

In search of food security



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In December 1999 the constitutional foundations for promoting agriculture and food security in the country were approved following intensive consultations with important sectors of organised civil society. Subsequently, in November 2001, one of several instruments for constitutional development, the "Land and Agricultural Development Law" was passed in the form of a decree with the force of law. This decree was one of the reasons for the deepening of the rift between the Government and the opposition, and therefore lay behind the failed "Oil Coup" of 11-12 April 2002.¹

The Government put special emphasis on foodstuffs because the country was heavily dependent on imports in this sector, and national supply was concentrated in the hands of large economic groups, which meant that the distribution of basic foodstuffs was over-centralised. It was clear to the national Government and to various groups among popular sectors of the public that this situation was a factor of insecurity, and was therefore highly destabilising both politically and socially. As the present Minister of Planning and Development has said, this made it necessary to work quickly and give priority to remedying this aspect of human security.

The Commission for Human Security maintains that one of the keys to attaining economic security and eradicating poverty is that markets should function properly and that institutions should be set up outside them. It is necessary to redouble efforts to ensure sustainable standards of living and security for everybody through the creation of new jobs. This report outlines a series of measures the Government is taking to try to promote economic and food security for the whole population.

The constitutional framework of agrifood security

The basis for far-reaching and integral rural development capable of guaranteeing food security for the people had already been laid down in title VI, chapter 1 "Socio-Economic Regime and the Function of the State in the Economy", articles 305, 306 and 307 of the Constitution of December 1999.

Article 305 stipulates, "The State will promote sustainable agriculture as a strategic basis for integral rural development, thus guaranteeing the food security of the population, this being understood as the regular availability of sufficient foodstuffs throughout the country, and that the public consumer should have convenient and permanent access to them. Security in food must be attained by prioritising the development of internal agricultural production, this being understood as the produce from farming, livestock rearing, fishing and aquaculture. Food production is in the national interest and it is vitally important for the economic and social development of the nation. To achieve this, the State will act in the areas of finance, commerce, technology transfer, land tenure, infrastructure, and workforce training, taking the measures that are deemed necessary to attain strategic levels of self-sufficiency. Furthermore, it will take action in the framework of the national and international economy to compensate for disadvantages typical of agricultural activities... The State will protect fishing communities, including those using traditional techniques, and their *caladores*,² in continental and coastal waters as defined by law."

Article 306 adds, "...the State will foster conditions for integral rural development with the aim of generating employment, guaranteeing the peasant population an adequate level of well-being, and including them in the development of the country. It will also foster agriculture and the optimal use of land through the provision of infrastructure, inputs, credit, training and technical support."

Furthermore, article 307 states, "The system of large estates is contrary to the public interest. The law will determine the measures necessary to levy taxes on idle land, and will take the necessary steps to transform it into productive units. Besides

this, land suitable for agriculture will be prepared for that purpose. Peasant men and women and other male and female agricultural producers have the right to own the land they cultivate in the cases and in the ways laid down in the relevant law. The State will protect and promote all co-operative and private forms of land ownership, and it will supervise the sustainable use of land suitable for agriculture so as to ensure that its agrifood potential is realised."

The Land and Agricultural Development Law

The constitutional articles laid down in the decree were passed on 13 November 2001.³ The aims of the law state, "...The value of the agricultural sphere is not limited to its beneficial economic effects on national production but transcends this sphere and pertains to the all-embracing idea of the people's human and social development... Regimes contrary to social solidarity, such as the system of large estates, are expressly condemned... by our constitution... Other aims of the new legal framework include ensuring bio-diversity, effectively enforcing rights to environmental and agrifood protection, and ensuring agrifood security for present and future generations... therefore the development of agricultural production that does not merely have economic goals but is of prime importance as a basic measure to effectively and efficiently satisfy the food requirements of the people of this country is sought."

Section 1 of the Bases of Integral Rural Development, chapter 1, article 1, reads, "The objective of this decree-law is to establish the bases of integral and sustainable rural development because this is considered a vitally important measure for human development and economic growth in the agricultural sector, within the framework of fair distribution of wealth and democratic and participative strategic planning: eliminating large estates as a system that is contrary to justice, to the public interest and to social peace in the countryside, ensuring bio-diversity, agrifood security, and the effective enforcement of the rights of present and future generations to environmental and agrifood protection."

1 On 9 April 2002, due to the measures that President Hugo Chávez was adopting towards taking control of the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, the management of the company went on strike, and other sectors that disagreed with the land reform law joined in. On 12 April a group of businessmen and officers from the armed forces removed Chávez from power and imprisoned him on an island where he was kept incommunicado. Pedro Carmona, head of the biggest business confederation in the country, took over the Presidency in a coup d'état and was sworn in by decree to "reorganise public powers". He immediately dissolved parliament, dismissed the Supreme Court, disregarded the Constitution, called for presidential elections within a year and called for legislative elections for December. At midnight on 14 April, after violent disturbances, troops loyal to the legitimate Government took the presidential palace, and awaited the outcome of the operation that was to rescue Chávez and return him to power. Carmona was forced to resign and was taken into custody.

2 *Calador* (plural *caladores*): pirogue, a long narrow canoe made from a single tree trunk.

3 Official Gazette No 37323.

The Commission on Human Security maintains that access to land, credit, education and housing is vitally important, especially for poor women. For this reason it is important to emphasise article 14, "Female heads of household who undertake to work a plot of land to maintain their family group and join in developing the country will be given preferential treatment in the allocation of land, in line with the terms of this decree. Female citizens in agricultural production will be guaranteed a special pre- and post-natal food subsidy from the Institute of Rural Development."⁴

In article 19, "*conucos*⁵ are recognised as a traditional source of agricultural bio-diversity. In the areas developed by *conuco* workers, the Presidency will promote research into, and the diffusion of, traditional cultivation techniques, ecological pest control, soil preservation techniques, and the conservation of germplasm in general."

Food security policies

As a means of putting into practice the legal framework outlined above, the National Institute of Land and Agricultural Development (INTI), speeded up the so-called Zamora Plan⁶ in a participative way as a response to the coup. Between March and 28 December 2003, almost 22,658 square kilometres of land were awarded to new owners through 9,000 agricultural charters. This allowed 35 Zamorano *fundos* (agricultural establishments) to be set up, benefiting 60,000 families, all of which was done in only 10 months.⁷ This has made a big impact on the situation that prevailed in the country before 1997.

The president of the INTI has said that "besides this handover of land on a massive scale, arrangements have been made with the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing Development Fund to advance credits to make this land productive... for productive infrastructure and to provide adequate machinery."⁸

In addition to this, the national Government decided to give a new boost to the Strategic Food Programme which was set up in April 1996, by promoting the MERCAL Programme since April 2003. Before this, in March 2003, the Special Food Security Plan (PESA) had been set up. It was with these objectives in mind that in November 2003 the President created the National Commission of Agrifood Supply (MERCAL Mission) attached to the Ministry of Agriculture and Land.

Campaigns in the agrifood sector

At the beginning of January 2004 the peasant men and women, along with indigenous peoples' organisations and other organised sectors of society started a campaign aimed at getting the Central Bank of Venezuela to make available USD 1 billion to finance agriculture. The funds would come from international currency reserves (over USD 21 billion) controlled by the Central Bank. It is thought that USD 14 billion will be enough to back the economy, so part of the surplus could be made available for integral rural development and to overcome agrifood insecurity. A variety of mechanisms will be used that might even include reforming the law which governs the Central Bank itself.

The Women's Development Bank

President Chávez set up the Women's Development Bank (BanMujer), by decree-law on 8 March 2001. This is a public micro-financial institution, and between 2003 and 2006 it proposes to allocate an increasing proportion of its micro-financial resources to the agricultural sector for both livestock rearing and crops so that, by 2004, this will amount to approximately 16% of the total estimated for the year. ■

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Conuco* (plural *conucos*) small plots of land for cultivation, involving almost no irrigation or tilling.

6 Named after Ezequiel Zamora (1817-1860), Venezuelan peasant who fought for land reform and social justice.

7 INTI, 28 December 2003.

8 INTI, 27 September 2003.