sup> This kind of participation in the project allowed us to employ a diversity of data collection methods: not only interviews with the actors concerned and documentary analysis, but also observing actors’ strategies and positioning in the different negotiation phases.

## **3.2 Decentralisation and governance: A theoretical discussion**

### **3.2.1 Decentralisation: Different concepts and problems**

In the last twenty years, developing countries have experienced a massive movement towards decentralisation. In the discourse of governments and international aid agencies, decentralisation appears as a solution to several core problems: efficiency deficits, fiscal crises, governance failures, government legitimacy, or even inequity (World Bank 1997; Bresser Pereira 1998; World Bank 2000).

Nevertheless, this abstract concept encompasses a number of conceptions of the actual forms that transfer of power from national authorities to local actors and institutions can take. Administrative decentralisation – or *deconcentration* – involves the transfer of managerial duties and decisions to local administrative bodies, in order to improve the quality of public policies and services (Larson and Ribot 2004). In this case, the goal of decentralisation is to do better justice to the preferences and interests of the local population by bringing the decision-making process closer to them. This should, at the same time, improve accountability. Moreover, decentralisation is considered a way to optimise public administration, by avoiding concentration of responsibilities (and the consequent ‘bottlenecks’) at the level of the central state.

However, in Latin America, deconcentration has often been used as a strategy to reduce the fiscal deficit of the national state. In the context of structural adjustment policies, transfer of responsibilities to local governments has often not been accompanied by transfer of the necessary financial resources. This is why some authors indicate that decentralisation is a synonym for legitimising the downsizing and dismantling of the state (Boron 2000a).

There is, however, a second concept of decentralisation, namely *political and democratic decentralisation*, the principal purpose of which is to encourage participation by the local population in decision-making processes. From this perspective, decentralisation is a tool to improve the legitimacy of the democratic system (Boron 2000a; Larson and Ribot 2004).

This is particularly important in Latin America, where broad segments of the poor have been marginalised with respect to political decision-making. This situation has eroded popular support for democracy (Przeworski 1998; Boron 2000b) and led to recurrent institutional crises in recent years (e.g. in Argentina, Ecuador and Bolivia), in which social movements (Tarrow 1994) played an important role. In this context, participation and inclusion of marginalised social actors in public policy-making is essential.

The policy which we will examine – the ‘Sin Desperdicios’ programme – corresponds to the second type of decentralisation, since it attempts to ensure participation in the decision-making process concerning waste management at different levels of the state, and including private enterprises, NGOs, as well as *cartoneros*’ and *quemeros*’ organisations.

Current decentralisation programmes concerned with natural resource management are facing various problems, though.

First, the actual extent of local participation has to be considered. Sustainable environmental regulation is “the basis of significant wealth for governments and national elites” (Larson and Ribot 2004). In this sense, decentralisation involves a threat to the interests of these parties, which are not willing to surrender power and profit. This is a significant obstacle to effective decentralisation, given the capacity of these actors to influence public policy. In consequence, decentralisation frequently remains a subject for discourse, without any real transfer of resources and decision-making capability. The participation proposed to community-based organisations and social movements is often reduced to mere consultation, or their presence is simply used to legitimise decisions previously taken by officials or other actors.

Second, it is important to examine practices which secure local participation, since they have different consequences in terms of political representation and, therefore, different potentials for reconstructing the legitimacy of the democratic system (Veneziano Esperón 2004).

Neoliberal critiques of state inefficiency and bureaucracy in the 1990s led international aid agencies to foster the transfer of resources and management responsibilities to civil society actors, such as local NGOs (Bresser Pereira 1998). Furthermore, they even encouraged the constitution of 'community-based organisations', in order to assure consideration of local interests. Unfortunately, these organisations proved to be 'project-dependent', since most of them were unable to survive once internationally financed programmes had been terminated (Veneziano Esperón 2004).

NGOs do not always have the capability to represent the demands of the poorest and most marginalised social sectors. These are often voiced by social movements. In both cases, however, the legitimacy of these organisations as representatives of local interests and perspectives is in question. This is why the dominant development discourse in the late 1990s stressed the importance of building institutional arrangements for decentralisation in which local elected authorities play a central role (Larson and Ribot 2004). Nevertheless, from our point of view, such arrangements do not assure that all groups' views and values will be considered. Local governments, in fact, are often influenced by clientelistic political practices and corruption. Besides, they "tend to have a poor record in terms of serving women, the poor and other marginalised populations" (Larson and Ribot 2004).

As a matter of fact, many social actors usually take part in processes of democratic decentralisation. This renders their implementation extremely complex: different institutions and organisations often have diverse views and interests regarding the transfer of power. Moreover, their ideas about natural resource management vary.

Consequently, we advocate the importance of examining processes of decentralisation from the point of view of governance. This will enhance comprehension of the complexity of the social dynamics involved in the interactions among actors concerned with a certain social problem.

### 3.2.2 Governance: An analytical framework

The concept of ‘governance’ has been defined in different ways (e.g. World Bank 1992, 1994; Hewitt de Alcantara 1998; Milani 1998; Lebesis and Paterson 2000; Rosenau 2003). These diverse approaches have led to in-depth theoretical debates. In the context of the National Centre of Competence in Research North-South (NCCR N-S), we collaborated with a research group at the Geneva-based Graduate Institute of Development Studies (IUED), in order to develop a conceptual perspective of governance that avoids the normative preoccupations with ‘good government’ or ‘governability’. Instead, we focused on producing an analytical tool for assessing the impacts of interventions by a multiplicity of actors (with different logics and interests) on the process of definition and implementation of particular policies. Below, we will present the components of this tool, which will be used to analyse the ‘social plant’ planning process in terms of actors, nodal points, norms and processes (Hufty 2006; Cross and Freytes Frey 2007).

Identification of *actors concerned* constitutes the starting point for empirical research. The delimitation of social problems targeted by the policy permits the individualisation of groups and social organisations that may be affected. This includes potential beneficiaries, but also NGOs and humanitarian organisations concerned with designing solutions for the problems involved, private enterprises whose economic interests are affected by the proposed actions, trade unions that defend workers’ interests, different governmental agencies, programmes, etc. This forms the basis for an exploratory process of identifying actors with the capacity to hinder or advance policy implementation (Cross and Freytes Frey 2005).

Some of the aspects relevant for characterising actors (this is not a conclusive list) are: a) Resources mobilised (different kinds of capital: economic, social, cultural, political) (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1995). This takes account of the (relative) power that different actors have to impel their own objectives and problem definitions; b) Objectives and interests, which facilitates some understanding of their positions and actions; c) Strategies for facing social problems: expression of demands, different alliances at nodal points, obstacles, and characterisation of opponents.

The *nodal points* constitute another key concept within the analytical framework (Hufty 2004; Chiara and Di Virgilio 2005; Hufty 2006; Cross and Freytes Frey 2007). These are the meeting points (actual or virtual) for the

different logics of actors concerned, in which agreements and differences take shape about which resolutions are strategically relevant for policy implementation. Thus identification of nodal points is an important analytical aspect in studying governance processes. This requires previous exploration of actors' perspectives and interests in order to identify the central conflicts that have the potential to block, modify or reshape a policy during its implementation.<sup>21</sup> Each nodal point is characterised by a central stake, in reference to which different actors concerned interact (discuss, negotiate, build agreements, fight, etc.).

In light of this definition, some of the aspects that should be analysed in characterising a nodal point are: possible alliances of interests and perspectives, power asymmetries among actors, and interaction patterns. By studying these dynamic aspects, it is possible to comprehend the complexity of norms, the production process, social actors' constructions, and the definition and redefinition of the policy pursued.<sup>22</sup>

A nodal point is a 'core concept' in the study of governance, since it allows for analysis of the complexity of interactions that take place during the implementation process. It also makes it possible to explore conflicts and alliances among actors and practices of conflict regulation.

The concept of *norms*, the third component in the framework, refers to the regulation of social practices, where social practices are considered as collective representations of appropriate behaviour within a given context. We interpret the concept broadly, including formally recognised norms – i.e. those that constitute legal or administrative bodies – as well as informal norms, i.e. those exhibited by actors' practices (Hufty 2004, 2006).

Nevertheless, considering this analytical framework, it is important to relate the concept of decentralisation to other analytical categories. Thus, we consider it necessary to point out that norms rule actors' constitutions, regulate interaction patterns, and are the stakes in nodal points. At the same time, different actors may subscribe to different normative patterns, and it is not possible to establish hierarchies between them in advance. In fact, the application of a certain normative pattern in a given context is a source of conflict among the actors concerned.

Regarding the fourth component of the analytical framework, i.e. the category of *process*, it has to be pointed out that governance itself is a process

and the other three elements are also traversed by processes: actors' constitutions, the dynamics of nodal points, and definition of norms. In any case, reconstructing the process of governance (as the regulation of the relationships among actors concerned with a certain social problem) requires, first of all, an analysis in order to comprehend the complexity of the interactions among actors that affect policy implementation (by individualising different nodal points). Second, it requires a synthesis to assess the influence of the particular dynamics in each nodal point on the results of the whole implementation process.

The analytical framework we have briefly presented will guide our discussion about the most important characteristics of the negotiation and formulation of the social plant project. We will concentrate our analysis on actors' identification and nodal point dynamics, considering the norms and processes involved.

### **3.3 Identification of actors concerned**

In our case study, the provincial government of Buenos Aires plays a leading role. It took the initiative to transform residue management by stipulating urban solid waste management plants with a social dimension. This initiative required articulation among actors – governmental institutions, NGOs, social movements, municipalities, etc. – to tackle social and environmental aspects of the problem simultaneously.

Other key actors include national agencies. Even though the national government did not play a principal role in previous urban solid waste management, it is now responsible for a good portion of project financial support as social movements aim to become plant owners.<sup>23</sup>

Municipalities are also concerned with this project. The decentralisation policy gives them the chance to regain some control over local waste management. However, they often have to negotiate with social movements about the plant's future control.

CEAMSE itself is a fourth important actor, as the institution entitled to and legally responsible for urban solid waste management. Most of the project's technical and operational aspects must be approved by this state enterprise, which supplies basic material (collected waste that needs to be sorted) and the land where the plant is placed.

In the case of the plant in question, '21 de septiembre'<sup>24</sup> is another central actor: it is supposed to operate the plant, organise *quemeros* for work, and guarantee the social and economic sustainability of the project in the long term. This organisation has a long history of social work in one of the poorest areas of Buenos Aires Province. It began its activities with the occupation of land that had formerly been an illegal dump – next door to a CEAMSE sanitary filling – in order to establish a neighbourhood on that site.

As a local social movement, '21 de septiembre' undertakes a number of social and community activities in order to meet neighbours' basic needs. Each day the organisation supplies two meals for 300 children living in extreme poverty. It also distributes clothing and manages some governmental food programmes and subsidies for poor unemployed people.

The main objective of the organisation is to build a 'comprehensive community development' in the neighbourhood, based on the principles of 'autonomy', 'solidarity' and 'self-organisation'. In order to achieve this objective, it conducts workshops (according to 'popular education methodology') to strengthen local capacity for association, literacy campaigns for elderly people, provides educational and recreational activities for teenagers and children, and runs productive cooperatives for baking, dressmaking, carpentry, blacksmith operations and oven-building.

The organisation is composed of neighbourhood leaders and social activists, who are mostly women with children. Since this is an informal social movement, it is very difficult – even for its leaders – to specify the exact number of members. The participants vary according to the activities and circumstances.

Given the fact that the neighbourhood is located near CEAMSE's main sanitary filling (Figure 1), most of its inhabitants are *quemeros*. Therefore, the organisation has always struggled to protect them from abuse by police and security guards. Thus it has started to promote the coordination of actions with other social leaders and small groups (who live in the vicinity of the sanitary filling) in order to build a 'network of neighbourhoods' to represent *quemeros*' interests when dealing with CEAMSE and other governmental actors. That is why the organisation has become involved in the 'Sin Desperdicios' programme.



Fig. 1  
A partial view of  
the '21 de septiem-  
bre' settlement,  
near CEAMSE's  
sanitary filling.  
(Photo by Ada  
Freytes Frey)

Together with these key actors, there is a group of minor actors which are relevant when it comes to dealing with certain aspects. They play roles related to technical issues and intermediation among the principal actors concerned. First, there are various NGOs oriented to environmental policies and social development.

Second, there is a group of political lobbyists with a considerable track record in local social work who participate in the negotiation process as intermediaries. Some of them also worked in previous projects related to urban solid waste management. This background makes them reliable in the eyes of '21 de septiembre' as *cartoneros* and *quemeros* supporters, and positions them as negotiators recognised by the public agencies and NGOs mentioned.

Third, as this scene of multiple actors with diverse interests (not always clearly articulated) and expertise often puzzles the principal leaders of '21 de septiembre', they summoned professional advisors to help them maintain a certain autonomy and support them in key aspects of the project.<sup>25</sup> Our team is part of this independent group of professionals, as we will discuss later.

Last but not least, we identified a very important actor in this process which we are going to call the ‘*quemeros* group’.<sup>26</sup> This is the group that will create a ‘network of neighbourhoods’ from which future plant workers will be recruited. Almost all of them are *quemeros* and live in the area. This group is made up of some ‘21 de septiembre’ organisation members, informal clusters of neighbours who jointly go to the sanitary filling every day, as well as some other tiny groups led by members of traditional parties. Thus, they are far from constituting a homogeneous collective: they have neither the same engagement with the organisation nor the same objectives regarding the plant.

Obviously, the ‘*quemeros* group’ is of fundamental importance for project implementation. The ‘social’ dimension of the plant and its impact on inhabitants’ livelihoods, but also project sustainability itself, depend on how *quemeros* participation is defined. This group is, however, a collective actor ‘under construction’. Our participation was oriented precisely to collaborating in this construction and strengthening process.

This enumeration of actors concerned gives us a glimpse of the complexity of the negotiation and decision-making processes around nodal points involved in the plant project.

### **3.4 Actors in motion: Nodal points identification**

We have identified three types of nodal points in the dynamics of interaction, operating at different levels. The first type concerns the design of decentralisation policy. The second has to do with its implementation in the particular case presented in this paper. This type includes three specific nodal points: political negotiation with national and provincial governments, technical discussion with CEAMSE, and definition of ‘21 de septiembre’ organisational strategy. The third type concerns local social interactions (in the neighbourhood): internal organisational dynamics and the constitution of the ‘*quemeros* group’. In the following paragraphs we examine the interactions related to each nodal point.

#### **3.4.1 General negotiation on decentralisation policy**

As stated above, the ‘Sin Desperdicios’ programme follows multidimensional objectives. It tackles social, environmental and commercial issues

simultaneously. The arrangements among these different objectives constitute the stake in this nodal point.

Considering the present CEAMSE monopoly on urban solid waste treatment in AMBA, CEAMSE managers regard the participation of other actors as something that ought to be controlled and limited. The most annoying among these actors would seem to be the *quemeros* and their organisations. The history of conflict and reciprocal suspicion, aggravated by some violent incidents in recent years,<sup>27</sup> makes it very difficult to imagine peaceful cohabitation. However, for some CEAMSE managers and engineers working in sanitary fillings, this social plant project is an opportunity to overcome daily conflicts, as a result of which they support the project to some extent.

For the provincial government of Buenos Aires, the challenge is to find a solution to the residue problem without increasing social unease. Officials are aware of the fact that *quemeros* work is, for several families, their last resort to avoid indigence. Thus, government officials aim not only to overcome the dispute over waste management but to create decent employment opportunities for neighbourhood inhabitants. Nevertheless, depending on the political constitution in each municipality and its relationship with local administrations, provincial functionaries exhibit different attitudes. They offer future plant management to municipalities or to social movements with an eye on political scenarios and possible alliances. In any case, this allows them to keep a certain level of control over the process since they will provide economic resources, specialised knowledge and coordination capabilities.

For municipalities, this social plant project is an opportunity to renew their participation in waste management and to work on solutions for the serious environmental and economic problem of final garbage disposal. However, the involvement of social movements appears to be regarded as a threat to their local authority and political support. At the same time, job creation and prevention of further social instability are desirable objectives for them, even if this means having to share the political benefits generated with social movements.

Two NGOs participated actively in programme design for 'Sin Desperdicios'. As mentioned above, the provincial officials who fostered this programme were former members of these NGOs. They seek to maintain their influence during implementation, in order to become the main suppliers of training and machinery (directly or as intermediaries).

Finally, the national government, represented by the Ministry of Social Development, is determined to replace ‘social plans’<sup>28</sup> – from which most *quemeros* families benefit – with sustainable community-based productive projects that create jobs for the present beneficiaries. Its economic support of the project is related to this objective.

The increasing relevance of social aspects of waste management in recent years has made local social movements and community-based organisations important actors in this scheme. In the social plant project analysed in this paper, *quemeros* organisation and mobilisation is a major political issue. As mentioned above, the neighbourhoods involved in the project are located near the largest sanitary filling in AMBA. Most of their inhabitants subsist on selling rubbish, and there are regular conflicts with CEAMSE guards. Therefore, any social plant project located in this district has to consider the participation of the *quemeros* social movement. The ‘21 de septiembre’ organisation’s history of struggle on behalf of *quemeros* rights positioned it as a suitable organisation to lead the project.

In contrast, the political distance between the national and provincial governments, on the one hand, and the mayor of the municipality concerned, on the other hand, blocked involvement by the local administration in the plant project. In fact, national and provincial officials preferred to support ‘21 de septiembre’ in assuming leadership of the project. That is why the municipality will not be present in further discussions.

### **3.4.2 Negotiations with national and provincial governments**

We will now address the nodal point that reflects negotiations on the implementation of the social plant project presented in this paper.

At the beginning of the process in 2004, this nodal point was characterised by the participation of a few ‘21 de septiembre’ organisation leaders, political lobbyists and various national and provincial officials, some of whom had relations to foreign and national NGOs.

The stakes in this nodal point include the budget requirements to open the plant and the sources of this funding (percentages of the budget to be provided by each governmental agency involved). This also assumes that the general model of the plant will be discussed, as well as the number of workers to be recruited and the quality and quantity of solid waste to be processed.

At both national and provincial levels, there are technical staff with considerable experience in dealing with urban solid waste, each of which advocates a different plant model. Each agency attempts to secure its influence in the process by imposing its own design and definitions in every area (amount of money required, machinery specifications, number of workers, legal ownership regime, etc.). At the same time, they are interested in participating but at the lowest possible cost. Therefore, they strive to control the budget and the issues in which they are going to be involved.

As for '21 de septiembre', the key issue is obtaining financial support to open the plant as soon as possible. However, in order to assure the sustainability of the project, they need to guarantee a significant number of jobs to *quemeros* and make enough profit to be able to invest in social and communitarian activities, which is their main objective as an organisation. In what amounts to political lobbying, they need to confirm their skills to ensure that they can act as intermediaries among governmental and non-governmental actors. At the same time, they want to show their efficiency in getting the best conditions for future workers and their capacity to mitigate tensions between fund suppliers and policy beneficiaries.

It is important to bear in mind that governmental actors do not follow a unified logic of action. Functionaries from several national and provincial agencies intervene in the negotiations. Their different political alignments<sup>29</sup> have a direct influence on the confluence or divergence of interests. This can be a good opportunity for '21 de septiembre' to benefit from these tensions. At the same time, however, this situation is a source of instability in that political alliances undergo continual change and the project depends on certain electoral constellations.

Another aspect to stress after analysing this nodal point is that the distinction between state and civil society is not as clear as it seems in some theoretical discussions. In fact, as stated above, some provincial functionaries formerly worked in environmental NGOs. Once they became part of the government they had the chance to implement the visions and intervention strategies developed in those NGOs. This gives us a clue as to the influence of NGOs not only in defining the public agenda but in public policy design as well. At the same time, the plant project presented in this paper envisages active participation by two NGOs, in training activities and in supplying machinery.<sup>30</sup>

In conclusion, it has to be said that the interactions in this nodal point are characterised by their disarticulation. Currently, parallel negotiations (i.e. '21 de septiembre' representatives meet separately with provincial officials from different agencies, and with provincial functionaries and national officials) are the usual procedure, which is highly worrisome for three reasons:

First, project progress is very difficult: the same issues are discussed with different national or provincial functionaries, who have different visions about them; at the same time, there is no coordination among these public officials.

Second, this process is a source of deep frustration, especially for '21 de septiembre' and the '*quemeros* group', given the continuous deferral of decisions. As explained above, *quemeros* constitute a population whose basic needs are not satisfied. At the same time, they are used to being ignored by public policy. That is why they hold a profound distrust of government and the state. This feeling was confirmed when the commencement of construction work on the plant kept being postponed.

Third, responsibility for the lack of coordination among actors is imputed to the '21 de septiembre' organisation. In fact, deferring project implementation generates tensions between the '*quemeros* group' and '21 de septiembre' leaders and members, since the latter are blamed for the deterioration of the project. Thus, our interpretation is that the difficulties of governmental agencies in assuming a coordinating role help to reinforce the idea that social organisations are unable to deal autonomously with a productive project. This is especially relevant if we consider that recent public initiatives to assist poor unemployed people have counted on the management capacities of organisations such as '21 de septiembre', to design and coordinate community-based productive projects.

### **3.4.3 Technical negotiations with CEAMSE**

In this nodal point the intervening actors are mainly CEAMSE representatives, some '21 de septiembre' leaders and technical advisors, and a foreign NGO which has worked with this organisation for a long time. The agreements and conflicts that arise from these negotiations are sometimes discussed among organisation leaders on the one hand, and environmental NGO representatives on the other.

Discussions in this nodal point focus on the plant construction process (supervised by CEAMSE) and the technical requirements of waste classification: the amount of land donated and its location in the sanitary filling, the quality and quantity of basic material – urban solid waste – to be supplied, the storage place, plant sanitary conditions, etc. These are key features in determining an acceptable quality of life for workers and the sustainability of the plant in the long term. Thus, the core stake in this nodal point is control of the process of waste selection, classification and commercialisation.

In order to obtain the financial resources from the national and provincial governments to build the plant, the ‘21 de septiembre’ organisation must sign an agreement with CEAMSE, in which all technical details are to be settled. Given CEAMSE’s monopoly of urban solid waste treatment and its traditional suspicion of *quemeros*, its managers attempt to maintain control of the classification and recycling process. Consequently, they intend to introduce various clauses to secure their authority to supervise not only the technical characteristics of the plant’s working process but also its commercial and financial aspects.

On the other hand, ‘21 de septiembre’ strives to defend its autonomy, especially its right to manage the plant and to define its social utilities. Its resources in this unequal struggle include social and political capital: the threat to mobilise *quemeros* for public demonstrations and the pressure of the national and provincial governments, both of which want to realise the project.

Therefore, the outcome of these negotiations will determine the actual degree of decentralisation, i.e. the extent of the transfer of decision-making power to the social organisation. There is a second stake, however, that has a direct impact on population livelihood and sustainable environmental management: the definition of waste treatment as a private field of business or as a social issue. In fact, to address the ecological dimension of the urban solid waste management problem, CEAMSE has begun to build huge classification plants – besides the social plants – that will be run by private-sector enterprises. These are supposed to be more ‘efficient’ in economic terms but they do not take account of the social aspects of the problem, since they do not include local actors as social plants would do.

A final remark about the interactions in this nodal point: in discussions, provincial officials, political lobbyists, environmental NGO members appear as

advisors of the '21 de septiembre' organisation, along with CEAMSE managers and engineers with technical knowledge. These multiple actors do not always share the same perspective. When they disagree, '21 de septiembre' seems to be trapped in the tensions generated by opposing logics.

This is the reason why they seek to select advisors from among trustworthy independent professionals. In the following paragraphs, we will examine the limits of this strategy by analysing the dynamics of the relationships with these advisors, including our own group.

#### **3.4.4 Definition of the '21 de septiembre' organisational strategy**

This nodal point concerns the '21 de septiembre' effort to retain its autonomy by seeking to select advisors from among professionals who are considered reliable. These 'independent professionals' contribute expert knowledge to help design the organisation's own vision of the social plant project. Therefore, the core stake in this nodal point is a strategy that would allow the organisation to firmly position itself in negotiations with other institutional actors.

The participating actors are a few '21 de septiembre' organisation leaders, technical advisors, political lobbyists and our research team. Relations with 'core group' participants are very informal and subject to constant change.

Instability in the 'core group' affects the whole process of development, as it is very difficult to establish clear lines of competence. These dynamics prevent establishment of a consistent long-term strategy with respect to the other actors concerned. Our experience suggests that due to this pattern, a lot of energy is consumed by affirming the commitments and bonds within the 'core group'.

Furthermore, the participating actors have different logics and perspectives, according to their experience, professional interests and responsibilities in the project. For instance, as for our team, and considering the objectives of our research project, we attempt to build participation and interaction skills among *quemeros*. The main preoccupation of other professionals, in contrast, is generation of economic benefits as a way of assuring the plant's sustainability and strengthening '21 de septiembre'. In pursuing this objective, they do not give primary consideration to workers' participation in the decision-making process.

These differences in vision, expertise and skill among advisors could represent an opportunity to open up a wide range of options, given the different aspects of the project (technical, social, political). Nevertheless, the '21 de septiembre' interaction pattern is to meet separately with each group, tackling the same issues simultaneously with different advisors. This approach does not allow for generation of an integrated view of the process and prevents development of a solid and informed position in the other negotiation spaces. A quote from an interview we conducted with a '21 de septiembre' leader illustrates this point:

*Sometimes we feel overwhelmed, because we ask someone who says one thing and we think: 'He's right.' Then we ask someone else and he says the opposite and we think: 'He's also right.' ... And we cannot say which is the best option ... Since they are all friends it is very difficult for us to choose who is right. But then, when you are with CEAMSE functionaries, you think: 'What should we ask for? How much do we need to demand?' It is very tough!*

In fact, since the organisation's leaders do not feel able to synthesise diverse logics and choose from among the different options proposed, they often end up trapped by the contradictions of different conceptions.

One final problem is the instability of this 'core group'. Relations between the organisation and each advisor are highly informal and affective.<sup>31</sup> It is for this reason that the group of advisors changes from time to time.

### **3.4.5 The '21 de septiembre' organisation as a nodal point**

The '21 de septiembre' organisation, like any collective actor, is characterised by inner dynamics that condition its forms of participation in different negotiation processes. Moreover, project discussion requires new activities; this adds to the existing workload of the organisation's members. This extra work has an impact on daily activities, threatening the life of the organisation as a whole.

The distribution of responsibilities within the organisation is not always accompanied by proper circulation of information, which leads to coordination problems, misunderstandings and internal conflicts. With regard to the social plant project, these problems of communication have sometimes provoked a lack of articulation at different levels: organisation members

who are more actively involved in daily activities in the neighbourhood are unable either to discuss alternatives and the results of negotiations about the plant with other neighbours or to articulate their visions and demands in order to carry them on to the other negotiation spaces.

However, the plant project definition process urgently requires proper delimitation of responsibilities and a transparent decision-making procedure. This seems to be a key point, not only because of the significant amount of money the organisation is expected to manage but also because of the multiplicity of actors and interests involved in the process. Furthermore, organisation members realise that this exigency will be more marked when the plant is in operation.

We identified these issues as a result of our relationship with the different organisation members, our participation in some of the interaction spaces (both within the organisation and between the organisation and other actors concerned), and also because of the work we did with the ‘*quemeros* group’ (discussed in the following paragraph). As a consequence, we held special workshops<sup>32</sup> with organisation members with the objective of addressing the tensions that emerged during the process of plant project implementation as well as the different perspectives of the organisation’s role in the social plant project.

On the basis of these workshops, we determined that the main source of conflict lies in how organisation members deal with this implementation process. The leaders in charge of negotiations sometimes feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities they have and they suffer from not being able to engage in their former daily occupations. Other organisation members experience the absence of their principal leaders as a problem, as they have to manage conflictive situations they do not feel prepared to deal with. They feel trapped: they do not have the information requested by ‘*quemeros* group’ members, they think that they are not performing the social tasks they should, and they are not always able to carry out the activities related to the plant project for which they are responsible (such as organising assemblies, strengthening *quemeros* groups, etc.). Thus, lack of coordination appears as the symptom of a deeper problem.

These workshops, as well as a later one with *quemeros* groups and members of the ‘21 de septiembre’ organisation, helped to create awareness about the need to improve the flow of information (Figure 2). Another positive result,

Fig. 2  
'21 de septiembre'  
leaders and future  
plant workers at a  
workshop: the  
participants are  
using geometrical  
pieces of paper to  
create a represen-  
tation of the social  
plant. (Photo by  
Ada Freytes Frey)

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which will be discussed in the next section, was the establishment of practices that permit the participation of future workers in negotiations with the national and provincial governments and CEAMSE.

### **3.4.6 'Quemeros group': The future plant's workers**

As stated above, this informal group's main characteristic is its heterogeneity and the lack (or at least weakness) of the channels its members have for expressing their demands and expectations about the plant project. Thus, our activities in the workshops became an important nodal point in the process analysed, since they allowed the *quemeros* interested in the project to voice their opinions.

In this sense, the workshops became spaces suitable for building agreements and identifying controversies that needed to be resolved in order to avoid future conflicts that may hinder plant sustainability.

An evaluation of the work done so far permits us to declare that these workshops have been useful in three ways: first, in allowing expression of *que-*

*meros* aspirations and points of view; second, in identifying failures in the flow of information as a source of tension for the whole implementation process; and third, in building institutional capabilities to broaden *quemeros* participation in decision-making.<sup>33</sup>

With regard to the first point, at the beginning of the process, the workshops were one of the few spaces where *quemeros* could express their views.<sup>34</sup> Thus, these workshops enabled us to identify common interests and basic agreements which are necessary to enhance *quemeros* involvement in the social plant project. Moreover, from the discussion in the workshops, a set of issues to be negotiated among the future workers emerged. These issues – which were not considered in other nodal points – seem to be a potential source of conflict among the future workers, since they have different views of them. Examples include task distribution in the plant, hierarchical organisation, workers' participation in taking strategic decisions (utilities administration and destination, admission of new workers) and family care support.<sup>35</sup>

As for the second point, communication failures are found throughout the process. On the one hand, asymmetries in knowledge and access to information hinder the network-strengthening process. On the other hand, uncertainty about the '21 de septiembre' organisation's role in the future plant – which reflects its internal conflicts, as mentioned in the previous paragraph – is a source of tensions and misunderstandings.

Thus, at the beginning of our work on the social plant project, one of the responsibilities assumed by our team was to bring *quemeros* visions and demands (as expressed in the workshops) to the discussions held in other nodal points we took part in – especially with the group of advisors. Furthermore, given the problems in coordinating the different spaces for transmitting information, we encouraged the generation of common working spaces with both *quemeros* and organisation leaders and members.<sup>36</sup> This was a very interesting experience, as we could see how both groups – *quemeros* and '21 de septiembre' members – dealt with the issues and concepts discussed in the workshops to build agreements among them.

Finally, the workshops were also oriented towards improving *quemeros*' participation in decision-making about the social plant. Various models of organisation and decision-making were examined and discussed. At the end, this led to the selection of delegates who would represent the future workers

in every negotiation space (particularly in the negotiations with CEAMSE and with the national and provincial governments). Another result was the strengthening and enrichment of ‘neighbours’ assemblies’, which were valued as a space for flow of information and decision-making. The discussions started in the workshops were developed more fully in these assemblies held on a weekly basis.

However, the dynamics of this nodal point illustrate some issues mentioned above: the eroding effect that the delays and contradictions in public policy implementation have on the capacity for organisation in poor segments of society. Participation in these ‘neighbours’ assemblies’ declined after a few months, due to the lack of tangible results in negotiations and the differences about building the social plant.

### **3.5 Perspectives**

We have analysed in this paper a negotiation process (still ongoing) that relates to a specific social plant. We have also studied ‘decentralisation in the making’. The application of an analytical framework of governance to the study of decentralisation policy has allowed us to reflect on the complexity of the social dynamics involved. As a matter of fact, the framework permitted us to comprehend the different logics of the actors involved – including our own – in the context of a public policy that seeks the encouragement of participation by civil society in public matters.

Examination of different nodal points makes it possible to establish critical issues at each level in which policy refinement and implementation are defined. However, the analytical strategy of considering each nodal point as endowed by its own internal logic of interaction must not lead to a loss of the integrity of the whole process. Indeed, we have shown how communication deficiencies and the lack of coordination among different actors and negotiation spaces hinder the social plant project under discussion.

A second important aspect is transfer of resources and power. The idea of decentralisation – particularly democratic decentralisation – implies open decision-making with respect to different logics and interests. Nevertheless, beyond discourse, the most powerful political and economic actors often try to profit from participation by local actors – i.e. to subordinate this participation to their own political or economic objectives – thus limiting

the actual scope of decentralisation. In the case examined, we observed this situation in CEAMSE's permanent efforts to maintain a high level of control over the plant. Moreover, some governmental officials attempted to impose project deadlines in line with their political or electoral schedules without considering the time it takes to conduct a participatory decision-making process.

In this sense, we consider that success in participatory decentralisation processes requires taking into account the complexity of building effective involvement in decision-making, especially among populations historically marginalised with respect to political participation. The discussion of the '*quemeros* group' nodal point illustrates this complexity, which, however, was underestimated in provincial policy, as this capacity building had not been considered as part of the project. On the contrary, the policy assumes the existence of social organisation and related management skills, which in this case were things to be developed and not a point of departure.

As discussed in the analysis of several nodal points,<sup>37</sup> social movements and community-based organisations often have to address tasks that exceed their technical and human capacities without receiving governmental support in terms of tools and resources, or even time. It is on such occasions that the discourse of democratic decentralisation hides the state's deficiencies in dealing with some of its responsibilities. In the case under study, we have seen how coordination and articulation duties – e.g. between the national and provincial governments or among governmental agencies and CEAMSE – depend on the action of social movements and the capacity to exert pressure. Thus, the '*21 de septiembre*' organisation would have to pay the local political costs if the project failed.

Furthermore, the whole process may sometimes lead to an indirect transfer of the resources destined for the most disadvantaged sectors to private actors. In fact, the respective organisation's failure to manage a social plant financed by the state may end in privatisation of this plant, which represents an absolute corruption of the programme's social objectives.

Hence this case discussion illustrates some aspects highlighted in the theoretical approach: decentralisation policies do not have a unified logic. This is even more true of policies that seek to enlarge participation by local civil society in decision-making. Incorporating new actors implies the multiplication of logics and interaction levels (as we have seen in some nodal points).

In consequence, the actual results of such a decentralisation policy in terms of sustainable management of natural resources and livelihood improvement depend on the resolution of governance problems which emerge from the complex processes of conflict and negotiation.

In the case of this social plant in AMBA, coordination problems among governmental agencies, the uncertainty of public policies and their dependency on electoral conjuncture, CEAMSE's intransigence in aspects related to its control faculties, the '21 de septiembre' organisation's difficulties in establishing long-term alliances and strategies, and the complexity of the tasks delegated to it are all factors that have been hindering policy implementation.

The results are clear: a year after the start of negotiations the plant has not yet been constructed.<sup>38</sup> Even if there have been considerable advances in definitions and neighbourhood network organisation, inhabitants' lives and conditions remain the same: they still subsist on what they can obtain in the sanitary filling, with the risks that this poses to their health and physical integrity (also considering that repressive activities against *quemeros* have been instigated). Moreover, the environmental problems remain unsolved.

Finally, we want to address the question about the impact of decentralisation policies on the legitimacy of democratic institutions. We think that there is no single answer to this matter as that impact depends on two things. First, there is the real political will of governmental authorities to open the decision-making process on substantial matters to local actors (including social movements and community leaders). Second, there is the capacity of social movements and leaders to represent local interests, views and values, and to ensure that they play an important part in the negotiation process.

Concerning the capability of social movements (or organisations) to represent the perspectives and interests of the local population, our study shows that such representativeness is a complex but possible construction. One experience with social movements in Argentina – of which '21 de septiembre' is an example – has been their ability to make visible and bring into political discussion the situation of marginalised populations. In fact, through political demonstrations and social organisation, they have incorporated the urgent needs and problems of these populations into the public agenda. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that very often the political mobilisation of this sector is based on clientelistic political practices: poor people join social

movements in order to satisfy their basic needs. Nevertheless, the latter have the potential to foster more far-reaching processes of collective democratic organisation through activities such as training, reflection upon their living conditions, political discussion and participatory decision-making.

For our team, an enriching aspect of this participatory research experience has been the chance to collaborate in this organisational process using our professional skills. This type of involvement is based on a specific way of understanding our commitment as social scientists. We seek to articulate our professional practice in terms of the political construction of social actors, but without forgetting the specificity of our task: we are not activists but researchers who offer our knowledge and our capacities for comprehending the social scenery. The effort to develop an analytical understanding of the conflict and negotiation processes in which we were necessarily involved was part of the difficult aim of attaining a balance between research and action.

However, we think that the work we have done has helped to reinforce the weakest actors in this process. At the same time, we have learnt an important lesson from them about fighting for one's goals. Now that they have discovered their strength they will realise their plan and then a new process will begin. They will have to learn how to work together without a traditional boss, knowing that what they earn belongs to them and has a 'social' purpose. We will meet with them again at this point if they still want us to participate in the process.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> In the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires City, 5.5 million tons of residue are buried annually, which represents management of 470,000 tons of solid urban refuse a month. Source: CEAMSE. <http://www.estrucplan.com.ar/Secciones/Organismos/ceamse/CEAMSE.asp>; accessed on 10 December 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Argentina is a federal republic. It is divided into 24 political districts: 23 provinces and the autonomous city of Buenos Aires (Argentina’s capital city). At the same time, each province is composed of municipalities, which have their own executive administrations (*intendentes*) and legislative bodies (*concejos deliberantes*). The metropolitan area of Buenos Aires City comprises the capital city and 19 nearby municipalities. The latter are part of Buenos Aires Province, the most important political district in Argentina, because of its population (38.13% of the country’s inhabitants, according to the last census, 2001) and economic power.

<sup>5</sup> State Society for Ecological Coordination in Metropolitan Area.

<sup>6</sup> Up to 1996 the mayor of Buenos Aires City was appointed by the President of Argentina. Owing to a change in the constitution, authorities are now elected directly by the citizens, whereas the national government elected the city’s representatives in the past.

<sup>7</sup> The words in italics are native expressions that are part of the colloquial language used by the subjects of this study.

<sup>8</sup> We have worked with Tarrow’s definition of social movements (1994). This author considers that ‘social movements’ are mobilised groups recruited across borders, engaged in sustained contentious interaction with powerholders. According to this definition, they are characterised by their low level of institutionalisation, which permits them to benefit from social networks they do not control. However, this situation is at the same time a source of instability.

<sup>9</sup> During 2002 and 2003, Argentina experienced a profound political crisis. After the resignation of President De la Rúa, in December 2001, there were four presidents in a short period of months. These two years were characterised by a high degree of social conflict and political instability. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the new democratic government elected in 2003 was to find institutional ways to mitigate social conflict.

<sup>10</sup> 'Nothing wasted'.

<sup>11</sup> The national and provincial governmental agencies have designated these plants as 'social' to differentiate them from the bigger private plants that are being built on CEAMSE's (Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado) land.

<sup>12</sup> Ministerio de Desarrollo Social de la Nación.

<sup>13</sup> The initiative was started by officials of the provincial government linked to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) oriented towards environmental issues. When we began our research in 2005, the programme had recently begun. It was developed through 2005 and 2006, with various changes in the personnel responsible for its implementation and with all the problems of coordination reflected on in this article. Consequently, construction of the plants was delayed. Today, some of the 'social plants' have started to operate, and some are already having difficulties because there was no previous organisation of workers' groups.

<sup>14</sup> The picketing organisations constitute one of the most important social movements to emerge in Argentina by the end of the 1990s. They are called *organizaciones piqueteras* (picketing organisations) in Spanish because of their main protest method: Blocking or picketing (*piquete*) streets and highways. They denounce the effects of neoliberal policies on the poor and impoverished sectors of society as well as the lack of accountability of traditional political representatives. As a result of their influence as political actors, they manage about 8% of the social resources channelled to poor, unemployed people (through what is called *planes sociales* [social plans]). One of their main characteristics is to be territorially referenced, so the 'neighbourhood' means not only the place in which they live, but their domain of political action.

<sup>15</sup> The names of this organisation and subsequently mentioned NGOs have been changed to ensure the confidentiality promised to them.

<sup>16</sup> In these neighbourhoods live about 1200 families in extreme poverty conditions.

<sup>17</sup> We refer to the PAMS (Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes of Global Change) – JACS SAM (Joint Areas of Case Studies South America) project 'Establishing coordination mechanisms among unemployed workers' productive micro-enterprises in Argentina', directed by Osvaldo Battistini, PhD.

<sup>18</sup> 'Recovered factories' are former private companies subsequently controlled by workers following bankruptcy.

<sup>19</sup> We are members of a research group ("Identity and Representation" area of the Labour Studies and Research Centre [Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones Laborales, CEIL-PIETTE]), directed by Osvaldo Battistini. Part of this group started to study picketing organisations and factory recovery processes in 2002. In 2004 we began collaboration with the National Centre of Competence in Research North-South (NCCR N-S), a long-term research programme implemented by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). This programme promotes research cooperation between, on the one hand, Swiss universities and research institutions and, on the other hand, 'Southern' counterparts organised in 'Joint Areas of Case Studies' (JACS). As members of the JACS SAM (South America), we first studied the movements concerned with organisation of picketing and recovering factories, as well as the relationships these movements developed with different levels of the state and other political and social actors (political parties, NGOs, trade unions). Second, we explored gender relations in these movements. This action-research project was the third developed in the framework of this cooperation, and it was based on the insights gained in the previous phases of our work.

- <sup>20</sup>The data obtained in these activities were complemented by additional data gathered with more traditional techniques, i.e. documentary analysis, observation and in-depth interviews with governmental functionaries, NGO representatives and '21 de septiembre' organisation leaders and members.
- <sup>21</sup>As we have just indicated, identification of nodal points is an analytical activity based on empirical information about different actors' perspectives and interests, the actions they take regarding the process of policy implementation, and the relationships they develop with other actors. This makes it possible to individualise a set of critical issues for policy implementation which are the stakes of different actors' interactions. These interactions develop in time and in different places: In meetings, in formal or informal discussions, in public demonstrations, in mass media interventions, etc. The important questions at each nodal point are: What is the central stake? Which actors are implicated? What are their positions and objectives? Which strategies will they develop to achieve their goals? How will they interact with other actors? And finally, how will these dynamics affect the process of policy implementation?
- <sup>22</sup>It is important to point out that the first definition of the social problem and policy objectives can be reformulated along the interaction process. Besides, actors' constitutions can also change depending on the dynamics of negotiation.
- <sup>23</sup>When municipalities have this responsibility, they also provide part of the funds.
- <sup>24</sup>We will also call it 'the organisation' in the following paragraphs.
- <sup>25</sup>We interpret the appeal for help to 'independent' professionals in this way as due to the fact that even though the '21 de septiembre' organisation has received numerous offers of technical support, from both the provincial government and NGOs, they decided to call upon advisors they contacted through people in whom they had confidence.
- <sup>26</sup>This is our own designation: We dealt with this group in the first workshop (in the context of a PAMS project). They defined themselves as "a *quemeros* group seeking decent jobs who joined the project because they are fed up with being treated like animals".
- <sup>27</sup>Diego Duarte's missing is a leading case in this conflict. He was trapped inside a waste mountain while he was picking up material in a CEAMSE sanitary filling and his body was never found. However, *quemeros* say they have daily conflicts with police and private guards. Sometimes they are even shot without any reason or warning.
- <sup>28</sup>'Social plans' are monthly subsidies of 150 Argentine Pesos (around USD 50) given to poor unemployed people by the national government.
- <sup>29</sup>Although both national and provincial administrations belong to the same political party, internal party struggles have played a major role in this project. Moreover, there were national and provincial elections in 2005.
- <sup>30</sup>Now that some of their former colleagues have been replaced, it is difficult to assess whether this change will affect the influence of these NGOs in the project.
- <sup>31</sup>For instance, in the interviews and informal conversations with '21 de septiembre' leaders we were told that the reason we were part of the 'core group' was mainly because they trusted us.
- <sup>32</sup>These workshops were organised as part of the action-research project, in response to the organisation's demands. We used a participatory methodology (Park 1992; Rodríguez Villasante 1994) in order to clarify organisational roles, communicational patterns and members' expectations of the social plant project.
- <sup>33</sup>All of these workshops' effects are important from the point of view of this paper because they had a very strong impact on the general decision-making process regarding the social plant project.
- <sup>34</sup>Another space with that characteristic were the 'neighbourhood network' assemblies.
- <sup>35</sup>Women were particularly worried about that, since arrangements such as nurseries or daily shifts for those who have children at school are basic conditions for their inclusion as plant workers.

<sup>36</sup>With this objective, we organised a workshop with *quemeros* and '21 de septiembre' leaders and members. These dynamics were then appropriated by the organisation to improve 'neighbours' assemblies', as is explained in the following paragraph of the main text.

<sup>37</sup>Technical discussion with CEAMSE, definition of the '21 de septiembre' organisation's strategy in the 'core group' of advisors, and the organisation's inner dynamics.

<sup>38</sup>We acknowledge that the democratic decentralisation process often takes a good deal of time to be implemented. However, we have to bear in mind that the seriousness of the social and environmental problems that the 'Sin Desperdicios' programme is meant to solve does not permit any further delay.

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