

Social Progress in Venezuela

Hugo Chávez was swept to office in 1998 with 57% of the vote and with a mission to transform the country.

After Chávez's election, millions of once excluded Venezuelans became a driving force in creating social change, working with their government to oversee radical reforms. A massive programme of wealth redistribution saw free healthcare for all become a reality, the creation of unprecedented opportunities to gain an education, substantial reductions in poverty and wider access to culture.

Women's rights were transformed as women led many of the social programmes, at the heart of the nation's social revolution. Huge steps forward in workers' rights were made. A new labour law introduced in May 2012 further strengthened these rights.

These and other achievements since have been under threat by a combination of falling oil prices and the impact of the economic war being waged against Venezuela. This has involved both internal acts of destabilisation carried out by Venezuela's business elite and economic sanctions imposed externally by the U.S., designed to strangle the Venezuelan economy. But the Venezuelan government has developed new social programmes to counter the effects of this aggression and sustain the social gains and progress made since 1998.

However, the continuing achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution hardly ever made it into the news during 2017. Media reporting on Venezuela has been overwhelmingly negative and biased. The mainstream media has purposely neglected to inform the public about the newly introduced social programmes in Venezuela.

Social progress remains at the core of this revolution. In 2017, public

expenditure in social programs increased to 74% in total.¹ While some of the new programmes have been created specifically to counter the consequences of an economic war deliberately brought about by the U.S. Government and Venezuelan big capital, others have been introduced to deepen social progress. Although the media has made systematic efforts to create a false image of Venezuela as a failed state, the reality is that this government has all along come forward with a series of new and creative solutions that confirms its commitment to social progress.

CLAPS HELP DEAL WITH FOOD SHORTAGES

To counter the food shortages caused by hoarding and contraband activity, Committees for Supply and Production (CLAPs) distribute food packs filled with the most important Venezuelan staples (pasta, rice, flour, beans, rice, tuna, oil, sugar, milk and such like) at 25,000 Bolivares which is very affordable given that in May 2018 the minimum wage was raised to 1,000,000 Bs. According to the research institute *Hinterlaces*, 60% of all Venezuelans believe that CLAP is the right way to deal with the economic crisis in Venezuela.

So far, tens of thousands of CLAPs are distributing food packs to at least 6 million Venezuelan households. According to *Datanalisis*, 50% of the population receives products through the CLAPs.

In addition to this, in 2016 the government created three new ministries commissioned to address the current food shortages in Venezuela: The Ministry for Agricultural Production and Lands, the Ministry of Fishing and Aquaculture as well as the Ministry for Urban Agriculture. The latter in particular is expected to

¹ <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/President-Maduro-2017-Marked-a-Consolidation-of-Social-Programs-20180115-0018.html>

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satisfy the needs of more than 3 million people through urban gardens, urban parcels, productive courtyards, organoponic vegetable gardens and urban green-houses by 2020.

HOMELAND CARD

In January 2017 President Maduro introduced the “homeland card” to streamline access to social programmes. This electronic card operates with 4G technology at a velocity of 65 megabytes per second. It is also equipped with state of the art QR coding, which prevents counterfeiting and allows digital access to the card holder’s socio-economic profile and their formal registration in all existing social programmes to which they are entitled.

All Venezuelan citizens over the age of 15 are entitled to register.² Currently over 16 million (16,595,140) Venezuelans are registered and protected by the system offered by the card.³ Venezuela’s population is slightly over 31 million.

INCREASES IN MINIMUM WAGE AND BONUSES TO COUNTER INFLATION

After a 30% increase in the minimum wage last November⁴, President Maduro announced another 40% push of the minimum wage this year. Effective from January 1, the increase brought the Venezuelan minimum wage up from 177,608 to 248,510 Bolivars. Similarly, food coupons were raised from 279,000 to 549,000 bolivars, bringing the total minimum wage to 797,510 Bolivars per month. The president also decreed an increase in the pension system, from 177,507 to 248,510 Bolivars per month.⁵

In the 2017 state of the union address, President Maduro announced yet another social welfare programme through which the government will support families with monthly cash payments. The payments will vary between BsF 320,000 and BsF 1,680,000, depending on the size of the family. This program currently benefits 1.5 million households, but is expected to benefit as many as 4 million households in the future. An additional bonus is also available for pregnant women and Venezuelans living with disabilities. In both cases, the government will offer a monthly bonus of BsF 700.000.⁶

Between December 2017 and January 2018 the government decreed the payment of a Youth and a Women Bonus, which benefited 5 and 10 million people in these groups respectively. It also decreed the Carnival and Holy Week bonuses benefiting millions of Venezuelans.⁷

These announcements were implemented on 2018 Labour Day, when President Maduro also decreed a 95% increase for wages and pensions as well as all other social benefits that individual and families are entitled. It should be borne in mind that the larger the family, the greater the increase in state household benefits. Additionally, President Maduro decreed, from May 2018, a new Working Class Bonus benefiting 10 million workers. This is the 44th wage increase since 1999.⁸

In April 2018, the government extended the benefits of pensions to 275,100 people, thus increasing the number of pensioners to 4,095,023, reaching 100% of the total.⁹

² <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/12899>

³ <https://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n320384.html>

⁴ <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13483>

⁵ <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13572>

⁶ <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13605>

⁷ <http://ciudadccs.info/partir-este-martes-se-cancelara-bono-unico-la-clase-obrera/>

⁸ Ciudad CCS, 1st May 2018, p.4

⁹ Ciudad CCS, 18th April 2018, p.16

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SOCIAL HOUSING

When President Chávez launched the housing mission several years ago, his first objective was to build 2,000,000 homes by 2018 and 3 million by 2019. In spite of all the difficulties the country has faced in recent years, the first target has been met. In 2017, President Maduro said in his annual address: "I will have the honour of handing over the 2 millionth home and meeting the deadline set by him [Chávez]".¹⁰ On March 20th 2018, he fulfilled this promise, by giving the keys to the two millionth house to the fortunate family.¹¹ He immediately committed the government to build one million more by December 2019.

REVOLUTIONISING CHILDBIRTH AND MOTHERHOOD

In an attempt to resolve the pressing issues of maternal mortality and obstetric violence (disrespectful, abusive and coercive treatment of pregnant and birthing people during obstetric care), the government launched a new national Humanised Childbirth Plan in 2017 to revolutionise the entire experience of childbirth through training thousands of community activists as doulas.

Venezuela's strong women's movement had demanded action from the government to reduce maternal mortality, provide adequate contraception and guarantee women's rights to pregnancies free from obstetric violence. The demands of the women's movement did not go unheard. Following a six-month investigation, Venezuela's Ministry for Women and Gender Equality introduced the National Plan for Humanised Childbirth.¹²

¹⁰ <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/President-Maduro-2017-Marked-a-Consolidation-of-Social-Programs-20180115-0018.html>

¹¹ Ciudad CCS, 21st March, 2018, p.16.

¹² <https://venezuelanalysis.com/video/13536>

SOCIAL MISSIONS

In addition to the recently introduced programmes mentioned above, there are also long running social programmes (*Misiones*) that have been running for more than a decade. Provided in all areas of social life such as education, retirement, the inclusion of women and minorities in politics, health and youth, among others, these have shown outstanding results. More than 1 million people have been lifted from illiteracy and the number of people receiving pensions and students enrolled at educational institutions has increased fourfold.

Even the World Bank recognises the benefit of these programmes: "*Large social programs called misiones were implemented to deliver basic services and transfer resources to previously excluded parts of the population. Economic growth and redistribution policies led to a significant decline in poverty, from 50 percent in 1998 to approximately 30 percent in 2013, according to official figures. Inequality also decreased, as reflected in the decrease in the Gini Index, from 0.49 in 1998 to 0.40 in 2012, among the lowest rates in the region.*"¹³

Furthermore, unemployment has decreased by six points and formal employment includes now 60% of the economically active population.¹⁴

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT & GENDER EQUALITY

Women have always been at the core of the Bolivarian Revolution and are active participants in its construction. The Constitution of 1999 states that all persons are entitled to full citizenship, and

¹³ www.worldbank.org/en/country/venezuela/overview

¹⁴ <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/President-Maduro-2017-Marked-a-Consolidation-of-Social-Programs-20180115-0018.html>

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it prohibits discrimination, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.

Some of the institutions and laws that have been created to empower the role of women in Venezuelan society are the Ministry for Women and Gender Equality, the Bank of Development for Women (BANMUJER), the Organic Law for Women's Right to a Violence-Free Life, the National Institute of Women, and programmes like Misión Madres del Barrio.¹⁵

In 2014 Venezuela was praised by the United Nations for having increased gender equality. In today's Venezuela girls and boys have almost the same enrolment rate in schools – 92.1% for girls and 92.3% for boys – while the female unemployment rate has dropped significantly over the past years, going from 16% in 1999 to 7.5% in 2014, as confirmed by data from the World Bank (<http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/venezuela,-rb>).¹⁶ The current Constituent Assembly, entrusted with the task of rewriting Venezuela's constitution, has set up a commission to draft a chapter on Women, Equity, and Gender Equality.

EMPOWERMENT OF MINORITIES

Based on the principle of equality, freedom, liberty and the respect for the dignity of the individual, the Bolivarian government has worked hard to make sure these rights are not respected with regard to members of minority groups.

Indigenous Peoples: A whole chapter of the current Constitution (VIII) is dedicated to the rights of indigenous peoples, something unprecedented in Venezuela's history. The 1999 Constitution was the

first ever to require that the National Assembly, Venezuela's legislative body, must include 3 Indigenous representatives. In 2007 the People's Ministry for Indigenous Peoples was launched, headed today by a young Wayuu woman from Venezuela's North-East, Aloha Núñez.

Persons with disabilities: In 2014 the Presidential Council for People with Disabilities was created to strengthen the participation of disabled persons in state and social affairs, as well as to increase awareness and eliminate discrimination towards disabled individuals across the country.

In the same year the country passed a new law stipulating that 5% of a company's employees must be people with disabilities, to ensure that employers cannot reject persons on the grounds of their disability. In this current constituent assembly disabled persons are important participants, expressing their ideas for an even more inclusive Venezuela in the Commission for Persons with Disabilities.

Afro-Venezuelans: Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have recognised the rights of Afro Venezuelans and have secured such rights through laws and in the creation of various institutions. Francisco Tovar, the Executive Director of the Institute of African Diaspora Studies (IEA) in Caracas has concluded that *“from a legal-institutional perspective there have been important advances in recent years – such as the Law Against Racial Discrimination in 2012, the creation of the National Institute Against Racial Discrimination the same year, the creation of the National Advisory Board for the Development of Afro-descendent Communities in Venezuela, also in 2012, the recognition of the historic memory and the contributions of the Afro-*

¹⁵ <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/6057>

¹⁶ <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Venezuela-Praised-for-Increasing-Gender-Equality-at-UN-Womens-Conference--20141021-0066.html>

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descendent population to the patriotic cause (the independence movement).¹⁷

DELIVERY OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE CONTINUES IN 2018¹⁸

Venezuelan Minister of Information and Communication, Mr. Jorge Rodríguez, gave a press conference on Monday 5 February 2018, in which he provided information about several forms of monetary social assistance and bonuses that the Venezuelan Government has delivered so far to benefit the sections of the population mostly affected by the economic warfare. They are:

Humane Childbirth Programme: so far this year, 79,839 women have benefited from this program, aimed at their caring through their pregnancy. They are receiving 700,000 Bs a month. In addition, they will receive an extra bonus of 1 million Bs after having their baby.

Jose Gregorio Hernandez Bonus: so far this year, 64,006 people with disabilities have benefited from this programme. They are receiving 700.000 Bs a month.

Mission Homeland Families: so far this year, 778,372 people have benefited from this programme, which aids low-income families.

Mission Greatest Love: in recent days 503,541 elders have received their pensions. So far, 98% of Venezuelan elders are pensioners. The goal is to cover 100% of Venezuelan elderly population.

Carnival Bonus: in order to ensure the leisure time and recreation of low-income families during carnival festive season, 3 million people have received a bonus of 700,000 Bs. The goal is to reach 8 million people.

¹⁷ <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/13000>

¹⁸ <http://www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/tres-millones-de-personas-han-sido-beneficiadas-con-bono-de-carnaval/>

HEALTH CHILDREN AND WOMEN: A PRIORITY

Despite the severe U.S. financial sanctions against Venezuela, aimed at strangling the economy and denying the country precious resources earmarked for the importation of food and medicine, the government has successfully implemented a national vaccination campaign to immunize children from 14 diseases (among which there are Hepatitis B, Polio, Rubella, Measles, and Diphtheria).

The Vaccination Campaign was designed with technical support from the World Health Organisation and benefited 9 million people, from children aged 6 months to adults aged 39, including pregnant women.¹⁹

Needless to say, the vaccines were administered completely free of charge.

The government of Venezuela has created the Latin American School of Medicine, Salvador Allende, which thus far has graduated 21,705 doctors, with hundreds of them coming from outside Venezuela, including from the United States, African nations, Latin America and Palestine. The School is completely free.

Not a single hospital or health centre has been closed down, and there has been no mass lay-offs of health workers, unlike developments elsewhere in the region such as in neoliberal Argentina and Brazil.

EDUCATION: ANOTHER PRIORITY

State expenditure on education has increased from 3% of GDP before 1998 to 7,5% currently. From nursery to university level, education is totally free of

¹⁹ PAHO, OMS, 7th April 2018,

http://www.paho.org/ven/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=418:venezuela-lanza-campana-de-vacunacion-para-interrumpir-la-circulacion-del-virus-del-sarampion&Itemid=0

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charge. Free school meals are given in 17,000 schools. Three million rucksacks with school materials and textbooks have been distributed free of charge to pupils.²⁰ Six million computers have been given, free of charge, to students and teachers.

Despite the severity of the economic war against Venezuela, no school, university or educational institution has been closed. Nor have any redundancies been implemented. Thus, for 2018 22.2% of the government's budget will go to education.

Government policy is to expand education. In 2017 despite enormous economic woes, as part of collective negotiations with the teachers' unions, 89,000 teachers were granted tenure. Furthermore, there has been a recruitment drive among youth as part of the *Chamba Juvenil* (Jobs for Youth) programme, and over 11,000 have been registered and will begin training as future teachers.²¹

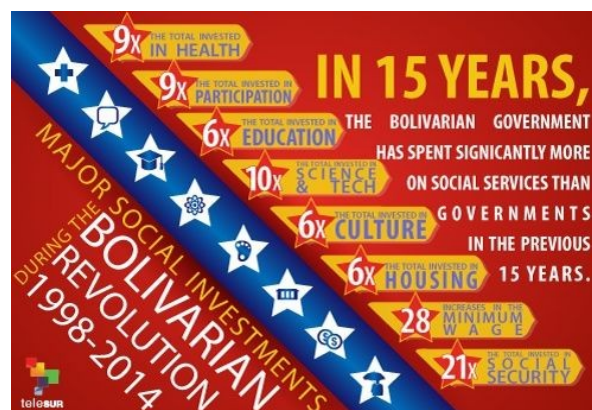
The expansion can also be seen in the growth this year of the *El Sistema*, the nation's free-of-charge system of youth orchestras and choirs which has now provided tuition to one million children, a landmark that was celebrated with a concert of 10,701 musicians.

A QUESTION OF RIGHTS

While the creation of laws and institutions to safeguard the rights of minorities is fundamental in achieving a more equal society, true equality can only be gained by living those rights on a daily basis and by demonstrating respect for people from all kinds of different backgrounds and with different orientations.

The Venezuelan government has created the basis on which such a society can

flourish, not only through the inclusion of minorities, but also with social justice in more general terms, as is evident in these pages.



Despite being faced with the severity of the US-led external financial and political aggression, domestic economic sabotage²² (contraband, hoarding of basic staples, induced hyperinflation, hard currency speculation and economic blockade), President Maduro remains committed to defending the social gains made by the people in 19 years of Bolivarian Government.

The 1999 Bolivarian Constitution provide the legal, political and moral framework for this. This partly explains why the U.S. strategy is "regime change", that is the destruction of the entire constitutional Bolivarian edifice so as to implement savage neoliberal policies as in Argentina or Brazil. The other – more fundamental – reason is Venezuela's oil, the largest in the world.

²⁰ Ultimas Noticias, 18th September 2018.

²¹ <http://cnae.me.gob.ve/index.php/10-mil-docentes-se-incorporan-al-mpppe-con-el-plan-chamba-juvenil/>

²² www.telesurtv.net/english/telesuragenda/Economic-War-on-Venezuela-20150122-0033.html