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Pollution from fishmeal factories: a local survey

Vulnerability of residents of the port of Mar del Plata

1.12.2015 in [Shortcut](#)

Psychologists and social workers from ATAJO participated at the request of the District Coordinating Federal Prosecutor, Daniel Adler. The work carried out on the residents of Villa Vértiz was presented to the prosecutor's office investigating pollution from fishmeal factories.



Image 1 of 1
Photo: Lucía Muraca /
ATAJO team from Mar del
Plata / www.fiscales.gob.ar

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Mar del Plata: Seven fishmeal factory executives have been charged with polluting the water and the environment.

9.09.2019 in [Prosecutors' Offices](#)

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In the city of Mar del Plata, where ATAJO has been operating since November 2014, the federal district attorney, Daniel Adler, filed a complaint with prosecutor Laura Mazzaferri, in charge of the First Prosecutor's Office, alleging the possible commission of environmental pollution crimes in conjunction with minor injuries to the public's health by the owners of fishmeal factories in the city's port. He also requested an investigation into possible non-compliance and/or acts of corruption on the part of public officials responsible for preventing pollution.

Based on this request, the intervening Prosecutor's Office requested the ATAJO team to conduct an initial assessment of the issue, which would allow them to identify the social vulnerability of the residents affected by the contamination. In response, the professionals working in the area, in coordination with the ATAJO social team, surveyed the affected areas, gathering information, reconstructing the history of the area, interviewing residents and representatives, and contacting the heads of the various institutions working there.

Villa Vértiz

Along the tracks used by the General Roca Railway until the early 1980s, which connected the port of Mar del Plata with the national network, there has since been a paradigmatic shantytown, several kilometers long and just a few meters wide: the "Villa de Vértiz," one of the most affected by pollution from the flour mills and the fish industry.

The settlement was first established in the interstices of the railway network, and then, after the line was decommissioned in 1982, it occupied the entire railway corridor. Since then, the possibility of relocating the settlement to facilitate the reopening of the branch line has been considered on numerous occasions; however, this never occurred due to two factors: on the one hand, the residents' resistance to eviction, and on the other, the low volume of exports and the meager domestic fish market do not justify such a railway infrastructure. In this way, the settlement has been consolidated and expanded over the last few decades.

Villa Vértiz stretches between Martínez de Hoz Avenue and Route 88, a 7-km stretch that is approximately 30 meters wide. The stretch between Edison

street that is approximately 60 meters wide. The street between Estación Avenue and Marcelo T. Alvear Street, approximately 1.5 km long, represents the most densely populated and conflict-ridden part of the settlement.

For Virginia Sívori, head of the local ANSES office, "housing insecurity is a key characteristic of the settlements along the road that runs through the neighborhood. The port community is strikingly patriarchal, with men being the primary heads of households. The neighborhood is home to third-sector organizations linked to religion, sports (primarily soccer), and the area's foreign origins."

According to a study carried out by the municipality of General Pueyrredón in 2010, Villa Vértiz was inhabited by 264 families totaling 998 people, predominantly young people under 20 years old (56.5%) with the remaining 30% between 30 and 40 years old. Its population had some roots in the place, since 38% of the census groups accredited a seniority of between 5 and 10 years (that is, between 1990 and 1995), while 37% indicated between 1 and 5 years of installation and only 5% registered less than 1 year of stay.

A large percentage of the settled families came from northeastern and northwestern Argentina (38% of the village's population was originally from Santiago del Estero and Tucumán), while 28% were born in the district or in neighboring rural areas. The settlement was formed by families who came to look for work, stayed for a while, or by residents of Mar del Plata born in the city who lost their jobs and couldn't afford to rent.

Below are the main points of the report submitted to the acting prosecutor's office during the month of November.

Health

Regarding healthcare, the city has two public hospitals (HIEMI and HIGA), 38 health centers, and one outpatient specialty center. There are several private clinics, sanatoriums, and medical offices.

The residents of Villa Vértiz attend Health Center No. 2, located in the Villa Lourdes neighborhood at 4546 Guanahani Street. The center is surrounded by fish factories, where fishing waste, sewage, and nauseating odors are present, making it unhealthy for residents. Given the number of specialties provided at Health Center No. 2, it serves as a referral center for other health units.

The ATAJO team interviewed the social worker at the Health Center, who, when asked about the most common health problems among residents, mentioned the following:

"Muscle pain, respiratory problems, bone pain, work-related accidents, and treatment in the emergency room or trauma department. Recurring illnesses directly linked to the fishing industry include respiratory diseases, joint problems, arthritis, and osteoarthritis. In pediatrics, the problems are primarily respiratory, with causes associated with housing issues."

The social worker also cited the neighborhood's garbage dumps as major sources of contamination, as well as sewage. Scabies and parasites are diseases linked to these sources of contamination and are often transmitted through dogs. Near the health center, she mentioned a factory that releases ammonia into the streets.

"In our department, requests for early retirement due to disability, RTI (retirement due to disability), are a frequent request from the adult population. Unfortunately, the working conditions and physical effort required for port work often force people to resort to this benefit," notes the ANSES official.

Likewise, the ENVION Program representative stated that the most common health problems among children are asthma and bronchiolitis related to the precarious housing conditions, as the kennels are unheated and most have leaky roofing. She also listed cases of mange due to connivance with dogs, some cases of tuberculosis, aggravated by toluene consumption, a lack of health checkups, and recurring dental problems. Regarding the filleting activity, rheumatological problems were observed due to the cold while handling fish in contact with ice, as well as spinal problems and herniated disks due to the strain of loading and unloading.

An example of this is the case of a neighborhood leader who has lived in the neighborhood for 28 years: She worked for 25 years in the fillet industry. Sometimes she worked illegally, sometimes she worked legally.

As a result of his work, he developed osteoarthritis, and as the disease progressed, he has stopped working. "Another issue that arises is psychological distress due to feeling discriminated against, expelled from the system, and addictions to cope with the pain of existence."

The neighborhood representative stated that "a group of residents have had the dust left by the drains analyzed, and they have found parasites typical of other provinces. The population has had intestinal problems."

Employment status

Work plays an organizing role in the daily lives of individuals, from material aspects (the material reproduction of the labor force and its family group, which is transformed into a new labor force) to symbolic aspects (a person's social status in society, which is ascribed through collective recognition of their work or occupation; a stigma when a job appears in society to be associated with impoverished or marginalized populations). This is important to appreciate because it helps us understand how precarious work involves not only specific material conditions of existence, but also the symbolic

Thus, work in precarious situations is highly fragile, and the market as a mechanism for social exchange appears to be more of an obstacle than a guide to the exercise of citizenship and the integration of individuals.

Today, precariousness implies fragile integration, as it involves economic uncertainty with no means of protection other than individual effort and entrepreneurship. Fragile integration results in a weakening of the relationship between the individual and their ties to society and their own citizenship.

"Seventy percent of the population works in the port, while the rest is dedicated to the culinary industry. Currently, there's little work at the port, so there's a lot of unemployment. The pseudo-cooperatives are using people," says one representative.

The largest employment situation in the area is in fish factories, where labor relations are precarious, informal, temporary, or concealed by cooperatives that require workers to pay a flat tax but remain in a dependent relationship nonetheless.

On the other hand, there are also shipyards, where many people work in their maintenance, such as sailors and fishermen. Another source of employment is the restaurant industry, due to the large number of restaurants in the port and resort areas.

Environmental impact

When residents were asked about their housing situation, most reported that they do not have property titles, that the predominant building materials are cement and brick, and that their homes lack roofing or interior siding, resulting in dampness, cracks, and deteriorated floors. They do not have gas service; they must purchase gas cylinders for their own use. In many cases, the water connection is homemade, and the drains are cesspools, although some homes dump sewage into a gutter that empties onto the sidewalk.

"We don't have water, we 'stole' it (sic), we pulled a hose from the vacant lot where there is a connection, they only installed electricity and sewage meters

where there is a connection, they only installed electricity and sewage meters in some sections. We only filed complaints about sanitation, but they didn't give me a solution because this is land without owners" (Patricia, 54).

Neighborhood residents see their actions limited in terms of improving the quality of services and urban infrastructure: actions only stem from continuing to make demands, without concrete solutions to these demands, and continuing to carry out informal works to ensure basic services in their homes. "I don't know what water I'm drinking. Sometimes it's much darker than usual, and we just don't drink it; other times it's just passable," said Cristian, 39.

The housing situation cannot be seen in isolation from the environmental impact of everyday life, in a situation of extreme poverty, housing shortages, and overcrowding. When asked about the environmental impact, residents of Villa Vértiz stated that the central problem lies in the urban problem of a lack of services. This primarily refers to respiratory problems due to precarious housing, the constant presence of rodents due to the lack of ditches, and sewage backups and electrical breakdowns. This territorial situation of this population places the emphasis on the provision of basic services as a priority.

"We complained about the clogged sewers, causing foul odors. The garbage piling up in the hallways makes it hard to get into people's homes. This also brings rats, so we asked for a trash container, but they never responded, and there are a lot of children here." (Graciela, 57).

Adding to the precarious living conditions of the residents of Villa Vértiz is the alleged pollution from the flour mills, which negatively impacts the area's environment, creating a situation of extreme complexity and risk for the population.

The situation of the residents of Punta Mogotes is different, where basic services are guaranteed and their economic status is higher than that of the residents of Villa Vértiz. In this case, the focus is on the environmental impact generated by the flour mills, who face daily difficulties related to the odors produced by the waste from these factories.

The main environmental problems facing the area are directly or indirectly related to the fishing industry. The restructuring of the industry not only brought negative consequences in terms of society and the sustainability of the fishing resource, but also exacerbated the deterioration of the urban environment caused by the fishing industry, especially in the port area, where the residential, commercial, industrial, social, and political center of the fishing industry and community is located.

During the 1960s and 1970s, there was significant public and private investment in urban infrastructure, but in 1990, the national government withdrew from the management of certain public services, and industries cut costs at the expense of environmental degradation.

Fishing companies increasingly tended to externalize their environmental costs by discharging their waste directly into the stormwater and sewage system and/or subcontracting parts of the production process to informal cooperatives that also discharge their waste without prior treatment.

"At dawn, the fish are filleted, then the guts are transported to the flour mills in open trucks. That's why liquids and fish heads spill out along the way, leaving them on the street. By mid-morning, they're already rotten because the decomposition process is so rapid. The problem is that they don't have adequate facilities. They never stop, but they work harder at night, and the smell gets worse," said Claudia, from Punta Mogotes.

The same neighbor illustrated the difficulties in the following way: "You open the car and you smell it, even if you are inside the garage, you open the closet and it smells like fish, the clothes smell like fish, it varies depending on which way the wind is blowing, but in summer it gets really strong and you can't open the windows, there are days when you can't hang up the clothes or when they dry and you bring them in they smell a lot and you have to wash them again."

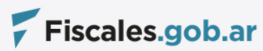
This persistent smell also has a negative impact on tourism, particularly on the planning of policies aimed at making Punta Mogotes a growing tourist destination. Regarding this, residents stated that "you notice the smell much more in the summer, which is why residents and tourists prefer to go to the southern beaches to escape the smell." According to Susana, "My daughter-in-law works at a hotel in the downtown area of Mogotes, where she receives tourists, and she always tells us that people vomit in the courtyard when they arrive because of the increasing smell."

Several actions have been taken by the neighborhood's residents to raise awareness of this environmental issue, which impacts the health and economic situations of families dedicated to tourism. "Previously, there was a 0800 number to report nauseating odors; I think it's a provincial issue. Residents would call and it had some impact; the flour mills made necessary investments long ago. Even," continued Horacio, a resident of Mogotes, "some time ago someone from the municipality approached me and took a report and conducted a survey, but nothing happened."

Some conclusions

The work carried out by the ATAJO professional team shows a new face of the MPF, capable of analyzing the complexities of reality from an interdisciplinary approach, and of making each of its departments available for the protection of the rights of the population, in order to develop work proposals that positively impact people's lives, as a way of contributing to social peace and

crimen y la prevención del delito.



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