

Conference in Solothurn, 15 and 16 October 2022 – Part 6

Participatory Democracy in Venezuela

Working Families Build Their Communities

by Natalie Benelli,* PhD, European correspondent



Natalie Benelli.
(photo ma)

Starting in 1999, Venezuela has implemented policies and legislation promoting the active participation of working people and their families in democratic decision-making.

Participatory democracy in Venezuela is mainly fostered through communal councils and communes (*comunas*), local community-based entities of self-governance that allocate decision-making power and material resources directly to the people in the community. Within these bodies, Venezuelans are directly involved in collectively solving the problems affecting their communities.

Creating a “new” republic for all

Prior to the victory of the Bolivarian movement led by *Hugo Chávez* in the 1998 presidential elections, most low-income working families were excluded from political decision-making. Their neighborhoods, called *barrios*, situated on the hills surrounding the capital city of Caracas, did not even exist on city maps.

Roman Catholic Priest *Charles Hardy* described the barrio where he resided in 1985 as “pressed-cardboard-and-tin shacks” with one home separated from another by only “a panel of cardboard”. The houses lacked running water, toilets, and enclosed sewers. “In front of my door, a stream of black water carried the sewage from my neighbors’ dwellings to the miniature black river behind my house.”

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Preliminary note

(Edit.) The Swiss *Natalie Benelli*, board member and European correspondent of the alternative media organisation Women’s Press Collective (WPC), which publishes the magazine “Collective Endeavor” (CE) in New York, illustrates with her article below the promising approaches for a “Participatory Democracy in Venezuela”. During the conference on Saturday evening, the film by terra tv “Nostalgic Women of the Future” was shown and explained by the Belgian director *Thierry Deronne*, who was present at the conference. The following article, like the film, gives an exciting insight into the life situation of working families in Venezuela.

Soon after taking office, president *Hugo Chávez Frías* won a referendum for the election of a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution for Venezuela, guaranteeing fundamental human rights to every child, woman and man.

The Constituent Assembly, whose members represented all categories of working people, drafted a new “Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela” that was adopted by 71% of the voters in December of 1999.

Building popular power: communal councils

To make the new, truly democratic society a reality, the Bolivarian government has fostered the creation of communal councils, local community-based units of direct democratic self-government.

The Law on Communal Councils was passed in 2009. Residents of a defined geographic area elect members to the council’s committees to collectively deal with issues like food, clean water, decent housing, health care, education, gender equality, public transportation, security, sports and culture. Communal councils give decision-making power and government funds to those who know the community and its needs best: local workers and their families.

By September 2020, there were 45,095 communal councils and 3,230 communes in Venezuela. Communal councils comprise 200-

400 households in metropolitan areas, 20 households in rural areas and 15 households in indigenous areas.

By 2007, 30% of the money allocated for local governments was going directly to the communal councils.

'Commune or nothing'

The Bolivarian government has passed several laws, including the Law on Communes, the Law on People's Power and the Law on the "Communal Economic System" to allow for communal councils to federate and join together with worker-run factories, service enterprises and farms to build communes (comunas).

The communes are the core of Venezuela's participatory and protagonist democracy and form the base of people's power. They cover large geographic areas and comprise thousands of residents, mainly in low-income areas.

Delegates from the area's communal councils form the commune's decision-making body, or parliament, which debates and decides on what the factories run by the commune produce, how much the workers get paid, how to distribute the product and how best to reinvest any surplus into the commune for the best interests of the community. Communes also have their own banks to administer the commune's financial resources.

In 2009, the Ministry of the People's Power for Communes and Social Movements was created. On October 20, 2012 late president Hugo Chávez Frías underlined the importance of the communes for the Bolivarian process by declaring "Commune or nothing!" In the spring of 2021, Venezuela's National Assembly passed two legislative projects promoting the building of communal cities and the creation of a national parliament of communes.

The organized people create their own services

Women are the majority of community leaders and are at the heart of building communal councils and communes. They have been fundamental in guaranteeing Venezuela's working families with access to food, housing, health care and other basic necessities threatened by the economic war the U.S. government, its allies in Europe and the Americas and Venezuela's wealthy elite, have waged against them.

U.S. sanctions make it nearly impossible for Venezuela to acquire affordable food on the international markets. Venezuela's government provides subsidized food to six million families through the community-run "CLAP" (Spanish acronym for *Local Committees of Supply and Production*). Volunteers from the communities served by the communal councils canvass door-to-door inquiring about the residents' food needs. The communal councils then organize the transport and distribution of the CLAP boxes. Communes set up community kitchens where volunteers prepare and distribute meals to low-income families.

Communal councils are also protagonists in the *Great Housing Mission*, Venezuela's housing program which has built and delivered more than 3.5 million homes to low-income families since 2011. In the working-class neighborhood housing project "Nueva Comunidad Socialista Amatina" in Caracas, 137 families joined together to design and build their future homes. Women led the way in a process made possible through community organizing and government support in the form of subsidies and expertise where needed.

100% health care coverage

The process of building a commune by and for the people is featured in the documentary "Times of Struggle" (Tiempos de lucha), a co-production of the Commune Altos de Lidice in Caracas and the *Popular and Latin American School of Film, Television and Theatre* (EPLACITE), a community-based, Latin American film, TV and theatre school founded in 1995 in Venezuela. The documentary focuses on building health care for all by bringing together the communal councils' health care committees in the commune.

The commune *Altos de Lidice* is composed of 5190 residents, 1000 of whom are children. Every single resident has access to free health care and medical screening.

Community-based health committees build volunteer teams to canvass neighborhood households inquiring about the health needs of residents. They distribute medicine to residents who cannot leave their homes, join doctors on their home visits to sick community members and monitor sick residents.

Health committees also check the health of every single child in a neighborhood and keep track of malnourishment and overweight to en-

sure these children receive the necessary care. Health committees set up communal drug stores to distribute medicine to the people of the community and organize vaccine and prevention campaigns to protect community members from specific health issues.

A truly democratic participation

Communal councils and communes are fundamental instruments for working peoples' parti-

cipation in truly democratic decision-making processes. In stark contrast to those in the U.S. and European countries, elections to communal councils and communes are not based on individuals' wealth, looks or slogans; and decisions are not made in the interests of the wealthy elites, but based on the daily needs that working people and their families have defined for themselves.

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