

Participatory democracy from below: community councils and communal banks in Venezuela

A personal impression

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While attending a conference in Caracas, Venezuela in October 2008, I had the opportunity to meet President Hugo Chavez Frias and to attend a meeting with the community councils and their communal banks, which play a crucial role in the country's transition to socialism. Being aware of the risk of romanticising difficult processes of change, I could not help but being deeply impressed with the "revolutionary spirit" that seems to permeate the "barrios" (townships) of Caracas. It reminded me of the time of the "mass democratic movement" in South Africa and Namibia during the 1980s.

Meeting Chavez

I was also impressed by the leadership of Hugo Chavez who is deeply rooted in his working class constituency, encourages self-criticism and engages actively with his constituency through the community councils. He thinks openly about the question of socialism, pointing out that there is not just one model and that there has to be tolerance towards different paths while building unity against imperialist domination. Chavez appreciates intellectual challenges and thinks creatively about a post-capitalist society. Practically this is reflected in Venezuela's move towards a 6-hour working day based on the understanding that work does not occur only at the workplace but also includes education, family work, and work for the community. The socialist concept of work moves beyond the narrow capitalist categories and the proposal for shorter working days has to be understood in that context.

I had the chance to witness how Chavez interacts with his constituency at the community councils. Far from trying to lecture his people, he listens attentively, engages in debates, appreciated proposals and generally supports initiatives that give Venezuelans control over their lives again. Chavez and his government seem to take lessons from history seriously by trying to avoid a bloated bureaucracy that will run the country "on behalf of the people". Instead, far more direct and participatory structures of democracy are being set up to enable poor Venezuelans to take control over their own lives. This includes a conscious building of community structures: Community councils and community banks not only receive funding from the state but have autonomy over how this money is spent in their neighbourhood. Alongside the over 800 "recovered companies" that were closed by investors and are now run by workers, these grassroots initiatives are perhaps the most important and revolutionary aspect of the changes that occurred in Venezuela during the past 9 years.

The “Consejos Comunales” (community councils)

Community councils were formally established from 2006 onwards, following the passing of a law that provided the legal basis. However, Venezuela's decentralisation process already started years before that with the explicit aim of direct, grassroots empowerment. Various initiatives were taken such as the “Bolivarian Circles” before the communal councils were established. These councils are neighbourhood organisations comprising of 200 – 400 families in urban areas and at least 20 families in rural areas.

All council decisions are taken in “citizens' assemblies” attended by residents who are 15 years and older. These assemblies elect their council executive committee, financial management and monitoring committees as well as thematic committees dealing with particular local priorities such as health, education, land, recreation etc. Before a communal council is formed, the assembly has to elect a preparatory committee, which carries out a “census” of the community, including a profile and challenges faced by the particular community. The preparatory committee also has to organise an electoral commission to supervise the council elections. The elected spokespersons serve for 2 years but can be recalled at any time by the citizens' assembly. This helps the community to hold their spokespersons accountable.

The communal councils have constitutional status and are meant to effect direct democracy and decision-making power at grassroots level. They are a practical learning experiment for the poor who have responded enthusiastically despite having had virtually no experience with participatory democracy before. During 2006 alone, about 16 000 communal councils were formed and this number has increased to about 30 000 today, covering about 70% of Venezuela's population.

Communal banks

Communal councils can receive funds directly from the national, state or city governments or through fundraising and donations. This is facilitated through communal banks, which the councils set up as co-operatives. Such communal banks can be established by a single council or in collaboration with other councils. For the past few years, the national government channelled annually between US\$ 800 million and US\$ 1,5 billion to the thousands of communal banks that the councils established. In turn, the communal banks provided grants for community projects and have already funded thousands of projects such as street pavings, housing for shack dwellers (who exchange a shack for a flat in a newly build block), medical centres, housing or sewage schemes etc.

Socialism from below

Community councils and community banks as a direct expression of grassroots democracy seem to frequently clash with the formal political structures like city councils, mayors and governors. Although they co-operate with each other on several infrastructural projects, there is a tension regarding power and status. Funding for the community councils comes at the expense of city budgets and Chavez' vision is to develop the community councils as the most important motor of the Bolivarian revolution. They facilitate a

process of people regaining control over their lives and are an alternative rather than an appendix to the old local government institutions. Thus the communal councils and communal banks are the seeds for Venezuela's "Socialism of the 21st century" that envisages the community structures to become the most powerful form of organisation in the years to come. They are meant to become the primary locus of government power and are part of a movement to replace the old government structures.

The community councils and banks have massively increased grassroots participation. Incentives for participation include the prospects for neighbourhood improvements but also organising council meetings as fun events, mixed with food, music and entertainment. Transport costs and time required for participation are minimal due to the small size of the councils. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the Venezuelan government has proposed to regard community activities as part of the working day, thus enabling the community to maintain high levels of participation.

Challenges

There are concerns that Venezuela's "Bolivarian revolution" hinges too strongly on the personality of Chavez and that the community councils are too strongly dependent on funding from the presidency. Critics within Chavez' own United Socialist Party pointed out that an emerging layer of bureaucrats lacks the commitment to the ideals of the revolution and may pervert positions of power for personal gain. Chavez is aware of these dangers and recognises that broad-based support and participation through participatory structures at grassroots level (community councils and banks; worker-run factories; community health centres etc.) are the best defence for the achievements made. These community structures are thus one of the most important pillars of Venezuela's transition to socialism. Unlike the liberation movements in Southern Africa, which often demobilised popular movements (including trade unions) after coming to power, Chavez and the United Socialist Party encourage and support participatory democracy from below. As a result, Venezuela's working class is starting to take control of its own destiny, supported by the visionary leadership of its president. This makes Venezuela the leading country in the struggle for socialism today.

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