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On: 16 July 2012, At: 06:47

Publisher: Routledge

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UK



## Development in Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdip20>

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Version of record first published: 01 Jul 2010

To cite this article: Luis Cesar Bou (2000): The new urban poor: The Tobas indians, *Development in Practice*, 10:1, 71-76

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614520052510>

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## Viewpoint

### The new urban poor: the Tobas indians

Luis César Bou

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#### Background

The Tobas belong to a large group of indigenous people known as the *guaycurúes*. Originally they occupied an extensive part of northern Argentina in the Chaco (*aymara* for hunting ground) area, which includes the provinces of Chaco, Santa Fé, Santiago del Estero, Salta, and Formosa, reaching as far as neighbouring Paraguay. Chaco was once covered with immense forests which contained valuable plants and tree species such as the *quebracho*. The Tobas were a nomadic group who lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering. They later adopted some Andean cultural traditions such as ceramics, weaving, and basket-making (Canals Frau 1987).

Since 1880, the Argentinian government has been systematically occupying indigenous lands. In Chaco, the last major confrontation between the *guaycurúes* and the army was in 1919. The indigenous people were decimated both by the army's superior firepower, but also by alcohol. Their ancestral hunting grounds were turned into vast estates mainly for the timber trade. One London-based company alone, La Forestal, held over two million hectares in the Chaco region (Gori 1983). The extraction of tannin from the *quebracho*, the production of sleepers for the railways, and wood for fences, reduced the vast forest into an enor-

mous wasteland within a few decades. A *quebracho* tree takes 100 years to grow but no one was interested in so long a wait ...

With great difficulty the Tobas adapted to their new, harsher situation. Few worked in the timber industry because they regarded the *quebracho* as sacred, and much of their disagreement with the white people arose from their plunder of the forests. The Tobas continued fishing and were eventually able to sell their crafts, though there were few tourists to buy them. They also took on wage-labour or domestic jobs; many women became house-servants for the white colonialists. The emerging cotton industry provided the best opportunities for subsistence. Each year, a huge number of Tobas people took part in the cotton harvesting which provided a substantial cash income. The money was handled by the women and would cover all the most urgent needs until the next harvest.

The real problem occurred when the cotton harvest failed, often because of the weather. Chaco province is one of the poorest in the region. There are few welfare resources and it is difficult to distribute assistance to the indigenous communities even when these are settled. So, the drought, the excessive rain, and other factors which destroyed cotton production had irreversible effects on the lives of these people. Migration was the only option, following the route south to the richer and more developed regions of the *Pampa Húmeda*. This sporadic migration increased sharply in 1982 when there were exceptionally heavy floods in Chaco. The local politicians were not interested in helping the Tobas or providing opportunities for their development.

The only way to survive in Chaco was agriculture, which meant giving land to the indigenous people—something the landowners found a ridiculous idea. The problem of the Tobas could be resolved far more easily: pay everyone who wanted to migrate to the south to do so.

The already critical situation of the indigenous people suffered a final blow in the 1990s. First, the increase in mechanised farming pushed them off what land they still had. Second, the use of combine harvesters meant they were no longer needed as farm labourers. For many years it had not been profitable for the landowners to use these since they cost more to buy than it would cost to hire indigenous workers, plus they were not suited to the crop. Neo-liberal economic policies and Argentina's integration into Mercosur made it possible for low-cost machines and technology to be imported from Brazil, something that rapidly changed the face of agriculture in the Chaco region. By the mid-1990s, all the harvesting was mechanised.

This devastated the indigenous communities. It would take far too long to describe all the violence, crimes, and fraud which the landowners used to 'get rid of' the indians, whose lands they had taken to enrich themselves—all of which was of course ideologically justified by appealing to the most crude and shameful racism.

One can always oppose violence with some form of resistance (of which the indigenous people have centuries of experience) but it is very difficult to resist hunger. It is even more difficult for people who are starving to survive without any help. The indian communities were trapped in hunger and the only option was to migrate. If their history is ever written, 1990–1995 will be known as the 'Great Exodus'. On foot, by bus, by lorry, by freight train, and in cattle trucks hired for this very purpose by the governors of Chaco, the indians arrived in the big southern cities. All they brought with them was chronic tuberculosis, mal-

nourished children, scabies, dengue, and other such assets.

## Rosario

There are two main reasons why the Tobas chose Rosario as a place to settle. First, it is the closest big city to the Chaco region and it has a social structure which is open enough not completely to reject recent newcomers. Elsewhere, they are not allowed to settle or are simply sent back to Chaco. In Rosario, where everyone is a descendant of relatively recent immigrants, the Tobas were not welcomed but nor were they evicted. In addition, there was already a large Tobas community which had settled in the 1950s and 1960s, attracted by the industrial prosperity which the city enjoyed at that time. They lived in the San Francisquito district on the outskirts. Although they managed to integrate, they did not lose their ethnic identity or their ties with home. Kinship ties among indigenous communities are very strong since, in the absence of a state, kinship was the basis of the whole social and economic system. Such ties between the Tobas in Rosario and those from Chaco were still strong and in times of economic crisis became networks which provided basic welfare. Therefore, new arrivals from Chaco could count on some minimal support from the labourers who had settled 30 or 40 years previously.

From 1982, as a result of the deforestation, the heavy floods in Chaco resulted in large numbers of Tobas coming to Rosario not in search of work, but just wanting refuge and support which they were unable to get back home. Many later returned to Chaco while others stayed living on the city's wastelands, most of them in the impoverished Empalme Graneros district. In Rosario the Tobas could obtain some medical assistance in the public hospital, their children could get a daily meal in the school canteen, and the municipal government provided a food ration. It was not welfare—more a miserable handout—but more than they were used to in Chaco. Therefore these

'goods' encouraged people to settle permanently.

Rosario thus became one of the preferred destinations for new migrants, and for the Great Exodus in the 1990s, which resulted in large refugee camps around the town. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of arrivals as many were separated from their communities and survived as best they could, often denying their indian identity as if this were a stigma. But at least 10,000 Tobas are now living in and around the Rosario, a significant number in a city of a little more than one million inhabitants.

### Survival strategies in the new environment

In the 1980s and 1990s, Rosario was far from being the big commercial and industrial centre it had been 20 years previously. Argentina's neo-liberal and conservative policies had completely transformed the city. Official statistics put unemployment at 24 per cent. If we add to this a similar number of part-time and temporary workers, at least one in two people have difficulty in meeting their basic needs. This context offered few economic alternatives to the new migrants. Some resorted to begging. The fact that they had migrated because of the floods meant that they received a certain amount of sympathy and solidarity from the rest of the population. However, this only lasted as long as the floods; later arrivals had to find other alternatives. Very few women ended up begging regularly, and the ones who did were always for some reason outside the main community. The children begged occasionally, but most adults were too proud to ask for anything.

Another form of subsistence was selling handcrafts: ceramics, basketry, and some textiles. In Rosario, the Tobas had a much bigger market than in Chaco. But there were limitations to this: for centuries white rulers of Chaco had treated the indians' crafts with contempt, and the indigenous people themselves now undervalue them. The result is

that the variety and aesthetic quality of the work was often inferior, which in turn means there is not a large market for these products. In addition, the indians seldom sold directly. The best pieces usually fell into the hands of intermediaries—including, to their utter shame, social workers and ethnographers—who also took most of the profit.

In the end, rubbish ends up being the Tobas' main resource. Here, they find food leftovers which might be their main meal of the day. Every night there is the sad spectacle of entire families in the city centre eating the scraps of food they find there. The rubbish also provides clothes, shoes, and a regular income. The cardboard boxes, bottles, and tin cans that are collected so patiently and sold on for recycling provide an income which replaces the money which came from cotton harvesting. The problem, besides the exploitation of the sellers, is the tough competition. Poverty has turned rubbish into a precious commodity. As a result 'mafias' now fight fiercely over the collection and selling of the rubbish. The Tobas, who tend to be passive and stoical, usually lose out and have to make do with the less 'valuable' and useful rubbish.

### Social welfare

In Argentina, social assistance has always been tied to political favours. Rather than preventing social problems, the focus has been on alleviating them long after the event. There is very little political gain in preventing a problem, but charitable distribution can increase votes. Therefore the Tobas get very little official support to foster their autonomous development. Many do not vote because they are not documented or because they are legally resident in another province. By not voting, there is no political capital to be gained by doling out assistance to them.

Another issue that makes it difficult for the Tobas to obtain social welfare assistance has to do with religion. In practice, the

Catholic Church and its associated bodies are the main welfare agencies in Argentina. However, this limited assistance is part of an attempt to gain supporters and is really aimed at the Catholic faithful; most Tobas are not Catholic. Attempts to convert the *guaaycurúes* had failed miserably in colonial times, since the celebration of the mass was easily associated with cannibalism, something which was practised by the neighbouring *guaraníes* and represented a powerful taboo for the indians in Chaco. Now, in the twentieth century, the Pentecostal Churches came to evangelise among the Tobas with huge success. Their millennial message was very well received by the most marginalised (Bou 1997). In addition, the Pentecostal Church is more tolerant of traditional beliefs. But this separated the Tobas from Catholicism once and for all, and fostered their more passive and contemplative attitude towards life: injustice and misery are recognised and condemned, but the Tobas do not believe that the solution is within our reach but will only come about after the Apocalypse.

Recently some Catholics, led by a Franciscan monk, have begun to provide the Tobas with some basic assistance. This indicates a change of attitude in some parts of the Church. But, as an institution, religious differences make it difficult for the Church to offer welfare assistance to non-Catholics.

The other big problem is that social welfare and education among the indigenous communities has always been directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, aimed at their acculturation. In Argentina, most of the population descends from immigrants of various origins and the indigenous people are at best considered as just another foreign group. The state has always sought to integrate this diversity into a new national identity. Cultural diversity is accepted in recent immigrants but not in the first generation. The task of creating one national cultural identity was handled by various state bodies, above all the education system, and by the armed forces through the obliga-

tory national service. These institutions also had control over medical and food assistance for the most vulnerable. Fortunately, national service no longer exists, but the education system has maintained its original purpose. Thus, indigenous people cannot get an education in their own language in Argentina. This makes it very difficult for children who start their primary education at five or six. Usually, the language problems mean that they get behind and very often drop out. If they do manage to overcome the language difficulties, the current curriculum means that they have to learn that the indigenous people of Argentina were wild and uncivilised and that the generals who conquered their lands and massacred their ancestors are heroes whom they should revere. Recently, bilingual teachers have been introduced in schools with a large number of indigenous children. But the only reason is to facilitate the process of educating them in an alien culture. We all know that, in the final analysis, acculturation is synonymous with ethnocide.

## What can be done?

Anyone who has read this far will be asking the familiar question about the poorest communities in the Third World: how do they survive? Or, more to the point, how do they have the energy to keep going? It is even more astonishing that these people who have suffered every form of humiliation and insult do not regard life as something wretched. They show more optimism and will to live than do the rich and powerful. This is explained by their cultural strength. The daily practice and transmission of their own cultural values make for an active solidarity among the community and the extended family that has ensured their survival (Ziegler 1989). This solidarity has been their only permanent 'social security'. This is why the education system and the unquestioning absorption of the mass media are so pernicious. Their own cultural values have, in my opinion, not only ensured the survival

of the Tobas but also provided a firm base from which they could develop and overcome their current situation. Two parallel courses of action are called for:

- Education should reflect their own cultural values to prevent the dilution of their culture. In Argentina, this seems to be more difficult than it really is. All that is needed is for these values to carry on being passed on in the highly efficient way that has obtained to date. The best way to offer external support is to provide an education which takes a more critical view of Western society. But there is no better education than one that is rooted in one's own reality. Non-formal education workshops could be focused on specific development initiatives and could be carried out with very little infrastructure. However, such initiatives also need to be accompanied with urgent economic action.
- In economic terms, support for incipient community enterprises is needed:
  - (a) In Rosario there have been successful experiences with cooperatives for *cirujas* (those who survive by recycling rubbish) which place the Tobas in a better position to negotiate the price for the products they collect (anything up to twice as much), and to defend their 'territory'. Some social workers had tried to do this but without much success. We believe this failure is because of the mechanistic use of the Western model of a cooperative which centuries of ethnocentrism have made us think is universal. The indigenous people's cooperative should be designed according to the traditional economic networks which follow kinship lines. This is perfectly viable as long as the traditional structure remains intact.
  - (b) Extended families can become efficient production and recycling

units. For instance, since getting hold of more advanced technology (an old sewing machine) one family began to produce baseball caps which they sell on the street. They use fibres from bits of material found in the rubbish (which are carefully restored and dyed). Baseball caps in various football team colours are sold by men near the stadiums, and this has provided an income far above the average. This model could easily be built on and extended: each family could recycle a specific item (paper, metal, wood, plastic, etc.) with access to and training in appropriate technology. Rubbish collection and sorting also lends itself to cooperatives.

- (c) In the long term, traditional crafts could become important culturally and economically. Education could help by supporting and enhancing indigenous aesthetic values, as well as by incorporating new materials and technologies in the traditional methods of production. There is an urgent need to train young people in ceramics, weaving, and basket making, and these activities could well be introduced into the formal education system—something that would also pave the way for indigenous craftworkers to be integrated into the state schools. This could be reinforced by workshops geared towards passing on this knowledge from one generation to another.

Corruption among the intermediaries could also be overcome with a cooperative to take charge of all the marketing, something that would require only a small amount of capital. Getting rid of the middlemen would make it possible to take part in various craft fairs and also obtain a permanent outlet in Rosario. There may even be a significant foreign market for these products as the quality and appearance improve.

## How?

There are rich possibilities for the Tobas' development in their new urban environment. To take these forward the following are necessary.

### Resources

It is very difficult to get anyone to invest in autonomous development because this does not produce recruits or have immediate political returns. As far as the international organisations and NGOs are concerned, the corruption among their representatives in Argentina makes it very difficult to ensure even a minimal amount of the money actually reaches the grassroots communities. But this is not an insurmountable obstacle: the funds needed are minimal and could be obtained through donations. In some cases money is not needed at all: as we have seen, an old sewing machine that was found in the rubbish dump can be a starting point for a successful household enterprise. What was indispensable in this case was having someone with the appropriate knowledge who could explain what this piece of equipment was and how to use it. This leads us to the last question.

### Social work

In the initial phase of the Tobas' autonomous development, it is essential to have the support of various specialists (social workers, teachers, scientists, physicists, artists, journalists, etc.) There is not one institution in Argentina which can provide all these specialists or run projects of this kind in the long term. The only real option is to create an independent network which brings together intellectuals and others willing to get involved in practical social work.

There are people everywhere who are genuinely concerned about the deterioration of our society. Often the institutions to which they belong (education system, university, public health, ministries) do not fulfil their purpose or do so badly. In some cases, the so-called altruistic institutions are

mired in corruption or political manipulation. But the individuals who are at the core of these institutions are usually their fiercest critics. We would suggest bringing such people together around some concrete action to which they can bring their knowledge, whether from within their institutions or as individuals. Such a network could also be an important pressure group, which is essential as the neo-liberal policies of the day preach individualism and indifference in the face of social problems.

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## Social exclusion: what's in a name?

*Fenella Porter*

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## Introduction

Social exclusion, and particularly male social exclusion, has been the focus of