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### Abstract

Although “informal urbanisation” is a main characteristic of many cities in the global south, and extensively discussed by a growing number of publications, many contribution fail to take its political side into account. With this background the article discusses changes in the relation between the state and squatter-settlements in Caracas. Major attention is paid towards innovative instruments that have been introduced by the socialist Bolivarian government to foster the development of a “participative and protagonist democracy” in the slums of Venezuelas capital.

### **Informal urbanisation, self-organisation and “Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”: The Caracas Experiment**

One of the most threatening characteristics of current global urbanisation is the rapid growth of slums. Every sixth person on the globe has to live under miserable and degrading living conditions, mostly on squatted land and without access to basic infrastructures (UN Habitat 2003), and this number is still on the rise. Given this background, the Venezuelan capital Caracas provides a highly interesting lecture in slum politics. Not only is the city a nearly paradigmatic example of informal urbanization, within which the majority of neighbourhoods has been built without formal permission, but, more importantly, it has been embarking upon a highly interesting experiment regarding the handling of these settlements. In the context of a “Bolivarian” project (compare Ellner, Hellinger 2004) of socialist transformation, the slum population is made a top-priority of national reforms and grassroots democratic elements are added to the existing representative-hierarchical system of urban planning. These changes do not only aim at “more” political representation and a surmounting of discrimination, rather they aspire to achieve a completely new system of communal policies, thereby pushing the political aspect (often times ignored) of informal urbanisation into the foreground of their efforts.

**Caracas – city of barrios**

The city development of Caracas is a direct result of the Venezuelan economic model based on oil exports. As part of an enormous expansion of federal expenditures made possible by high revenues, a remarkable infrastructure and a plethora of ultra-modern skyscrapers rose in the 60s and 70s in the Venezuelan capital. This modernisation, however, included only the

core of the metropolis. Parallel to this, the population of the Venezuelan capital grew dramatically and Caracas underwent an uncontrolled and explosive expansion in all directions. Since sufficient new housing was never provided for the masses of in-migrants into the city the first squatter settlements arose as early as the 40s. These expanded quickly and occupied, in subsequent decades, almost all spots of previously undeveloped land.

As a consequence of this urban development history, Caracas has developed to an authentic dual city in which the brick-red of the barrios, immediately adjacent to the city-core in intermediate areas and climbing up to impressive heights within the mountain ridges, is the dominating colour. The majority of the Caraqueños do not live within the modern core of the city, but in informal, self-erected settlements.

Resulting from this development, the living situation in most parts of the city is determined by problems that are internationally characteristic of informal urbanisation. Residential areas can often times only be reached by improvised stairways, and connections to the drinking water grid, waste-water disposal or power supply are mostly non-existent. Thus, water and electricity supply are improvised by means of illegal “hook-ups” to existing grids, and waste-water disposal is accomplished through collection-canals. Often surfaced streets are nonexistent, so that Caracas’s inter-connection by means of mini-busses (the most common means of transportation) and rubbish removal is problematic. Furthermore, an undersupply of fundamental social services such as schools, medical facilities, libraries and playgrounds adds to the problem.

Additional to physical problems barrio inhabitants are disadvantaged by a multitude of legal hindrances: ownership of homes built by means of private initiative has, for example, not been able to be formally legalised until just recently. Ignorance of any form of construction norms, hindered attainment of legal renter’s status, and the lack of urban infrastructures even enabled, in combination with infractions against official planning for urban spaces, the razing of entire city districts. This results in a situation whereby, in addition to miserable living conditions, housing in the barrio means having to live under a permanent state of insecurity. Added to this is the cultural stigmatisation of the barrios, which, in the eyes of the culturally dominant Venezuelan middle class, are perceived more as a disease rather than normality (Perdomo & Bolívar 1998: 124) and as a result in many ways criminalised and discriminated.

Barrios are thus not only characterized by bad living conditions, but also by a social, cultural and legal discrimination. As a consequence Caracas represents a case, in which the modern notion of an egalitarian, planned and rational city is only valid for the city-centre and the districts of the prosperous classes, while the barrio residents (and, at the same time, the majority of the inhabitants) are excluded from participation in “normal” urban standards.

### **Barrio politics a la Bolivariana**

This discrimination was, for many years, not even recognised as a topic for discussion by the Venezuelan city planners. The barrios were considered to be “marginal settlements”, “informal” or “ranchos” (i.e. “huts”), and their expansion was rejected. Neighbourhoods that had grown to hundreds of thousands of inhabitants were not included into urban infrastructure planning; they received no political representation and did not even appear, at times, in the local city maps.

This changed only step-by-step in the 80s, when the ballots of the growing barrio population became increasingly significant, and intellectuals made barrios an issue. Left-wing grass-roots organisations formed within the slum quarters, and new social movements evolved that made the plight of the barrios their focus for political action. Frequently founded for the solution of a concrete problem, barrio groups took over responsibility, step by step, for individual areas of district organisation. From kindergartens to football fields to neighbourhood newspapers, numerous activities were accomplished no longer by the government, rather by the neighbourhood organisation. This subsequently led to a growing political awareness of the barrio movements as well, which laid down the foundation for many of today's activities.

When a socialist government assumed power in Venezuela in 1999, the integration of the barrios, through a number of steps, was made a top priority of national politics. The main reason for this development is the simple fact that the slum population quite obviously represents the political basis for the current government. Particularly in crisis situations, such as the putsch attempt in 2002, or in connection with the oil industry strike in 2003, the government was able to get support from the population in the barrios, which came down from their neighbourhoods into the city and re-established the balance of power by massive demonstrations. Furthermore, support of grassroots initiatives also corresponds to the ideological core of Bolivarian political beliefs. The concept of a "citizens power" (Poder Ciudadano) constituting the Republic of Venezuela in the form of a direct democracy is the core concept of the new constitution passed in December 1999, and it also formed a crucial point of reference in the (failed) constitutional reform initiatives of 2007. Thereby, the authority of the people is understood as a power that both constitutes and controls the State by its creative self-initiatives. The responsibility of the apparatus of the State is, therefore, to strengthen the authority of the people and to develop elements of the "participatory and protagonist democracy".

## **Communal councils**

In this context, the incorporation of the Barrios into mainstream policies became a central issue for a wide range of urban planning politics. The common denominator of the various initiatives is, the idea of strengthening the "participatory and protagonist democracy" whereby the residents shall not be simply informed of the State's intentions and allowed to bring forward their suggestions and concerns; rather, investment plans and action priorities should be worked out by the Comunidades and implemented with their participation.

This basic idea is most clearly reflected in the installation of Consejos Comunes (local councils, roughly), which were set up as a new planning structure in March 2006. In an information disclosure by the Ministry for Social Development and People's Participation, it was stated that the assignments of the Consejos Comunes would involve the following: "The Consejo Comunal is the organisation that is most advanced and can be made up of neighbours from a certain Comunidad (a neighbourhood consisting of about 200-400 households of this kind), in order to assume the day-to-day execution of the authority of the people, e.g. in order to transform decisions made by the Comunidad into practice. It is the fundamental authority for planning, in which the people formulate, execute, monitor and assess the public policies." The Consejo Communal can be viewed as a kind of parallel district government, which is installed in addition to the existing executive branch, and which is directly linked to the neighbourhood as an action-body liable to account. The connection of

power to the residents, anchored in the Consejos, is guaranteed by means of citizen assemblies, whose determinations are binding for the Consejos.

The functions and job-descriptions of the Consejos are neither determined individually nor detailed precisely in law. Specifically however, the Ministry does list a whole series of targets:

- “1. The existing fundamental organisations in the Comunidad shall connect and motivate the formation of new organisations wherever it is necessary.
2. A unified work-plan shall be developed and its results shall be assessed, in order to address the problems that the Comunidad can solve by its own means.
  - a) Material and human resources, which are in the Comunidad’s possession, shall be analysed.
  - b) Support from the neighbourhood shall be accomplished, in order to solve the problems of the Comunidad.
  - c) Development of projects shall be encouraged, in order to solve essential problems that do not lie within the domain of the Consejo Comunal.
3. Social control shall be realized for all activities that develop within the Comunidad, whether they be of federal, communal or private nature (food supply, education, health, culture, sports, infrastructure, co-operatives, missions, etc.)
4. The founding of co-operatives and the forging of projects for endogenous development shall be encouraged. (...)”

In terms of content, the Consejos Comunales are thereby thoroughly equipped as complete local administrations which, in principle, are able to tackle any issue that is important to the residents. It is essential that this palette of tasks is not only written down on paper; but also has a financial basis with considerable sums of money assigned by commission of the Consejos.

Consequently, corresponding self-administering bodies have developed, in the mean time, in approximately 75% of the Venezuelan communities, which work parallel to the State’s existing apparatus, assuming their responsibilities in part, and which are able to be directly controlled by the population. Their political influence is considerable, and they continue to strive for growth.

## **Contradictions and problems**

As a result of these reforms, a remarkable democratisation of city planning has been implemented, in which formerly marginalised communities now play a central role. But of course, such a process does not exist without discrepancies. The new participation structures suffer quite often due to Venezuela’s (and most of Latin America’s) typical culture of corruption, bribery and favouritism. Cases involving unfair advantage or improper invoicing become public from time to time, while the press is energetically discussing the nepotism inherent in a “boli-bourgeoisie”, which is supposed to have established itself within the new decision-making structures and which now supposedly controls the granting of contracts.

Problems, which are more likely to be of significance in the future, are to be found as well in the horizontal coordination of various Consejos Comunales and in the tensions grassroots

democratic procedures and hierarchical-bureaucratic decision-making within the administrations. Here, the notion has always been dominant to date on the part of the activists, that these issues should be solved step-by-step in a kind of syndicalistic fusion of local communal councils into district councils, which then successively form city-wide councils.

Furthermore, for many issues the question remains unanswered, which “public power” - the communal council, the traditional administration or the president – has the right to take a decision in the event of conflicts. So far this has always been solved case-by-case, which leads to a non-transparent and superficial flow of information between the grassroots mobilisation and the bureaucracy. The fact that it is becoming more urgent, at least in light of the growing consolidation of Consejos at higher decision-making levels, to find a form of merger between administrative-bureaucratic and grassroots decision-making, is obvious.

### **Conclusion: Self-organisation and the State in the development of slums**

Caracas – an experiment in governance? When we look at the history of squatters’ settlements in Caracas, it becomes quite evident that central urban development problems are not a result of sheer growth leading to an “ungovernability” of the city. Contrary to that, the “barrio-question” is attributable to a mix of failure on the part of the State, lack of interest on the part of the ruling elite and active discrimination. This mixture forms not only the justification for the evolution of the barrios; rather, it also cast in stone for many decades the disadvantaged status of the barrio resident. Bad living conditions, and social and political discrimination remain, therefore, in an almost irreparable vicious circle.

Such an inter-relationship is, by global comparisons, not unusual. Also, the approaches to activate and empower residents are not exactly internationally unique. But what differentiates the current Venezuelan politics vis-à-vis informal settlements from the main body of its international peers, is their integration into a transformative national concept of “participatory and protagonist democracy”. Given this background, a genuine shifting of power to the residents takes place and Venezuelan slum politics represent an important lesson for the world-wide treatment of informal urbanisation processes. To come to the point, its core message is: an integration of marginalised residential settlements can only be successful if it is able to break through the structures of the marginalisation and actively transfer decision-making power to marginalized classes.

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