

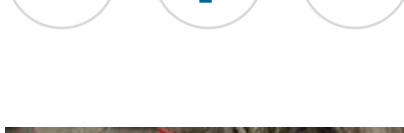


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Argentina's scientists struggle amid slipping peso and rising inflation

Researchers warn that the country's science infrastructure is at risk of collapse if austerity measures continue.

Michele Catanzaro



A professor teaches class in Buenos Aires during a protest for better wages and funding. Credit: Eitan Abramovich/AFP/Getty

Juan Pablo Paz's plans for a new cold-atom laboratory have slowly eroded over the past two years. Paz, a physicist at the University of Buenos Aires, won a US\$1.1-million grant in February 2017 to set up the facility. But the money, awarded by the Inter-American Development Bank, was transferred to Paz through an Argentinian government agency that paid him in pesos.

As Argentina's currency weakened, so did Paz's buying power. When the physicist won his grant, \$1 cost 16 pesos. "Now it costs 38," he says. "By the time I got the money, I was able to buy just a part of the equipment."

Paz, who is looking for money to cover the last 40% of his lab's start-up costs, is one of many researchers who say that Argentina's worsening financial woes are hurting their research. The slipping peso makes it harder to purchase equipment from abroad, while rapidly increasing inflation has crushed scientists' budgets and salaries at home.

Researchers have also struggled under austerity measures adopted by the government in 2014 and intensified in June by a financing agreement that Argentina signed with the International Monetary Fund.

"The science and technology system of Argentina is collapsing," a group of high-profile scientists, including Paz, wrote in an open letter published late last month. More than 1,000 foreign scholars or Argentinian scientists working abroad – including several Nobel laureates – have endorsed the message.

Pinched purse

Argentina's total science spending increased tenfold between 2003 and 2015, reaching the equivalent of \$3.96 billion. Along the way, in 2007, the country established a dedicated science ministry. Still, Argentina spends much less of its gross domestic product (GDP) on research than does South America's leader, Brazil. The slice of GDP that Argentina devotes to science peaked at 0.63% in 2012, when Brazil spent 1.13%.

And recent years have seen a reversal in fortune for research overall. The government's science outlay fell by almost 40% between 2015 and 2018 when measured in US dollars, and the share of Argentina's budget devoted to research has fallen from 1.69% in 2008 to 1.23% in 2017. The picture is set to grow grimmer next year: the budget proposed by Argentina's president, Mauricio Macri, includes further cuts to science.

Macri also disheartened researchers last month when he transformed Argentina's ministry of science into a less-prestigious secretariat to cut costs. The move sparked protests by several scientific societies. "We did not see an energetic reaction by [then-science minister Luis] Baraño, as if that decision was not important," says Gustavo Alberto Monti, the president of the Argentinian Physical Association, which called for Baraño's resignation.

Grants grow scarce

The government's belt-tightening has drastically reduced the average value of awards made by ANPCyT, Argentina's main granting agency for science and technology. The country has also suspended its contributions to several international research projects.

The situation is also dire at CONICET, Argentina's national research council. The council, whose budget stood at \$681 million last year, is now spending 90% of its money on salaries and scholarships, leaving little for research, says Fernando Stefani, a physicist at the University of Buenos Aires. "There are research centres that cannot pay for illumination or gas. Their lab rats and cell lines are dying," he says. "It's a dramatic situation."

Scientists also complain of delays in payments from CONICET and ANPCyT. "We are in October, and we have been transferred less than 40% of our annual budget", says Andrea Gamarnik, a virologist at the Leloir Institute, a life-sciences research centre in Buenos Aires. She wants the government to spend more on science, to help solve problems facing Argentina. "I study dengue, a virus that affects the region," she says. "If we don't do that, who will?"

Future fears

Officials with the government say they hope to ease the pain, but keeping up with the peso's slide has been difficult. "We were not able to change the budget immediately," says Jorge Aguado, secretary of planning and policy at Argentina's science secretariat. "We understand the concerns, but we are committed to extend the budget, in order to maintain projects and purchases."

Mario Albornoz, coordinator of the Iberoamerican Network of Science and Technology Indicators (RICYT), says the situation in Argentina is part of a broader trend. "Almost all Latin American countries, including Brazil and Mexico, are cutting their science budgets, for macroeconomic reasons," says Albornoz, whose group tracks statistics related to research in the Americas. "This government has made many mistakes, but it's not true that it wants to destroy science. The country is in a tremendous crisis and has high levels of poverty, so social expenses are prioritized."

But that does not satisfy many researchers, who see science as vital to Argentina's future. "What will we live off in thirty years?" says Stefani. "Past-century technology and agricultural activities will not be enough."

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