

Asociación Civil de Periodismo Social, Argentina

Making Poverty Visible in Mainstream Media

By Manuel Quintero

In 2001 a financial crisis caused the savings of millions of families to vanish into thin air. It multiplied the numbers of the unemployed and sent images of extreme poverty around the world. Many were caught by surprise, since this did not take place in an impoverished country with minimal resources—of which there are many in the Global South—but in Argentina, a country blessed with immense natural wealth, a population with adequate levels of education and a highly skilled labour force.

Although the high, sustained economic growth of recent years has led to a decrease in poverty levels in Argentina, inflation could put a stop to this tendency and, according to some analysts, there could be sharp increases in poverty and extreme poverty indexes. This is a particularly sensitive topic for the government of President Cristina Fernández, whose popularity has recently diminished, as a result—among other factors—of rising inflation. This is such a delicate issue that officials of the government’s national institute of statistics resigned in 2007, expressing their disagreement with alleged manipulation of statistics.

The Civil Association of Social Journalism (Asociación Civil de Periodismo Social or ACPS), an organization created in 2003 to promote a better relationship between journalists and non-governmental organizations in Argentina, contends that the country’s media generally ignore the issue of poverty, contributing to a situation in which it has little impact and minimal visibility in the national public agenda. When the media does give some attention to this issue, the coverage lacks context, and is over-simplified, signifying a violation of fundamental human rights.

ACPS Director Silvia Fiore was interviewed about the work of her organization.

Q. What projects have been carried out with WACC support?

A. One of the strongest and most consolidated, which involves other stakeholders and other media at the regional level, is the ANDI project. The ANDI Network-Latin America is a network of 12 news agencies across Latin America promoting children’s rights. Its work consists of systematically monitoring communication media for issues related to children, including children and poverty. In Argentina ACPS is the local node for the ANDI agency.

In addition, we provide training to journalists who are working in different media and university students. We also get involved with non-governmental organizations and organize no-cost workshops that provide them with tools to improve their access to the media. This is a weakness of organizations. We’ve been able to see the needs these organizations have. One of the most recent things we’ve done is to create the Network of Daily Newspapers as part of a strategy to bring visibility to the “invisible.”

Q. How did you find out there is a need in the community that you could respond to?

A. In general, organizations in Argentina do not have a lot of resources for making their communication professional. One way this limitation is evident is that they find it difficult to realize that they have the capacity to generate newsworthy events. This indicates a gap between the media and organizations. We are trying to reduce this gap by offering training to

these organizations on how to approach the media, provide the media with information and understand the dynamics of how the media operate.

Q. What has been the project's effect in the community?

A. The Network of Daily Newspapers invited journalists, heads and directors of the major media in the region to establish a network for defining an agenda with issues of shared interest, linked to social concerns. Currently, 14 daily newspapers are part of this network. The idea is to reach a consensus on publishing information regarding a given topic, and then each of the media produces its own piece at the local level, but the results are made available to the entire network. For example, this year an investigation was conducted on the topic of micro-credit as a way for people to get out of poverty.

Q. How are these projects associated with the particular context in Argentina?

A. In Argentina topics related to poverty are typically addressed only incidentally, when they are mentioned in relation to economic topics. Until recently, the issue of poverty had not been seriously addressed. It was not until 2001, when the economic crisis arose, that the media began to suddenly cover poverty issues, however somewhat hastily and from perspectives that lacked commitment.

In reality, children had already been dying from hunger for a considerable period of time. Poverty, hunger, malnourished kids and horrendous impoverishment were nothing new in certain parts of the country, and we had been covering these problems in the alternative media. Then one day, the publication *Clarín* published a photo of a malnourished child who weighed only five kilos, and suddenly the topic became a regular part of media coverage. At the same time there was an entire social movement, with people taking to the streets, organizations holding assemblies and a political movement in the social sector that was working to play a greater key role. The crisis was a landmark of sorts, because after that the major media—which had not been concerned about these issues before—started to give them a lot of attention, although in a questionable manner.

From that moment on we started to see more journalists concerned about doing a better job of using the jargon linked to the social sector, and also being able to understand it. So we became involved, contributing toward making journalists better informed and more specialized in this area. Because it was really quite pathetic to see the media talk about “those poor little people” so impoverished and at the brink of death. It certainly didn't reflect a perspective based on human development. So we help journalists understand that there are other angles to use when talking about the issue of poverty. We still have a great deal of work to do.

Q. To what extent has WACC's support facilitated carrying out the project?

A. WACC is contributing to various areas of work. For example, through the Network of Daily Newspapers we are taking very specific actions, such as facilitating the publishing of op-ed pieces written by specialists in certain areas. We have published three studies this year. Through the Network of Daily Newspapers we have developed a webpage with specific tools for editing journalistic content linked to poverty.

Our work in monitoring the media includes measuring many variables that are associated with children and also related to poverty. With WACC support, this year we are not only measuring poverty, but also the way it is presented in the media.