

Not such a participatory democracy



In the midst of sharp political polarization, discussion regarding the impact on the country of the international economic crisis has been postponed. A series of plans promoted by the Government attempt to ensure food security as well as universal access to health, housing and education. However, there have been complications involving the distribution of food, cutbacks in health plans and an insufficient response to the demand for housing. Results come closest to those hoped for in education.

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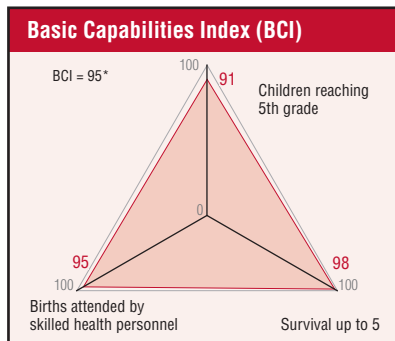
During his second presidential term, President Hugo Chávez won a referendum on the Constitution in February 2009 that will allow him to be re-elected indefinitely. These electoral proceedings gave rise to widespread controversy and reenergized the polarization that already existed in society.

The electoral climate¹ postponed any discussion with regard to the possible consequences to the country of the worldwide economic crisis. Despite the fact that Venezuela is highly dependent on hydrocarbon exports, President Chávez is optimistic regarding the impact of the global recession: “Put the price of oil at zero and Venezuela will still not undergo a crisis”.² The increase in the price of crude oil gave rise to considerable income and a monetary surplus, which resulted in a steady rise in imports and a high measure of public debt. The oil bonanza also made it possible to develop a variety of social programmes – known as “missions” – and to reduce the poverty indices.

According to the Budget Act for fiscal year 2009,³ oil revenue represents 46.5% of the country's revenue sources. Of the total budget, 12.5% is devoted to social programmes and missions. Inflation of 15% is estimated for the period, four points above that projected for 2008. The real rate of inflation in 2008 was 30.9%, the highest in the region for the third consecutive year.⁴

Food security

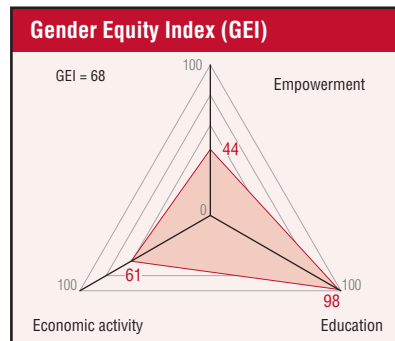
The Ministry of Food was created in 2004 with the mandate to generate an operational and strategic reserve of food in order to guarantee food security for the population. It oversees the food mission – Mercados de Alimentos (Mercal) [Food Markets] – a



network established in 2003 that distributes subsidized products in working-class areas; the Strategic Food Programme Foundation; and the food centres set up in 2004. Originally 1,000 in number, these now consist of 5,963 active centres, 65 non-operational ones and 47 inactive ones.⁵

Food has been among the items most sensitive to inflation. Statistics published by the Central Bank indicate that between March 2007 and March 2008 the price of food increased 42.6%, the highest rise in 11 years. There continues to be a steady increase in consumer prices. There are also other variables that hinder the State's efforts to guarantee the right to food for the more vulnerable sectors of the population. Since 2006, the country has been affected by fluctuating food shortages, a situation that reached its peak between late 2007 and early 2008, when 13 of the food items listed in the basic food basket became difficult to obtain.

Despite its verbal promotion of food autonomy, the Government resorted to increased imports. The Ministry of Food acknowledged that Mercal imported 70% of the items on offer. By 2008, it was estimated that 45.6% of the average 2,460 calories consumed daily in Venezuela came from food that had been purchased abroad. During that year, Mercal benefited some 9.6 million people, and sold almost 1.3 million metric tons of food. In January 2008, the Food Producer and Distributor (PDVAL) was created, a subsidiary in the agricultural area of Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), the State-owned petroleum company. Rafael Ramírez, the Popular Power Minis-



ter for Energy and Oil, announced that the food network would be on a national scale and allow access to food at State-regulated prices. PDVAL currently operates parallel to and in the same way as Mercal, and its estimated distribution for 2009 was 755,000 metric tons.

At the same time, due to their improved purchasing power, Venezuelans increased their general levels of consumption by almost 20% in 2007. According to figures released by President Chávez, daily calorie consumption increased 23%, from 2,202 to 2,717 calories.⁶ Poverty indices have fallen due to the effects of the economic bonanza resulting from high oil and tax revenues. Data from the Comprehensive Social Indicators Service of Venezuela for the second half of 2007 indicated that income poverty affected 33% of the population, while extreme poverty had fallen to 9.6%.⁷ The Human Development Index reached 0.8263, a figure higher than the previous decade's index of 0.7793. Moreover, the National Nutrition Institute established a Sub-nutrition Prevalence Index for 2006 of 6%, the projection of which would fulfil the Millennium Development Goal regarding the eradication of hunger by 2015. However, the increase in prices reduced the purchasing power of wages. By January 2009 the Workers' Documentation and Analysis Centre estimated that the cost of the food basket was about USD 750,⁸ the equivalent of two minimum wages (USD 371.73).

* “Children reaching...” estimated following procedure “1” in p. 209.

1 Countrywide elections for governorships and mayoralties were also held in November 2008.

2 Ministry of the Popular Power for Communication and Information. “Even with Oil at Zero Dollars Venezuela Will Not Undergo a Crisis”. Available from: <www.mci.gob.ve/noticias_-_prensa/28/187247/aun_con_el.html>.

3 While the President has ordered that the budget figures be revised, the amended budget for 2009 had not been published when this report was submitted.

4 Central Bank of Venezuela. “Price Index”. December 2008.

5 Ministry of the Popular Power for Food. “Statistics”. 25 February 2009. Available from: <www.minpal.gob.ve/porta/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=27&Itemid=66>.

6 Ministry of the Popular Power for Communication and Information. *Per Capita Consumption of Food Has Increased and Extreme Poverty Has Diminished*. Available from: <www.minci.gob.ve/pagina/28/174697/consumo_per_capita.html>.

7 Servicio Integrado de Indicadores Sociales de Venezuela [Comprehensive Social Indicators Service of Venezuela].

8 Centro de Documentación y Análisis de los Trabajadores [Workers' Documentation and Analysis Centre].

A comprehensive and systematic food security strategy, as suggested by General Comment Nº 12 of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, does not yet exist in Venezuela. Although low-cost food distribution has achieved significant levels of success, other aspects, such as increasing national agricultural production, are less developed.

The right to education

It is in the fulfilment of the right to education that Venezuela displays its most positive figures. For the Global Campaign for Education, the country shows some of the best indicators in Latin America and, according to the *2008 Report and Accounts*, delivered by the President to the National Assembly on 9 January 2009, over 7.5 million Venezuelans were registered in the various levels of the school cycle. Furthermore, it was revealed that the level of illiteracy had decreased to 0.4% due to the implementation of the Robinson mission and that over 437,000 students had graduated from Robinson II, 81,000 of whom were indigenous inhabitants.⁹ In addition, 345,000 scholarships were awarded to persons of limited means, while 67,000 people were trained to enter the labour market.¹⁰ The Ministry of Education reported an increase of 2.8% in the availability of educational services in 2007, with the construction of 726 new training establishments. Repetition rates were 5.1% between first and sixth grades, while constancy levels of schooling are still improving: for every 100 students registered in first grade, 66 reach ninth grade, three more than in the previous period and 22 more than in the 1999–2000 period.

The right to health and housing

While progress has been made in fulfilling the right to education and food, other economic, social and cultural rights have stagnated or declined. With regard to health, normative progress made in the Constitution itself, as well as government promotion efforts, have not managed to overcome the sector's structural problems.

In December 2003, the Executive Branch activated the Misión Barrio Adentro [Inside the Neighbourhood Mission] as a way to improve basic care in working-class areas. Significant progress was made in the short term, partly due to the participation of 14,345 coordinators and doctors as well as the construction of a variety of welfare modules all over the country. However, in 2008 there was a slow-down of this health policy, and closed modules and decreasing numbers of doctors and coordinators (to 8,500) were reported.¹¹ The strategy has been developed in

parallel with the national hospital network, and the main health centres continue to show serious shortcomings. This lack of coordination has become more critical due to the National Assembly's nine-year delay in enacting a Constitutional Health Law.

With regard to the right to housing, the Government has not been able to achieve its objectives in this sector for 10 years. By 2008, according to official information published in the media, 23,223 new dwellings had been built. The Ministry of State for Housing had estimated the housing deficit in the country at 2.8 million dwellings – 1 million for new families, 800,000 “shacks” that needed to be replaced, and a further million in high risk zones such as on mountain slopes or in watercourse areas – and that 200,000 dwellings a year over 10 years are needed to be built in order to address the deficit. However, in 2007 the Government attained the highest figure yet, with 61,512 dwellings.¹² In 2005, the Executive elevated the department in charge of housing construction policies to ministerial rank, a measure that has been hindered by the institutional weakness of the sector. No fewer than four different officials were appointed Minister in 2008 alone, a high turnover that has obstructed the continuity of policy. Instability in the institution has persisted in 2009, as the Ministry of Housing and Environment merged with the Ministry of Infrastructure in February to form a new body known as the Popular Power Ministry of Public Works and Housing.

The right to life and citizen security

In the field of labour rights, the decline in unemployment continued, reaching 7.2%.¹³ The informal economy declined for the fifth consecutive year – to 43.2% in September 2008 – as compared to the formal economy, calculated at 56.8% in the same month. However, the percentage of people who work without enjoying the various labour benefits established by law is still high. Furthermore, the collective recruitment process in the public sector remains paralyzed, which has reduced the capacity of the working class to face inflation. Increasing homicides owing to labour conflicts over the right to employment constitutes a serious setback. Conflicts between the construction and oil unions for control of jobs led to 48 union leaders being murdered in 2007 and 21 in 2008.

In fact, violence has become one of the most serious problems in the country. According to figures released by the Department of Scientific and Criminal Investigation (CICPC), 10,606 firearm homicides took place in the country between January and September 2008. It is estimated that 130 murders occur in Caracas for every 100,000 inhabitants, one

of the highest rates in the continent. During 2008, robbery increased 8%, homicide 11% and kidnapping an alarming 101%. Provea monitored 247 cases of violations of the right to life in 2008; the worst offenders, with the greatest number of complaints, are the CICPC (18.6%) and the police departments in the states of Lara (12.55%) and Anzoátegui (7.2%).

The high levels of violence affect different sectors and conflicts. According to the 2008 report by the Venezuelan Prison Observatory, the prison population totalled 23,457 people. During that year, 422 inmates died violently and 854 people were wounded by firearms or sharp objects. Also during 2008, seven peasant leaders were murdered during confrontations linked to land disputes. According to estimates circulated by Braulio Álvarez, congressman and coordinator of the Simón Bolívar Peasant Front, 214 peasants have been murdered since the passage of the Law on Land and Agricultural Development.¹⁴

The criminalization of civil society

During the years of his mandate, President Chávez has promoted popular participation in the construction of so-called participatory democracy. However, its impact has been limited due to the tendency to exclude broad social sectors for political or ideological reasons. Complaints have been made about pressure on civil servants to participate in promotional events and the establishment of patronage networks in working-class areas that exclude those who do not support the President. In this respect, the increasing militarization of popular organizations is a matter for concern, as is their inclusion in tasks related to citizen security, which could give rise to potential human rights violations. Another worrying issue is the tendency to criminalize expressions of protest. During 2008, 1,763 demonstrations were monitored throughout the country; 83 of them were repressed, hindered or obstructed by State security forces. At least 89 demonstrators were subjected to criminal judicial proceedings arising from their participation in the protests. Moreover, three people were killed by police officers during the demonstrations.

There continues to be evidence of serious difficulty in obtaining access to public information, which, among other things, interferes with citizens' right to carry out social monitoring activities. Finally, the work of human rights NGOs continues to be hindered and criminalized. Highly placed government spokespersons accuse such NGOs of wanting to destabilize the country and carry out a U.S. agenda. In this respect, the enactment of a Law of International Cooperation has been made a priority. Such a law would establish rules for a series of controls and filters for the work of civil society organizations. ■

9 The Robinson mission uses volunteers to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic to adults while Robinson II allows people to obtain an elementary school certificate and/or train for specific jobs.

10 “Significant Aspects of the 2008 Report and Accounts Submitted by President Hugo Chávez to the National Assembly on 13 January 2009”. Available from: <www.parlatino.org.ve/paginas/sala_situacional/cuenta_2008.htm>.

11 *Yearly Report October 2007 – September 2008 on the Situation of Human Rights in Venezuela*. Venezuelan Programme for Education–Human Rights Action.

12 Ministry of the Popular Power for Housing. *Report and Accounts 2007*.

13 Questions are raised with regard to the employment measurement changes adopted by the National Statistics Institute (INE), which now in effect include persons who have earned at least one wage during the period analysed, who belong to a cooperative or other form of social economy or who have received a subsidy from the National Executive. Some claim that such broad terms of inclusion legitimize various forms of labour flexibility.

14 *Radio Nacional de Venezuela* [Venezuelan National Radio]. “Popular Movements Join Forces in Order to Confront Murder for Hire in the Countryside”. Available from: <www.radiomundial.com.ve/yke/noticia.php?20082>.