



## **VOICES OF POPULAR POWER IN ARGENTINA**

Friday, 12 October 2007  
2.00 p.m. - 4.00 p.m.

Equality Authority  
2 Clonmel Street  
Dublin 2

Facilitator:  
**Marina Sitrin**

### **Seminar Report**

This seminar was supported by:



# Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	2
Introduction	2
Purpose	3
Objectives	3
Overview of seminar theme	3
Presentation: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina	4
Facilitator information	8
Further resources	9
Appendix A: Participant list	10
Appendix B: Participant Expectations for Seminar	11
Appendix C: Participant feedback	12

## Acknowledgements

The Centre thanks Irish Aid for financially supporting this seminar as part of our *Capacity Building in Development Education* project.

## Introduction

This is a report on a development education seminar recently organised by the Centre for Global Education as part of its *Capacity Building in Development Education* project. The aim of the project is to enhance communication, improve practice and strengthen capacity in the development education (DE) sector through the delivery of three activities:

- The publication of a DE journal, *Policy and Practice*;
- Organisation of an annual development education conference;
- Delivery of two development education training seminars per annum.

The aim of the seminars is to focus on aspects of development education practice which will benefit local educators and organisations involved in DE. They aim to bring a new perspective and approach to DE and focus on topics and issues that relate to our day-to-day practice. Previous seminars have included DE practice in the Black and Minority Ethnic sector and new methodologies for monitoring and evaluating our work. The proceedings of previous seminars are available on request from the Centre ([jenna@centreforglobaleducation.com](mailto:jenna@centreforglobaleducation.com)) or from the Centre's web site ([www.centreforglobaleducation.com](http://www.centreforglobaleducation.com)).

This report documents the content of our second DE seminar in year three of the project which was titled *Voices of Popular Power in Argentina* and examined the emergence of new horizontally structured popular movements in Argentina in the context of social and economic upheaval in the country in 2001.

However, the wider context to this discussion concerned the exciting new approaches to development that have emerged throughout the Latin American continent, most notably in Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Chiapas, Mexico as well as Argentina. These new movements have been successful in reclaiming land, workplaces and people's control of their everyday lives, and have altered the way we think about development and its possibilities in the developing world.

The Centre organised the seminar to enable local development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to become more closely aware of popular movements in Latin America, particularly Argentina, and consider methods of integrating and utilising their experiences in a broader context of local development education initiatives.

The Centre recognises that many colleagues from the sector could not attend the seminar in Dublin and has compiled this report based on Marina Sitrin's presentation, excerpts from her book, *Horizontalism*, and the seminar discussions.

## Purpose of Seminar

This workshop aimed to enable local DE practitioners to become more aware of the new movements for social change that have emerged in Latin America generally - and Argentina specifically - over the last decade. It explored the radical shifts in organisation and mobilisation that have occurred recently in Argentina, and considered how these grassroots popular movements have impacted on the development process in Latin America and can inform our own practice at a local level.

## Objectives of Seminar

1. To present an overview of the social and economic upheaval that gripped Argentina in December 2001.
2. To discuss the new social movements that exploded in Argentina after 2001 that not only transformed the fabric of Argentine society but also highlighted the possibility of a genuinely democratic alternative to global capital.
3. To consider the implications of these alternative paths to development for Argentina and other countries in the region, particularly in respect to our development education practice.
4. To consider why and how local development NGOs should become more aware of and involved with these new movements.

## Overview of Seminar Theme

The 19th and 20th December 2001 marked the beginning a popular rebellion in Argentina. After International Monetary Fund policies led to economic meltdown and massive capital flight, millions of Argentians poured into the streets to protest against the freezing of their bank accounts, the devaluing of their currency, and the bankruptcy of their state. This rebellion - of workers and the unemployed, of the middle class and the recently declassed - erupted without leadership or hierarchy. Political parties and newly emerged elites had no role in the movement that toppled five consecutive national governments in just two weeks. People created hundreds of neighborhood assemblies involving tens of thousands of active participants. The dozens of occupied factories that existed at the start of the rebellion grew to hundreds, taken over and run directly by workers.

The social movements that exploded in Argentina in December 2001 not only transformed the fabric of Argentine society but also highlighted the possibility of a genuinely democratic alternative to global capital. Marina Sitrin's book *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina* is the story of those movements, as told by the men and women who are building them.

## Presentation: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina

The seminar followed the progression of the popular movement in Argentina following the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2001, when millions poured into the streets to protest the freezing of their bank accounts and the bankruptcy of the state. Since then, people across Argentina have united in neighborhood assemblies and workplaces to take power and legitimacy from the government and to reclaim their lives and prosperity. The new social relationship that has formed is now commonly known as *horizontalidad*; it rejects politics and political parties or programs, instead creating directly democratic spaces through horizontal networks and relationships.

Marina Sitrin illustrated the experiences of the Argentinians through excerpts from her book *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*. The book is an oral history transcribed from interviews with participants in autonomous social movements and collectives throughout Argentina between 2002 and 2005.

Pablo, Asamblea Colegiales (a neighborhood assembly):

“It was the night of the nineteenth. The middle class sat at home watching the news on television - seeing poor people crying, women crying in front of supermarkets, begging for or taking food - and the state of siege was declared. That’s when the sound of the *cacerola* (the banging of pots and pans) began. From one window and then another, from one house and then another, came the noise of the *cacerola*. Television newscasters reported that there were *cacerolas* in one neighborhood and another and another until people realized that their individual reactions were forming part of a collective reaction. The mass media functioned as a kind of mirror, multiplying the protest-involuntarily I suppose, but it functioned like that.

The first person began to bang a pot and saw the neighbor across the street banging one, and the neighbor downstairs too, and soon there were four, five, fifteen, twenty. People moved to their doorways and saw other people banging pots in theirs. They saw on television that this was happening in more and more neighborhoods, and soon they went to the main corner of their neighborhood - for example, in this neighborhood it’s this one [pointing outside to an intersection], this is a very important corner- and hundreds of people gathered banging pots until one point, when the people banging pots began to walk. Newscasters reported that groups of *cacerolas* were marching to the house of the Minister of the Economy, because Cavallo had resigned. Then others began walking to the Plaza de Mayo, downtown, and more people headed there, without really understanding why, but going anyway. You could see them arriving on television and calling, “Come, come, everyone come.” The Minister of the Economy had resigned. He’d resigned, but they began to say it wasn’t enough. “The rest of them must go. They all must go. We want them all to go. *Que se vayan todos*.” And it was born there - that was the first time those words were spoken and it’s important to know that, until that moment, they’d never been spoken before...

...They were saying that all the leaders must go, that by extension everyone in a position of power - all the politicians, all the representatives, all the judges - they all must go” (Sitrin, 2006:22-23).

Pablo, Asamblea Colegiales (a neighborhood assembly):

“No one was obeying some ideological command. People simply met on a street corner in their neighborhood, with other neighbors who had participated in the *cacerolazos*. For example, in my assembly, in the neighborhood of Colegiales - and I know many other cases - someone simply wrote on the sidewalk, in chalk, “Neighbors let’s meet here Thursday night.” Period. Who wrote this? No one knows. In the first meeting there were maybe fifteen people, and by the next week it was triple that. Why did it increase in this way? It wasn’t an ideological discussion, or an intellectual, academic, or political one. It’s like asking why people went out to *cacerolas*. It was the most spontaneous and elemental thing, to go out in the street and meet others on the corner. It isn’t that there was a decision to be horizontal - it’s not that there was a decision to use direct democracy as if someone had just thought it up. It wasn’t a decision. We simply came together with a powerful rejection of all we knew. A strong rejection of political parties and their structures, a strong rejection of all those who represented the state or who wanted to occupy positions in the state. We made a specific decision that we are going to do things for ourselves” (Sitrin, 2006:40-41).

Candido, Chilavert (a recuperated workplace):

“The decision to take the factory was a very difficult step for us to take. Most of us here in the print shop have been working together for forty years. We’ve always more or less shared in the union struggles, like the ones over wage issues, and generally we’ve won. We always ended up doing pretty well. So taking over the business, the factory, was really powerful. It was a huge decision that included all the *compañeros*. At first, we didn’t know what to do, but when we realized that they were going to come and take the machines, well, then we had to make a decision. The time for thinking had ended and we took over the workplace. That step was reflexive, instinctive. You know that if they take the machines from you, you’ll end up on the street. It’s a reflex - you don’t think about cooperatives, you don’t think about anything. Defending your source of work is a reflex.

In Chilavert, you could pick up your foot, and someone from a movement would come out from under it. They were everywhere. It was amazing, the support we got from everyone. People that didn’t even know us were there, on the front lines, being clubbed. Everyone fought to be on the front line. It’s really emotional [eyes tearing]. Today, it’s a little calmer. Now we talk about the day-to-day running of the print shop. But when you struggle for something...it’s your obligation to fight for what you want, and that moves you. People you don’t even know - who you’ve never seen before in your life - are fighting for you” [starts to cry] (Sitrin, 2006:69).

Emilio, Tierra del Sur (a neighborhood assembly, occupied building, and community center):

“We don’t need anyone to impose a new “Communist Manifesto” on us and throw us into that camp like a bunch of fools. After I abandoned that form of a communist idea, I said to myself, “What is it that we want? What is our project?” The good thing is we have no program. We are creating tools of freedom. First is the obvious: to meet out basic necessities. But the process of finding solutions to meet our basic needs leads us to develop tools that make us free. For me, that’s the

meaning of autonomy. If you start to think about what constitutes autonomy, and you then start to discuss the notions of *autogestión*, self-sufficiency, web-like articulations, noncommercial exchange of goods, horizontal organizing and direct democracy, you eventually end up asking yourself, “If we achieve all these things, will we then be autonomous?” Autonomous from what? No. If one day we achieve true autonomy, we won’t be autonomists or autonomous, but will, in fact, be free” (Sitrin, 2006:115).

Neka, MTD Solano (an unemployed workers’ movement):

“There are lots of diverse experiences now. Here in Solano, we don’t organize as a closed community, instead, we try to stay open to the possibility of finding different experiences, since people are struggling for different things in different places. For example, there are indigenous groups struggling everywhere, not just in Argentina but also in Chile, in Bolivia, and in Mexico with the Zapatistas. There are many of us, and we’re everywhere. The problem arises when we consider ourselves unique and exemplary communities. I believe that by breaking with these hierarchical models, we can encounter another potent reality. The fundamental thing is to be able to weave networks out of all of these experiences. We don’t believe that some experiences are more powerful than others, or that they can illuminate all other experiences. Just the opposite. We each come from different places, acting, struggling, and learning to bring ourselves out of our situations. We really don’t feel alone. What makes us feel different in some moments is repression, which is sometimes strong, and other times, more subtle. It doesn’t cease to exist, but is sometimes more subtle. We’re struggling alongside other *compañeros*, and I believe we’re powerful” (Sitrin, 2006:147).

Paula, HIJOS (a collective of the children of those disappeared during the dictatorship):

“There’s an interesting discussion on power taking place now, one that’s different from previous conversations and conceptualizations. This is happening, not only in HIJOS, but in the entire movement, particularly in different groups of the unemployed workers’ movements. Some of the questions we’re asking, for example, are: “Power for what? What kind of power?” These new concepts of power are being discussed everywhere, and it interests me a great deal. What power are we creating? Are we really inverting the pyramid? Might we end up creating a new dominant class? Perhaps we’ll come to the same conclusion, but first we must ask ourselves what power is, and what we want to do with it. From there we can create more possibilities within ourselves. For me, the greatest problem isn’t taking control of what currently exists; it’s creating elements of the future in the present, based on what we desire. The key is to keep asking ourselves, “Why? How? With whom?” If we are going to build a revolution, we can’t continue with established formula. It is fundamental that we continuously ask ourselves what it is we want in order to really create power” (Sitrin, 2006: 171).

Paula, feminist and GLTTB collectives

“The best part about the assemblies is that they let people do politics in a different, nonpartisan way. This new relationship has given way to very deep changes in people’s subjectivity.

The way people get together in their neighborhoods now and talk about things, the way they listen to each other and value every person's opinion equally, is profoundly important. In political parties, it's not like this. In political parties, some people's opinions are valuable and some aren't. I believe that we are constructing a new way of being political, which is really positive.

If the assemblies disappeared, it wouldn't be so terrible. I say this because there's something happening in people right now - a real change. And this is really important for building whatever kind of future - it doesn't matter what kind exactly. I think the most important thing, with respect to the neighborhood assemblies, is that they've created a profound change in people's subjectivity. People who believed they were never going to do anything again, all of a sudden did. This is especially important considering our society, which teaches us that nothing done collectively matters, and that the only important thing is the individual. Just the fact that people have started to realize they can do things collectively is really important. They feel like if they can gather ten, twenty, or thirty people together, they can do something - they can change something, even if it's small. This, just this, is really important. This change is an extremely deep subjective change, because people are questioning this individualism that has been so entrenched in us since the end of the last century. While the neighborhood assemblies aren't everything we'd like them to be, I believe much of this change is related to them" (Sitrin, 2006: 216).

## Facilitator

Marina Sitrin is a writer, teacher, dreamer and militant, who has participated in numerous anti-capitalist and visionary movements and groups. She has worked with international women's human rights struggles and campaigns as well as unions, legal defences, and legal collectives. Marina received her undergraduate degree from the New School for Social Research and is completing her PhD in Sociology, with a focus on contemporary social movements and globalization, at SUNY Stony Brook in New York. She has been teaching at the Gallatin School of NYU for the past six years on topics such as law and justice, popular power, social movements and contemporary Latin American movements in particular and has lived in various parts of Latin America over the past 15 years collaborating with different social movements and communities. She considers herself an activist intellectual, or militant investigator, and often works with oral histories and the direct voices of people in struggle. Marina is the author of *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina* and an upcoming book entitled *Insurgent Democracies: Latin America's New Powers*. She has also published chapters in *Globalize Liberation* and *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Anti-Capitalism*. She is currently teaching at the New College of California at San Francisco in a Masters program in Activism and Social Change.



**Further resources:**

Crabtree, J (2005) *Patterns of Protest - Politics and social movements in Bolivia*, London, Latin America Bureau.

Deutschmann, J (1987) *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution*, Atlanta, Pathfinder Press.

*Fourth World War, The* (2003) [Film]. Rowley, R. New York: Big Noise Films.

Gott, R (2000) *In the shadow of the liberator - Hugo Chavez and the transformation of Venezuela*, London, Verso.

Insurrección: organizing the end of an empire, website, accessed 17 October 2007: [www.insurreccion.org](http://www.insurreccion.org).

Sitrin, M (2006) *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*, AK Press, Edinburgh.\*

*Take, The* (2004) [Film]. Lewis, A & Klein, N. Toronto: Barna-Alper Productions.

Zibechi, R (2003) *Genealogía de la Revuelta. Argentina: la sociedad en movimiento*, Nordan-Comunidad, Montevideo.

**\*Copies of Marina Sitrin's book *Horizontalism* are available for purchase at the Centre for Global Education; email [jenna@centreforglobaleducation.com](mailto:jenna@centreforglobaleducation.com)**

## **Appendix A:**

### **Participants List**

Ámal Abordán Bernal	Latin America Solidarity Centre
Jenna Coriddi	Centre for Global Education
Fionuala Cregan	NCCRI
Nina Sachau	Comhlamh
Eoin Vaughan	EIL Cork

### **Apologies**

Raul Araujo	Border Arts Centre for Art and Conflict
Iseult Harrington	Border Arts Centre for Art and Conflict
Helena McNeill	Lourdes Youth and Community Services
Miren-Maialen Samper	Latin American Solidarity Centre
Jean Somers	Dublin Employment Pact

## Appendix B:

### Participant expectations

“I am interested in particular in the takeover of industry that occurred in Argentina, and what a potential connection to Europe could be. What are the lessons that can be learned, what can we take on board, what are we doing with this information and these experiences”?

“I am interested in the thoughts of Ireland and its methods of integrating new people and lessons that have emerged from Latin America and Argentina”.

“I want to know what the role of popular movements, people’s backgrounds, and personal experiences has been to make a change, to create this sense of revolution”.

“I have not found a significant amount of events or information regarding Latin America in Ireland, so I was excited to see this seminar being held. Also I find social movements very interesting”.

“I am interested in different forms of policy and campaigning”.

“I have had experiences in Latin America and am also interested in development education”.

“I lived in Argentina for a few years, and am interested in the conflict and the rebellion. I saw the system collapsing during the restructuring and privatisation of the financial system and the vast amounts of misery that resulted”.

“I want to know what pushes people to organise socially to govern themselves or to take over. Do we need a crisis to be motivated to act on our behalf”?

“I am aware of the visible success of some of these movements, but am curious to know how sustainable they will be in the long run”.

## Appendix C:

### Participant feedback

“It will be interesting, now that I am better aware of what has happened in Argentina, to see how the situation progresses. I am curious to see how the movements will keep their momentum, or whether they will revert to their previous lives once they regain what was lost initially. Also, whether or not the government regains any of its legitimacy”.

“It will help me to understand more of what is happening in Latin America, but I find it difficult or challenging to imitate or apply ideas from social movements in Latin America to Ireland”.

“I was surprised by the amount of movements in Latin America”.

“The seminar and information was very useful for my organisation because we have lots of volunteers going to Argentina”.

“I was not aware of much of this information before the seminar”.

“Today’s seminar made me think that NGOs need to evaluate their work...are we really making a change”?

“I felt that the presentation would have been improved with pictures; illustrations would have been very interesting”.

“It was good to hear the voices of the Argentinians”.

“I would have liked more participative methodologies”.

“I found the voices of the people to be the most useful aspect of the seminar”.