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An outdoor chemistry class held on 28 August in Buenos Aires as part of a rally against the government's alleged "destruction of Argentinian science." EXACTAS UBA/FLICKR (CC BY-NC-ND)

## Argentina's economic crisis could trigger scientific 'collapse,' researchers warn

By Valeria Román | Sep. 27, 2018, 5:15 PM

**BUENOS AIRES**—Argentine scientists are deeply worried about the effects of the country's economic crisis on science. The government has proposed cutting research budgets in 2019 as part of an austerity push and it is behind in its financial commitments to institutes for this year, which means many labs lack the funds to pay for day-to-day operations. "The science and technology system of Argentina is collapsing," warns molecular biologist Alberto Kornblihtt, who heads the Institute of Physiology, Molecular Biology, and Neurosciences of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (Conicet) here.

The government has also decided to eliminate eight ministries, including the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Productive Innovation, created in 2007, which has now become part of the education ministry; former Science Minister Lino Barañao, a chemist, has become a government secretary. The demotion is "a major setback that can not be ignored by the community of scientists, engineers, and technologists," the National Academy of Exact, Physical, and Natural Sciences here wrote in a statement issued this week. "We are deeply convinced the Ministry's elimination will not be a great contribution to solving" the economic crisis, the nine board members of Conicet wrote in a letter to Argentine President Mauricio Macri.

Macri's center-right government on 19 September presented a balanced budget for 2019 that it hopes will please the International Monetary Fund enough to help secure a loan package to address the economic crisis. As part of the measures, Barañao's budget will go down from 3.7 billion pesos (roughly \$96 million) in 2018 to 3.4 billion pesos (about \$88 million). With inflation factored in, however, that's effectively a 35% cut, says Fernando Peirano, a professor at the National University of Quilmes here and a consultant for the Argentine Industrial Union. The National Commission of Space Activities will suffer a 20% funding cut, to 1.9 billion pesos. Conicet, which pays most researchers' salaries, will see its budget go up by 27%, from 13.3 billion pesos to 16.4 billion pesos, but even that isn't enough to keep up with the expected inflation rate for this year.

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The cuts come just as Argentina's scientific community was debating a national science strategy for 2030, says physicist Susana Hernández, president of the Argentine Association for Advancement of Science, who coordinates a coalition of 23 scientific associations. "The current belt-tightening policy is discouraging that initiative," she says. "By lowering the budget, the government doesn't make science a priority for the future."

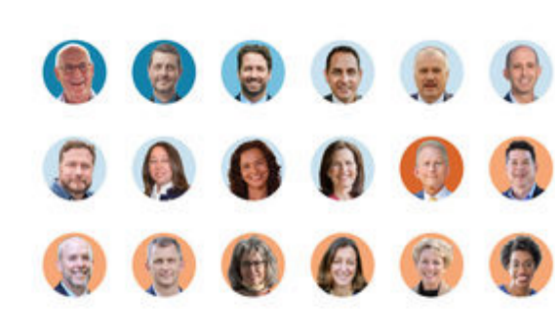
Ana Franchi, director of the Center of Pharmacology and Botany Studies here, says her institute has so far this year received only 20% of the annual budget for things such as supplies, services, cleaning, and safety. If the government's budget is adopted, it will mean the "collapse next year" of her institute, she says. Franchi and other institute directors have had meetings with Barañao and with the board of Conicet, but they haven't led to a solution.

Meanwhile, the fall of the peso, which has lost more than 50% of its value so far this year, has dramatic consequences for researchers who rely on supplies and equipment from abroad. Immunologist Gabriel Rabinovich, vice director at Conicet's Institute of Biology and Experimental Medicine Experimental here, says it has made a machine he needs to rapidly detect proteins in his studies on cancer and immunology research prohibitively expensive. With such hikes, "It is impossible to compete with researchers from developed countries," Rabinovich says.

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