

## **CAN COVID ACCELERATE THE METROPOLITAN UNITY OF GREATER BUENOS AIRES?**

*As in most metropolises, the pandemic brought a sudden interruption to the lives of the people of Greater Buenos Aires (GBA). From early on, Argentina has stuck to a strict Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation scheme. The GBA's capacity for metropolitan coordination, a test for its leaders, has been a positive surprise, and the political response has been unprecedented.*



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**O**n March 19<sup>th</sup> 2020, the day Dr Alberto Fernández completed his first 100 days leading the national government, Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation was decreed and the country's borders were closed as a public health protection measure to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. This measure, unprecedented in Argentina's modern history, also featured another novelty of major political impact: it was announced jointly by the national president, the Head of Government of the City of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, and the Governor of Buenos Aires Province, Axel Kicillof. These three figures govern the territory of what is known as the Metropolitan Region of Buenos Aires (MRBA). It was a highly unusual gesture in the country's political culture.

The Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation marked a turning point in the lives of Buenos Aires' citizens, restricting many freedoms in the pursuit of collective health. Time will tell if it will also facilitate long overdue institutional coordination in the metropolitan area. For now, the various scales of government seem more united by the dread and horror of the likely news of lost lives than by any compatibility of political party or ideology. While the national and provincial governments belong to different strains of Peronism, the city is run by the republican coalition that ruled the country until December 2019.

As Argentina's main gateway, the MRBA – home to around 15 million people – is worst hit by the pandemic's effects. The city council prepared for the quarantine by arranging a group of epidemiologists on the 107 helpline of the Emergency Medical Attention System to provide information and relief for suspected cases. One week after the first case, the measures were stepped up and those over 65 years old were asked to preventively isolate themselves, and all arrivals from abroad were obliged to carry out a period of 14 days' isolation in hotels contracted by the city council. Finally, March 20<sup>th</sup> marked the first day of the Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation decreed by the head of state.

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As of May 12<sup>th</sup> the city has 2,871 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 126 people have died. Of the total number of cases, over 26% (759) are located in vulnerable neighbourhoods. The MRBA has 4742 cases in total (1871 + 2871). According to the daily national report and the national map published by the newspaper *La Nación*, the MRBA accounts for over 63.3% of the country's positive COVID-19 cases.<sup>1</sup>

The challenges of dealing with the pandemic are multiple, starting with inter-jurisdictional coordination. Unlike other cities, the metropolitan area does not have a metropolitan regulatory framework or a specific entity. However, the national government worked alongside those of Buenos Aires province and city to decide on the measures to be taken, setting aside ideological and political differences. Most of the accesses to the city were closed to avoid movement between the two jurisdictions. Measures were also taken to limit mass passenger transport and to reserve it for essential personnel. Mandatory checks were introduced at major intercity train stations with the installation of rapid test points and infrared thermometers. Managing resilience to face this crisis as well as those to come as a consequence of climate change will require metropolitan governance mechanisms to be developed (Lanfranchi et al., 2018).

In the city, the government made agreements with hotels to provide space for preventive isolation to citizens returning from abroad, but also for use

1. Up-to-date data published by La Nación can be found at: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/en-detalle-infectados-fallecidos-coronavirus-argentina-nid2350330#/>

as medical centres for minor cases of coronavirus. Similarly, facilities were opened to host people living on the street during quarantine and provide them with accommodation. In terms of education, a Connected Educational Community (CEC) was created to provide support to students, their families and teachers to carry out academic activities from home. The city also offers *Cultura en casa* (Culture at Home), which provides easy access to cultural content free of charge via the government's website. Over 21% of the total population of the city of Buenos Aires is over 60 years of age. To care for it, the *Adultos mayores* programme (Elderly Adults programme) was set up, which enables telephone assistance and help with shopping to be given through an extended network of volunteers.

In recent days, the focus has been on the city's vulnerable neighbourhoods. A substantial rise in coronavirus cases has been noted and, for this reason, it was decided mass door-to-door testing should be carried out for people with symptoms. What is more, due to the sanitary conditions of certain houses, several centres were opened to enable inhabitants to comply with mandatory isolation. Finally, over these weeks, the compulsory use of facemasks was imposed in all public spaces in the city with a very high rate of compliance among the city's residents.

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Perhaps one of the most interesting opportunities the new scenario presents is the possibility that local governments will be motivated to implement new approaches to public space, using tactical urban planning tools to test "temporary" transformations, that could become definitive if they work. Thus, the government recently announced the partial or total pedestrianisation of 100 streets and avenues of the city in record time to allow neighbourhood shops to reopen while respecting social distancing. It is an interesting time to start innovative urban planning processes, as many things are expected to change in the "new normal", which seems to be here to overturn existing paradigms. In fact, the city already had an updated Environmental Urban Plan on its agenda.

What will the city be like in the decades to come? Will a commitment be made to mobility models that focus on decentralisation, proximity and pedestrianisation? Like Paris's 15-minute city and Barcelona's Superblocks strategy, Buenos Aires is developing a new Environmental and Anthropological Urban Plan that puts the environment and people first. These ideas

are currently being discussed within the council of the Urban Environmental Plan and the city's Urban Development Secretariat. It is to be hoped that they will enter the implementation and co-creation stage with all the city's vital sectors sooner rather than later. For this, "PlanificAcción" methods have been proposed (Lanfranchi, 2019), which focus on building social capital through the participatory design of transformative projects, while simultaneously defining the plan's strategic guidelines.

It may be said that, so far, the measures taken by the governments have been successful in terms of public health, as Argentina has one of the region's lowest rates of contagion. However, after 55 days of compulsory isolation, the economic situation for *Porteños*, and for all Argentinians, is very worrying. The future is uncertain, but the current unity among the leaders of Greater Buenos Aires is promising, and perhaps we can emerge stronger out of the current crisis as a society.

## References

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