



Children and adolescents' voices from the UNSAM Technical High School as a sign of hope and educational change

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Abstract: The right to education in Argentina has been a constitutional paramount since 1853 in all its territories. However, many children and adolescents find themselves forgotten by the national education system. The UNSAM Technical High School is an inspiring educational place that follows from the premise of not leaving any child and adolescent behind.

The [Technical High School](#) (*Escuela Secundaria Técnica*, EST) of the University of San Martín ([UNSAM](#)), which is located in the *Reconquista* area of the municipality of San Martín in the Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, was created in 2014 as a response to the [social movements](#) of Jose Leon Suarez, which were demanding a space for the 'forgotten' children and adolescents who could not receive proper

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attention within the national education system. Significantly, the school was established to guarantee access to education in the *Reconquista* area, involving young people who are left behind in the formal education system due to low performance and absenteeism which often result from the social context surrounding them.

In addition, the school seeks to pursue social transformation by reinforcing a vision of territory, environment, community, and professional work. The [documentary](#) 'A possible future' illustrates the history of the school and how it was created as an open institution for the community. In terms of the orientation, the school focus is on manufacturing and commercialising processes that are developed in the industry, companies, and enterprises of certain areas such as food, chemical, microbiological, technological and textile.

This secondary school project is part of a valuable [initiative](#) by the Ministry of Education which aims to create and support educational institutions located in places where social inequalities persist and to guarantee better educational conditions for children and adolescents.

Focusing on the social context in which the school is located, it is worth mentioning that the area of the Province of Buenos Aires concentrates on three landfills and treatment plants for the final disposal of urban waste. According to [CEAMSE](#) (the State Company responsible for the transportation, treatment and disposal of solid waste these 500 hectares receive 18,000 tons of waste per day – the largest amount in Latin America – and produce [methane emissions](#) that are visible from space. This area of the Province is populated by more than 150,000 persons with more than 40 percent of people living in poverty. A significant number of them is heavily involved in waste disposal operations, either formally or informally, working as 'recuperadores urbanos' (collectors of urban recyclable waste). The students of the aforementioned Technical High School belong to these families.

In view of the greatly positive relevance that this school has had from a human rights-based approach, in March 2023 an international team from the Global Campus of Human Rights ([GC](#)) visited its premises and met some of the teachers and students, in the context of a program of activities sponsored by the Swedish Right Livelihood ([RL](#)), with the aim of acting as a sounding board for the voices of children and adolescents while also advocating for children's rights worldwide.

It must be highlighted that, prior to the visit at the school, the GC worked with children from various countries to establish its first child-led [conference on mental health](#) that was held in Nepal in January 2022. For the preparation of the conference, consultations took place in nine countries; three of them were from the Latin America region and involved more than forty children from Ecuador, Chile and Brazil. As a result, two to three children and adolescents from each country were elected to represent their peers in the GC 'Children's Leadership Team'.

In this vein, the main objective of the visit and consultation at the Higher Technical School in 2023 was to raise the voice of the adolescents who study therein, while also defining their own agenda of priority topics, sharing their vision, and engaging

in intergenerational and multicultural dialogues with GC representatives. Before the consultation, the school management and the [CIEP-UNSAM](#) International Center for Political Studies coordinated the preparatory actions for the visit to ensure students' participation and facilitate all logistical aspects.

Importantly, during the consultation, the children and adolescents were asked to identify issues that affect them in their day-to-day life. Many adolescents were able to discuss with their peers and raise their concerns and challenges in regard to, inter alia, environmental contamination, violence, drug abuse, gender inequality, and lack of financial resources to finish school. The consultation was enriched by the participation of GC experts in human and children's rights from various countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nepal, Lebanon, Armenia, Italia, Austria, Argentina, Ecuador, and India. In line with the consultation, further meetings have been planned to allow these adolescents to elect two representatives who would take part in the GC Children's Leadership Group.

Relevant data on the situation of children and adolescents in Argentina

According to [UNICEF](#), in Argentina, as of June 2022, 51,5 percent children lived in monetary poverty, 13,2 percent experienced extreme poverty (with families perceiving an income below the costs of the basic food basket), and around one million of children skipped a meal every day. More than five million children are living in poverty, and the currency devaluation and inflation has affected this group particularly. Around one million children have no social protection coverage and only 19 percent of children aged 0 to 3 have access to childcare services. Only half of workers have access to maternity or paternity leave. Regarding secondary school, in 2021 only 58 percent of adolescents completed school. Moreover, in 2020 10 percent of births involved adolescents aged 10 to 19. In addition, the unintentional pregnancy rates were particularly high: 7 out of 10 in adolescents aged 15-19 years and 8 out of 10 in girls under 15 years. The causes of pregnancy in the latter group are the result of sexual abuse and rape that could lead to health risks.

The importance of enforcing the right to education effectively

The UNSAM secondary school is in line with the basic right to access to education in all the territories of Argentina. The right to education is guaranteed under Article 14 and Article 75 inc. 19 and 22 of the [national Constitution](#), Law 26.206 as well as the complementary human rights international treaties that are enshrined under the Constitution.

In addition to elevating the ratified international treaties to the constitutional rank, the Constitution of Argentina recognises human rights in its legal system. In particular, the country has adequate laws and regulations protecting human rights within its society. However, significant gaps exist in the implementation of the relevant legal frameworks across the country, which need to be urgently addressed.

Even though Argentina is one of the biggest economies of Latin America, the country is facing an ongoing financial crisis. As a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([ICESCR](#)), Argentina should utilise 'the maximum of its available resources' (article 2) to ensure the full realisation of the rights enshrined in this international instrument, including the right to education (article 13). Therefore, these rights should be satisfied before other state obligations unrelated to human rights, such as external debt. However, in the context of the last visit of the UN Independent Expert on foreign debt in 2022, it was found that Argentina's living standards have generally declined over the past five years, especially in the sector of education. The Argentinian state, as a rich human and natural resources country, should fulfil its human rights obligations through '[pluralism and inclusion](#)'.

Moreover, Argentina ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#)) in 1990 and is required to properly implement article 28 and article 29, which also partially echoes article 13 of the ICESCR. Particularly, Article 28 entails that every child has the right to education and states recognise it with a view to achieving its realisation 'progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity'. By virtue of article 2, Argentina is also obliged to respect, protect, and fulfil the right in question without discrimination of any kind. Following the conceptual '[4-A scheme](#)' as elaborated by the first UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, in order for the right to be fulfilled, education should be 'available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable'. In addition, as expressed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its [General Comment No. 1](#), the CRC insists that the right to education should be 'child centred, child friendly and empowering'. Significantly, child participation under article 12 can stimulate the development and the evolving capacities of children, as explained in the Committee's [General Comment No. 12](#). The right of the child to be heard in the context of education is fundamental to fulfil both rights respectively.

A good practice to follow

The UNSAM Technical High School can be seen as an expression of the country and UNSAM University's commitment to equality and justice, as well as to giving proper attention to the socio-educational demands emerging in the Reconquista area. The UNSAM school can be understood as a positive message of hope, especially for those children and adolescents who are looking for an educational institution that serves as a place of support and protection. This school also provides an interactive, cooperative, caring, and participative environment that addresses the children's views and prepares them for an active role in their community. Furthermore, the UNSAM school can represent an example of educational change which is jointly guided by the school's social educators together with the children and adolescents concerned.