

Venezuela: Land reform, food sovereignty and agroecology

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A massive transformation of agriculture is occurring in Venezuela, a transformation that has lessons for every other country in the world. The Law of the Land and Agrarian Development, the Law of Food Sovereignty and Security and the Law of Integrated Agricultural Health set out the agenda (they can be found on www.mat.gob.ve2, in Spanish). The policies are based on the premises that farmers should have control of their land and product, that the country should produce its own food, and that chemical fertilisers and pesticides should not be part of agriculture.

Land in Venezuela has been in the hands of about 500 families and corporations since the 1800s and worked by an impoverished peasantry. Much of the land was underutilised as cattle ranching, pulpwood plantations, export crops such as sugar cane, or left idle. Most food was imported. This land is gradually being taken over by the government and handed to local communities who have been fighting for it for two centuries.

Food sovereignty is a key government policy, guaranteed in the constitution: "Food sovereignty is the inalienable right of a nation to define and develop priorities and foods appropriate to its specific conditions, in local and national production, conserving agricultural and cultural diversity and self sufficiency and guaranteeing food supply to all the population." Food imports are only allowed if there is a shortfall of production in the country, and exports occur only after domestic demand is met.

Control over production is in the hands of farmers' cooperatives on the newly distributed lands. Assistance is provided by the government for cooperative management and to establish processing plants so the farmers are no longer victim to the power to set prices of the processors and distributors. Agriculture is planned, at three levels: the National Agrarian Assembly, the regional agrarian assemblies and the local peasants and producers councils. The regional assemblies are elected by the peasants and producers councils.

One goal is the elimination of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Venezuela has had a long experience in their use and the change will be gradual. Agroecology colleges have been set up with the assistance of Cuban advisors, as Cuba went through this process 20 years ago and is now almost fully organic. Agroecology is promoted in all agricultural development projects, to producers and institutes.

I had the opportunity in July 2010 to visit Venezuela and see the changes that are taking place. Here are my impressions.

Urban agriculture - Caracas

Venezuela is emulating the remarkable achievements of Cuba, where more than half of the fruit and vegetable needs of the urban population are produced within the cities. As in Cuba, the city food gardens are all organic, providing non-toxic safe fresh food to communities. The benefits of urban agriculture are seen as contributing to food security and sovereignty, improving the urban environment, supplementing the income of families, communities and schools, and fostering learning and recreational activities. The gardens are set up on unused land, at schools and, using raised beds, on concrete and balconies.

Community centres have established these gardens wherever possible. Some are in the very early stages and need more time and increased soil fertility to fully develop. One that I saw, on a former industrial site, was built on subsoil only six months ago, and was suffering the consequences, showing patchy growth and pest damage; a worm farm has been set up on that land to produce fertiliser to improve the hard soil. The community centres include a free health centre, usually a subsidised shop, a computer centre, adult education facilities and some even run a community radio.

An excellent example has been created in the median strip of a busy highway in Caracas by homeless people, former drug addicts, and is producing excellent crops. Marigolds are planted in each raised bed to provide habitat for beneficial insects, so that pests are no problem. Fertility is provided by a mixture of mountain soil and manure. When asked why the garden was unfenced, the spokesperson said that the usual local suspects for vandalism were already working on the project, so it needed no extra protection.

Cacao production and processing – Barlovento region, Miranda State

Cacao growers, mostly descendents of former slaves brought from Africa, were until recently among the most impoverished people in the country, in a highly profitable industry. The cocoa beans were bought up cheaply by international corporations like Nestlé by various means of price manipulation, and processed overseas. Now the producers are organised into cooperatives that have, with government assistance, set up factories for the primary processing into cocoa powder then into chocolate. The factories are managed by the producer's cooperative and the factory workers, who are from cacao growing families; decisions are made collectively. The price they receive has gone from 1 bolívar per kilo (about 15 cents) to 14 bolívares in three years and now provides them with a good standard of living. Still a large proportion of the beans are sold on the open market, but the government has set and enforces a minimum price that the commercial processors have to pay.

Fishing – Chuao, Aragua State

Venezuela has the strongest fishing regulations in the world, and they are supported by the fishing people. Trawling has been phased out, fishing near reefs is prohibited, stunning devices like dynamite and poisons are not allowed, and nets cannot be left in the water – they are just thrown out and hauled in. The size of the nets allows small fish to escape to breed or provide food for the larger fish. Sardine fishing is not done, as these are near the bottom of the food chain and needed for other fish. All fishers are organised into a local Fisher People's Council, and the National Council makes policy. The regulations are enforced by the government and the fishing people themselves, in order to provide long-term sustainable harvests. The fishing families now have education, health care, decent housing and retirement pensions, benefits they have never had before. National fish production has

actually increased under these policies. The cooperatives run the cool stores and market the catch.

Field crops – the plains states of Cojedes, Portuguesa and Yaracuy states

The central plain of Venezuela is the main food producing area, a region formerly totally dominated by huge estates. The land is gradually being redistributed to the communities that have worked the land for generations. Most of the people are Indigenous and were growing corn and beans long before the Spanish colonists arrived.

The communities that have gained control of the land have different methods of land ownership and organisation. Some communities chose to own individual plots and work together for machinery and knowledge sharing and marketing. Others form cooperatives of from seven to more than 100 members to hold title of the land in common and work the land together. Other land remains as state farms with day to day decision making determined by the farm workers. I saw several of these farms, with sizes ranging from several hundred hectares to several thousand.

The main crop is corn, the staple food eaten by most people every day, as arepas (corn flour cakes) and cachapas (ground up fresh corn cooked as a pancake). Other crops include cassava, beans, sweet potatoes, squash and rice. Fruits such as guavas, mangos, bananas, pawpaws, avocados and citrus are commonly grown.

The farming process is mechanised, with harvesting machinery provided by Argentina and tractors by Iran, Byelorussia and China. In one area, San Carlos in Cojedes State, a huge state-owned agricultural support centre has been set up, to hire out machinery to the cooperatives surrounding it. Urea was also stocked – on questioning we were told that while agroecology is the policy it will be some time before some farms develop the skill and motivation to stop using chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

One farm was experimenting with organic techniques, quite successfully. Some fields were mulched with crop residue and treated with biological controls, while others were still managed chemically. The organic fields had far fewer weeds but obviously lacked some fertility. The biological controls were successful.

Biological control and biofertiliser labs are being set up across the country to produce beneficial insects and fungi, and soil inoculants. Several species of predatory wasps and lacewings are used to control caterpillars and aphids respectively; they are bred in large numbers in the laboratory and released onto the crops at the right time. Metarrhizium and Beauveria fungi are produced to control other insect pests – corn grubs and coffee beetles. Trichoderma fungi are used to keep root rotting diseases under control.

Biofertilisers are microbes that release nutrients out of the soil. The well-known Rhizobium is produced to assist nitrogen availability for legume crops, and Azotobacter, another nitrogen provider, and Bacillus megaterium, which releases phosphorus are also part of the lab's work. Currently the organisms are provided to farmers at no cost in order to encourage agroecology, as a temporary measure. The labs are planning to produce other microbes including mycorrhizae, another phosphorus releaser.

Seed banks and seed treatment plants have been established to provide the range of agricultural genetics suited to the various regions. The aim is to completely bypass the

international corporations that supply seed around the world, and preserve the genetic diversity that has been built up in Venezuela for thousands of years. Genetically modified (GM) seeds are not allowed, though this is not ruled out in future if some are found to be safe. The precautionary principle is used. Seeds are treated with the beneficial fungus *Trichoderma* instead of fungicides for storage and sowing.

Agroecology college – Barinas State

We visited the Paulo Freire Latin American School of Agroecology, an institute set up to provide education for future advisors and teachers from around Latin America. Students are nominated by either the Via Campesina network or the Brazilian Landless Peasants' Movement. The aim is to reclaim agriculture from the neoliberal model, especially for Indigenous and Afro farmers. The stated philosophy of the school is social transformation in defence of Mother Earth, and its motto: Estudio, trabajo, organización con agroecología, en la revolución (Study, work, organisation with agroecology, in the revolution).

The students spend the morning in class and the afternoon in the fields doing practical work. One student was working on a pig-breeding project, mating domestic pigs with wild pigs to create hardiness, and distributing the offspring to a network of participating farmers. On weekends and for a month each year the students go out to the farming communities to live with the farmers in order to both teach and learn. The school has its own farm, producing cattle, pigs, cheese, grains and vegetables on 50 hectares. Permaculture is integrated into the education process. There are no fees to attend the school.

What does it mean for Australia?

Australia went through land reform several times in history – the selection acts of the 1860s and 1870s, the closer settlement acts of the 1890s and the soldier settlement programs following the first and second world wars. These reforms have created a nation of family farmers. While there have been inroads by corporate farming, the majority of farmland is owned and managed by the farmers themselves. This is what people in Venezuela have been fighting for and are now achieving. In Australia we do need legislation to prevent the spread of corporate farming and protect the family farm, as several states of the USA have.

While Australian farmers do control their land, they do not have influence over the prices they receive. The Venezuelan experience shows that farmers can cooperate to obtain fair prices, and can bypass the power of the huge corporations that control food processing and distribution. This is what Australian farmers need to do, and can do. An excellent example is the Organic Dairy Farmers of Australia cooperative that sets the price of milk for its members.

The other important lesson is that governments can pursue genuinely sustainable policies. Governments can assist farmers in organising themselves, can facilitate the phase-out of chemical agriculture, and can act independently of the World Trade Organization. Supermarket chains can be broken up or nationalised to prevent them from constantly reducing the prices they pay farmers. Processors can be stopped from using the threat of cheap imports to screw producers. We need governments committed to genuine sustainability. The changes in Venezuela have enormous significance globally as they show what governments and people are capable of doing.

The significance inside Venezuela is immeasurable. A farmer on a newly founded

cooperative farm at San José told us: “Ahora tenemos dignidad” (Now we have dignity). A few years ago that land was part of a huge estate on which the man was a labourer living in extreme poverty. When asked what will happen if the opposition wins government and tries to give the land back to the big landlords he said: “There will be civil war. We are not going to let them take our land away again”.

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