

Excerpts from Student Papers on Venezuela

Alexis Henry, “Empowering the Poor through Education: The Reality in Venezuela”

...Since its initial discovery in the early 20th century, oil has played a major role in Venezuela. By 1929, Venezuela was the world’s second largest oil producer, after the U.S., and the world’s largest oil exporter. In 1943, the Hydrocarbons Act reformed Venezuela’s oil policy, closely tying oil profits to the state’s income. Previously oil income was based on concessions, but the Hydrocarbons Act connected oil revenues to taxes on the mining companies. Foreign companies could not make greater profits from oil than they paid to the Venezuelan state. In 1960, the Venezuelan government pushed for a coalition with Middle Eastern oil companies, the world’s main oil exporting countries, resulting in the formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

An oil boom in the 1970s resulted in a major change in Venezuela’s economy. The oil crisis of 1973 dramatically increased oil prices, leading to the boom. The price jumped from \$2 a barrel in 1971 to \$11 in 1973 to \$35 in 1978; as prices increased so did government revenue. Foreign owned oil companies, Shell, Standard Oil (Exxon), and other smaller companies, were then nationalized in 1976 by President Andrés Pérez. *Petroleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA), a holding company, became the basis for the nationalization of Venezuela’s oil industry. Nationalization of oil was Andrés Pérez’s way to turn Venezuela into a developed country, known by his slogan “*sembrando el petroleo.*” Increase in oil prices, however, also led to inflation within the country. Public transportation costs rose resulting in riots and uprisings throughout the nation. This event is referred to as the Caracazo. By the 1980s, oil prices began to decline with a historical low of \$3.19 a barrel in 1998.

Determined to revolutionize Venezuela, Hugo Chávez came to office in 1998 with 56% of the vote, to gain control of oil companies, redistribute land, and repair the nation’s economy; calling for the creation of the Fifth Republic. Essentially, Chávez wanted to serve the interests of the often forgotten and ignored poor by redistributing the nation’s wealth. He called for the rewriting of the constitution and issued a referendum in 1999. Voters approved it on December 15, 1999 and reelected Chávez, under the new constitution, for a six year term. The referendum decided that a president could be elected to two six year terms. Despite Chávez’s landslide election, his presidency has met with much opposition. A coup attempt was staged April 11, 2002 by Pedro Carmona. For 48 hours, Carmona was President of Venezuela until loyal soldiers surrounded the palace and reinstated Chavez and his assembly into power. In 2004, Chávez faced a recall referendum in which he won 59% of the vote, allowing him to remain in office. Chávez continues to provide new opportunities for Venezuela’s poor and to diminish the oil companies’ increasing independence from the state.

The production of oil greatly changed the state of the nation, allowing the opportunity for success and development. Yet, in 2006, Venezuela is still emerging from the instability and poverty of its pre-democratic era. The current president, Chávez, is working hard to reduce its reliance on oil and the gap between different socioeconomic groups.

A New Era

Upon Chávez' entrance as President in 1999, a new government commitment to social and human rights was established, especially for the poor. Prior to 1999, the Venezuelan government was not concerned with the large economic gap between the rich and the poor. As a result the impoverished classes existed without access to basic needs such as health care and education. The Chavez administration recognizes the "accumulated social debt" (VCSI, 10) meaning that the government accepts responsibility for "the fact that the levels of poverty and social exclusion ...continue to be very high" (VCSI, 10). The government owes it to its people to create an environment of opportunity in which everyone has the chance to succeed and enjoy basic social rights. The Millennium Declaration of 2000, released by the Venezuelan government, documents the initiatives "to honor the accumulated social debt expressed in a series of lacks and deficiencies" (VCSI, 7). Approved in 1999, the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela now includes the peoples' right to education, health care, a balanced diet, adequate housing, employment, and socially vulnerable groups. Integral attention to the elderly and children is also included. Fighting poverty, as a priority, in order to ensure "observance of social rights" (VCSI, 16) is the strategy the Venezuelan state has chosen to pursue. Venezuela follows the

theoretical principle according to which poverty represents a transversal axis and its subsequent eradication will be the result of improving other economic, educational, social, environmental, cultural and sanitary factors and additionally taking into account that poverty implies more than lack of income. (VCSI, 15)

Unlike previous administrations, Chávez and the Venezuelan government are determined to be a government that benefits and empowers the people.

A goal to eradicate extreme poverty, halving between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has been set with three specific objectives to accomplish it. "To guarantee enjoyment of social rights in a universal and equitable manner, To improve the distribution of income and wealth, To strengthen social participation and generate citizen power in public decision making costs" (VCSI, 10). From the need to achieve these goals come the social missions launched in 2003 "in order to cut down on the number of poor people in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" (VCSI, 10). The missions equip the people with the necessary skills to bring themselves and each other out of poverty. People are helping people. Making the distinction between the government and the State— "The State is not the government. The State is the people and the government" (Wagner and Wilpert, 2). As a participatory democracy, Venezuela utilizes the method of co-responsibility meaning "that the State is not a paternalistic state, but instead that the people have duties as well as rights. It is necessary to take on the big job of creating this consciousness in people of their duties" (Wagner and Wilpert, 2). The people are being encouraged to develop their capacity "to participate in the solution and the search for the solution of the problem. In the Constitution, we have established mechanisms for this participation" (Wagner and Wilpert, 2). The Bolivarian Revolution has created a social democracy in which "voting, electing, being elected, public freedoms, freedom of the press," is included, but the people also have access to social rights: education, health care, and employment. (Wagner and Wilpert, 2).

Poverty in Venezuela

Economic classes are separated into A, B, C, D and E. A is the “upper classes, B upper middle class, C middle class, D working class and/or poor, and E very poor” (ABCDE Class handout). Classes A, B, and the upper half of C combined make up 4 percent of the total population. Typically they have a household of about four persons, have a high capacity to save money, own vacation homes, travel abroad and have a household income above **3,700,000 bolivares**. Fifty four percent have obtained a university degree. The lower middle class, the second half of group C, comprise 15% of the population. They have some ability to save money, live in apartments, and 29% have a university degree. Twenty one million people make up the D and E classes meaning 81% of Venezuela’s population lives in poverty. An overwhelming majority of the people, 15 million, are in class E, the poorest segment of the society. Nationally, “[u]nemployment has risen 53 per cent ... over the past three decades” (Gindin, 1).

Prior to Chavez, “the oil wealth of Venezuela was simply looted by the people in groups A, B, and C and wound up in overseas bank accounts” (ABCDE Class handout). The period between 1984 and 2004 has experienced an increase in Venezuelans included in the poorest class, from 40 to 58 percent, and a decrease from 28 to 4 percent in middle and upper class Venezuelans (Gindin, 1).

As elections near, controversy has ensued over “whether poverty has been reduced under the Chávez administration” (Weisbrot, Sandoval, and Rosnick, 1). The percentage of people living below the poverty line in the first half of 1997 was 60.94% and 55.6% for the number of households below the poverty line. In the second half of 2005, that percentage has dramatically decreased to 43.70% and 37.9% respectively (Weisbrot, Sandoval, and Rosnick, 2). Considering the rise in rates from 2002 until the first half of 2004 due to the oil strike and recession, Venezuela has experienced impressive economic improvement. “The Venezuelan economy grew by 17.0 percent in 2004, and by 9.3 percent in 2005” (Weisbrot, Sandoval, and Rosnick, 3). “For the 84 per cent of Venezuelans in classes D and E ... their income has increased 53 per cent in the last year— an improvement of 33% per cent accounting for inflation” (Gindin, 2). These percentages of poverty are all based on cash income but “[t]his, however, does not really capture the changes in the living standards of the poor in Venezuela” (Weisbrot, Sandoval, and Rosnick, 4). Although no accurate method exists, if the poverty rate was adjusted to reflect the effects of the benefits of non-cash income on the poor the difference would be more clearly emphasized. For example, the poor “often do without health care if it were not provided by the government, and therefore suffer from worse health, lower income, and lower life expectancy” (Weisbrot, Sandoval, and Rosnick, 6). However, assuming that out-of-pocket expenses for health care were between four and six percent of their income and missions like Barrio Adentro replaced that expense, the poverty rate would be reduced from 37.9% to about 35.8% in the second half of 2005.

The conflict arises when 1999 percentages are compared to the first half of 2004 without taking into the account the dramatic poverty drop that occurred in the second half of the year; “leaving off the subsequent recovery, is meaningless and misleading” (Weisbrot, Sandoval, and Rosnick, 3). While poverty had been gradually decreasing from 1997 to 2001, beginning in 2002 rates rose from 48% to 61% in one year. However, “this poverty rate is measuring the impact of the oil strike and recession of 2002-2003” (Weisbrot, Sandoval, and Rosnick, 3).

Education and the Social Missions

To attain a job a person must have an adequate education but to get an education a person must not have to be burdened with health concerns. Still yet, to alleviate worries a person must have adequate healthcare and to afford it one needs to have a job. Under Chávez, Venezuela has decided to step in and break the vicious cycle of poverty.

“[S]ocial missions are the nucleus of the strategic offensive to progressively reduce poverty, to give power to the poor” (Sánchez, 8). Venezuela’s new relationship of co-responsibility is the reason the social missions have been so effective. More importantly, the missions have reached out to every traditionally marginalized group, including the elderly, children, women, the illiterate, the malnourished, the ill, the homeless and drug addicts, to name a few. “They are formed around President Chávez’s concept of granting power to the poor so they become protagonists in their own emancipation and can gain more power and fortify their principal role in the defense, support, and development of the Bolivarian revolution” (Sánchez, 8).

Educational missions provide the right to education to those who never had the opportunity or were previously unable to continue. Missions Robinson I and II, Ribas, and Sucre drastically transformed the education system. Mission Robinson I, formally launched on July 1, 2003, was the first officially established mission. The purpose was to eliminate illiteracy in twelve months using the Cuban “Yo sí puedo” method. “Based on 65 audiovisual classes, the course makes it possible for illiterate students [of any age] to learn to read and write in seven weeks” (Sánchez, 17). The classes are run by facilitators and supervisors while students participate in the video lesson. Five months later, by December of 2003, one million Venezuelans from the barrios, plains, jungle, and mountains had become literate. Civilian and military aid contributed to the success of the program. “The armed forces guaranteed the success of this extraordinary logistical task, providing land, air, and river transportation and access to barracks storerooms” (Sánchez, 17). The military allowed Mission Robinson to reach remote areas where many of the poor, traditionally without access to education, live. All graduates of the program receive a family library of twenty five books and some outstanding students are rewarded with credits, housing, and jobs.

Next came Mission Robinson II, **year**, made up of two parts, providing adults with the opportunity to achieve a sixth grade education. The first part, “equivalent to fourth grade comprises five subjects: mathematics, language, history, geography and natural sciences” and the second part “includes fifth and sixth grades and adds an introduction to computers and English to the study plan” (VCSI, 11). Within a matter of months after its creation, 1.2 million students were attending Robinson II, sixty percent of them being recent Robinson I graduates.

Adults who had not completed secondary school education were the target of the third mission, Mission Ribas. The method mirrored the Venezuelan-Cuban technique of the previous two missions. National inclusion for those “who have not finished high school and are therefore excluded from the educational system” is the intent of Ribas in order to “facilitate their incorporation to the national productive apparatus and to the system of higher education, thus improving the quality of life in the short and medium run” (VCSI, 11). Pupils were able to graduate in two years with an education in science,

humanities, and technology. To solidify the Ministry of Energy and Mines and PDVSA's, the state oil company, commitment to serving the interests of the people, they were assigned to "the logistical support, organization, and direction of the mission" (Sánchez, 19).

Lastly, Mission Sucre was launched on November 3, 2003 to allow high school graduates previously "rejected by the system" access to higher education:

thus conjugating a vision of social justice with the strategic nature of higher education for the sake of sustainable, integral human development, national sovereignty and the building of a participative, democratic society, a task for which it is a requirement to guarantee the participation of all sectors of society. (VCSI 11)

This mission grew out of a response to over half a million high school graduates who were unable to find a place at a university because they had "virtually become the preserve of students from private schools" (Sánchez, 16). "One fundamental aspect of Mission Sucre is the concept of the municipalization of higher education: in other words, to create university courses where students are living, and to create courses in line with the needs of each region and the country" (Sánchez, 20). The Bolivarian University was then established and now conducts studies in legal science, history, and communications.

Mission Accomplished?

In February 1999 as Chávez assumed the presidency, school attendance rates "stood at just 59 percent, there were 1.5 million illiterates, more than two million adults who only had reached sixth grade, and close to a further two million who had been unable to complete their secondary education" (Sánchez, 15). As of 2004, 45% of the population participates in the four different education programs. Six hundred fifty new schools have been built throughout the nation and 6,900 educational institutions have been refurbished. Five hundred thousand scholarships, in the amount of 160,000 bolivars, have been distributed through the missions to the poorest students representing "a genuine reduction in unemployment" (Sánchez, 20). Seventy five thousand classroom libraries were provided in 2004 and 2,600 in rural schools, a significant increase from 9,000 in 1998. As of September 2005, 1,437,428 students will have graduated and 1,366,577 will be enrolled in Mission Robinson. Mission Sucre will have incorporated 350,000 total participants into higher education. Ribas has granted 1878,728 scholarships among 800,000 students. Overall, the missions have worked to incorporate excluded children and adults back into the educational system.

Universal Education

The State's third goal, as stated in the Millennium Development Goals, is to ensure that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. "The structure of the Bolivarian Educational Process creates a model of social equilibrium that provides an integral education from birth with the continuum of programs offered" (VCSI 20). The five stages of the Bolivarian school system include Simoncito (ages newborn to six years), Bolivarian school (six to twelve years) Bolivarian High school (twelve to nineteen years) Robinsonian Technical Colleges (professional education) and the Bolivarian University (undergraduate studies). "[T]here

is really a great difference between a Bolivarian high school and a "normal" Venezuelan high school" (Wagner, 1)

Changes to the pre-existing education system were immediately implemented as Chávez took office. The education budget was increased from 2.8 to 5 percent of GDP and enrollment charges in public schools were prohibited. Primary education has also been extended from a half day to a full day schedule to allow more students. More teachers are being trained; their level of respect is increasing as well as their salaries. "Teachers' salaries were raised and their work recognized as truly important" (Sánchez, 16).

Thus far the project has been highly successful. 2,000 classrooms have been built to school 60,000 preschool children 3,807 schools have been incorporated into the Bolivarian system. 280 high schools are also participating. 208 Robinsonian schools have enrolled 8,710,852 students for the 2002-2003 school year. Adult education for the same year rose to 461,979. The University Initiation Program has incorporated a total of 403,666 high school graduates who never received a university place into the Bolivarian University of Venezuela. Education in Venezuela is radically changing the lives of the poor. Using education as the key to battling poverty and gaining support for it from the government, military, and big businesses is radical. Chávez's revolutionary initiatives have accomplished much in way of focusing on inclusion rather Venezuela's long history of exclusion.

Venezuela: The Reality

Criticism of Venezuela is almost entirely directed towards their president, Hugo Chávez, and the negative impact he has had on the economy and the people. Two and a half weeks actually spent in the country has proved otherwise. Venezuela is changing and prospering unlike previously done by any country in Latin America. Yet, the United States government and media continue to paint a skewed picture of Chávez's work in Venezuela. In response to Venezuela's Congress granting Chávez the power to rule by decree for 18 months, Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice commented, "I believe there is an assault on democracy in Venezuela and I believe that there are significant human rights issues in Venezuela." She continued saying, "I do believe that the president of Venezuela is really, really destroying his own country, economically, politically" (Newsmax, ¶3). Chávez has also been accused of a "Latin brand of populism that has taken countries down the drain," and his relationship with Fidel Castro of Cuba has been described as "particularly dangerous" (BBC News, ¶5). Tensions only rose when Chávez called United States President George Bush the devil during his speech at the United Nations. As a result, many Americans are concerned that Chávez, despite his initiatives towards healthcare, education, and poverty, will one day become a power hungry dictator.

In Venezuela, members of the opposition, although a minority, are also concerned about his close relationship with Cuba, the state of the economy, and the possibility of their government returning to a dictatorship. The people of Venezuela are also talking about what Chavez is or is not doing for the country. Yet, campaign posters and graffiti in support of Chávez decorate the streets even a month after the election. Every city, pueblo, or barrio has the slogan, '*con Chavez, manda el pueblo*' painted somewhere. Posters of Chavez's face seem to be posted everywhere; people can be seen wearing shirts with his

name on it, and talk of Chavez buzzes in the streets. However, this is only the superficial view of Venezuela. A closer look, in actual conversations with the people, will reveal that the current revolution is much larger than Hugo Chávez Frias. The author, Charlie Hardy, puts it well, “Chávez only has power because he represents what the majority thinks and feels” (1-2).

So, what has Chávez done for Venezuela? Firstly, he has created a climate in which social change— healthcare and education for all— is possible. More importantly, he has allowed the citizens of Venezuela, specifically the 15 million living in poverty or extreme poverty, to create the changes they wish to see in their community, to be completely involved. The citizens of Venezuela have done just that. They have readily stepped up to take control of their communities. This revolution is about much more than being *chavezista* or *anti-chavezista*, it is about what Venezuelans call “the process.” One can be with “the process” but against Chávez. The missions and the cooperatives only work as well as they do because of the involvement of the community. For example, Goya, the head of La Zaragoza School, a non-Bolivarian school that existed before Chávez, stated that Bolivarian schools will be successful when the community also becomes responsible for it. Their community chooses the teachers, is involved in how the school is run, and adding additional pieces to the school. In the school’s beginning it was the community that literally built the school and later decided to add more grades and classes. The same principle goes for other areas of society. In Barquisimeto, the governor, a supporter of Chávez, appointed a director for the city’s community center. The community believed they could run the center better on their own, “locked her out...and are demanding that they be the ones to decide who will co-ordinate the activities there” (Hardy, 1). The people who are being directly affected by policy changes need to and do speak up about how those policies will be implemented and how it can best be implemented to benefit the community. No one program can solve the problems of the entire nation and no one man can create solutions that conform to each neighborhood without the leadership of the people who live there. It is Venezuela, and not Chávez that is working to erase a history of exclusivity and replace it with an inclusive society.

Another thing that stands out is the number of Venezuelan flags hanging in museums, hotels, people’s homes, schools and even on the side of the carts of street vendors. Looking back, this pride in their country is because it has become what they have made it. It is the people who wrote the nation’s constitution and it is the people who are changing their communities. The people have constructed what it means to be a Venezuelan and naturally they hold pride in their flag because they feel that their flag represents them; it is not about nationalism or an idea of superiority. According to the most recent LatinoBarometro Poll, 89% of Venezuelans believe that democracy is the best form of government and rate their democracy a 7 on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being “totally democratic.”

Before Chavez came to power, many grassroots organizations were working on a small scale to provide education and healthcare for the poor. Chavez, a man of the people, was the first to take power and organize those same initiatives on a national scale. Under his government there is a commitment to helping the poorest of the poor, to make Venezuela for everyone. He also took advantage of oil profits to fund these efforts. The

impression received from speaking with different Venezuelans is that they are helping themselves and they are able to do so because someone has given them a chance.

But the revolution in Venezuela is not just about economics and welfare. The structures of popular participation which are developing, and the united socialist party which is being formed, are designed to secure a transfer of power from the rich to the working class and the poor. (Tucker, ¶4)

Empowering the Oppressed

On his website, Charlie Hardy, states, “I hate the word “poor.” In using it, it doesn’t establish a relationship ... I prefer to speak of “the oppressed.” By saying that, there have to be “oppressors” and there are” (cowboyincarcas.com). He furthers explains saying,

The “poor” are poor because my (yes, my) oppressor-world hasn’t yet decided to give them a chance. And for whatever it is worth, I don’t believe most of them want to be “rich” either. But they do want the chance to work, to have education for their children, decent housing and health care. (cowboyincarcas.com)

Of the many missions and initiatives started by Chávez, education has had the biggest impact in distributing power between the poor and the rich or the oppressed and the oppressors. The education missions and the Bolivarian school system have worked hand in hand to eliminate discrimination and allow the previously oppressed to participate in the democratic process.

Six years ago, education past the sixth grade was inaccessible to many who lived in rural, economically disadvantaged communities. Now those same people are being taught to read, 1.2 million adults were taught in one year alone. Their children are also for the first time studying in or planning to attend university. For the most part the missions have been effective. As Lisa Sullivan, a former missionary commented, this is the first time that money is going directly to the people who need it instead of waiting for it to trickle down. There no longer exists any excuse for people who do not go to school. In most communities, like Monte Carmelo for instance, everyone goes to school unless they are too lazy. Some children even travel as much as an hour and a half each way to attend school. The oppressed recognize that only through education can they better their position in society. Also, they are not interested in bettering their position as individuals but as a community of people. When interviewing high school students at *La Pastora* about their plans to attend university, they all expressed their desire to study areas that they can use to better their community and in turn their country. One girl, Raquel, said that they are struggling for endogenous development; to change the negative values of their country’s past, beginning with themselves. A major premise of the Bolivarian Revolution is social responsibility. “As one sixty-year-old housewife participant in Robinson remarked, “I feel as though my President has personally called on me to come to school, because we have a participatory democracy in Venezuela, and to participate, I should learn to read and write” (Venezuela’s Literacy Triumph, 2).

Through education the oppressed have been empowered to take charge of their communities and their country. Seventy one percent of Venezuelans believe that voting is the most effective way to influence change. One boy from La Pastora explained that he voted for Chavez because it was because of him that he is going to school. The students realize that they have been granted a gift and must take full of advantage of it... and they

are. The majority of Venezuelans vote, Community Councils have been formed, and some youth join political groups like *Frente de Francisco Miranda*. Everyone is committed to participating in the revolution one way or another. When students were asked how they are a part of the revolution, Raquel answered, “**we go to school.**” Education has made the oppressed citizens of Venezuela excited to consider themselves Venezuelan and hopeful of what is to come.

While United States and Venezuelan critics alike question if there is the possibility of a viable future that will last beyond Chávez, the oppressed have already figured it out. “The process” existed before Chávez in alternative television stations, healthcare centers, organic farm cooperatives, and community schools, and it will continue long after Chávez. The oppressed have been given the tool necessary to change their country—education. Once established, that is something that can never be taken away. On the same note, now that Venezuelans have a taste of democracy, a dictatorship can never be possible. If the United States is seriously considering getting rid of the power behind the Bolivarian Revolution, they must quit criticizing Chávez and begin to worry about the oppressed.

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