

MTE: Popular economy workers child care facilities offer critical services during the COVID-19 pandemic

in Argentina



Popular Economy in Argentina

The popular economy in Argentina refers to workers who are in informal employment arrangements such as agricultural workers, home-based garment workers, street vendors and waste pickers among others. The popular economy employs 46 per cent of the labour force.¹ In Argentina, over 5 million people² are employed in the popular economy, but only 2.8 million are registered with the National Registry of Workers of the Popular Economy (ReNaTEP).³

MTE



The Movimiento de Trabajadores Excluidos (MTE) - Excluded Workers Movement - in Argentina

was formed in 2001 against the backdrop of a critical economic and social emergency that left 21% of the labour force unemployed. A striking manifestation of this crisis was the exponential growth of people collecting waste to trade recyclable materials – the so-called *cartoneros* and *cartoneras* (waste pickers).

In the early 2000s, waste pickers' working conditions were very poor. Many had to bring their children along because there was no safe place to leave them. They had no benefits, no health care, no adequate transport or appropriate tools of their own. Waste pickers were the first group of workers in MTE and became the founders and backbone of the organisation challenging the poor working conditions and police harassment faced by workers. Cooperatives were founded, attracting thousands of affiliates and, little by little, they secured rights, uniforms and decent working tools. Based on waste pickers' experiences, the MTE expanded as an organization to reach informal workers in other sectors and the *Unión de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular* (UTEP) - Popular Economy Workers' Trade Union -was born—a crucial steppingstone in supporting the popular economy in Argentina. UTEP brings together workers in the popular economy who, previously, did not have any institutional framework to voice their demands and bargain collectively for their rights.

The MTE expanded and now represents workers across various sectors including garment workers, waste pickers, community workers, rural workers, housing and infrastructure workers, street vendors and public space workers, urban social integration workers, and former convicts. MTE not only supports workers' struggles for their labour rights, but the organisation takes a more holistic approach which considers workers' family; the neighbourhoods where they live; transportation; access to health care and child care facilities and community centres offering cooked meals and safe spaces for local youth.

¹ [ILOSTAT](#) - reflects informal employment data from Argentina 2020 Permanent Household Survey (Urban)

² Ibid

³ Ministry of Social Development - Argentina. 2021. [Diagnóstico y perspectivas de la economía popular Reporte Agosto 2021](#). Buenos Aires: ReNaTEP

Children's Leisure and Learning Centres (CIRA)

The first MTE-UTEP *Centros Infantiles de Recreación y Aprendizaje (CIRA)* - Children's Leisure and Learning Centres - emerged during the early years of the organization, when workers decided a key priority was to create care facilities so that children did not stay home alone, particularly at night. With a sister organisation - the Che Pibe Foundation - an agreement was signed to provide child care in the community where waste pickers lived while they were working. This represented a first and big victory because—until then—there were no known child care centres opened in the evening. Most waste pickers work in the evenings when businesses are closed, and recyclables can be collected.

This had three immediate positive effects. First, children were no longer left at home unattended while their parents worked. Second, the centre contributed to curbing child labour as children no longer had to go out with their parents to collect recyclables. Prior to the centre, this was unavoidable as parents had no one with whom to leave their children and had to work to survive. The centre also addressed gender inequalities by making it possible for women to extend their paid working hours. Otherwise, women workers in the popular economy would stay home to provide care—at the expense of their own finances.

Today, MTE-UTEP has 12 CIRA distributed in four provinces of Argentina (Corrientes, Cordoba, Chubut and Buenos Aires). Most are in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area as this is where MTE has more affiliates and because it is almost impossible to obtain financing outside this geographic area. These facilities provide care to more than 870 families in the popular economy. Children benefiting from the centres are between the ages of 45 days old to 15 years old and their parents work as construction workers, garment workers, community workers, street vendors and waste pickers. In addition to the CIRA, the social community arm of MTE-UTEP also manages 750 soup kitchens throughout the country. Most of these soup kitchens also facilitate art workshops, offer school tutoring, and organize sports activities for children and adolescents.

The CIRA are more than 'nurseries' or 'kindergartens' as they offer care services to older children and go beyond meeting educational needs. MTE chose to call these children's learning and leisure centres to convey the holistic approach taken by offering a combination of care services, safe spaces and appropriate infrastructure, trained staff and a learning environment. The centres are designed to meet a specific demand in the popular economy - providing workers' children with care, leisure and learning activities during working hours adapted to workers' needs.

Workers' engagement and leadership



Women workers in the popular economy play a leading role in designing and developing the CIRA. The centres encourage women workers from the popular economy to team up with workers with technical and academic qualifications in early childhood development, social work and management. Within each centre, there is one staff member who ensures general coordination and management (if required there are coordinators per area or shift). There are two educators in each classroom, cleaning and kitchen staff, and a technical team consisting of a social worker, psychologist and educational psychologist. MTE-UTEP finds that the best results are produced when working together as women workers from the popular economy have extensive knowledge of the various sectors of work (i.e., garment work, waste picking,

street vending etc.) and are from children's neighbourhoods. Moreover, it is these women workers who spend the most time at the centres and ensure processes move forward. MTE-UTEP, therefore, invests in supporting them to organise and build up their skills through training and participation in decision-making processes.

Each CIRA is relatively autonomous in how it manages its day-to-day operations and sets its own team and planning meetings. Decisions in the design and management of the CIRA must always take on board the needs of parents' specific sector of work as this impacts opening hours, health protocols and defines children's needs. All the CIRA coordinators, of which there are 12, meet every 45 days to address common problems and propose possible solutions. Four comrades coordinate all the MTE's CIRA and facilitate these meetings. These four leaders are part of the general follow-up team dedicated to all 12 centres. Once a year, all educators of the centres located in Buenos Aires meet to take stock and plan. While this should be a national level meeting, MTE-UTEP does not have the funds to bring all CIRA staff and popular economy workers together every year.

Educational guidelines and philosophy



The CIRA share a common philosophy drawn from the struggle of popular economy workers which informs the educational guidelines in the centres. The starting point is a participatory and transformative approach to education drawn from Paulo Freire's work – *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* – that seeks liberation from intersecting forms of oppression and promotes self-governance. Below are some of the key educational topics addressed through the CIRA.

- *Popular and Latin American Education:* Inspired by Freire's approach, students and educators come together on an equal footing based on the notion that everyone has something to learn and something to teach. Activities based on students' culture and traditions are encouraged. Popular education is directly linked to lived experiences and material conditions and it aims to improve living conditions. Each and everyone's own knowledge, experiences and genuine voice—gained throughout life—are valued.
- *Comprehensive rights:* These are based on Argentina's Act 26061: Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents.
- *Tenderness in teaching:* This pedagogy brings to light the need for affection and aims to strengthen bonds through learning. Support during the teaching and learning process is essential and children are taught the importance of their human rights.
- *Gender perspective:* Our approach questions gender relations and reveals inequalities that result from assigned sex differences at birth. How we understand childhood becomes more complex through this stance. Gender stereotypes, such as blue for boys and delicate attitudes ascribed to girls are deconstructed. This expands opportunities during early childhood which is essential to children's healthy development by encouraging them to make their own choices and play freely. The CIRA tries to demonstrate how care responsibilities can be shared by ensuring equal participation from boys and girls. Families are invited to CIRA meetings and events, not just mothers, so fathers are encouraged to play a more active role in caregiving at home.

- *Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE)*: Drawing on Argentina's legal provisions guaranteeing children at all levels and ages receive comprehensive sexuality education in all academic institutions (Art. 1 of Act 26.150), the CIRA promote a comprehensive understanding of sexuality by considering how feelings of affection are expressed, promoting values related to love and friendship and thinking about gendered roles and norms. The CSE complements the gender perspective by identifying how constructed inequalities between women, men and trans people affect all aspects of life – economic, cultural, sexual, political and educational).
- *Ecology and environmentalism*: The CIRA promotes reflection on how the environment affects children's lives with the aim of teaching them to care for the environment around them. Drawing on the waste pickers movement, children learn about the tremendous ecological value of recycling and waste collection and are encouraged to engage with broader ecological movements and networks.
- *Food sovereignty*: The need to access a comprehensive, healthy, and affordable diet is increasingly clear. MTE-UTEP supports food sovereignty by connecting peri-urban smallholder farmers to street vendors in the popular economy so that healthy fresh produce is available in low income neighbourhoods. For example, the vegetables and fruit that reach the CIRA come from MTE farmers, except in provinces where MTE has not organised rural workers. MTE always encourages trade within the popular economy.
- *Decolonizing, ancestral, indigenous thinking*: The CIRA encourage teachings and learnings drawn from original peoples' knowledge, history and worldview, which were erased through colonization.
- *Interculturalism*: This refers to respecting all peoples' and nations' cultures and traditions, without placing one country above another.

Financing



MTE-UTEP receive regular state funding for only 6 of the 12 children's centres. Some fall within specific grant agreements with the government of the City of Buenos Aires that were secured through mobilizations by waste picker and garment worker cooperatives. The other centres receive funding through the UDI (Child Development Units) programmes from the Ministry of Development in the province of Buenos Aires. The state funding covers less than half of current expenses in the centres.

The early childhood programme of the Ministry of Children, Adolescents and Family is not adapted to workers in the popular economy. Limited funds are available for the CIRA due to the number of requirements that must be met in terms of working hours and infrastructure that are not realistic for centres based in low-income neighbourhoods catering to workers in the popular economy. MTE-UTEP are finding it difficult to enter the programme even when all these requirements are met as their application was submitted over a year ago and they have not yet received a response.

There is no comprehensive programme in Argentina promoting care spaces for children of working parents – particularly parents with irregular working hours. The Early Childhood Programme is aimed at children between 0-4 years old and separate after-school programmes exist. The uniqueness of the CIRA is the care offered to children from 45 days old to 15 years

old to ensure they always have a safe space while their parents work. The lack of a national care programme means MTE-UTEP must draw on several programmes and funding sources to cover costs – it is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Most of the educators' wages and food are secured by the MTE movement, through the *Salario Social Complementario* - Wage Social Benefit. MTE-UTEP successfully organised the *Salario Social Complementario* for organised popular economy workers which consists of their earnings and a wage supplement paid by the government.

Initial equipment and educational inputs and materials are sometimes provided through grants, social programmes, and donations – sometimes from workers from the cooperatives. When essential equipment must be replaced, cooperatives can at times cover these costs or raffles and solidarity actions are organized to raise the necessary funds. MTE-UTEP is working with the Urban Social Inclusion Secretariat in Argentina's Ministry of Social Development to undertake construction work and refurbishing in some centres.

Adapting to the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the strict COVID-19 lockdown in Argentina between March 2020 – November 2020, the CIRA were transformed into soup kitchens run by workers and with support from government subsidies. Unable to leave their homes to work, popular economy workers were left without an income to purchase essentials such as food. CIRA'S role, as well as other community spaces, was fundamental in providing meals to workers during this time by delivering food parcels to children's families every week and guaranteeing nutritious food for children in community spaces.

As lockdown restrictions eased, the centres continued to provide food aid as the educators began tutoring children while schools were still closed. Though virtual lessons were available, most children attending the centres faced several challenges in pursuing their studies:

- Connectivity coverage is either not available or very poor in low-income neighbourhoods
- Lack of appropriate devices and sufficient memory to connect as many only have access to one computer or mobile phone shared with the whole family
- Lack of knowledge of digital tools used in virtual lessons

It was a huge task for the centres' educators to support them in reconnecting with school. They used multiple strategies: going house to house assessing children's situations; engaging with different MTE-UTEP soup kitchens to create small study bubbles for 5–10-year-olds to help with homework; providing connectivity at community spaces; and engaging with schools and educators to send homework to MTE-UTEP educators who would print it out for families.

Once the CIRA centres reopened, new health protocols were applied. The centres could only open for a few hours and could not provide lunch or supper snacks, which was not conducive for workers who needed to urgently start earning an income. Preventive COVID-19 measures were therefore designed through a continued dialogue with families and union leaders from each sector branch, to make them more compatible with the needs of working families.

The MTE-UTEP community structures dedicated to children were supported to take up more digital tools to facilitate their work.

The economic hardship brought on by the COVID-19 restrictions manifested in many ways including through a higher incidence of domestic violence and child abuse. The lack of timely and appropriate response from public authorities and growing community concerns, led MTE-UTEP to develop a protocol on sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence and corresponding training programme for CIRA staff. The aim was to support staff to identify and seek appropriate recourse if cases of sexual abuse arose among children attending the centres. A team of experts including a lawyer, two psychologists and a social worker came together to support the design of the protocol and roll out the trainings in close collaboration with the educators from the centres.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the way in which worker-run and managed care spaces for children can adapt quickly to meet community needs. The CIRA drew on established systems of collaboration and support between educators, workers in the popular economy and professionals to shift course and design community-based interventions.

Designed with workers at the centre, the CIRA cannot be easily categorised as a nursery, kindergarten, or after-school community space. They encompass all these aspects and more. MTE-UTEP identify the following priorities to rebuild following the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Build more CIRA centres throughout the country, especially outside Buenos Aires. MTE-UTEP must create spaces for leisure and learning where children can flourish, ensuring the full realization of their rights.
- Mobilise for a national programme of care centres for popular economy workers' children and adolescents, with the appropriate monthly budget to improve educators and caregivers' working conditions.
- Support children and the restitution of their rights during this difficult time for popular economy workers as they face high rates of post-pandemic poverty.



Photo credit: MTE |



The Excluded Workers Movement (Movimiento de Trabajadores Excluidos, MTE) is a social organization where we come together as people who have been squeezed out of the formal labour market due to the neoliberal models. We have created our own work in popular economies to earn our livelihoods and we find in popular organization a way to dignify our work and our living conditions.

We founded cooperatives and productive units to organize work collectively around eight areas of activity: Waste Pickers, Garment Workers, Agricultural Workers, Construction Workers, Public Spaces, Freed People and their Families, Community and Society, and Winds of Freedom. We also have common areas such as Women and Diversities, Health, and Training.

Along with other organizations, we created the Popular Economy Workers Confederation (Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular, CTEP) and then went a step further towards formalizing our trade union as the Popular Economy Workers Trade Union (Unión de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular, UTEP) from where we fight for our rights, voice our demands and advocate for the changes needed for future generations to have Land, Housing, and Work.