DRAFT VERSION

"People's perceptions on the meaning of public assistance: Interviewing leaders of soup kitchen organizations (comedores) in a poor neighborhood of Buenos Aires"

Presenter
María Mercedes Di Virgilio
Authors
Hilda Herzer, Carla Rodríguez, Adriana Redondo, María Mercedes Di Virgilio y Fernando Ostuni. Area de Estudios Urbanos, IIGG – Facultad de Ciencias Sociales/ UBA - Argentina
E – mail: mdivirgilio@fibertel.com.ar

This work arises as the result of a comprehensive project that focuses on the perceptions of leaders from social organizations belonging to a poor neighbourhood in the South of Buenos Aires City. This project deals with the process of urban renewal which began in that area mid 90s.

The process of renewal began to materialize in La Boca neighbourhood through building coastal defenses, the parks alongside the river shores, the opening of recycled shops and places meant to offer services in the consumption and tourism area. However, just a few blocks away from this indiscernible border, there is a sharp contrast which is marked by unemployment, malnutrition and low income. As 2001 drew on, the economic crisis in Argentina got worse and, as a consequence, the neighbourhood renewal gets delayed.. In this setting, old and new soup kitchen organizations emerge and consolidate as long as free supplies are provided as welfare methods which add up to the income and ensures the growth of many families whose capactity to be self-sufficient decreased due to the depth of the crisis. With the deepening of the crisis, soup kitchen organizations begin to include new beneficiaries and new sectors in their agendas regarding different issues such as habitat, employment and health.

This paper analyzes leader's conceptions about the assistance that they offer to poor families, their description of beneficiary families and the definition of their role in the neighborhood. The paper also discusses the methodological problems to consider data based on in depth interviews carried out among the leaders of popular soup kitchen organizations in the years 1999 and 2002.

During October and November in 1999, several soup kitchen organizations for children placed within 70 blocks were investigated. In 2002, the old kitchen soup organizations were visited again and three more were created. On the whole, 18 interviews were made.

1. Soup kitchen organizations: raising issues on their role as social organizations

Even if there had been several social organizations that worked as support networks since the late 80s (Lacarrieu, 1992, 1994 y 1995), these places multiply during the next decade as job precauriousness and unemployment rise. The soup kitchen organizations spread all around the La Boca[1] neighbourhood, to the extent that in those places where poor housing can be found, more than one of them can be counted on the same block.

Thus, considering the number of people living there, the number of soup kitchen organizations, at first sight, seems to be too many for such a little place. In other words, their presence is not determined by a rational spatial and accesibility distribution but they overlap one another.

Out of the 18 soup kitchen organizations that were interviewed in 2002, 72% of them arose between the late 80s and 1997, the rest of them started later that date. If we watch their dates of origin, we can see that there is a close relationship with the worsening process and the economic crisis: hyperinflation, recession, unemployment and job labour precariousness, which as the last decades went by affected the living conditions in wide population bands

Some soup kitchen organizations emerged as personal projects or some member of the family

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[1] Historically speaking, La Boca became a working class neighbourhood filled with European immigrants, who as protagonists of the rising social mobility process, characterized Argentine society in the 70s. As they managed to put on an equal footing with wealthier people, they moved out to typical middle class neighbourhoods. La Boca was noted for its wooden and corrugated iron roof houses, painted in lively colours, prototype of the Genovese immigration. This environment underwent an emptying process--between 1947 and 1991 lost 40% of its population—added to a degrading process, getting worse as from the 70s as the Riachuelo port closed and the growing close of most industries in the area (shipping and textile companies and food production) In this context, as the old production and functional roles were not performed anymore in La Boca, the increasing depopulation and economic decline, the City Government in the 90s, through the building of coastal defenses, encouraged the renewal process of La Boca neighbourhood, mainly populated by low income families, but in excellent urban location due to its proximity to the city centre. Not only did the local government get different political intervention, but there were several takeovers from high purchasing power groups as well. These groups of people began to settle into the neighbourhood by acquiring old sheds, shipyards and houses to recycle them and use them afterwards, especially for commercial and cultural activities which give ground to a touristic spot in the centre of the city.

is the responsible one to run the place. In general, the person running the place identifies this activity with some kind of social activism or welfare for people. Others are group based, namely, neighbourhood mothers, university students or people who work together in other kitchen soup organizations and, as they gain experience, they feel the necessity to have their own space because it was suggested by some organization or political party or union.

The emergence of soup kitchen organizations in La Boca during the 90s can be explained from two processes. On the one hand, they appear in a context known for the shrinking of the purchasing power in families, the rise in unemployment and underemployment. The kitchen soup organizations play a key role in the social reproduction of low income families, mostly single parent families. But this help given to subsist, does not necessarily generate the development of political participation, especially participation coming from the people who need the aid because it is conceived from an assisting criterion. There was only one of these organizations that did not follow the rule, time will tell whether the political framework becomes clearly evident in these organizations and the emergence of proposals that, at least from the argumentative surface, drifts apart from the welfare point of view.

On the other hand, the restructuring conditions in the political sphere play an important role within the justicialist party. As from Carlos Menem's first tenure (1989-1995) and the justicialist party veer towards the application of neoliberalist politics, there is an identity crisis which shakes the ground in the justicialist party and has a deep impact in the base of political affiliation. That is why, social welfare is enhanced and, as explained by an interviewee, casts aside political affiliation in political offices and search for other ways of participation, with a higher degree in autonomy. *Then we used to work on social welfare, over here in La Boca, out of logic, because everything is politics, until we decided to devote ourselves exclusively to social welfare"* (Juan de Dios Filiberto Soup Kitchen Organization, 2002). The institutional crisis at the end of 2001 (Schuster, 2003; Svampa, 2003) clearly shows the disrepute into

which the "political class" and political parties fell and strengthens the distance by those who run the kitchen soup organization in regard to the whole political party.

2.   Soup Kitchen Organizations: two moments (1999 and 2002)

2.1.   1999

"We are the machines of doing good"

Chances that a kitchen soup organization manages to survive and develop seem to go hand-in-hand with the "social willpower" of the people who run it: *"Helping vocation outlives all (governments). We believe that, or at least I do, I am the one that encourages and develops this with some arguments, sometimes, primaries…because we are the machine of doing good or of helping people…"*

Kitchen soup organizations leaders, assume their role, mainly, through important personal ambitions. Amongst those that express their profile more clearly, those with political links outstand from the rest. The only efforts which are valued are those one made by the person in charge of the organization. There is little room for the acknowledgement from other people's efforts, either coming from the government or from individual sources. These places are the most "diversified" in terms of organization. Those who run them support crowds of people and they weave a network of organizations (or participate in them) which revolve around themselves[2].

Without assessing how meritorious theirs actions are, this individual centered point of view cuts, in most cases, the possibilities of institutional growth at kitchen soup organizations as bodies of the neighbourhood framework, their permanence and possibility of participation in collective problems being limited to the interest and/or willingness of those who run them, who do not assume a protagonic role as social or nieghbourhood leaders

As they are food brokers, essential goods which are assigned a high degree of social visibility, it empowers the person running the kitchen soup organization, consolidating his argumentative construction. The neighbours that live around the area acknowledge them because of their capacity to participate and solve situation in certain matters (especially paperwork business) and the ability to provide useful information because that data is the result of their links with political leaders of varying political weight.

Within the organization, the political leaders are supposed to handle an internal net, which has an influence from the norms when it comes to decide, for instance, who attend the soup kitchen daily, task coordination and assignment. Regularly, these guidelines are circumscribed to the space and timing linked to the kitchen soup organization, but in some cases, this place of power enables them to determine which the behaviour is desirable, at family or social level of those who take part in the closest community.

The modus operandi of most kitchen soup organizations is restricted to the fulfillment of feeding needs (lunch and tea, Monday to Friday) and in some cases, coaching lessons for children (once a week). In addition to this, there is a considerable number of mothers who seek for a place in which they can eat with their children. This is how these organizations become a grant to the meager income these families earn.

Political activity versus social activity

Most of the kitchen soup organizations keep partisan links, which are not always overt. In some cases, the soup kitchen is supported by foundations or by some national leader whose name is unknown. In others, the person running the kitchen soup is an activist of different level who channels part of his political activity through this initiative. This is how they become brokers in primaries or in electoral times, between the local community and the political organizations, bringing a number of voters who are supposed to favour the party, thus encouraging granting favours in return for votes.

As regards the first series of interviews, two big groups were identified. These groups differ from one another because of the relationship they have with political parties. At the same time, within the non-partisan people, there are three categories, those who participate in non-partisan institutions (Church, unions), those who argue a political practice different from the traditional one, and finally, those who emphasize completely ruling out their link to political parties and they propose objectives merely for welfare and fundamentally referred to feeding matters. So, there is certain heterogeneity among the soup kitchen organizations taking into account the point of view or role that the person running the kitchen soup has towards political activity:

a. Non-partisan people: the persons running the kitchen soup do not participate in political activity and do not stress their personal leadership.

b. Partisan people: the persons in charge are activists, referents, political broker or political leaders.

c. Non-partisan Politicians: the persons in charge express they have political and organizational objectives[3].

At the same time, it is possible to identify two conflictive perspectives from which the main actors, the people running the soup kitchen, read their task: as a social activity versus political activity. The former is the clear one and the one pointed out as the main or central one, the one which is recognized by the soup kitchen organization. The latter, is usually neglected or veiled, or accepted but as an extra activity[2]. *"This must be one of the only soup kitchen organizations that does not do dirty business with politics. Unfortunately, politics is involved in everything. So there are soup kitchen organizations that say, well 'I give you lunch but you must enroll in our party' or 'I give you lunch and a bag of food'…Politics is not the way to work socially."*

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[2] *Except for Los Pibes, where the organization of planning activities related to collecting and delivering supplies is accompanied with discussions about politics and current news that arise out of the problems which are brought by the families that participate in the meeting point.

We participate in politics, let me make myself clear, because it is convenient for us, because sometimes when the elections come and they tell you: 'we're going to send yu a hundred boxes of supplies'(…) In some primaries we get two thousand, three thousand pesitos (…)But everything comes back here." "Because the people that work in the neighbourhoods are the ones who have the votes." "But we have never enrolled anyone for a political party so that he comes here to eat and we don't speak about politics either. People know. I am a peronist. When we play primaries we identify with either one or another party, but even someone belonging to the radical party can come here and he will get his meal" "I believe people's needs do not have political parties, that's why the radical party won" "Some people go into politics but outside this institution(…)We have fully devoted to (…) social assitance. Over here you can see peronist pictures, well, it's only natura because (…) (…) the tendency is (…) is like that (…) The president's idea, myself too, is Justicialist, it's peronist, but they have nothing to do with it, I insist. The friendships we have with the radical party, with the people from the Centro de Gestion y Participacion[3], with everybody, they are very firm, we even work together."

All statements are from the leaders related to political parties, with the exception of one person in charge of a soup kitchen. It is clearly shown how they make a difference between social welfare and political activity related to granting favours in return for votes (Auyero, 2000). The first one is positively valued whereas the second one is criticized when it is done through a soup kitchen organization and vindicated if it is done outside that sphere. The differentiation is so marked that social welfare seems to unify beyond partisan differences, for *"people's needs don't have political parties"* o *"I don't do politics with people's stomach"*

However, there is a point in which both activities overlap, articulate one another. There is a point in which social and political work go "*click*". And even if the political activity has other

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[3] *These are areas which are not government-based. There are 16 centres spread in different neighbourhoods in the city. It is there that people can do some paperwork and in some of them, social and educational activities with the neighbours are encouraged.

room and a different timing, it is exercised by the person running a soup kitchen, and *people know*". And by people, it is not meant children, it is meant adults, voters. If a reflection is made upon that articulation made by the person in charge of the soup kitchen, which is a distant articulation (parents do not usually attend soup kitchen organizations), with an atomized clientele, and in an unequal and vertical interchange, and if all that is taken into account, it could be defined as an analogy of "capital". Adults whose children are benefited by the soup kitchen organization, or adults who see that somebody does public work in the neighbourhood, they are "capital" that the broker invests on them(maybe just of electoral value, perhaps political value as well).

2.2.   2002

In the scenario of the social and economic crisis, there is a growth in community soup kitchens in the neighbourhood and the number of people that resort to this kind of food welfare rises as web (see Lindemboin and Dañan, 2004) New beneficiaries add up to the old attendants. These new groups of people are obliged to attend soup kitchen organizations so as to subsist. The person in charge of a **social association** describes them like this*:"(In this soup kitchen) there isn't a sector that we can call, 'the sector of those who are in dire straits' (…) If they tell you their story, they had a trade, they had a house, they had social service"*

Individual action versus collective action

The place people running a kitchen soup give themselves has not changed significantly, after undergoing the 2001 institutional crisis. However, a new kind of leadership can be outlined centered on   social self-organization and it emphasizes collective action. Two kinds of leadership take shape: a traditional personal one and another one which appeals to discursive images in an assembly way. Both share their critical discursive position as regards Partisan structure and their links with local politicians.

The persons running the soup kitchen keep playing a key role inside the institution, they use such expressions like "*the voice that speaks out", "Jack of all trades"* or *"the spokeswoman"* which serve to describe their role inside the soup kitchen organization. In the context of the social and economic crisis, these people- food *"owners"* – become more visible among the population they assist. A group of party leaders who have some "personal" features remains. These people highlight their personal merits above the institution's acknowledgement; such situation illustrates the obscure place that soup kitchens take up as organizations in the perceptions of people in charge and beneficiaries.

It is important to underscore, as another "personal" and egotist feature that characterizes the people who run the soup kitchen, the image that they develop as regards their job in the neighbourhood, feeling their duty as a kind of "*divine commandment": "my love for God is what is helping me to go ahead, because if I show you the amount of food sent by 'Accion Social' you will laugh your head off (…) I do it out of my own sacrifice and my love for God, but people get to eat something here (…) I love God so much that every morning I pray and I say: 'Dear God, donate some food to me, donate some food to me,' because I am powerless but I don't want to quit either (…) People already know, I've been working here for free for 30 years (…) I know I'll get the contributions of the love I have for God. Now there is a person who will come to bring me some toys (...) on Saturday a physician is coming to give me medication, because I beg it to God so much." "I don't have any dirty job around[4], I don't earn anything (…) I say that God has chosen me to do this work (...) sometimes I go mad and I want to give up on everything, because I don't even have time for my partner (…) but I say that God has also chosen this and, well, I feel like I have to do it, and I have willpower to do so (…), I feel well both spiritually and morally speaking with all the stuff that I'm doing".*

In the case of soup kitchen with militancy**,** in general, the role of the person running the soup kitchen is exercised through a shared leadership. There is a stronger participation from the collaborators in the assemblies or committees, and at the discursive level, they vindicate and

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[4] It means a little job.

emphasize democratic ways at the decision making process. Nevertheless, they are the most experienced ones (generally 3 or 4 *"visible heads"*) which decide upon the path to take: *"we organize ourselves as committees for each activity, school coaching has a committee, workshops has another committee, welfare employment program has another committee, tea has another committee, baking has another committee, cleaning and learning have another committee. Then there are three more people in charge, who are three coworkers that have to guarantee that all those activities turn out ok in the end. (…) Well, if you want I can tell you there are three people who actually decide"*.

Whether it is their personal leadership or shared with a small group, leaders coordinate the soup kitchen closely and control *"everything"* and they concentrate, mainly, in the administrative jobs and in the search for resources, this way, there is a political-institutional management (beyond the different styles or orientations): they strike up relationships with the local government so as to get grants (or improving the ones they already have) and getting loans for houses. In some cases, they even reach companies, foundations or shops to ask for donations and they concentrate themselves on getting welfare employment programs for their collaborators. Women who run soup kitchens are also busy with matters related to direct attention for beneficiaries (cooking the meals, laying the table, cleaning the place, among others). Some women in charge of soup kitchens delegate operational matters on other women that work as collaborators. But beyond these differences, it is necessary to point out that the *presence* of the people running the soup kitchen, whether they are men or women, takes place every day, daily. This double presence, on the institution's every day life and in the relationship with the government organizations or any other interlocutor key for the life of the soup kitchen, characterizes their role as heading towards the political institutional path.

The 'place' given to beneficiaries is in close relationship with the groundwork objectives and with the role which is attributed to the person running the soup kitchen. There are different ways of connections. Some, the ones develop a welfare activity, they summon the beneficiaries to collaborate mainly in the everyday tasks at the soup kitchen: washing up,

serving up the meals. The ones who emphasize political action, demand the beneficiaries presence in the different demonstrations they make: *"Here nobody gets anything without waging a struggle. To get a bag of food, the requirement is: going to demonstrations, struggling for the food and the welfare employment program or for housing (…) the key thing is to struggle"* In view of this interpretation, the right to get aid is associated to the struggling capacity and attitude and, the struggle itself, is related to street pressure, more than to the construction and decision making processes in the soup kitchen life as social organization.

In this sense, the way in which political leaders identify their beneficiaries is also different. The first ones see the beneficiary like another person. Many people take distance from this "other" people and they label as relaxed this attitude of sending children to the soup kitchen or going there themselves as a habit.

They describe this attitude as the development of a mechanism that consists of subsisting through welfare coming from the different government organizations or neighbourhood institutions. *"There is a serious cultural issue here in which people believe that one has the obligation of giving away things to them (…) In fact, what we really have to do is lead people to overcome their own problems"*. These people are not related to the struggle the "struggle or street demonstration", with which they disagree, but they do not share the everyday decisions and the soup kitchen organization with their beneficiaries.

The second ones, talk about a "we", in which they symbolically level the leader's and beneficiaries's position: *"I am just like them (the beneficiaries) (…) People when they lose their job, they try to unite themselves, either for a small enterprise o just for spending time with people who have the same problem as you"*.

As regards collaborators (mostly women) a cooperative relationship is established with the person running the soup kitchen, backing him in the daily attention of beneficiaries. On the one hand, some party leaders strike up a hierarchic relationship with the collaborators. Whereas others, define them as "members" or "peers". In some cases the collaborators get

some food in consideration, a small income in cash or the access to a welfare employment program.

In the interview context, the reference to the number of beneficiaries arises linked to the necessity of justifying the existence of the organization, the resources they handle and how people running it operate in the organization. In this sense, some people in charge of soup kitchen organizations highlight a tendency to soar the number of attendants, evading any clear records of how many people actually go there. If we watch soup kitchen organizations, some incoherence can be seen between the number of beneficiaries that (it is said) attend the place, the spatial distribution and the resources they can rely on.

Emergence of social action as politic action

A distinctive feature which makes the difference with the soup kitchens in La Boca neighbourhood is the role that political activity has in the context of the soup kitchen's daily routine.

The organizations that acknowledge themselves as 'non-partisan' and whose owner has no direct relationship with party politics, their way of working is discursively linked to the '*solidary vocation*'. A kind of solidarity which is conceptualized as a personal attribute and not as a principle for social organization; in other words, the interviewee depicts himself as a solidary person that, due to his personal attributes, makes a contribution to the community in which he is inserted. For this kind of soup kitchen organizations, social work is the main action and the persons running the soup kitchen describe his job as a social activity separated from politics. In these organizations the *decision making process* is overtly one-sided. That is why we speak about *vertical practices* and about a deep personalism which gives the soup kitchen attendants a dependent and subordinate position.

As for the role of the institution, in these soup kitchen organizations, feeding assistance is developed as the provision of a service that may or may not be accompanied with other activities. Within this group of organizations, the people running the soup kitchen tend to

assume (apart from the commitment of fulfilling certain basic needs such as feeding) an attitude basically oriented to get *education* for the beneficiaries, understood as the attempt to modify certain personal practices: from public health principles and hygienic conditions to manners and customs.

Leaders of soup kitchen organizations who take a stand as non-partisan politicians point out that they move their resources so as to get a *common horizon* to create a new *political conscience* within the population with whom they perform their activities. In this sense, the people who were interviewed insist on their interest to build a collective conscience and the appropiating of the place taken up by the soup kitchen. In this context, the welfare practice is linked to the political struggle: *"the struggle for an ideological and political change of the economic model."*

In their discourse, leaders from these organizations depict the decision making structure as plural. They talk about construction processes of assembly practices and in a horizontal way which promotes participation and debate. Even if these leaders discursively construct a non-restrictive leadership, their recurrent references to the role of the few responsible people who *'provide a path'* for things to materialize, it expresses the persistence of the role and the weight some people and some personalities have as they exercise their directions.

A history of fragmentations.

The great majority of those responsible for soup kitchen organizations possess previous experience in social institutions.[5] Some of them allude critically to this experience. In general they have stopped collaborating in the previous organization because of "disagreements with the person running the place", among other matters, because they did not share *"the social and*

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[5] The manageress of a traditional soup kitchen organization with a "community experience" of twelve years in the neighbourhood of La Boca constitutes an example. Her solidary work began collaborating in a nursery, then she organized a soup kitchen organization (which she transferred to another person) and, finally, in 1995, she created the soup kitchen organization that she manages at the moment.

political management" that was carried out in the institution, as well as due to problems arisen with the handling of resources (money).

Thus, the fragmentation of leaderships emerges as an explanatory factor that accounts for the proliferation of soup kitchen organizations in the neighborhood. Underlying these disagreements, we can acknowledge the need or the personal desire of the people running the place for creating and/or presiding over their own soup kitchen organization, "for working on their own", for strengthening their personalism after a long acquired experience. Among those who mention their previous experience, two groups are differenciated: those who go back to an apolitical intervention (keeping the traditional format of the charitable institutions) and those who practised it with accompanying activism, which they then abandoned or decided to change.

Accordingly, it is not strange that the connection level among the soup kitchen organizations is reduced to sporadic contacts and that a joint work of articulation to generate collective actions does not exist, thus hindering the emergence of a community network among the soup kitchen organizations in the neighbourhood.

In the discourse of the leaders, we cannot perceive any appreciation to the work developed by their peers, it would seem that there exists a dispute among the managers, a competition for who has the biggest soup kitchen organization or which of them is the one that renders more services. In general, with the exception of those who take part in the Liaison Committee (Mesa de Enlace),[6] most leaders argue that they do not identify the rest of the neighbouring soup kitchen organizations, they mistake their names or they do not know where they are situated inside the neighbourhood (it is worth mentioning that in many opportunities the places are located in the same street and/or block) and when they talk about certain soup kitchen organization, in particular, about the people running the place, they do it negatively, disqualifying them or criticizing them: in every occasion, that in the soup kitchen organizations in La Boca *"there's a lot of politics involved"*, except, of course, in their own

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[6] Space of reconciliation between government officials in the City of Buenos Aires and social neighbourhood associations.

one. As an example of the kind of relationship the comments of two of the people running soup kitchen organizations, who until recently were part of the same institution, are illustrative:

A manager points out: *"[This soup kitchen organization] has been working for 9 months and in 3 months I have achieved things that people haven't been able to achieve for years... [I] kick out lots of people, today I've kicked out more than 70 people (...) I have no room, I kick out people because I know them from the neighbourhood and I know who they are, [this] I think, must be the third biggest soup kitchen organization in Buenos Aires (...) in La Boca there are no soup kitchen organizations that have more than 120 people, none has over 300, I have over 300, 250, 350, almost every day."*

In this respect, a person in charge of a social grouping comments: *"we are so mean that we can't even get together to make chocolate."*

Self-organization and rendering of services

In the immediate context of the crisis of 2001, the appeal to the autonomy regarding political parties becomes a forced topic in every speech. An autonomy founded in the rejection of party representatives and, in some cases, extensive to other union and social representations. Since 2002 the differentiation lines that distinguish this heterogeneous group of organizations reside in the way they interpret and guide their activity, that is to say, in formulations built around the *what for* of their existence.

In this sense, two groupings are shaped:

1) the activities are understood as a service;

2) the activities are developed as mechanisms of self-organization of the population.

In the first kind of organizations the decision-making process is usually unilateral, behind the back of the community that crowds the organization. With the exception of those institutions of religious origin where the interviewees carry out their work as volunteers, the rest talk about the establishment of which they are part as if it belonged to them. Thus, among the

institutions where willingness to help is the main explanatory factor, the welfare activity redounds to a similar perspective to that of old charity entities and the ultimate aim is the search of certain personal satisfaction/recognition.

In some cases, the interviewees highlight the role of substitute mothers they carry out and in other cases, they consider their work with certain Messianic tone: *"To me, because it is something that I'm crazy about, I mean, not only for the soup kitchen, but to be with people, I mean, to help the one that needs it the most." "And I like it, what do I know, I never went, or studied or anything, but the contact with people (...) they are satisfactions that one finds, personal."*

When we recognize top-down practices in these institutions, it means that the individual management and the tendency to a distant negotiation of the collective mechanisms of pressure prevail in them. Therefore, under this personalism the efforts are oriented to administer the directory of contacts (people, authorities and institutions) to which we could resort in a cautious way. The interviewees are not willing to resign the central role that they occupy in the leading of the direction of the organization and that is why they will hardly assign or delegate in members of the beneficiary population of the soup kitchen organization tasks which are not subordinated, of full autonomy and influence in the decision making process.

In the soup kitchen organizations where activities are carried out as *mechanisms of self-organization* of the population, the interviewees permanently insist in certain concern about generating feelings of belonging and appropriation of the space that the soup kitchen organization constitutes. In this context, these organizations foster and project microenterprises. (A street grill stand or the elaboration and sale of bread and pre-pizzas.) Thus, –according to their referentes– while the maintenance of the organization is favoured, some of their members find a job.

These already mentioned working enterprises imply an internal organization capable of generating resources to answer to the needs of the community. Accordingly, the self-

organization introduces a position of importance for the component of the "self-generation" of resources, which acquires particular resonance in the immediate context to the crisis. A place, in that context and in some cases, strongly idealized: *"Now I am completely into this because we generate the money from inside to run the whole organization, the people."*

The comparative analysis shows that self-organization, associated to the generation of one's own resources, acquires growing importance, particularly in the discursive aspect, since in practice it is extremely difficult that these enterprises become economically viable. The self-organization can be recognized as part of a strategy that tends to the diversification of sources of income and resources. However, the marked prevalence of the government funding–and the strategic importance of their reception– is kept as central source of financing.

In these terms, the capacity of applying pressure in the face of the government authorities in charge of administering and fixing the use of government aid to the sectors of lower income is constituted as the strategic source of access to resources.

The soup kitchen organizations that foster self-organization are *subdivided* into institutions that integrate wider political instances (for example the CTA, workers' union)[7] and institutions that do not belong to other structures. Nevertheless, beyond this disparity, all these interviewees show as objectives of the institution that they represent: to organize and to make the population politically aware: *"We believe that it is necessary to produce a change of economic model and that the only way is with the people in the street, all the people organized in the street. The government has to be national and popular so that the people live with dignity again. Neither Radical nor Peronist, not even Leftist, Liberal Leftist, "trosca", is it clear? (...) To discuss people's concrete problems and to see how we give them political shape."*

This political purpose is developed in a framework of crisis of representation. In this sense it is significant that several of these interviewees are defined as Peronist that have been left

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[7] The Centre of Argentinian Workers is not recognized as union centre by the National Government. It comprises some unions and organizations of unemployed people (pickets or grassroots), social movements, etc.

without activism or party structure: *"I recognize myself as a social activist, but a political activist. I have political ideas, identity. Many of the comrades ("compañeros") come from a Peronist identity (…) we speak of Peronism as a total acephalism. It is a political identity without representation. Neither party, neither union."*

Crisis of politics and emergency of new sociopolitical brokerages

The comparative analysis allows us to recognize certain discursive slips, very linked to the coming of the crisis. The place of the partisan elements, which in the first series of interviews was already identified as omnipresent, but hidden and devaluated –i.e., only admitted by a few people and justified in terms of facilitating instrumental relationships of the development of their "social" activity– gets duller definitively (at most a very indirect relationship is admitted with political party characters, which is expressed through the figure of the foundations).

Meanwhile, in the context of the crisis, the number of soup kitchen organizations increases; these institutions focus on politics in terms of grassroots, as action that is exercised from the social practice and sustained in the mobilization capacity and in the scale of the mentioned mobilization.

The inscriptions and articulations of this political practice in a bigger political field remain –as much as the role of the brokers and the relationships of clientelism used to do it– hidden and confused. We can observe, as a change, on the other hand, the effectiveness on the part of this sector of soup kitchen organizations to replace old local brokerages, and to interpellate directly to the Government. From this political conception, they take the initiative that allows them to integrate and to channel the nutrition demand towards the Government, this way becoming a powerful circuit of new brokers.

Meanwhile, self-organization and generation of one's own resources are the signifiers that emerge in the context of the crisis, accompanying these practices; but their development

depends on the centrality that is played by the direct raising of the public resources that guarantee the existence of the soup kitchen organizations, the dependence of the subsidy and, in particular, the welfare practices that it reproduces.

3. The relationship with the local government

The great majority of the soup kitchen organizations in the neighbourhood of La Boca maintain a bond with the Government of the City through the financial and nutritional support that they receive for the development of their activities.[8] It is possible to observe that since the end of 2001 the relationship with the Government of the City has been on a changing trend. On the one hand, the office in charge of the social affairs area has begun to carry out annual meetings (Mesa de Concertación or Coordination Committee) with the soup kitchen organizations, spaces dedicated to training courses on workshop and food preparation are being organized.

On the other hand, the Centro de Gestión y Participación[9] has become a very visible "reference", given a change in the linking methodology of some soup kitchen organizations (those that are articulated at the Mesa de Enlace or Liaison Committee), which since that moment have directed their public action on neighbourhood scale, of protest and complaint for higher quotas of food resources, through their "activity" (which process was repeated on several occasions, until finally, the physical headquarters of the Centro de Gestión y Participación was transferred to Barracas neighborhood). This was the beginning, for some soup kitchen organizations, of the stage of political action based on the street demonstration, then transformed into *piquetera* (pickets).[10]

This way, there is an inflection, the government's food policy follows the logic of emergency, and resources are quantitatively increased without defining qualitative changes from the

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[8] Only in 3 of the highlighted soup kitchen organizations it is declared that support is not received.

[9] See footnote n° 7

[10] The action of the social movements of unemployed people that block streets in the city carrying out grassroots is called this way.

Government of the City of Buenos Aires. The partial instrumentation of Vale Ciudad (welfare nutrition programme) was only applied in the neighbourhood of La Boca, as an attempt of displacing the assignments in kind (*bolsones*), invigorating the running of small shops in the neighbourhood and giving back the families, individually, the capacity for choosing their food supplies. Some soup kitchen organizations, in this sense, also began to channel the Vale Ciudad.

In this dynamics, nevertheless, the programmes maintain the welfare way of working; as a consequence, it partially continues keeping a dependence situation from the organizations. It does not appear as an explicit objective of the government's action, through the identified intervention dynamics, the attempt to develop or to strengthen institutional capacities of management that allow those people running soup kitchen organizations to make progress with the creation and/or the support of community networks to face up to the diverse problems in the neighbourhood from a collective perspective. The references of some leaders to the limited meetings carried out show them as set up for an exchange of information and, they have not achieved a working regularity.

The relationship given through the supplemental nutrition programme, between those who have the funds that constitute the base of the operation of almost all the soup kitchen organizations and those who run them, is coloured by paternalism. This characteristic is, in turn, the one reproduced by those who run the soup kitchens with the children, women and/or old people that come to them. Somehow, the possession of the material resources that the other essentially needs, in both situations, defines the established relationship of power.

Regarding the perception of the actions that the Government of the City of Buenos Aires carries out, as well as a strong negative bias exists towards political activity in general and towards political parties in particular in the discourses, this is also repeated regarding the local government. The most frequent explanations of this perception refer to insufficient and even ineffective action with respect to the welfare that the government provides, which does not respond to the population demands.

The welfare action of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires in relation to the organizations is based on the handing of packed meals (*viandas*) and/or food as well as of annual subsidies, with non-systematic controls in relation to the working of the soup kitchen, basically oriented to the verification of the number of diners and its adaptation to the number of *viandas* granted. In few cases there is supervision of the quality of the food prepared for the people who attend the place. Anyway, according to what was pointed out by those running soup kitchens, the report of a larger number of assisted population does not redound in the increase of the amount of the subsidies or of the assignment of a larger number *viandas* or *bolsones*. In many cases, contradicting the identified data, a more significant adjustment of the contribution is carried out, offering provisions for a smaller number of addressees.

Anyway, although it is highlighted that the government assistance is insufficient, for most of the soup kitchen organizations of the neighborhood, their funding depends mainly on that contribution. Although several of them also generate enterprises and/or they receive donations from private individuals, foundations or unions to help to their maintenance, these actions are not enough.

Although most of the people in charge agree about criticizing the government action regarding the insufficiency of the resources that it gives, the link that they keep with the different authorities of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires depends on the characteristics of the soup kitchen organizations. For example, not all the organizations show actions of complaint towards the government through the collective demonstrations (grassroots). Many speak against these measures because they consider that they are playing with people's necessities, emphasizing at the same time their political dispensable feature.

In those that develop a non-partisan activism, the Government is their priority interlocutor. They sustain an active action through complaints, demonstrations, blocking streets and occupation of the building of the Centro de Gestión y Participación, demanding not only a larger supply of food or subsidy rises but also larger quantity of welfare employment programmes. In these soup kitchen organizations a high participation in the different spaces

generated by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires is also observed, such as the meetings of the partaking budget, workshops, etc. We should highlight that even though these soup kitchen organizations have great capacity of demonstration and have achieved a directioning of the resources in favor of their complaints on some occasions; they do not outline proposals of modifications in the definition or application of the nutrition policy.

In relation to the soup kitchen organizations of activism, the link that they have with the government is more heterogeneous. Although they also criticize the work of the Secretaría de Acción Social (Local Office of Social Affairs) and the lack of response from the Centro de Gestión y Participación, most of them do not express their demands through street demonstrations (grassroots). In general, they usually have more diversified strategies to obtain resources. On the one hand, some of them have generated micro-enterprises to pay the expenses of the soup kitchen organization and, on the other hand, they are trying to get donations from different sources.

As for the soup kitchen organizations with a welfare profile (some of which are part of bigger structures such as the church or unions), like the previous group, in general they do not participate in collective demonstrations. Their participation in the spaces generated by the government is also quite heterogeneous. Some people state that they have contact with the Centro de Gestión y Participación and the Secretaría de Acción Social, and others that they do not have any relationship. They receive resources from the Government as well as from other sources.

In general, the soup kitchen organizations constitute an intersection point between some social politicies of the government of the city, the voluntary efforts of the people running them and actions of clientelism that respond to traits of parties or political movements at the local level and the necessities of the population. Their place in the institutional framework is not very clear: although they receive subsidies and nutrition contributions from the Secretaría de Acción Social of the Government of the City they are not considered state owned; while the

links with political organizations in the neighbourhood and their role as brokers in electoral

situations are also vague.

4. Thinking the results over from the field work situation

We find it important on the occasion of this conference to reflect on the peculiarities of the

field work that we pursued throughout the investigation and the achieved results, we will

particularly examine the articulations between observing and listening with the interpretation

of the results.

Why did we listen?

The choice of the interviews in depth like an approach to the interpretations and definitions

that the leaders of the soup kitchen organizations give on their tasks, their role in the

neighbourhood and their bonds with politics and the Government was based on our interest to

gain access to the *explanations*, given by the community leaders, with the purpose of reaching

those *senses* that the actors themselves assign to their action. The work in the soup kitchen

organizations is very similar, the *routine of feeding* children and mothers is a picture that

repeats itself almost without variations from organization to organization: children queue on

the pavement and when the table is ready and everything is already, then children and mothers

enter the room which is, generally, properly prepared and equipped with that aim in an old big

house or in some premises that used to act as warehouse or neighbourhood shop. However, the

sense with which that routine is mounted in each one of the organizations is different. Those

differences are the ones we try to grasp in the analysis carried out here.

The *doing* of the leaders of the soup kitchen organizations has a *polysemous sense*: it turns

towards *the vocation for helping*, because they feel their function as a *divine commandment*,

because it is necessary *to promote the right through the fighting attitude*, among others. The

same doing has different senses and that polysemy converts the *doing* into doings: what they do, each of them does it in a different way.

La Boca is a very popular neighbourhood for researchers, which is why for the community organizations and their members the researcher's world is a quite familiar world. However, we cannot forget that in the act of listening (during the interview situation) the researcher exerts power on his interviewees. *That power penetrates into the act of knowing and conditions it,* even when the researcher has the intention of converting his informant into an interlocutor or guides the desire of the most genuine neutrality. During the field work on numerous occasions we noticed the necessity to either find acceptance of their points of view or of their work in us, or provide justifications that frame their perspectives. This situation became especially evident when reflecting on their position in the organization and on the (denied or accepted) relationships with the world of politics. We notice, then, the effect that the general social context also echoed in the interview situation and that its effects were added to the consequences that the interview situation usually has on the act of knowing.

With the crisis of 2001, leaderships in Argentina were seriously questioned, especially political and social leaderships. The slogan "*to kick them all out*" echoed in every public space in which politics had something to do. We observed then *the leaders' necessity to be discursively away from the socially questioned leaders* and to create in us the conviction that their leadership was a different leadership. It was clear that in that effort our presence *brought* the social look about leaders and leaderships to the environment of the soup kitchen organization.

The effect of the context was also evident when we interrogated on their relationships with political parties or with the world of politics. Just as we mentioned in our analysis in the first series of interviews, the relationship with political parties was identified as omnipresent, but hidden and devalued –i.e. only admitted by a few people and justified in terms of facilitating instrumental relationships of the development of their "social" activity. In the second round of interviews that relationship gets duller definitively (at most a very indirect relationship is

admitted with political party characters, which is expressed through the figure of the foundations).

While we listened, we also watched

The interview situation also revealed itself to us as a *watching situation.* Watching appeared as an important source of effective knowledge for us, at the same time that it allowed us to create new hypotheses on the analyzed phenomenon. In that watching in some opportunities we could grasp the disagreements that exist between the action discursively built by the leaders and the referentes on which that construction was based. Leaders usually refer to the number of beneficiaries that come to their soup kitchen organizations; however, the numbers referred rarely matched our observations. Therefore, we started to think about the *legitimization function* that numbers have, from a subjective perspective. It is not the same to see to 500 children as to see to 20, the number somehow legitimizes the work of the leaders and their features of goodness stand out.

Likewise, watching allowed us to identify the significant social relationships that are given inside the soup kitchen organization and what are those that are developed in the outside. The significant social relationships of the inside are those that established with the beneficiaries and with the collaborators. The relationships with the world of politics, on the other hand, are those that are developed in the outside. The already mentioned relationships penetrate into the work at the soup kitchen organization through some practices such as the distribution of welfare employment programmes among the collaborators or the access to information. However, the place of the relationships with the world of politics is the outside, an outside that appears strongly mediated by the leader's figure.

Studying in and studying about

We frequently notice the necessity of distinguishing between the place or environment where the study is developed and the object of study. However, the study of *the soup kitchens* was a

fundamental task to approach the understanding of the leaderships in the neighbourhood, of their views about their own work and of the senses that are assigned to them. *Context and action constitute in this case a hardly detachable pair, which offers the researcher numerous hints to think their articulations and their specificities.*

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