

# Lives on Hold

Natalia Herbst

[Originally published in Spanish in Perfil, May 9, 2020](#)

We are currently part of a natural experiment. Without much premeditation, and with none or low resistance, societies with very different norms and customs agreed to put a halt to their lives. For many, days lack purpose; for others, time is spent thinking where they want to go, all while navigating unpredictability. We cannot see a time horizon, we are unable to understand the world we are living in due to a lack of technical knowledge needed to assess what is happening in all its complexity; we are going through this experience without economic and financial planning capacities, and we see our independence reduced. We are, more than ever before in the recent past, looking to the State – across its different levels – for answers to our questions of sustainability and capacity to have what we need, whether it is food, education, saving a business, or creating jobs. It is difficult to understand what we want, what will be possible, and what is our life project.

This global natural experiment also expresses itself regarding leadership. It highlights the importance of good leaders who, regardless of their ideology, understand the value of science and evidence, and are open to listening and reaching consensus in their decision making. This has been the difference between saving lives and not. How the pandemic has evolved in different countries also supports a [theory](#) about what a world would look like with more [women leaders](#). The cost of having poor leaderships was always human, but while before the consequences were unfulfilled lives, today these become lost ones.

In Argentina, the National Youth Institute (where I worked) generated evidence in 2018 from a commissioned [National Youth Study](#) that offered us a glimpse of how the country's youth experience their lives. And the evidence is alarming: 46% don't know how to look for a job, 42% don't know how to perform in a job interview, and 67% think that schools are failing to equip them for the modern world. The study also revealed how socioeconomic disparities affect individual experiences: youth that grow up in households with better socioeconomic performance can delay maternity and paternity, travel across urban spaces, consume cultural goods, and perceive employment as personal fulfilment; however, those who are born into lower socioeconomic status experience the lack of information and tools for successful family planning, they experience a smaller range of cultural goods, and they see work as a mandate tied to subsistence. Their experiences include a higher frequency of purposeless days, hours spent thinking what to do, and difficulties in understanding what they want, what is possible, and what is their life project.

The 2018 National Youth Study provided us evidence. Covid-19 provided us, in a very cruel way, a small window to understand part of the experience of millions of Argentinians that live their days with a level of uncertainty that was previously impossible to fathom by so many. And these dynamics relating to inequality and exclusion are not in any way particular to my country or region. The current crisis exemplifies in a very extreme way that societies can only thrive as a whole when everyone in them does. Can this be the breaking point that alters the boundaries we see that define our wellbeing? Will we make use of this evidence when defining our preferences? This could become the time when, as we continue to look to the State for answers, our citizens' claims become united through a new understanding that our individual wellbeing is useless without collective expression. As we experience unpredictability and dependence from the State at a level that makes many uncomfortable, could this lead us to prioritize a development vision more inclusive of livelihoods that until now we could not begin to understand? Our shared

COVID-19 trauma may be the difference that leads to more of us experiencing existences that help us understand how greater predictability empowers us to define our life projects.