

## Venezuela's battle for food sovereignty

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A Venezuelan food co-operative.

When I asked Alfredo, a dairy farmer and president of the Prolesa milk processing co-operative in Tachira state, what food sovereignty meant to him, he said: "Food sovereignty is not only about being able to produce enough food to feed ourselves, it also means getting to a point where we can export food to other countries.

*"There's a global food crisis, and each day more and more people are going hungry. As Venezuelan campesinos<.em> [peasants] we need to realise that we have an obligation to the people of the world."*

This sentiment was shared by many of the campesinos I met during a recent three-week visit, together with a small delegation from the Venezuela Food Sovereignty project, to rural communities.

Alfredo told us how he was contributing his "grain of sand" towards Venezuela's food sovereignty.

Thanks to Prolesa, local milk farmers now have an alternative source to sell their milk to rather than being at the mercy of prices set by profit hungry multinationals that often exported the product for higher profits.

Instead, local farmers can now earn more for their milk and also produce quality products at fair prices for the local community and surrounding areas.

In an effort to keep prices as low as possible for consumers, Prolesa members work with other farmers, communal councils and workers at the local Ministry of Agriculture and Land (MAT) office to promote a campesino market.

This allows producers to sell their produce directly to the consumer, cutting out intermediaries.

Venezuelan campesinos like Alfredo are in an almost unique position of counting on the support of their government in this struggle for food sovereignty.

The goal of food sovereignty is enshrined in Venezuela's constitution, which was adopted in a 1999 referendum.

Going against the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy, article 305 of the constitution states food

security can only be achieved through “developing and privileging internal agricultural production”.

The constitution entrusts the state to “generate employment and guarantee the peasant population an adequate level of well-being”.

It deems *latifundios* (large privately-owned land estates) to be “contrary to social interest”. The constitution establishes the need to “transform them into productive economic units”.

When President Hugo Chavez was first elected in 1998 on a pro-poor platform, Venezuela was heading in the opposite direction.

Campeños told us that pre-Chavez governments had converted Venezuela into a “port economy”.

As we were taken around Yaracuy by Fray, a member of the 3Rs cooperative and the Jirajara Peasant Movement (MCJ), which takes its name from the local Jirajara warriors who fought the Spanish colonisers, I asked why everyone we met kept repeating this phrase.

“Chavez,” he replied.

“Chavez is like a teacher. They try and say he is crazy because he spends so much time talking on television. But every time he speaks, he is giving a class in history, economics, geography and politics.

“All this has contributed to raising the consciousness of the people.”

Fray said the growth of the oil industry, which began in the 1940s, changed Venezuela’s economy.

Venezuela’s parasitical capitalist class shifted its focus away from the export-orientated agricultural sector towards finding ways to extract a share of the oil rent.

As agricultural production fell, capitalists imported produce via the same ports the oil tankers left from.

This had a dramatic warping effect on the economy. Its effects on campesinos devastating.

People were uprooted from the rural south, leaving fertile lands uninhabited to seek jobs in the rapidly expanding coastal cities clumped around oil fields and ports.

National Institute of Statistics (INE) figures trace a fall in the rural population from 68.6% in 1941 to only 12.3% in 2001.

Neoliberal policies in the 1990s resulted in the area of cultivated land falling from more than 2.3 million hectares in 1988 to about 1.6 million by 1998, according to figures from the old agricultural ministry.

Neoliberalism impoverished millions across Venezuela, but those in rural areas were hardest hit.

Not only did those working in the agricultural sector earn only 20-30% of the average wage

of workers in other sectors, government figures show that between 1984 and 1997 their average real income fell by 73% (compared to 61% in the cities).

In November 2001, Chavez issued a package of 49 decrees, including a new land law aimed to start implementing the constitution's principles.

The law allowed large landholdings left idle to be expropriated and redistributed to campesinos for productive purposes, as per the constitution.

The large landowning oligarchy responded by seeking to overthrow the government.

The law was, in large part, shelved over the next few years as the government concentrated on defeating destabilisation attempts by its opponents. These included a coup attempt in April 2002, a bosses' lock-out of the oil industry in December 2002-January 2003, and a recall referendum in August 2004.

The Chavez government survived, but the destabilisation threw the economy into crisis. The bosses lock-out caused the economy to contract by about 25%.

Government figures show that by the end of 2003, per capita food consumption was the lowest it had been since the 1960s.

As large landowners and agribusinesses sabotaged food production and distribution, dependency on food imports rose. Imports accounted for almost 50% of calories consumed by 2003.

However, the right-wing attempts to bring down the government were defeated by the mass mobilisation of the poor majority. The government came out strengthened.

In December 2003, Chavez kick-started his "war on latifundios", launching Mission Zamora.

The aim of the mission was to target latifundios for land redistribution and provide technical and financial support to farming cooperatives.

The weakness of the campesino movement and the fact that the state institutions overseeing the land reform were still new meant the mission's was initially limited to redistributing idle land already in public hands.

By 2005, government figures show that of the six million hectares identified as latifundios, less than 650,000 hectares had been recuperated. On the other hand, 2 million hectares of state-owned land had been redistributed by the end of 2004.

Over the next three years, 1.3 million hectares of latifundio were recuperated by the government.

Agricultural funding was also dramatically raised. Funding was directed to agroindustrial projects, machinery, subsidies to producers, expansion of infrastructure in rural areas, and low-credit agricultural loans, among other areas.

Cultivated land increased from 1.6 million hectares in 1998 to more than 2 million in 2006. However, domestic agricultural production was unable to keep up with the increased consumption levels generated by the rising purchasing power of the poor thanks to the

government's pro-poor policies.

To compensate, Venezuela escalated food imports.

In 2004, Mission Mercal was established to counter capital's control over food distribution and tackle rising food prices. The state-subsided chain of food outlets soon accounted for 40% of food distribution.

At the same time, a huge boom in cooperatives was occurring. The number of cooperatives rose from 10,000 in 2003 to 74,200 by mid-2005. INE census figures recorded 121,000 people as working in agricultural-based co-operatives,,14% of all workers in the sector.

Leonardo, one of the founders of Prolesa, said the decision by Nestle and Leche Tachira to refuse to buy milk from local producers during the bosses' lock-out was the catalyse to create the co-operative.

"They drove into the middle of town and simply poured the unprocessed milk onto the road," he said. "Meanwhile mothers were unable to get milk for their children."

With an initial loan from the government, savings from some cooperative members, and the commitment of some local dairy farmers to sell their milk to the cooperative, Prolesa was born in 2004.

To assist the creation of cooperatives, the government created Mission Vuelvan Caras ("About Face").

In the mission, 50% of scholarships offered to 650,000 participants were for agricultural training with an emphasis on co-operation.

Despite being a small operation, Prolesa is seen as a threat by the dairy corporations. After Prolesa was formed, they have began offering local farmers higher prices.

More than 40 local farmers preferred to continue supplying Prolesa, even if it meant earning less.

Corporate campaigns to divide the community have been unable to undermine the bonds of solidarity that have been created

It may be why Prolesa, despite financial and technological difficulties, is still functioning unlike most cooperatives set up at the same time.

Often, co-operatives were set up simply to access loans. The money was then divided up among the members. In other cases, people found it too difficult to work in cooperatives and decided to return to their individual farms or move back to the city.

INE figures demonstrate that the number of people employed in agricultural activities declined by 11% between 2005 and 2008.

This was not the only challenge facing the campaign for food sovereignty.

Government social programs helped dramatically reduce extreme poverty in the countryside, falling to less than 20%. The huge increase in funding was not matched by a similar rise in production, but agricultural production nonetheless rose 18% between 2003

and 2008.

But the even greater surge in consumption increased Venezuela's dependency on food imports. Moreover, a combination of price and currency controls acted as a disincentive for local production at the same time as importing became cheaper.

The increasing strain on Mercal supermarkets showed with increasingly bare shelves.

During 2007, big capital used its control over food production and distribution to caused food shortages. This helped cause a drop in support for the government and was a factor in the defeat of a referendum on Chavez's proposed constitutional reforms.

Falling oil prices and rising international food prices forced the government to begin taking more radical measures. These have included nationalisation of food distribution companies found violating the law and increasing the take over of the unproductive land of large landowners.

This has set the stage for a new phase in the struggle for food sovereignty in Venezuela.

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