In the marginalised communities of Argentina—indeed in many parts of Latin America—civil society organisations (CSOs) play a prominent role in the provision of social services to the poor and as forces for collective action (Roitter et al. 1999; Roberts and Portes 2006). The aim of this chapter is to analyse the historical roots, characteristics and contribution to fighting poverty of CSOs in urban slum communities based on fieldwork undertaken in two of the city of Buenos Aires’ largest informal settlements: the *villa* 1-11-14 of Bajo Flores and the *villa* 21-24 of Barracas.

*Villas* can be defined as densely populated housing settlements composed of self-made dwellings constructed on vacant urban land, which are generally characterised by inferior access to public services, precarious structures and unclear delimitation of the land pertaining to each dwelling (Gallart *et al.*1992:13\(^1\)). The villas of Bajo Flores and Barracas were chosen for research fieldwork because they are among the city’s largest and oldest informal settlements and because the Catholic

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1 Translated by the author.
University of Argentina, where our research group is based, operates a community action programme there.

The analysis is based on a CSO survey applied in both settlements in 2011, which collected quantitative and qualitative data through in-depth interviews with the leaders of a total of 97 organisations. All CSOs included in the survey satisfy the following conditions: they are organised, private, non-profit distributing, self-governing and voluntary. These criteria are based on the Johns Hopkins Centre for Civil Society Studies’ definition of the non-profit sector (Salamon et al. 2003).

The data from the CSO survey is supplemented with information from the Family Survey on Living Conditions and Relationship with CSOs applied in 2011 to a sample of 320 households living in the same communities. For a more detailed description of the CSO survey see Mitchell (2012) and of the household survey see Lépore (2012).

The chapter begins with a brief description of the historical evolution of the informal settlements in the city of Buenos Aires (CBA) and of the socio-economic characteristics of residents. The second section provides an overview of the scale, composition and role of CSOs in the provision of social services. Then, in order to advance the understanding of how grassroots organisations emerge in marginalised communities, the third section analyses the evidence on the process of collective action. The fourth section considers the importance of the construction of ties between local organisations and people and institutions outside of the community and how they relate to the availability of human and economic resources. The fifth section examines the organisations’ broader advocacy role. The chapter ends with a summary of the main conclusions and recommendations on how the private sector and management education institutions can contribute to strengthening the civil society sector in marginalised communities.

The villas of the city of Buenos Aires

The growth and proliferation of informal settlements in CBA is one of the most visible signs of the persistence of poverty in Argentina. Although the informal settlements first emerged in the 1930s and 40s, as workers migrating to urban centres to find work in the expanding industrial sector were forced to construct their own housing on unoccupied lands, the rate of population growth in the settlements has accelerated during the past two decades. The share of the population living in informal settlements rose from 2% in 1991 to 6% in 2010; at the same time, the exodus of higher income households to suburban areas led to a 2.5% drop in the city’s overall population (Macció and Lépore 2012: 53). These demographic changes have accentuated the territorial concentration of poverty and, with it, the degree of residential segregation (Suarez 2011). The growth of informal settlements in the CBA parallels the global trend of expanding urban slums. According to UN-Habitat (2013:15), in 2012, 863 million people (33% of the urban
population) lived in slums worldwide, compared to 760 million in 2000 and 650 million in 1990.

The residents of the informal settlements of the CBA suffer many of the same deprivations as slum residents in other global cities, including insecure tenancy, overcrowding, inadequate access to water, sanitation, electricity and other public services, discrimination in the labour market, and other violations of their basic human rights. The percentage of the population in informal settlements in the CBA with income below the poverty line is 53%, compared with only 7% in the rest of the city. Although the labour force participation rate of heads of household is practically the same as outside of the settlements, the unemployment rate is far higher and residents tend to only find employment in the informal sector. The poor quality of local public schools and high repetition and drop-out rates\(^2\) reinforce the intergenerational transmission of poverty within these communities (Macció and Lépore 2012).

**Scale, composition and role in social service provision**

A total of 65 organisations was identified in the informal settlement of Barracas and 43 in Bajo Flores (Table 1). This means that there are two organisations per thousand residents in Barracas and 1.7 in Bajo Flores, placing these communities slightly below the Argentine average of 2.9, but higher than in some other Latin American countries such as Brazil, which has an average of only 0.7 (Cao et al. 2011: 20). Moreover, the scale of civil society activity is comparatively higher when based on the total number of people who participate in the organisations’ activities. According to the CSO survey, over 21,000 residents of Barracas (two-thirds of the total) and almost 12,000 residents of Bajo Flores (nearly half of the total) participate in the activities of CSOs operating in the neighbourhood. In comparison, it is estimated that 25% of the adult population in Argentina participates in a CSO (Cao et al. 2011: 59). The finding of a relatively dense network of CSO operating in the informal settlements contrasts with the results of some research (Wacquant 2008; Zaccardi 2008), which has found an erosion of networks of organisations and institutions in segregated communities.

The principal purpose of these organisations is the provision of social services (Table 2). Two-thirds of the CSOs in Bajo Flores and half of those in Barracas are social assistance providers, primarily community kitchens. The next most important category is education, which includes day-care centres, nursery schools, charitable education organisations and formal education institutions, such as schools

\(^2\) A quarter of adolescents have not completed primary school and two-thirds of youth ages 18–24 have not finished secondary school (Macció and Lépore 2012: 72).
and universities. A total of six research or human rights organisations operate in Barracas and two in Bajo Flores. Other types of organisations identified include Catholic and Evangelical churches, cultural and recreation organisations (such as community radios and sports clubs), political organisations and social movements\(^3\), and organisations that provide job training.

\(^3\) Social movements can be defined as organisations, groups of people, and individuals who act together to bring about transformation in society (Kaldor 2003: 12). The most prevalent social movements in Argentina are the groups of urban unemployed workers.
The CSO survey identified a surprisingly limited number of neighbourhood advocacy organisations that work to advance long-term common goals or represent community members before public authorities. Each neighbourhood has one principal representative organisation and only two other neighbourhood organisations were identified in Barracas and none in Bajo Flores. The representative organisation of Barracas, the *Junta Vecinal 21-24*, consists of a board (made up of a president and 8 members) and ten neighbourhood commissions and that of Bajo Flores, the *Cuerpo de Delegados de la 1-11-14*, is composed of representatives from each block who are selected in informal assemblies.

Over time, most organisations have diversified their activities and today offer programmes that transcend their initial purpose. For example, social movements run day-care centres, cultural organisations run drug prevention programmes, community kitchens offer education and training programmes and the local Catholic churches are among the most important providers of social services in the community. For example, two parish churches, *Nuestra Señora de Caacupe* of Barracas and *Madre del Pueblo* of Bajo Flores run soup kitchens, homes for youths...
and the elderly, legal services programmes, nursery schools, a secondary school, psychological assistance, job training and drug treatment programmes.

Today food assistance is by far the most important type of social service offered by CSOs. Between the two neighbourhoods, a total of 56 community kitchens provides daily food rations to close to a quarter of all residents. Six out of ten organisations provide some type of education services, such as after-school programmes, day-care centres, nursery schools and adult literacy programmes. Two out of ten organisations offer programmes that aim to increase the labour market and productive opportunities of residents, such as job training in electricity, carpentry, auto-mechanics and computers, as well as micro-credit programmes. The most important health programmes are those that provide workshops on topics such as reproductive health, oral hygiene and nutrition. CSOs also are increasingly providing drug treatment programmes to address the growing problem of drug use and addictions.

Community Kitchen ‘La Sonrisa del Bajo’
The process of collective action

The informal settlements of the CBA provide relevant evidence of the capacity of the poor to see beyond self-interest and cooperate to resolve collective problems. A total of 34 organisations identified in Bajo Flores and 31 in Barracas are grassroots organisations created exclusively by members of the community (Table 1).

The evidence from the CSO survey indicates that economic and social crises have been important catalysts for collective action. In fact, the years in which the greatest number of organisations was created (1989, 1994 and 2001) coincide with the years of sharpest economic contraction. Many community kitchens began, for example, as reciprocal relationships in which community members contributed food to a collective pot or helped provide food to neighbours relatively worse off than themselves. Similarly, many day-care centres began when mothers joined together to share childcare responsibilities, enabling some mothers to work outside the home. In all of these cases the close relationship between family, friends and neighbours facilitated cooperation.

In many cases, organisation leaders also have been motivated by their own personal beliefs and experiences. A third stated that they were inspired by their interest in helping others and often associated these goals with their religious faith. One out of five leaders said they were motivated by a personal crisis, such as the death of a loved one or having suffered abuse earlier in their lives.

The presence of a strong leader was another decisive factor in the creation of many organisations. According to the CSO survey, eight out of ten grassroots organisations have a dominant leader who has worked in the organisation since its creation.

Bridging social capital and access to resources

While the bonds of trust and cooperation among community members are decisive for the initiation of collective action, the construction of alliances or ‘bridges’ with people and institutions outside of the community is crucial to the expansion and diversification of CSO activities. These contacts that traverse the boundaries of informal settlements are especially important with regard to access to economic and human resources.

The public sector is the primary source of CSO financing (Figure 1). Six out of ten grassroots and four out of ten outside organisations obtain economic resources from either the city or the national government. In many cases, organisations have

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4 See Narayan (1999) for a discussion of the importance of ‘bonding’ versus ‘bridging’ social capital.
developed a relationship of co-production with the state in which a public entity is responsible for programme design and financing and the organisation for programme administration.

Figure 1 **Sources of financing of CSO programmes (% of organisations that obtain economic resources from each source)**

Source: CSO Survey applied in Barracas and Bajo Flores, 2011

All other sources of financing for grassroots organisations are extremely limited: only 6% receive funding from the private sector, 11% from fundraising activities and 13% from individuals. The sources of financing of outside organisations are far more diversified, indicating that charitable, faith-based and other outside organisations can provide effective means for channelling resources to poor families living in marginalised communities. Outside organisations can also play a role in bridging relationships between grassroots organisations and individuals or businesses interested in supporting social programmes in informal settlements.

Outside CSOs also are able to attract far more human resources than grassroots CSOs, and the difference is especially notable with regard to the number of paid employees and professionals. On average, grassroots organisations have three times as many beneficiaries per paid employee as outside ones and five times as many beneficiaries per professional.

At the same time, the leaders of outside organisations emphasised the importance of contacts with grassroots organisations and with other key actors in the community, such as the parish priests or doctors and social workers from the local public health centre, in the initiation of activities in the neighbourhood. T.E.M.A.S. is an example of an organisation that has been particularly effective at constructing alliances with both grassroots organisations and the public sector.
T.E.M.A.S. (Trabajo, Educación, Medio Ambiente y Salud)

Since 2004 the organisation T.E.M.A.S. (whose initials stand for Work, Education, Environment and Health) has implemented diverse and creative social projects in the villa 21–24, including a micro-credit programme for female entrepreneurs, a school of boxing for youths, an after-school education programme for primary schoolchildren, a community library and an oral hygiene and dental services programme. The organisation has been able to enhance its impact in the community by constructing alliances both with leaders of grassroots organisations and the public sector. T.E.M.A.S. offers its after-school tutoring programme in a soup kitchen and its dental services programme in a local community centre. It also teams with nearby public schools by conducting reading promotion programmes in classrooms and by providing workshops to public school teachers on how to gear teaching plans and exercises toward the specific needs and lives of children from disadvantaged households.

The grassroots organisations that have procured external sources of financing have been better able to incorporate professional personnel and practices and improve the quality of their services. The comparison of the experiences of two day-care centres serves as a relevant example. The first was created by a pre-school teacher living in Barracas to offer free childcare services to mothers with young children. As the organisation has been unable to attract donations or professional volunteers, they provide rudimentary care to 42 children with just three part-time volunteer teachers and five mother-helpers working in shifts. In contrast, a day-care centre in Bajo Flores created by a group of mothers as a means of satisfying their own food and childcare needs, over time has been able to become a legally recognised formal association, incorporate both paid and volunteer professionals and eventually obtain a subsidy from the city government. Today, the organisation employs a team of 20 paid teachers, social workers and other professionals to care for 96 children and now seeks not only to provide childcare, but also stimulate young children, strengthen family bonds and offer childcare training to adolescent mothers.

The broader role of CSO in the public sphere

The broader role of civil society in advocating for the poor, seeking transparency and accountability of the state and organising citizens to work toward the achievement of collective goals can potentially have an even more profound effect on
The evidence from the household survey indicates, however, that the participation of residents in the informal settlements in CSO activities is limited mostly to the reception of social services and attendance at local churches. Only 6% of households participate in neighbourhood assemblies that seek to advance collective goals, such as regularise home ownership, combat insecurity and improve public services, and 3% participate in a political party or social movement.

The low level of participation in neighbourhood assemblies seems to be associated with the low level of confidence in civil society leaders. Only a third of surveyed households said that they trust CSO leaders and only a quarter trust the delegates of representative organisations. The high level of violence and conflict between rival gangs—problems associated with the sale and consumption of drugs—are other obstacles to participation in neighbourhood organisations. According to the household survey, neighbourhood violence causes some families to isolate themselves socially.

In interviews the delegates themselves complained that the effectiveness of the representative organisations is not only limited by the low level of community participation, but also by their lack of internal cohesion (‘everyone trying to get water for their own well,’ as one representative said) and vested interests between public officials and people in positions of power in the neighbourhood.

CSO participation in protests against the state is also lower than one might expect. Close to half of the organisations’ leaders responded that they had participated during the previous year in some form of protest against the state. While the most frequent demands were related to housing, insecurity and access to public services, in almost a quarter of the cases, the organisation sought to obtain economic resources for itself or public sector jobs or benefits for the organisation’s members. A relevant question is whether or not the high level of dependence of CSO on the public sector for economic resources makes them less active in defending community interests in negotiations with the state. The autonomy of civil society may be crucial to its effectiveness in the broader public sphere.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has presented evidence of a dense network of CSOs operating in the informal settlements of the city of Buenos Aires. These organisations play a principal role in the provision of social services to the poor, especially food assistance, through a complementary relationship with the state. It is clear, however, that the current multiplicity of CSO activities focused on the satisfaction of basic needs is unable to remove the inequality in access to social opportunities that reproduce economic and social marginality.

Today, the principal obstacle faced by grassroots organisations is the lack of access to economic resources and skilled personnel. Economically poor communities have resource-poor organisations. As a result, grassroots CSOs depend almost exclusively on the public sector for financial resources, limiting civil society autonomy, with obvious implications for the ability of the civil society sector to counterbalance state power. These results point to the potential benefits of helping grassroots organisations to diversify their sources of financing to include the private sector. Advocacy, charitable and faith-based organisations can play an important role in enabling grassroots organisations to establish contacts outside of the community.

Management educators can incorporate these issues into their curriculum in a variety of ways. First, they can include in class discussions on poverty, information on the characteristics of the civil society sector in poor communities and case studies of particularly effective CSO programmes. Educators can also give students hands-on experience in poor communities by creating opportunities for them to work in CSO programmes, such as happened when a group of professors and students in business administration at the Catholic University of Argentina designed and implemented a programme in Bajo Flores to train youths for restocking jobs in supermarkets. Other hands-on experiences can include management consulting services to organisations in topics such as fundraising, human resources, accounting or programme management. Students can also work together to design projects to foster private sector investment in CSO programmes (such as the development of investment funds or strategies for programme evaluation).

Finally, true empowerment of poor communities to collectively work toward shared goals requires the formation of strong, independent representative organisations. Delegates expressed in interviews the need for technical assistance in areas such as architecture, engineering, law and human rights to enable them to converse with government in the design of policies to urbanise and integrate informal settlements into the city. Clearly, this is an area in which both the private sector and universities can play an important role.

References


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