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Access to clean water in Argentina remains a work in progress, says report

Green Cross Argentina study identifies inequity of water access due to infrastructure shortcomings among several problems

By Marcela Valente

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In **Argentina**, the availability of water far outstrips demand, yet 11% of the population still lacks piped water, while a large proportion of the rest squanders it without a second thought.

So says the report of a research study carried out by the environmental organisation **Green Cross Argentina (GCA)**, entitled Agua: Panorama General en la Argentina (Water: a General Overview in Argentina).

Marisa Arienza, head of GCA and one of the study's four expert authors, told IPS there has been "substantial improvement" in the provision of **access to clean water**, but challenges remain.

"The main problem is inequity of water access. This has a terrible effect because when a family does not have access to drinking water, they drink polluted water from wells, with the result that they suffer from diseases and even disabilities," she said.

Nearly every month, Argentina's president, Cristina Fernández, inaugurates waterworks providing piped water to densely populated districts on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The same goes for residential sanitation services and sewage treatment plants in the country's provinces.

At the inauguration of a sewage treatment plant in Moreno, on the western outskirts of the capital, the president emphasized the facility "is not only new urban infrastructure, but also contributes to the environment and health". "When piped drinking water and sewage systems are put in, people get sick less; these are real, concrete facts," she said.

However, more infrastructure is needed to ensure everyone has access to these basic services.

The scenario in Argentina is similar to that of the rest of Latin America, where there are also deep inequities, although in some countries people waste less water, and in others the works to improve access to water still lag far behind.

According to the GCA study, in Latin America, where water is abundant, 38 million people – nearly 7% of the population – are without access to safe water. In some cases, they have to spend long hours every day fetching water.

This is also true in Argentina, where plentiful water supplies co-exist with unequal access, wasteful use and pollution with agricultural chemicals, sewage and industrial effluents, the study says.

In Argentina, water is used primarily in agriculture (71%); then come household consumption (13%), livestock (9%) and industry (7%).

The availability of water is not evenly spread throughout Argentina. Approximately 85% of the total surface water used is drawn from the Rio de la Plata basin, which extends from Bolivia to the Atlantic Ocean, covering parts of Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, and the whole of Paraguay.

But there are arid and semi-arid areas in the north-west, centre-west and south of Argentina, where water is scarce and people are more aware of the need to look after it and use it sparingly.

"The value of drinking water is usually not adequately appreciated in Argentina, although the cost of treating it requires large investments and foreign loans. A lot of water is wasted, especially in the cities," Arienza said.

The lack of stewardship of this resource in Argentina becomes evident when water extraction capacity and individual consumption are compared for Argentina and Brazil.

According to the study, Brazil can extract 6,950 cubic km a year, and on average each Brazilian consumes 216 cubic metres a year.

In Argentina, in contrast, withdrawal capacity is 994 cubic km of water a year, much lower than Brazil's, while consumption is 745 cubic metres a person annually, more than three times the level in Brazil.

In any event, not everyone in Argentina benefits from an abundant water supply. There are areas in the north of the country, and in the poorest and most populous districts on the periphery of Buenos Aires, where there is still no access to water.

According to Arienza, there has been "a great leap forward" in investment, which has raised the proportion of the population with access to piped water from 66% in 1991 to 89% today.

She also said the idea is now catching on that water and sanitation are two sides of the same coin. This is a relatively new concept because, up to 10 years ago, access to water was prioritised almost exclusively.

"It used to be thought that the main thing was access to water, but now water and sanitation are seen as a linked issue, because going ahead with water pipes alone causes groundwater to become polluted with effluents," she said.

According to the study, 34.3% of the population had access to sewer systems in 1991, a proportion that increased to 41.5% in 2003, 55% in 2009, and more than 65% today.

The deficit in sanitation provision was previously highlighted by Dan Adaszko, a research scholar at the Argentine Catholic University's (UCA) observatory on social debt, in his study on "*Las condiciones habitacionales y de acceso a bienes y servicios en la Argentina 2010*" (Housing Conditions and Access to Goods and Services in Argentina 2010; pdf). Adaszko told IPS that, despite improvement, the lack of housing and access to urban services "is an irrefutable indicator of backwardness".

He pointed out that the percentage of the population lacking access to water and sanitation represents a national average that covers up much higher levels among poor households, which also have to cope with additional deficits, like higher exposure to pollutants and open-air garbage dumps.