

# THE PROBLEM OF UPROOTING IN ARGENTINA

## HARD DATA TO UNDERSTAND THE REALITY

By Manuel Martino

The forms of rurality have changed in recent decades. The advance of large-scale production, the disappearance of small and medium-sized farms, and the lack of processes that add value to primary production do not encourage life in the countryside. **People work in the countryside but do not live in the countryside.** The daily panorama of the "interior" of Argentina reflects abandoned ranches, large extensions without fences, closed rural schools, towns whose population is not growing or is disappearing, closed railway stations and old factories. People have migrated from the countryside to the village, from the village to the city and from the city to the big urban centres in search of better opportunities. Grandchildren or children of small farmers, stallholders, truck drivers, rural tradesmen, and young people, find the flip side in urbanity: overcrowding and marginalisation. The unequal distribution of the population in the territory is one of the main social and environmental problems we face.

The data are alarming. Argentina is the 7th largest country in the world in terms of surface area, but the 32nd largest in terms of population, making it **one of the least densely populated countries with one of the highest urbanisation rates (92%).**

Only 8% of people live in towns of less than 2,000 inhabitants, which yields stark figures such as **41% of Argentina's population living in one out of three urban conglomerates (Great Buenos Aires, Great Rosario, and Great Cordoba), most without basic services.**

THE RURAL EXODUS IS FROM THE FERTILE LANDS TO THE CONURBATIONS.

**According to the latest agricultural census, one farmer has disappeared every two hours since 2002.**

From 2002 to 2018, 80,000 agricultural holdings (AH) disappeared, which represents a 25.5% drop. But if we look at the period since 1988, 41.5% have disappeared. This has led to a concentration of production: 1% of the AHs occupy 36% of the sector's surface area, while 55% of these farms occupy only 2% of the land.

**Population policies, the installation of manufacturing centres in large urban centres and the concentration of land in the hands of**

**transnational companies produced one of the largest rural exoduses in Argentina. Planning that left very fertile land without a community.**

This time the exodus is not only from desert areas to urban areas, but also from rural territories with high agricultural yields, no environmental resource constraints, deep soils, temperate climate and water availability.

The first step in the process of land concentration is related to land tenure. First the fields are rented out to the big sowing *pools*<sup>1</sup> which in some cases pay more than the profitability of a crop can provide, then the owner is decapitalised, and finally the land is sold to these big landowners. This also creates a class in the sector that does not produce and is dependent on agricultural income.

In order to understand this process, one must not only look at who owns the land, but also at who uses the land. This is because the process of concentration in the Pampean region has started with leasing. **Nationally, 19% of privately owned land is leased to third parties.** But this indicator increases in the soya-growing region of the country, showing the advance of the sowing *pools* in the use of the most fertile land. The percentage of privately owned leased land rises to 33% in the province of Buenos Aires (8 out of 23.6 million hectares), 36% in the province of Santa Fe (3.5 out of 9.4 million hectares), and 40% in the province of Cordoba (4.7 out of 11.7 million hectares). At the same time, **soya cultivation accounts for 35% of the country's agricultural crops,** to the detriment of the regional economies, which have reduced their production, together with livestock farming, which has had the same number of heads of cattle for 50 years and is suffering a similar concentration.

**ROOTING IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS NATIONAL REPOPULATION.**

The process of soya production, the loss of livestock production, the loss of local food production, and the lack of value-added, throw overboard the theory of a countryside that generates the necessary labour to favour development. But this goes hand in hand with a **strong**

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'sowing *pool*' is used in Argentina to refer to a system of agricultural production, generally controlled by a financial company, in which a group of investors leases land, contracts the services of sowing, spraying and harvesting, as well as insurance, and is responsible for selling the product, distributing the profits among the investors. This type of system was installed in the country in the 1990s, hand in hand with neoliberal policies.

**cultural hegemony of uprootedness, consumption, and the city as synonymous of "progress"**. That is why the first step is to consolidate the roots in rural villages.

There is an established idea that rural villages, rurality itself, is synonymous on the one hand with a quiet life without the social problems of overcrowding in the big cities (which is in fact true), and on the other hand with technological backwardness, stagnation, isolation and lack of opportunities, which is also partly true. But the latter should not be seen as a stagnant reality, but rather as the ground floor of new basic necessities for life in the context of rurality.

When addressing the issue of roots, it is important to do so from the territory in question, starting with the concrete needs of the population in the form of a list of demands, and then moving on to structural problems. Not with an idyllic peasant vision, but **with a vision based on the concepts of value added at source, technology, alternative energies, food production and community organisation.**

#### AXES THAT STRENGTHEN THE PROCESSES OF RURAL ROOTING.

Although the more developed proposals, strategies and concrete experiences merit a new article, the following seven points are the basis for consolidating national rooting and repopulation processes.

1. Utilise and reclaim former railway lines, giving utility to the land (in many cases misappropriated by large landowners or private producers).
2. Recover the land corresponding to existing fiscal property, which according to data from the National Agricultural Census, corresponds to a total of 5,797,440 hectares throughout the country.
3. To promote training, production, commercialisation, added value at origin, communication, habitat and cultural production in the communities of rural villages and areas.
4. Develop formal and non-formal education spaces that address these axes.
5. Establish the perspective of food sovereignty in rural and urban communities.
6. Consolidate and multiply local marketing channels, favouring the consumption of ecological, healthy, natural and local products at a fair price.

7. Promote women's active participation in order to achieve equal opportunities in the rural sphere. One piece of information that provides a more in-depth development of the agricultural matrix is that only 20.49% of the AHs in the whole country are owned by women, while 77.80% of the land is owned by men.
8. Revaluing rural culture in dialogue with scientific and technological knowledge.
9. Promote the construction of sustainable and ecological housing.

Source of numerical data: National Agricultural Census, National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC), Republic of Argentina, 2018.

<https://www.indec.gob.ar/indec/web/Nivel4-Tema-3-8-87>

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