

Building International Investment Law

The First 50 Years of ICSID

Edited by

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ICSID

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR
SETTLEMENT OF INVESTMENT DISPUTES



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CHAPTER 44

And Others: Mass Claims in ICSID Arbitration

Abaclat and Others v. Argentina, ICSID Case No. ARB/07/5¹

Veijo Heiskanen

I. INTRODUCTION

Mass claims are a relatively new phenomenon in ICSID arbitration. However, they have already posed a challenge to ICSID arbitration, and indeed the large number of claims arising out of the 2001 Argentine financial crisis have raised issues about the legitimacy of the whole ICSID system.² Are mass claims capable of being handled within the ICSID system, based on *ad hoc* procedures and procedural decisions, or are amendments required to the ICSID Convention and/or the ICSID Arbitration Rules to accommodate mass claims processing?

Before considering the challenge posed by mass claims, and what the possible approaches might be, one must take a closer look at the concept. What are international mass claims in the first place? There is no agreed legal definition, apart from the technical definition flowing from the laws of large numbers. Indeed, statisticians suggest that the laws of big numbers become relevant when the number of claims amounts to somewhere between 300 to 2,000, the precise threshold depending on the homogeneity of the claims population, the margin of error and the level of confidence

1. *Abaclat and Others v. The Argentine Republic*, ICSID Case No. ARB/07/5, Decision on Jurisdiction and Admissibility (4 August 2011) (Tercier, van den Berg, Abi-Saab) [hereinafter *Abaclat v. Argentina*].

2. The term “legitimacy” is used here in a technical and non-political sense, referring to “the consent of the users” rather than “the consent of the governed.” There is considerable literature on international mass claims outside the context of investment arbitration.

required.³ Stated differently, as a technical term mass claims refers to a level of numerosity in which statistical methods become available in claims processing.⁴ In a less technical sense, mass claims may be understood as referring to any situation in which there is a multiplicity of claims against the same party, arising out of the same event or circumstance, whether an armed conflict, a civil disorder, a financial or economic crisis, or any other extraordinary event. In this less technical sense, for instance, all of the approximately 50 ICSID arbitrations brought against Argentina in the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis are “mass claims” in that they all share a common factual background.

Mass claims may arise in the field of foreign investment protection in three different contexts: (1) State-to-State arbitration; (2) consolidated investor-State arbitration; and (3) individual mass claims. The first of these contexts is not relevant in ICSID arbitration. While State-to-State arbitration is often available under investment treaties, State-to-State disputes cannot be submitted to ICSID arbitration, which is designed to deal exclusively with investor-State disputes. However, while State-to-State arbitration may seem an anachronistic solution as it implies a return to the bygone era of diplomatic protection, it may often be the most effective way to deal with international mass claims, as the relevant provisions in investment treaties tend to leave more room for adjustment of the arbitral process to cater for the specific features and requirements of mass claims processing.⁵

Consolidation of all or most arbitrations arising out of the triggering event into one proceeding is another way of dealing with mass claims. For instance, all claims arising out of the 2001 Argentine financial crisis, or out of the civil unrest that has recently affected some of the Middle Eastern and North African countries, could have been, theoretically, consolidated and submitted to one and the same arbitral tribunal. This could have offered opportunities for enhanced procedural efficiencies, while also reducing the risk of inconsistent decisions – an issue that is more acute in a mass claims situation and therefore more likely to affect the legitimacy of the ICSID system than in the context of traditional *ad hoc* arbitration of individual disputes.⁶ However, this is not an option under the ICSID system as compulsory consolidation is not available, and voluntary consolidation after the claims have already arisen is unlikely, for well-known reasons of moral hazard.⁷

3. See, e.g., William G. Cochran, *Sampling Techniques 3rd ed.* (John Wiley & Sons 1977) and Arlene Fink, *The Survey Handbook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications 1995), as well as the author's personal experience in working with experts in various international mass claims programs.

4. For further discussion see, e.g., Veijo Heiskanen & Sandrine Giroud, “Aristotle's Statistics: Consistency and Accuracy in International Mass Claims” in *Contemporary Issues in International Arbitration and Mediation: The Fordham Papers 2013* 109-22 (Arthur W. Rovine (ed.), Brill Nijhoff, 2014).

5. For an example of the use of State-to-State arbitration along these lines (the claim initially covering sixteen claims, but subsequently reduced to nine) see, e.g., *The Republic of Italy v. The Republic of Cuba, ad hoc* arbitration, Final Award (15 January 2008) (Derains, Tanzi, Cobo-Roura).

6. Heiskanen & Giroud, *supra* n.4.

7. *Ibid.* at 117. Simply put, each claimant is likely to calculate that it will be better off, and more likely to prevail, if a specific tribunal dedicated to deal with the particular claim is established.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the ICSID system – and ICSID tribunals – have in practice been faced with a *fait accompli*: they have been confronted with individual mass claims, raised by claimants originating from one and the same country against one particular respondent State, that need to be registered, processed and resolved even if there are no specific provisions either in the ICSID Convention or in the ICSID Arbitration Rules to provide much guidance on how to deal with them. Mass claims therefore tend to raise a threshold challenge to the ICSID system as a whole – should they be admitted into the system at all, given the absence of regulation or, if admitted, how should one deal with them, in the absence of regulation?

II. THE CASE

A. *Abaclat and Others v. Argentina*⁸

The purpose of this chapter is not to undertake an analysis of the systemic issues raised by the Argentine claims, and not even by all mass claims submitted to ICSID arbitration, but to focus on one particular case which, in itself, may properly be characterized as a mass claim, even in the technical sense of the term – the approximately 180,000 claims brought against Argentina by Italian holders of Argentine government debt, represented in the proceedings by an entity known as Task Force Argentina (“TFA”) – *Abaclat and Others v. Argentina*.⁹ To date, no final award has yet been issued, but there is a series of procedural orders as well as the much-commented Decision on Jurisdiction and Admissibility dated 4 August 2011, in which a majority of the Tribunal consisting of President P. Tercier and co-arbitrator J. van den Berg rejected Argentina’s objections (the “Majority”) and addressed preliminary issues such as its jurisdiction and the admissibility of mass claims in the ICSID context.

Abaclat v. Argentina arises out of Argentina’s default on its foreign sovereign debt in the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis. Argentina raised a number of preliminary issues that were related to the substantive aspects of the case, including whether bonds qualify as an “investment” under the ICSID Convention and the applicable investment treaty, the Argentina-Italy BIT (the “Treaty” or the “BIT”). However, the key findings of *Abaclat v. Argentina* that are relevant from the perspective of mass claims relate to preliminary objections raised by Argentina on the basis of the mass nature of the proceeding. These include the Tribunal’s decisions on issues such as whether Argentina’s consent to arbitrate in the BIT covered mass claims, and whether the Tribunal had the power to take procedural decisions and adopt procedural directions to address the mass nature of the proceedings, in the absence of any specific provisions in the ICSID Convention applicable to mass claims. As agreed by the Parties, the Tribunal’s decision was limited to “general issues” and did not deal with issues “touching specifically upon each individual claimant,” except where the presentation

8. *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1.

9. The number of claimants was subsequently reduced to approximately 60,000, following their acceptance of Argentina’s exchange offer of 2010. See *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1, ¶¶ 4 and 216.

of the general issue (of jurisdiction or admissibility) cannot be done without reference to a particular situation.”¹⁰ The “general issues” had been identified by the Tribunal in a “List of Issues” provided to the parties on 9 May 2008.¹¹

The Tribunal’s key findings on issues relating to the mass nature of the claims were:

- Argentina’s consent to the jurisdiction of the Centre included claims presented by multiple claimants in a single proceeding;
- The Claimants’ claims were in principle admissible;
- The Declaration of Consent signed by the individual Claimants was in principle valid, but this finding was without prejudice to the Tribunal’s subsequent decision on whether the consent of any specific individual claim was invalid due to fraud, coercion or essential mistake; and
- TFA, the entity created by Italian banks to coordinate the proceedings, was to be considered the Claimants’ agent pursuant to Rule 18 of the ICSID Arbitration Rules, and there was no abuse of right in this regard.

The first two of these points are addressed in more detail below.

B. *Abaclat v. Argentina* in Context

The *Abaclat* Tribunal took a series of decisions on points that related to the mass nature of the claims before it. Noting the many preliminary objections raised by Argentina in the proceedings, the Tribunal deemed it “not only appropriate but also necessary to distinguish issues relating to ICSID’s jurisdiction *stricto sensu* and admissibility issues.”¹² The Tribunal explained that, when distinguishing between these two sets of issues, it had been guided by the following “cornerstone consideration”:

If there was only one Claimant, what would be the requirements for ICSID’s jurisdiction over its claim? If the issue raised relates to such requirements, it is a matter of jurisdiction. If the issue raised relates to another aspect of the proceedings, which would not apply if there was just one Claimant, then it must be considered a matter of admissibility and not of jurisdiction.¹³

This is a novel approach in that it links the distinction between jurisdiction and admissibility to the mass nature of the claims; indeed, Professor Abi-Saab in his dissenting opinion went so far as to attack the Majority’s approach as being “conceptually wrong.”¹⁴ While the Majority’s approach indeed seems unorthodox as this is not how the concepts of “jurisdiction” and “admissibility” are usually distinguished, the Majority appears to have sought to make a conceptual distinction that is in and of itself entirely valid – preliminary issues that were related to the mass nature of the claims,

10. *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1, ¶ 226.

11. *Ibid.*, ¶ 228.

12. *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1, ¶ 248.

13. *Ibid.*, ¶ 249.

14. *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1, Dissenting Opinion of G. Abi-Saab, ¶ 126.

and those that were not. While it might have been technically more appropriate to refer to the issue in different terms – for instance, as an issue of judicial or (more accurately) arbitral propriety¹⁵ rather than admissibility – not much turns in the end on how the issue is conceptualized. Whether the Tribunal’s decisions on the issues raised by the mass nature of the claims are characterized as decisions on admissibility or as determinations on arbitral propriety (*i.e.*, whether it is proper or appropriate for an ICSID tribunal to deal with mass claims, in the absence of any guidance in the ICSID Convention or in the ICSID Arbitration Rules on how to deal with them), the fact remains that in either case the decision would be a matter of discretion or exercise of judgment rather than a strict binary test of yes or no.¹⁶ Once the Majority had determined that the claims before it fell, as a matter of general principle, within the field of its jurisdiction *ratione personae* and *ratione materiae*, its decision on whether to deal with the claims because of their mass nature can only be matter of judgment rather than a decision dictated by hard and fast jurisdictional rules.

On the other hand, the Tribunal also had to consider Argentina’s objection that the mass nature of the claims deprived the Tribunal of jurisdiction as they fell outside the scope of its consent to arbitrate under Article 8(3) of the BIT.¹⁷ While the Claimants took the view that the mass nature of the claims merely raised procedural issues and no issues of jurisdiction, Argentina argued that its consent could not cover mass claims for a whole series of reasons, *inter alia* because the ICSID framework was silent on collective proceedings; because at the time the ICSID Convention was concluded collective claims were not allowed in Italy or Argentina and could therefore not have been envisaged; and because collective proceedings would change the nature of ICSID arbitration by not allowing the individual examination of each claim.

Distinguishing the present proceedings from class actions (as Claimants were claiming individually and not through a representative of a “class”), the Majority noted that it could “not ignore” that some aspects of the proceedings resembled representative actions, in particular because the Claimants were pursuing their claims through an agent, the TFA, which represented their interests and made all decisions

15. “Judicial propriety” is the term used by the International Court of Justice, for instance, when determining whether it is appropriate for the Court to issue an advisory opinion, or whether to refrain from exercising its jurisdiction on the merits. For discussion *see, e.g.*, Andreas Zimmerman, Christian Tomuschat & Christian J. Tams, *The Statute of the International Court of Justice: A Commentary* 578 *et seq.* (2nd ed., Oxford University Press 2012). The term “arbitral propriety” has been used, *e.g.*, by the annulment committee in *Amco Asia Corp. et al. v. Republic of Indonesia*, ICSID Case No. ARB/81/1, *Resubmitted Case, Decision on Annulment* (3 December 1992) (Sucharitku, Fatouros, Schindler) 9 ICSID Rep. 9, ¶ 7.55 (2006).

16. For discussion *see* Veijo Heiskanen, *Ménage à trois? Jurisdiction, Admissibility and Competence in Investment Treaty Arbitration*, in 29 ICSID Rev. F.I.L.J. 231-246 (2014).

17. Art. 8 of the Argentine-Italy BIT provides that, “[i]f a dispute still exists between investors and a Contracting Party, after a period of 18 months has lapsed since notification of the commencement of the proceeding before the national jurisdictions indicated in paragraph 2, the dispute may be submitted to international arbitration.” Under Art. 8(3) of the BIT, “[f]or this purpose and in conformity of the terms of this Agreement, each Contracting Party hereby gives its advance and irrevocable consent that any dispute may be submitted to arbitration.”

relating to the conduct of the proceedings.¹⁸ However, this did not justify the conclusion that Argentina's consent did not cover mass proceedings:

[B]oth parties have consented to ICSID arbitration as dispute resolution method for disputes arising out of the BIT. The only remaining question is whether a specific consent regarding the specific conditions in which the present arbitration would be conducted is required, i.e., regarding the form of collective proceedings.

This question led the Tribunal to the conclusion that the answer should be in the negative, mainly for the following reasons:

- Assuming that the Tribunal has jurisdiction over the claims of several individual Claimants, it is difficult to conceive why and how the Tribunal could loose [sic] such jurisdiction where the number of Claimants outgrows a certain threshold. First of all, what is the relevant threshold? And second, can the Tribunal really "loose" [sic] a jurisdiction it has when looking at Claimants individually?
- In addition, the collective nature of the present proceeding derives primarily from the nature of the investment made. The ICSID Convention aims at promoting and protecting investments, without however further defining the concept of investment and leaving this task to the parties through relevant instruments such as BITs Thus, where the BIT covers investments, such as bonds, which are susceptible of involving in the context of the same investment a high number of investors, and where such investments require a collective relief in order to provide effective protection to such investment, it would be contrary to the purpose of the BIT and to the spirit of ICSID, to require in addition to the consent to ICSID arbitration in general, a supplementary express consent to the form of such arbitration. In such cases, consent to ICSID arbitration must be considered to cover the form of arbitration necessary to give efficient protection and remedy to the investors and their investments, including arbitration in the form of collective proceedings.

Thus, with regard to the "mass" aspect of the present proceedings, the Tribunal considers that the relevant question is not "has Argentina consented to the mass proceedings?", but rather "can an ICSID arbitration be conducted in the form of 'mass proceedings' considering that this would require an adaptation and/or modification by the Tribunal of certain procedural rules provided for under the current ICSID framework." If the answer is in the affirmative, then Argentina's consent to ICSID arbitration includes such mass aspect. If the answer is in the negative, then ICSID arbitration is not possible, not because Argentina did not consent thereto, but because mass claims as the ones at stake are not possible under the current ICSID framework.¹⁹

The Majority concluded that the "mass aspect" of the proceedings related to "the modalities and implementation of the ICSID proceedings," and not to the question of

18. *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1, ¶ 487.

19. *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1, ¶¶ 489-91.

consent. Thus, the issue was, in the Majority's terminology, one of "admissibility" rather than "jurisdiction." While one may debate, as noted above, the basis on which the Majority distinguished between jurisdiction and admissibility, its approach to the determination of jurisdiction left less room for conceptual argument; it reflects the established understanding that jurisdiction is a "field" concept that may be defined in terms of time (*ratione temporis*), nationality (*ratione personae*) and subject matter (*ratione materiae*). The consent of the State to arbitrate covers this entire field, and so long as the claimants' claims fall within this general field, an arbitral tribunal constituted under the treaty has jurisdiction over the claims, regardless of the numerosity of the claims. This is arguably so because such a general consent, given by a State in an investment treaty, is not addressed to any particular individual investor of the other contracting State; it is addressed to an unspecified or anonymous *class* of foreign investors that is neither limited nor defined, nor identified, except in the general terms of time, nationality and subject matter. Such a general consent, unlike a consent expressed in an arbitration agreement, has an inherent potential to trigger numerous claims – if not necessarily a mass claim – in any instance where a governmental measure affects a broader class of foreign investors, precisely because it is delimited in general terms.²⁰ In other words, mass claims are, in principle, not something alien to investment treaty arbitration; they are a potential (although not necessarily a necessary) consequence of the general and abstract nature of the consent to arbitrate given in an investment treaty.

As noted above, the *Abaclat* Majority considered that the "mass aspect" of the claims was not a matter of jurisdiction but of admissibility. The Majority rejected Argentina's argument that since collective proceedings were not provided in the ICSID Convention, there was a "qualified" or intended silence on the issue and collective arbitration was therefore not possible. This finding was based on the same reasons as the Tribunal's finding that Argentina's consent covered mass claims:

[T]he Tribunal finds that it would be contrary to the purpose of the BIT and to the spirit of ICSID to interpret this silence as a "qualified silence" categorically prohibiting collective proceedings, just because it was not mentioned in the ICSID Convention:

- First, at the time of conclusion of the ICSID Convention, collective proceedings were quasi inexistent, and although some discussions seem to have taken place with regard to multi-party arbitrations, these discussions were not conclusive on the intention to either accept or refuse multi-party arbitrations, and even less so with regard to the admissibility of collective proceedings;
- ICSID sets forth a standard arbitration mechanism. Insofar as investments can be of varying nature and scope, it is possible that the current ICSID procedure may not be fully adapted to resolve a dispute arising out of any kind of investment. Indeed, where an investment, protected under a BIT providing for ICSID arbitration, shows certain particular characteristics, these characteristics may influence the way of conducting the arbitration, and lead the Tribunal to make certain adaptations to the standard procedure in order to give effect to

20. See Veijo Heiskanen, *Forbidding dépeçage: Law Governing Investment Treaty Arbitration*, 32 *Suffolk Transnational Law Review*, 367, 373 n.14 (2009).

the choice of ICSID arbitration. The need for certain adaptations to the standard ICSID arbitration procedure merely derives from the impossibility to anticipate all kinds of possible investments and disputes, and is certainly not a sufficient motive to simply close the door of ICSID arbitration to investors who are not “standard investors” having made “standard investments.”²¹

The Tribunal concluded that the silence of the ICSID framework regarding collective proceedings was to be interpreted as “gap” and not as a “qualified silence,” and the Tribunal had the power under the ICSID Convention to fill this gap, within the limits of the ICSID Convention.²²

III. *ABACLAT V. ARGENTINA’S IMPACT AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF INVESTMENT LAW*

While the *Abaclat v. Argentina* decision has already triggered a debate about mass claims processing in the ICSID context, its most important contribution may be yet to come as the final award has not yet been issued. It is therefore premature to draw conclusions, at this stage, about the contribution that the *Abaclat v. Argentina* decision may or may not make to the development and indeed the feasibility of mass claims processing within the ICSID system or, more broadly, to the development of international investment law. In the meantime, however, it is possible to assess the contribution that the *Abaclat v. Argentina* decision has made to the manner in which ICSID tribunals should or should not address preliminary issues arising in the context of mass claims arbitration.

Two other ICSID cases, *Ambiente Ufficio S.p.A. and Others v. Argentina* and *Giovanni Alemanni and Others v. Argentina*, have addressed largely the same issues as *Abaclat v. Argentina*, and not surprisingly so since all three cases involve claims brought by Italian nationals for purported violations by Argentina of the latter’s obligations under the Argentina-Italy BIT in the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis.²³ However, as both *Ambiente Ufficio v. Argentina* and *Alemanni v. Argentina* involve a substantially lower number of claimants – the former initially 119 Italian individuals and legal entities, subsequently reduced to 90, whereas the latter involved initially 183 individuals and legal entities, subsequently reduced to 74 – they are less important than *Abaclat v. Argentina* when assessing the feasibility or otherwise of mass claims arbitration in the ICSID context.²⁴

Indeed, the *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunal highlighted the difference between the number of claimants and stressed that it was not dealing with “mass claims,” but rather with a “multi-party action” or “multi-party proceeding”:

21. *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1, ¶ 519.

22. *Ibid.*, ¶ 520.

23. See *Ambiente Ufficio S.p.A. and Others v. The Argentine Republic*, ICSID Case No. ARB/08/9, *Decision on Jurisdiction and Admissibility* (8 February 2013) (Simm, Böckstiegel, Torres Bernárdez) [hereinafter *Ambiente Ufficio v. Argentina*] and *Giovanni Alemanni and Others v. The Argentine Republic*, ICSID Case No. ARB/07/8, *Decision on Jurisdiction and Admissibility* (17 November 2014) (Berman, Böckstiegel, Thomas) [hereinafter *Alemanni v. Argentina*].

24. In both cases, the number of claimants was reduced following acceptance by some of the claimants of Argentina’s renewed exchange offer.

[T]he Tribunal would want to point out that the “mass claim” concept was commonly relied upon in the context of the *Abaclat* proceedings with its initially 180,000 and now still 60,000 claimants. Whilst the Tribunal does not take any stand on the question of appropriate terminology to be used in that case, it would emphasize that the dimension of the Claimants in the case to be decided by the present Tribunal can in no way be compared to the *Abaclat* case, being merely one thousandth of the latter. Especially insofar as the use of the term “mass claim” or “mass proceedings” might convey the connotation that already the sheer number of claimants in itself calls for modifications or adaptations of the procedural arrangements to guarantee the manageability or fairness of the case, the Tribunal strongly insists that it does not see any such implications arising from the number of initially 119 and now 90 Claimants as such. ... [T]he Tribunal will in its subsequent reasoning stick to qualifying the present proceeding as a “multi-party action” or “multi-party proceeding.”²⁵

Nonetheless, since Argentina raised largely the same preliminary objections in *Ambiente Ufficio v. Argentina* as it did in *Abaclat v. Argentina*, the *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunal had to deal with largely the same issues. On all the key points, the *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunal endorsed the findings of the *Abaclat* Tribunal. Thus, on the issue of whether a “specific” consent of the respondent State was required, beyond the “general” consent in the Argentina-Italy BIT, the *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunal concluded that “it [was] evident that multi-party arbitration is a generally accepted practice in ICSID arbitration,” and that “the institution of multi-party proceedings therefore does not require any consent on the part of the respondent Government beyond the general requirements of consent to arbitration.”²⁶ Nor did the tribunal accept that the mere number of claimants would make the proceedings “unmanageable” or that they would violate fundamental principles of due process or would be otherwise unfair to the respondent State.²⁷

Similarly, the *Alemanni* tribunal in its decision only dealt with Argentina’s general objections to jurisdiction and admissibility.²⁸ However, contrary to the *Abaclat* Tribunal, the *Alemanni* tribunal was “not convinced” that the distinction between jurisdiction and admissibility raised any major difficulty, nor was it convinced that the distinction was “of any particular importance in disposing of the issues presently before it.”²⁹ Nor did the *Alemanni* tribunal see “[any] advantage whatsoever in entering into a battle of terminology” of whether the claim before it constituted a “mass claim” and merely noted that the number of claims before it did not, in ordinary usage, fit the descriptor “mass,” and that the proceedings were not of a representative character, as each claimant was claiming in his own name.³⁰ Nor was the tribunal persuaded by the need to have an additional, specific consent, noting that “consent is not more valid by being given twice, any more than it is less valid for having been given only once.”³¹ The question therefore was rather whether “on the proper interpretation

25. *Ambiente Ufficio v. Argentina*, *supra* n.23, ¶¶ 120, 122 (footnote omitted).

26. *Ibid.*, ¶ 141.

27. *Ibid.*, ¶ 166.

28. *Alemanni v. Argentina*, *supra* n.23, ¶ 252.

29. *Ibid.*, ¶ 257.

30. *Ibid.*, ¶ 267.

31. *Ibid.*, ¶ 269.

of the BIT, has the respondent, or has it not, given a consent which is wide enough in scope to cover the proceedings brought (as in this case) by the multiple group of co-claimants.”³² The tribunal considered that the issue before it was one of whether “the instrument setting up the arbitration or establishing the Respondent’s consent to it can be properly interpreted, on the particular facts of the case, as covering the particular multiplicity of claimants within that consent.”³³ This required the tribunal to interpret Article 8 of the Italy-Argentina BIT, which referred to “[a]ny dispute relating to investments” and “a dispute ... between investors and a Contracting Party.” The tribunal considered that since the term “investors” was used in plural in Article 8(3), there might be in appropriate circumstances more than one investor involved in a dispute; however, “whether there is only one investor, or more than one, there must be a ‘dispute.’”³⁴ In other words, “the use of the singular must be read as presupposing a substantive unity in the ‘dispute’ submitted to arbitration,”³⁵ and consequently, “[t]he Tribunal must therefore proceed to determine whether what the multiple Claimants have brought before it in this case is a ‘a dispute.’”³⁶

Noting that both the *Abaclat* Tribunal and the *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunal had failed to direct their minds to the issue, the *Alemanni* tribunal found that the link that must exist between a group of claimants and between their claims, in the absence of a consent by the respondent to the hearing of their claims together, lies in the notion of the “dispute”:

[T]he jurisdiction created by Article 25(1) of the ICSID Convention “extends to” (which in this context means, is confined to) “any legal dispute arising directly out of an investment.” ... The focus on “a” dispute is continued in both the ICSID Institution Rules (Article 2) and the ICSID Arbitration Rules (Rule 1). There is an exact match with the terms of the dispute settlement clause in Article 8 of the BIT, under which the Respondent issued its standing consent to arbitration, which refers sequentially to “any dispute,” “a dispute” and “the dispute.” The intention and effect are obvious. These treaty clauses provide a mechanism for the settlement of individual disputes; they do not (absent either special agreement to that effect or joinder) provide a mechanism for the joint settlement of a collection of separate disputes. ... The Tribunal has already indicated that it is perfectly possible, in its opinion, for a “dispute” to have more than one party on the claimant’s side. But the interest represented on each side of the dispute has to be in all essential respects identical for all of those involved on that side of the dispute.³⁷

The *Alemanni* tribunal found that, in the case before it, it was unable to determine, at this preliminary stage of the proceedings, “whether the actual rights of all of the Claimants ... and whether the actual effect ... on those rights (or associated

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, ¶ 286.

34. *Ibid.*, ¶ 287.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, ¶ 288.

37. *Ibid.*, ¶ 292. Arbitrator Böckstiegel, who is also a member of the *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunal, did not share the *Alemanni* tribunal’s criticism of the former’s findings. *Ibid.*, ¶ 291.

expectations) of Argentina's conduct were sufficiently the same as to amount to a single 'dispute' over Argentina's obligations under the BIT, even within the broad and non-technical understanding of a 'dispute' that is appropriate to Article 8 of the BIT read in conjunction with Article 25 of the ICSID Convention."³⁸ Consequently, the tribunal concluded that the substance of the jurisdictional issue before it, *i.e.*, whether there was a single dispute over Argentina's obligations under the BIT, was so closely intertwined with the substantive disagreement between the parties, both factual and legal, that it had to be joined to the merits.³⁹

The *Alemanni* tribunal's approach to the notion of "dispute" put it on a different path of reasoning from that adopted by the *Abaclat* and the *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunals.⁴⁰ This is noteworthy as the determination of whether there was a "dispute" between the parties goes to the heart of the issue of how mass claims are understood and indeed defined in the ICSID context. The issue is, in essence, whether it is sufficient, for a mass claim to be admissible before an ICSID tribunal or (in terms of the *Alemanni* tribunal, which did not make a strict distinction between jurisdiction and admissibility) to fall within the jurisdiction of an ICSID tribunal, that the claims are disputed by the respondent State, or whether an additional substantive link must be found to exist between the claims and the claimants, beyond the fact that all of the claims are alleged to arise out of the same event or circumstance. The approach adopted by the *Alemanni* tribunal suggests that such an additional substantive link must indeed exist, for the dispute to amount to a "single" dispute, and that this determination must be made on a claim-by-claim basis rather than on the basis of a global determination of whether all the claims appear to arise, *prima facie*, out of the same event or circumstance (which, as noted above, was the approach adopted by the *Abaclat* and *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunals).⁴¹

However, it is difficult to see why such a further substantive link should be required, and indeed what it could be, to establish jurisdiction. Is it not sufficient, for a "dispute" to exist, in the broad and non-technical meaning of the term adopted by the *Alemanni* tribunal, that the respondent State objects to the claims as a whole and denies its liability? Or should there be evidence that the respondent State has disputed each and every claim, individually, before the arbitration proceedings were brought? If the answer to the latter question is yes, the door would certainly be closed to mass

38. *Ibid.*, ¶ 293 (emphasis in original).

39. *Ibid.*

40. The *Abaclat* Tribunal considered that "group examination of claims is acceptable where claims raised by a multitude of claimants are to be considered identical or at least sufficiently homogenous," concluding that in the circumstances, all of the claims derived from the BIT, arose out of the same event, and were similarly affected by the measures taken by Argentina, and consequently "appear[ed] to be homogenous." *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *supra* n.1, ¶¶ 540-44. Similarly, the *Ambiente Ufficio* tribunal noted that the issue of whether there must be "a necessary link" between the claims in a multi-party proceeding could be left open, as it did not consider it "necessary or useful to elaborate on the question *in abstracto* whether it is required that the claims be "homogeneous" or whether it suffices that they are "sufficiently comparable," etc., and to try to devise a general standard or threshold in that regard." *Ambiente Ufficio v. Argentina*, *supra* n.23, ¶ 154.

41. *See supra* n.40.

claims processing in the ICSID context. However, this does not appear to be what the *Alemanni* tribunal meant, and indeed the tribunal appears to have confused the issue of whether a dispute existed, *i.e.*, whether the claims were disputed, which is a preliminary question, and the question of the legal and factual basis on which the claims were disputed, which is a matter for the merits.⁴² However, so long as this confusion persists, the *Alemanni* tribunal's ruling to suspend the decision on whether the claims before it constituted a single "dispute" has created some uncertainty as to whether the ICSID mechanism continues to remain available for mass claims processing.

IV. CONCLUSION

As a result of the *Abaclat v. Argentina*, *Ambiente Ufficio v. Argentina* and *Alemanni v. Argentina* decisions, the issue of mass claims has been placed firmly on the ICSID agenda. While the ICSID system has survived the test and proved capable of accommodating mass claims within the existing framework, there is no doubt that the current system is not ideally suited to mass claims processing – which is hardly surprising, given that State contracts and contract-based arbitration were the paradigm of foreign investment at the time the ICSID Convention was negotiated. It is indeed investment treaty arbitration, and the general and abstract nature of the consent to arbitrate given by States in investment treaties, that have created the regulatory environment that has enabled the emergence of mass investor claims as a novel form of investment arbitration.

Given the moral hazard that in practice precludes the consolidation of mass claims after they have already arisen, there is no doubt that by far the best solution to deal with the challenge posed by mass investor claims to the ICSID system would be an amendment of the ICSID Convention that would enable the compulsory consolidation of all claims arising out of the same extraordinary event or circumstance. This would not only ensure consistency in decision-making, which in turn would protect and promote the legitimacy of the system as it would preclude different tribunals from reaching different conclusions on the basis of what are essentially the same facts. It would also result in considerable procedural and economic efficiencies, in particular by allowing the respondent State to consolidate the legal and evidentiary basis of its defense, as well as by ensuring that the consolidation tribunal would be fully familiar with the relevant factual circumstances, without having to be educated effectively from scratch in the context of each individual case.

However, for the time being the prospect that the ICSID Convention will be amended any time soon to accommodate mass claims processing seems highly unlikely. Not only is the amendment of the Convention exceedingly difficult as it would

42. What could have been joined to the merits is the question of whether each and every claim in fact arose out of the measures taken by Argentina in the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis, however, this issue had effectively already been "joined" (or rather left) to the merits as the *Alemanni* tribunal's decision only dealt with Argentina's objections "of a general character." *Supra* n.28.

require a consent of each Contracting State; there does not appear to be much policy support for such an outcome in the first place, judged by the lack of any debate on the issue. In the meantime, as the challenge is unlikely to go away, ICSID tribunals and the ICSID Secretariat will have to make the best out of the current legal framework, regardless of its flaws. When assessing their performance, it is important to keep mind that those flaws were not their creation.

