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an infant mortality rate of 16.8 per thousand, of which 6,898 deaths are considered avoidable. Three things are worth signalling: this is the first time since 1995 that there has been a percentage increase in this indicator in Argentina; it is the largest annual increase since 1986; and it is taking place in an international context in which rates for this indicator are falling.

The Government’s response

The Government’s main and almost exclusive response to the social and economic crisis is still the Unemployed Heads of Households Programme, initiated at the beginning of 2002. It established a payment of ARS 150 (about USD 40, a little under half the amount needed to satisfy the basic food requirements of a typical family) for all unemployed heads of household with children under 18. As time passed it became clear that it was not a serious strategy to combat poverty through a more equitable distribution of income, but rather a palliative measure designed to defuse the unprecedented levels of social conflict which were threatening the very survival of the institutional political system. In practice the programme fell far short of its pretensions to be granting people their due rights. The fact that the benefits were temporary, not universal, and subject to an application deadline meant that the programme continued the welfarist - rather than rights-based - logic underpinning the social policies implemented in the 1990s.

The Government did not make significant changes to the design of the programme, so the problems outlined here still exist. On the contrary, it decided to strengthen and give priority to social programmes lacking objective criteria for accepting or rejecting applications for benefits from people who are in an identical situation in terms of the vulnerability of their rights.

The struggle over public service charges

In the 1990s the logic of economic and social policies was determined by the relationship between the Government and the international financial institutions (IFIs), giving rise to the biggest social and institutional crisis in the country’s history. The unprecedented increases in the levels of poverty and extreme poverty, and the increasing impossibility for ever-larger sectors of the population to effectively exercise their economic, social and cultural rights, paralleled the implementation of economic and social policies that will allow a fair distribution of the wealth generated by the country. On this point it is vitally important that the relationship between Argentina and the multilateral credit organisations respect these criteria rather than continue to stand in the way of the country’s social development.

The Presidency has however pushed through a new law modifying the Economic Emergency Law that regulates the procedure for raising these charges. While that law had made any kind of increase subject to overall re-negotiation of each contract, thus guaranteeing that no measures could be adopted that afterwards might turn out to be erroneous, the new law allows the Presidency to authorise increases in public service charges before the process of contract re-negotiation has ended. That is to say, while the Government has not attempted to increase service charges, it could do so at any time because it now has the necessary legal tools. If this happens, large sectors of the population will be denied access to essential services, jeopardising still further the full exercise of their economic, social and cultural rights.

Conclusion

The changes made to the political and institutional system after the crisis of December 2001 allowed the focus of public debate to shift back to the definition of aspects of the reconstruction of democracy in the country.

The first measures implemented by the Government included changes to the composition of the Supreme Court and steps to remove impunity for violations of human rights committed under the military dictatorship that began in 1976. This has contributed to making larger sectors of the population again consider politics as an effective tool for improving people’s material conditions of life. However, the seriousness of the social crisis requires that the Government adopt urgent measures to guarantee the full exercise of the economic, social and cultural rights of the whole population, this being the only way to rebuild a real democracy. This involves attaining sustained economic growth, as well as changing the logic of the design and implementation of economic and social policies that will allow a fair distribution of the wealth generated by the country. On this point it is vitally important that the relationship between Argentina and the multilateral credit organisations respect these criteria rather than continue to stand in the way of the country’s social development.

The incipient economic recovery initiated in early 2003 poses a great challenge to the Government. It is essential that it should face up to discussing the distribution of wealth in the country, and avoid replicating the process followed in the 1990s - when considerable growth in economic activity was taking place simultaneously with a social crisis on a scale unprecedented in Argentina’s history as well as effectively guaranteeing the strengthening of democratic institutions.

15 INDEC, Rates of infant mortality by political-territorial division of mother’s residence, at www.indec.gov.ar
17 After the 2002 devaluation, Congress passed the Economic Emergency Law authorising the Government to re-negotiate its contracts with privatised companies so that they could adapt to the new economic scenario. This law laid down that tariff increases could only be made in the framework of a re-negotiation in which all contracts would be analysed and all interested parties (including consumers) would participate.
18 Article XII, section 4 of the IMF Charter.
19 IMF pressure to raise public service charges contrary to both Argentine legislation and the Fund’s own charter were denounced to the Independent Evaluation Office of the Fund by users’ and consumers’ organisations and by the CELS. For more information on this subject see www.cels.org.ar/Site_cels/noticias/bolten/FMI_tarifas.pdf.
20 Besides this, the legislative reform has restricted participation by congress in the revision of the texts of the new contracts (once these are re-negotiated) that are submitted to it.