



Evaluating the Impact of Housing Redevelopment: The Case of the Barrio Playón de Chacarita Informal Settlement in Buenos Aires

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Abstract: *This article assesses the impact of the Integral Redevelopment Project (PIRU) in the Playón de Chacarita neighbourhood, an informal settlement in Buenos Aires, based on a policy designed to address housing shortages for vulnerable groups. Using quantitative methods, the study compares data from 2010, 2016 (an ad hoc), and 2022 censuses to evaluate the programme's success in reducing overcrowding and enhancing housing conditions. Results indicate significant improvements, with overcrowding falling from 20% to 2%, a figure that matches wider urban benchmarks. However, the analysis reveals persistent challenges in curbing housing informality, as post-PIRU data show an unanticipated rise in the number of dwellings, suggesting that there are flaws in beneficiary targeting or that the expansion of the informal settlement has continued. The findings emphasise the need for consistent evaluation methodologies in housing policies and highlight the limitations of localised interventions without broader socioeconomic reforms.*

Keywords: Urban redevelopment; housing deficit; post-intervention evaluation.



Introduction

The New Urban Agenda approved during the Habitat III world conference held in Quito, Ecuador, highlights in several passages the need to advance solutions to the problem of habitat in general and housing for the most vulnerable social groups in particular (UN, 2016). In line with the agreements reached at this summit, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) defined by the United Nations within the framework of the 2030 Agenda focus on the same problem. Goal 11 ('Sustainable Cities and Communities') explicitly proposes '*to ensure access for all people to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and to improve slums [by promoting] inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory planning and management*' by the year 2030. Beyond the declamatory nature of these objectives – unattainable at this point – they do constitute a commitment to and blueprint for the design of public policies by local and national governments tasked with addressing these matters. While the problem of affordable housing is particularly significant and structurally complex in less developed countries, there is growing concern in the most developed countries as well (IADB, 2012).

The objective of this article is to contribute to the analysis, evaluation, and monitoring of housing policies aimed at the social and urban integration of informal settlements in developing countries, where large proportions of populations do not have access to formal housing markets. In particular, I look at the case of the Playón de Chacarita neighbourhood in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA), Argentina, where an Integration and Redevelopment Project (PIRU) was carried out between 2016 and 2022. This project sought to provide a solution to the housing problem, converting the former 'Fraga Villa' informal settlement into a neighbourhood integrated into the formal inner city. To do so, the project included the relocation of two-thirds of the families to new housing complexes built by the local government on adjacent land.

In light of a relative lack of studies and methodologies for the ex-post evaluation of the impact of housing policies and programmes on the housing deficit, the research question guiding this study has to do with the extent to which some of the explicit and implicit objectives of the PIRU were met. The methodology broadly consists of comparing the housing situation of the neighbourhood after the implementation of the PIRU based on data from the 2022 national census against two baselines: one is the ad hoc census carried out by the local government in the future Playón neighbourhood, and the other is the previous national census of 2010.

The housing problem

Studies on the housing situation in Latin America usually address the problem from a quantitative perspective in an effort to determine the housing deficit, which is understood as the difference between the existing housing stock – with a certain level of construction quality considered acceptable – and the number of households and people who demand access to housing with these characteristics (Palumbo 2022). Most studies in Latin America also similarly distinguish between two types of deficit, one qualitative and the other quantitative, although these concepts are not always operationalised in the same way (Arriagada and Rodríguez Vignoli 2003; Cuenin and Moya 2011; Szalachman 2003). The quantitative deficit mostly refers to the number of new dwellings that would have to be built to house all the people in a country or a territory in decent conditions at the rate of one household per dwelling. The quantitative deficit takes into account dwellings that are built with extremely precarious materials, are located on disaster risk zones, or have more than



one family sharing the same unit. On the other hand, the so-called qualitative deficit is related to the need to improve the quality of the existing housing stock and refers to dwellings that need to be improved to reach certain minimum standards of habitability and occupancy: i.e. dwellings made of materials of substandard quality, ones with precarious or no connections to public services, and overcrowded dwellings (too many persons per room). Ideally, the measurement of both types of deficits should also consider different ‘thresholds or levels of satisfaction’ of basic housing needs according to the sociocultural patterns of each context (Pelli 2007), but this is not always easy in practice.

In general, a housing policy can be defined as a state action explicitly aimed at addressing the housing problem, particularly for populations that do not have the capacity to access housing through the formal market. The degree of commodification may vary between housing policies, depending on the mode of state involvement. Policies may include the direct provision of new housing by the state, subsidies to demand through soft loans, or subsidies to the supply of housing or rentals by the formal real estate market (Barreto 2022). Although such policies should be targeted at the population with the lowest incomes, it often occurs that they ultimately address the demand of the middle middle-income groups that have some repayment capacity because of their greater economic solvency (Ozslak 2019).

Housing programmes, on the other hand, are defined here as specific actions on a smaller scale that may or may not be framed within a national housing policy, but that take the form of concrete interventions into specific situations in a territory (Fernández Wagner 1995). They tend to be much more specific in terms of the identification, location, and segmentation of the beneficiary population, the resources to be allocated, and the number and type of housing solutions needed. In addition, housing programmes have a more or less precise time frame for implementation, at the end of which certain goals are expected to be achieved.

Although it is difficult to make generalisations that apply across different national levels and periods, we can say that housing policies and housing programmes are rarely designed to meet the demand for housing in a comprehensive way in the medium or long term. They also typically do not define the criteria and methodologies for evaluating their impact, monitoring objectives over time, or meeting the population’s future demand for housing, considering, for example, current demographic and socioeconomic trends.

Case Study

Historically, so-called *villas de emergencia* (or ‘emergency settlements’) have been one of the predominant ways of providing access to low-income housing in Argentina’s cities. Formerly known as slums, these neighbourhoods often arise through the spontaneous occupation of interstitial spaces in the inner city. They first emerged in the 1940s, when the state was applying the import substitution and industrialisation policy, as vast contingents of internal migrants arrived in big cities in search of job opportunities and social progress. They found temporary residence in these settlements until they could enter the formal labour market and access social and economic benefits such as access to housing credit.

During the 1970s and 1980s, hand in hand with the deindustrialisation and economic liberalisation imposed by the civic-military dictatorship, the nature of the *emergency settlements* changed drastically. What was once thought of as a temporary housing solution became a place of permanent residence from which it was no longer easy to leave. Along with other types of informal housing settlements, like the ‘asentamientos’ in the outer periphery, *emergency settlements* soon became the main form of access to housing for the low-income population (Fernández Wagner 2018).



Unlike the first *emergency settlements*, the Fraga Villa was born in the post-deindustrialisation era in the 1990s. The privatisation of the former state-owned railway company and the closure of several railway lines left manoeuvring yards and other railroad facilities in disuse, but still in the hands of the national government.

The Playón neighbourhood is located in the wider Chacarita district, located at a strategic point in the city (Figure 1) with excellent access to the city centre of CABA by public transport – both subway and bus. The origin of the Fraga Villa dates to the year 2000, when a small group of unemployed former railway workers settled on land that had previously been used as a shunting yard for Urquiza Railways (Paiva 2017). According to a report by the City Ombudsman's Office (DPCBA 2006), by 2006 the settlement already had 120 households amounting to about 500 people distributed among 59 dwellings. As usually happens in such cases, most middle-class residents and community organisations adjacent to the Fraga Villa opposed the existence of this informal settlement from the beginning and openly called for its forced eradication, since its presence – they claimed – negatively affected not only the security but also the value of their properties.

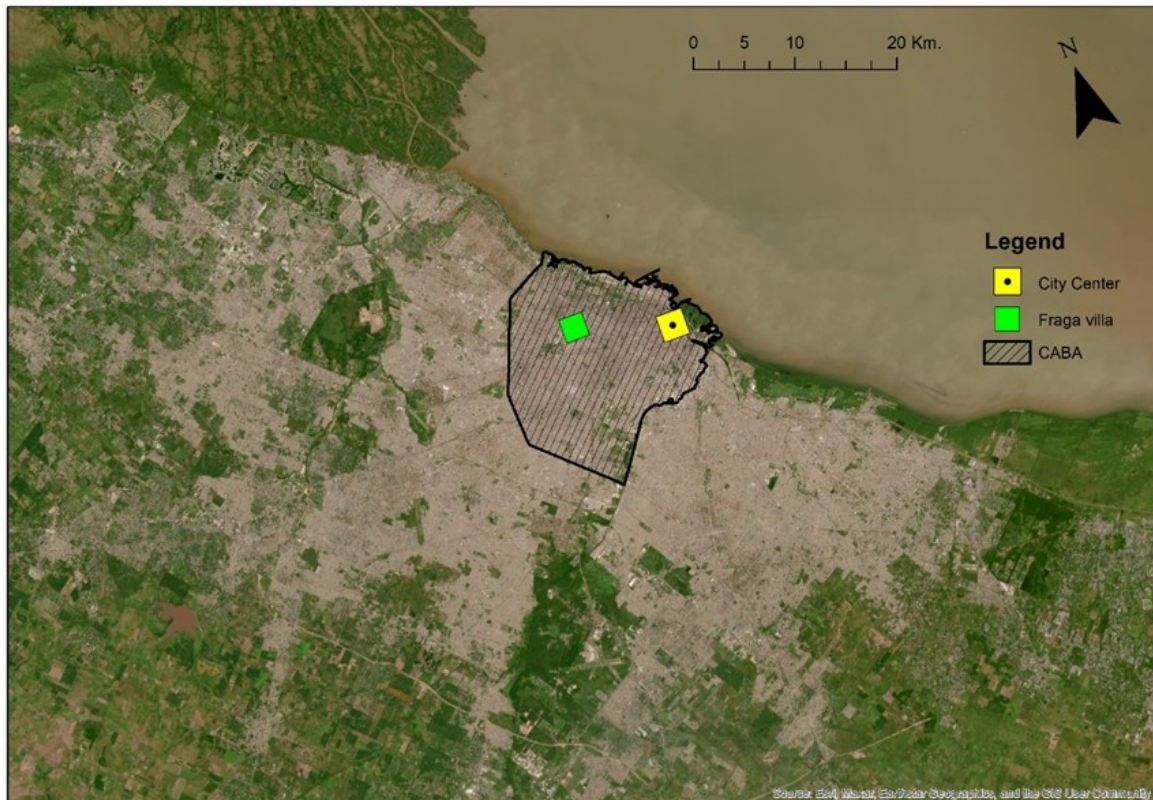
In 2015, an unprecedented opportunity presented itself that was favourable to the on-site redevelopment of this and other informal settlements in the city. For the first time in several decades, the same political party (the PRO, a centre-right coalition) was in power both nationally and locally. This scenario was promising for overcoming previous challenges that had stalled progress. Although the problem was ‘local’, all the land involved belonged to the national government.

In 2016, the City Housing Institute (IVC) ordered an ad hoc census to be carried out in the Fraga Villa to determine the universe of beneficiaries, and the number of housing solutions required to provide a definitive solution to the housing problem for its inhabitants. Then, in 2017, the local legislature passed Law 5799, creating the Playón de Chacarita Integral Redevelopment Project (PIRU). This semantic shift was no accident, but rather a deliberate strategy to break the territorial stigmatisation associated with the term ‘*villa*’ (Di Virgilio et al. 2010) and to legitimise the project among residents of the nearby formal city, who until then openly supported the settlement’s eradication. After all, the implicit objective was that if the PIRU was successful, there would be no more [emergency settlements], tenure insecurity would end, and property values in the surrounding areas would recover.

The PIRU explicitly sought to ensure that all registered families would obtain a housing solution with formal property rights, at the rate of one dwelling per family, including those registered as tenants. According to the official plan, 678 families were to be relocated to new dwellings that would be built on adjacent vacant land (monoblock-type complexes with up to 8 floors), while the remaining 364 families would stay in the original settlement in dwellings that would undergo improvements and would be connected to basic services (Figures 2, 3 and 4), thus solving both the qualitative and the quantitative types of deficit. The PIRU also included other components: opening and consolidating streets (as an extension of the surrounding formal urban fabric), providing infrastructure and commercial and community facilities, and improving the public space. It also planned to apply a gender-based perspective and promote neighbourhood citizen participation throughout the entire process. The properties were to be paid for through 20-year mortgage loans, in instalments that would not exceed 20% of family income.



Figure 1: The location of Fraga villa emergency settlement and CABA



Source: Author's elaboration.

The work began in 2017 with the opening of Triunvirato Avenue and the construction of new housing. In 2019, the bulk of the construction had been completed, and the first relocations began, starting with families in more critical situations and those whose homes needed to be demolished to proceed with the construction of interior streets. By 2021, 550 families (81%) had already been relocated and the first demolitions for the for the construction of streets also began. A year later, in 2022, construction was fully completed, and 652 families (96%) had been relocated.



Figure 2: Schematic of the PIRU Barrio Playón de Chacarita



Source: IVC.



Figure 3: The Fraga villa emergency settlement in 2016



Source: IVC.

Figure 4: New dwellings in the Barrio Playón de Chacarita



Source: IVC.



Methodology

A quantitative methodology was employed for the ex-post evaluation of the PIRU, in particular the extent to which it had managed to meet two distinct types of objectives. On the one hand, there was the *explicit* objective of redeveloping the informal settlement under the slogan of one house per family, thus eliminating the quantitative deficit of household overcrowding. On the other hand, there was the *implicit* objective of putting an end to informal housing, under the assumption that once the universe of beneficiary families is defined and housing solutions are provided, the growth of the settlement and the reproduction of informal housing would be ‘frozen’.

Population, household, and housing data from the 2022 census conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC) are compared with two baselines. Data from the previous 2010 national census serve as one baseline, and the other is formed by data collected as part of the ad hoc IVC census from 2016.

It should be noted that there are at least two comparability issues regarding the data sources. In relation to the data, the dwelling and household/family variables have different operational definitions. While INDEC defines and applies them objectively and consistently through censuses, the IVC defines them based on the self-perception of interviewees. Thus, to maximise the number of housing solutions, IVC data will likely underestimate the number of dwellings and overestimate the number of households. However, there is also a problem with the census comparability because the spatial aggregation of the INDEC data is not the same in both censuses. In 2022, the area of the former Fraga Villa was exactly delimited by two census tracts (in the same way as the IVC census), while two more tracts were applied to the area of the new housing complexes and part of the surrounding areas of the Fraga Villa. In 2010, on the other hand, those four census tracts were comprised within a single tract, making it impossible to distinguish the data on the Fraga Villa from the data on its surrounding areas. In order to address this problem, the data for 2010 and 2022 are compared by restoring the 2022 tract geometry to that of 2010 and adopting the assumption that the total housing deficit in both censuses corresponded to the sector of the former Fraga Villa in 2010 and to the whole of the Playón de Chacarita neighbourhood including the former Fraga Villa and the new housing complexes) in 2022.

Results

Table 1 shows how many people, households/families, and dwellings were counted by the 2010 and 2022 national censuses and the 2016 IVC ad hoc census, along with the respective housing deficit indicators. Depending on the case, data are presented either for the specific area of the former Fraga Villa or for the whole area, including the new housing complexes and part of the surrounding areas of the Playón neighbourhood.



Table 1: Evolution of the housing deficit in the Playón de Chacarita neighbourhood, 2010–2016–2022

Geographic area and indicator	Year	
	2010 (INDEC)	2022 (INDEC)
<i>Single census tract (the former Fraga Villa, the new housing complexes, and part of the surrounding areas)</i>		
Dwellings	585	1552
Households	727	1584
People	2324	2044
People per dwelling	3.97	1.32
Households by dwelling	1.24	1.02
Quantitative deficit (2 or more households per dwelling)	142	32
Quantitative deficit (2 or more households per dwelling) %	20%	2%
Qualitative deficit (3 or more persons per room)	73	17
Qualitative deficit (3 or more persons per room) %	10.0%	1.1%
<i>Census tract of the former Fraga Villa</i>		
	2016 (IVC)	2022 (INDEC)
Dwellings	513	645
Families/households	1042	660
People	2764	1762
People per dwelling	5.39	2.73
Households by dwelling	2.03	1.02
Qualitative deficit (3 or more persons per room)	529	15
Qualitative deficit (3 or more persons per room) %	51%	2%

Source: Author's elaboration based on INDEC and IVC data.

If we take 2010 census data as a baseline, there were 585 dwellings, 727 households, and 2324 people in the census tract of the Fraga Villa plus its surrounding areas, which yields an average of almost 4 people and 1.24 households per dwelling. The quantitative deficit (households in need of new dwelling) equalled 20% of households, and the qualitative deficit (overcrowding of people) amounted to 10% of them.

Twelve years later, data from the last 2022 census show a completely different picture, with a much-improved housing situation within the area and a reduction in all deficit indicators: an average of 1.32 people and 1.02 households per dwelling and the overcrowding of homes and people at a level of just 2% and 1.1%, respectively. Regarding the average number of people per dwelling, it should be noted that the figure is even lower than the citywide average of 1.97.

These figures suggest that by 2022 the PIRU had not only significantly improved the housing situation compared to 2010 but it had also managed to meet the explicit objective of eliminating household overcrowding. Keep in mind that these figures were obtained from consistent operational definitions and measurements of dwellings and households.

Now, let's see what the data from the 2022 census show compared to the data from the ad hoc census carried out by the IVC. In this case, the figures refer specifically to the area of the former Fraga Villa, excluding the new housing complexes and the surrounding areas. In



2016, the IVC counted 2764 inhabitants, 1042 ‘families’, and 513 dwellings (IVC, 2016), which yields an average of 5.39 people and 2.03 households per dwelling, with a quantitative deficit of 51%. The ex-post figures for 2022 once again confirm the positive impact of the PIRU on the area of the former Fraga Villa: 2.73 people and 1.02 households per dwelling.

What emerges as novel when looking at the 2022 data is that there were 1762 people, 660 households, and 645 dwellings within the former Fraga Villa. If we consider that only 364 ‘families’ were supposed to remain in 364 dwellings, this means that in 2022 there were almost twice as many dwellings (and families/households) as expected. Certainly, part of this increase may be illusory, explained by the simple fact that by using self-perceived definitions of a dwelling and a household/family the IVC census underestimated the former and overestimated the latter. However, part of this increase may also be real, which can be explained by a continuous arrival of new inhabitants and the construction of new informal housing (especially multi-story buildings) even after the completion of the PIRU. The following analysis tests this hypothesis.

If we apply the same coefficient of permanence of 35% of families (since the remaining 65% would be relocated) to the 3764 people registered in 2016 by the IVC, we find that there should have been 966 people remaining in this sector. Of course, this figure ignores a substantial demographic factor, which is natural growth (births minus deaths). But even considering the existence of this factor (although not its exact incidence), it does not seem realistic that natural growth is sufficient to explain why the population in this area doubled in just six years. On the other hand, it seems more realistic to consider the factor of net migration, which is the difference between entries and exits (not counting relocations). The data in Table 2 support this hypothesis, showing that about 15% of the household heads in the former Fraga Villa in 2022 had lived in ‘another place’ five years earlier in 2017 (i.e. they were not there when the IVC census was carried out). This percentage is slightly higher than that of CABA as a whole.

Table 2: Previous place of residence of household heads, 2022

	This place		Another place		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Former Fraga Villa	562	85%	98	14.8%	660	100%
New complexes and surroundings	807	87%	117	12.7%	924	100%
CABA	1,208,935	85.9%	197,800	14.1%	1,406,735	100%

Source: Author's elaboration based on INDEC data.

Discussion and conclusion

Employing different data sources, it was possible to reconstruct the evolution of the housing deficit in the former Villa Playón de Fraga – later renamed the Playón de Chacarita neighbourhood – and to reach some conclusions about the impact of the *in situ* redevelopment and relocation programme carried out by the local government.

As for the explicit objectives of building new housing, improving the pre-existing stock, and integrating the former Fraga Villa into the neighbourhood and its surroundings, it seems clear that they were successfully achieved. The housing deficit in terms of the overcrowding



of households and people was reduced to a minimum and became comparable to the level of overcrowding in surrounding areas and even placing it below the citywide average.

To a large extent, the ad hoc IVC census that defined the universe of beneficiaries (and the necessary housing solutions) based on a methodology using self-perceived definitions of ‘family’ and ‘dwelling’ may have resulted in a greater number of housing solutions than would have resulted if the situation of the Fraga Villa had been diagnosed by applying the INDEC’s operational and official definitions. Whether the PIRU ‘excessively’ benefited the population of the former villa and/or the real estate operators (who also exist and speculate even among the poorest people) is not a matter addressed in this article.

However, as for the PIRU’s implicit objective of preventing informal housing from resurfacing or continuing to reproduce, the success seems much more relative. According to the 2022 census, there are 281 more dwellings than there should be according to what was originally planned for the former Fraga Villa area. We were not able to determine whether this difference results from the fact that the IVC census allowed – intentionally or not – an underestimation of the real number of dwellings in 2016 or is the result of the continuation or resurgence of informal construction through the arrival of new families (i.e. that the *villa de emergencia* continues to grow). Both explanations are probably valid. In any case, there is still another problem: if the PIRU only took into account property titles for the 364 families who were to remain in the neighbourhood, then in 2022 there would be 281 households whose inhabitants would not have a deed to their property. Of course, there is always the possibility that the IVC will implement an ad hoc property regularisation programme in the future.

At first glance, this seems like a simple practical problem, but the analysis here suggests that it is much more complex than that. First of all, the ad hoc censuses used to define the beneficiaries eligible for housing programmes should employ concepts, definitions, and methodologies consistent with those used by official statistics agencies, in this case the INDEC. Otherwise, it is difficult to evaluate and monitor their ex-post effectiveness with reference to a baseline because the ad hoc censuses are not replicated once the project is completed. Secondly, however, without casting doubt on the need for redevelopment programmes such as the PIRU, it cannot be overlooked that since this type of programmes are aimed to provide solutions through specific and focused interventions to a universe of beneficiaries who are defined by a snapshot taken of a given place at a given moment in time, they inevitably collide with a much larger, structural problem: the formal housing market does not ensure access to housing for the economically disadvantaged population. There is no solution to the housing problem without fundamental social and economic changes, which would enable a true housing policy with capacity to guarantee, among other things, the right to decent housing for the whole population.



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