

The social programme of the Bolivarian Republic

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Going against the current of predominant trends, the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution consecrates rights of citizens to health and medical care, as well as other social rights, while increasing state responsibility. In the context of social development, the new Republic promotes enhancing the standard of living through common and supportive action, and encourages people to have a sense of inclusion and belonging through political, economic and social participation.

Venezuela underwent a social uprising in February 1989, in response to an economic adjustment programme. The repressive measures taken to deal with the so-called «Caracazo» ended the lives of hundreds of citizens, but in 1993, the President of the Republic was constitutionally deposed. Meanwhile, that same year, the financial collapse started with the fall of the Banco Latino. The economic crisis worsened from 1994 onwards and by August 1995, 18 of the 41 private banks had been intervened and 70% of the deposits were managed by the State. Venezuelan banks became increasingly involved with foreign banking and by the end of 1998 foreign banks were among the main shareholders of Venezuelan banks. During his second term in office (1995-1998), President Rafael Caldera suspended constitutional guarantees on real estate, private property and trade and placed restrictions on trips abroad, the right to hold meetings, and immunity against arbitrary arrests. When Congress lifted the restrictions, the executive branch reinstated them to prevent capital flight and speculation.

In 1997 the executive branch promoted the adoption of a reform project including privatisation of key industrial sectors, but because of pressure and political disagreement, the legislature prevented its adoption. Meanwhile throughout the 1990s, various social forces gathered around a new project for the country, seeking a participative and inclusive democracy; Venezuela entered into a qualitatively different process in December 1998, with the electoral triumph of Commander Hugo Chávez Frías.

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

With this new government, the Bolivarian Republic was initiated, on the grounds of a «just and peace-loving society», of «Law and Justice». This was consecrated by law a year later (1999), when the people adopted the Bolivarian Constitution by referendum. Its ultimate aim is to *re-found the Republic in order to establish a democratic, participatory and protagonist society, multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural, in a federal and decentralised State of Justice, consolidating the values of freedom, independence, peace, solidarity, common good, territorial integrity, social harmony and the rule of law for this and future generations; ensuring the right to life, work, culture and education, social justice and equality without any discrimination or subordination whatsoever; promoting pacific cooperation among nations and consolidating Latin American integration in accordance with the principle of non-intervention and self-determination of the peoples, the universal and undivided guarantee of human rights, democratisation of international society, nuclear disarmament, ecological balance and juridical environmental goods as a common heritage of humanity that cannot be relinquished.*»

In this Revolution, the market continues to play an important role, but with the presence of a strong State that regulates it and an organised community that carries out social monitoring. The people do not delegate their sovereignty,

but are organised to exercise it fully in a «participatory and protagonist democracy».

The centre of the new government's attention is fighting poverty. According to studies made by the Centre for Studies on Growth and Development of the Venezuelan Population, poverty was concentrated in the IV and V strata, representing 39.3% and 40.7% respectively; furthermore, the middle class was going through a process of impoverishment, reaching 11.9% in 2001. According to the UNICEF report,² the top 20% of households received 52% of the total income while the lowest 40% got only 13% of the total during 1990-1997.

Unemployment is likewise addressed. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the rate of open unemployment has decreased significantly, dropping from 15.3% in 1999 to 12.8% in 2001. The rate of inflation dropped from 29.9% in 1998 to 12.3% in 2001, which means a considerable reduction in relation to the 1996 level, when it rose to 106%, the highest in the region.³

Poverty and joblessness continue to scourge Venezuelan society, and the government has borne them in mind when designing economic policies. However, the lack of political will to invest by a major part of the private sector, flight of capital abroad, the low productivity that still prevails, and the tax crisis of 2002 (related to the drop in oil prices during the first half of the year) have all had a negative impact on the government's financial disbursements, employment and inflation.

Social expenditure

The government has allocated considerable amounts to social expenditure, which rose from 34.7% in 1998 to 38.5% in 1999 and stayed at this level until dropping slightly in 2001. There has been a progressive and sustained increase in social public expenditure as a percentage of the GDP, going from 7.8% in 1998 to 9.0% in 1999, 10.7% in 2000, and 11.8% in 2001, as shown in the Integrated System of Social Indicators for Venezuela in 2002.⁴

The implementation of the Bolivarian Republic is expressed through various concrete measures, such as:

- The elimination of any payment for enrolment in State schools. The development of a programme of totally free, full-time Bolivarian state schools, with morning and afternoon snacks, lunches, sports, supervised homework, programmes for cultural development, substantive improvement of the facilities and special attention to the quality of education. Between 2000 and December 2003, 3,000 similar schools will have been created with positive impact on enrolment, continuation of schooling, and the children's improved nutrition.

¹ The authors appreciate the cooperation of the Documentation Centre and the Unit of Assessment of Social Impact of the Development Bank for Women, Venezuela.

² UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children*, 2001.

³ Central Bank of Venezuela. *Report by the Historical-Statistical Information Service*. Caracas, 2002.

⁴ Ministry of Planning and Development, Caracas.

- The development from 2002 on, of the Public Pre-school Programme to insure access for all children, whatever their economic condition. According to the 2001 Report of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, growth of annual pre-school enrolment increased from 2.8% in the 1998-1999 school year to 8.5% in the 1999-2000 school year, reaching 800,885 students, while for the 2000-2001 period, there were 835,074 students, with a growth rate of 4.3%.
- The implementation of a public programme for the construction of decent housing, aimed at poor communities, increasingly incorporating the organised community in the design, execution, assessment and follow-up.
- The programme for rural aqueducts and technical water boards (drinking water and sewage) in poor urban and rural communities with the same participatory methodology mentioned above. According to the 2000 Report on Human Development in Venezuela, prepared by the Central Office of Statistical Information (OCEI) and the United Nations Development Programme, 91% of the population has access to these services. Communities who find deficiencies in this service organise themselves to resolve the situation, following the principle of sharing responsibilities between the State and society.
- The implementation of the Land and Agrarian Development Law which aims at improving food sovereignty, democratising the right to productive land for workers and farm workers, and providing technical and financial support. In the articles of this Law, priority is given to women who are heads of households.
- The implementation of the Fisheries Law that seeks, among other things, to protect artisan fishers from the depredating action of the large trawling companies that not only damages the economy of artisan fishers but also affects sea beds.
- The implementation of the Decree Law developing the constitutional rights of our aborigines to their languages, the respect of all ethnicities and cultures, and the right of every person to have a decent life built on work, education, justice and equity.
- The development of a public micro-financing system based on solidarity, discipline in work, sharing of knowledge and state-society co-responsibility. This system has led to the establishment of the Women's Development Bank, the Bank of the Sovereign People and the Fund for the Promotion and Development of Micro-finance. These micro-finance institutions were set up to fight poverty and achieve the goals that were agreed on at the Millennium Summit Meeting.

The nature of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is also manifest in the «Strategic Plan for Health and Social Development 2000-2006», which has served to guide government action in this area, despite the obstacles that must be overcome in implementing major changes that damage the interests of powerful groups. The introduction to this Plan states: «*In the framework of the new Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Constitution establishes as citizens' rights, the right to health and medical care, similarly to a series of social rights. In this respect, the interventions (by the Ministry of Health and Social Development) are to be aimed at satisfying these rights with equality of opportunities and equity... The new social and health policy in the context of social development promotes the enhancement of the standard of living based on common and supportive action, a sense of inclusion and belonging, through political, economic and social participation.*»⁵

This introduction is followed by these general objectives:

- To guarantee health and social development as a right and responsibility of the State.
- To develop public health and social development policies aimed at enhancing living conditions and environmental quality.
- To guide public health and social development policies to achieve efficiency in the healthcare system, increasing access to services and reducing inequity.

- To orient public health and social development management toward guaranteeing user satisfaction and enhancing the quality of care.
- To generate a sustainable process of social development that includes integration and social growth.
- To overcome social, cultural, economic and political exclusion, showing results that are qualitatively and quantitatively higher than the initial situation.
- To reform and modernise the health sector.
- To promote active citizen participation in problem solving.
- To strengthen and implement the decentralisation process through the transfer of the administration of outpatient clinics, dispensaries, rural medical centres and national public hospitals (including those of the Venezuelan Social Security Institute), and through the execution of social or political programmes to benefit the states and municipalities.⁶

The principles that are to guide policy-making are as follows:

- *Social Participation*. This principle assumes that public exercise is not limited to the government, and is aimed at the consolidation of legitimate and formal fora for citizen exchange and expression. This implies redistribution of power as collective property to include traditionally excluded social subjects and enabling problem solving through the active participation of citizens in decision-making concerning social development and health.
- *Equity*. This principle assumes equality in health care and social development and gives priority to actions and services for improving health and living conditions of at-risk individuals and groups. It aims at consolidating social justice in order to make the human development of all citizens possible.
- *Universality*. This principle guarantees the social rights established for all Venezuelans, through the application of policies aimed at enhancing the quality of life, as all people have the right to health protection.
- *Gratis*. This principle guarantees comprehensive health care and social development at no cost and without distinctions of any nature.⁷

Polarisation

During 2002, the process of building the Bolivarian Republic has been severely attacked by sectors adversely affected by the non-privatisation of basic industries (especially the oil industry), the sound use of land and marine space, and the emphasis on human development and sustainability of natural resources. These attacks have ranged from the *coup d'état* on 11 April 2002, to the implementation of a series of economic, political and conspiratorial measures at the end of 2002, attempting to remove the President of the Republic from office. The social forces again have a major role to play. As they did in April 2002, in an organised way and from the streets, the people have managed to recover and restore the President to office in an alliance with the Constitutional Armed Forces. With sustained and organised action people are seeking to guarantee this space of real advocacy within a participatory democracy and to maintain constitutional and democratic order while defending the social improvements achieved so far.⁸ ■

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

8 EDITOR'S NOTE: Chávez promoted measures to take control of the state oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) nominally in possession of the government, but in fact slave to international operators. The managers of the company promoted a general strike on 9 April 2002. Following a large demonstration, where government partisans confronted the opposition, a group of the latter, comprising the business community and the military, removed Chávez from office, took him to an island and deprived him of his freedom, keeping him incommunicado. A new president was sworn in on 12 April. He dissolved parliament and, ignoring the Constitution, called for general elections to take place within a year. On 14 April, troops that were loyal to the legitimate government handed power back to Chavez. In October, a group of high-ranking armed forces called for «civilian and military disobedience.» and in December, political polarisation increased. The Organisation of American States has called on Venezuelans to reach a «constitutionally democratic solution and an electoral solution».

5 *Strategic Plan for Health and Development 2000-2006*. Caracas, 2000, p. 1.