



# From Dialogue to Action: Paying the Democratic Deficit in Venezuela

*Participatory Democracy at the Local Level*

*Presented to National Conference on Dialogue and Deliberation  
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***“The only way to end poverty is to give power to the poor”***

*Hugo Chávez Frías*

*President*

*Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*

# Overview

- What democracy/whose democracy?
- Context: Venezuela (1998-2006)
- Institutional mechanisms/tools of participation:
  - Venezuelan constitution (1999)
  - Participation Laws
- Participatory cases:
  - Communal Councils
    - Barinas
  - Barrio Adentro (Inside the Neighbourhood)
    - Caracas
- Enablers/Problems
- Dialogue

# What democracy? Whose democracy?

- Interpretations of democratic theory
  - Dominant model: representative democracy, elitist democracy
  - Growing **alternatives**: deliberative democracy, deep democracy, radical democracy, real democracy, strong democracy, **participatory democracy**
- The “democratic deficit”

# Venezuela





# Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

- Pop. approx. 25 million (85% urban)
- Cultural mix (African, Indigenous, European)
- Govt. structure:
  - federalist republic
  - Unicameral
  - 3 designated seats for indigenous reps.
- Wealth distribution:
  - households in poverty: reduced from 55% (1997) to 38% (2006)
  - Middle to wealthy class: approx. 20%
  - Social investment: 41% of GDP currently spent on social programs (funded primarily by previously uncollected taxes).
- Land distribution: 5% of pop. controls 75%
- Economy:
  - Highest growth in the world – 17% in 2004
  - Highest growth in South America – 9.4% in 2005
  - petroleum, construction, transportation, communication, mining
- Trade alternatives: ALBA, Mercosur, multi-polar

# Venezuelan Context:

- 40 yrs of representative democracy and two-party rule (Punto Fijo Pact)
- 1976 oil industry nationalized
- “Caracazo” of 1989
- Failed military insurrection in 1992 (led by Hugo Chavez)
- Major shift in 1998 (broad left coalition led by Chavez’ Polo Patriotico)
- Brief coup d’etat in 2002 (led by a coalition rep. the opposition: former ruling elite, Chamber of Commerce, media, union and Catholic church hierarchy – supported by US govt.)
- Oil industry (management) lockout 2002-03
- Referendum in 2004 (spearheaded by US-funded opposition)
- Opposition withdraws participation in Dec./05 congressional elections
- Opposition not expected to participate in Dec./06 presidential elections
- Chavez’ current popularity between 60-70%

# Representative Democracy

- 1998: **Election** of Hugo Chavez (62%)
- 1999: **Referendum** on constituent assembly (92% vote yes)
- 1999: Elected constituent assembly re-drafts constitution
- 1999: National **referendum** on the constitution (72% in favour)
- 2000: President ratifies term in **election** (required by constitution) (60%)
- 2001: Enactment of 49 decrees
- 2003: Opposition organizes recall referendum
- 2004: Chavez wins presidential **referendum** (60%)
- 2005: Bolivarian coalition wins 70% of municipalities/parishes and 20/22 state governments
- 2005: Bolivarian coalition wins 100% of National Assembly\*
- Dec./06: Presidential election

\* Opposition does not participate (only 10%).

# Participatory Democracy

- Constitution (1999) provides:
  - Legal and institutional context
  - Electoral recall and referenda
- ALBA – Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas
- Co-managed and worker-run factories/businesses, cooperatives
- Communal Councils and Social Accountability
- Participatory Budgeting
- “Alternative” Media
  - 100’s of participatory, community radio and television stations
  - Big alternative media: VTV, Vive, Telesur, Radiosur, Diario VEA
- Rich history of grassroots activism and participation – accelerated since 1998
- Culture of democracy: “citizenship” and self-government



# Institutional Tools of Participatory Democracy:

- Constitution
- Participatory Democracy Laws

**Citizen's  
Assembly**



# Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (1999)

## Fundamental Principles

### Article 5

- Sovereignty resides in the people
- Direct and indirect participation
- The state emanates from, and is subject to the sovereignty of the people.





# Chapter III: Article 62

- The participation of the people in forming, carrying out and controlling the management of public affairs ensures involvement in their complete development, both individual and collective.
- It is the **obligation** of the State and the **duty** of society to facilitate the generation of optimum conditions for putting this into practice.



# Chapter III: Article 70

Participation and involvement in political affairs can be manifested by:

- voting to fill public offices
- Referendum
- consultation of public opinion
- mandate revocation (recall)
- legislative, constitutional and constituent initiative
- open forums and meetings of citizens

social and economic affairs:

- citizen service organs
- self-management, co-management, cooperatives in all forms, including those of a financial nature, savings funds, community enterprises, and other forms of association guided by the values of mutual cooperation and solidarity.



# Chapter III: Article 132

•Everyone has a **duty** to fulfill his or her social responsibilities and participate together in the political, civic and community life of the country, promoting and protecting human rights as the foundation of democratic coexistence and social peace.



# Participatory Democracy Laws

- Organic Planning Law
- Organic Law of Municipal Public Power
- Organic Law of the Government Federal Council
- Law of State Councils of Planning and Coordination of Public Policies
- Law of Communal Councils
- Law of Local Public Planning Councils (CLPP)

# Law of Communal Councils

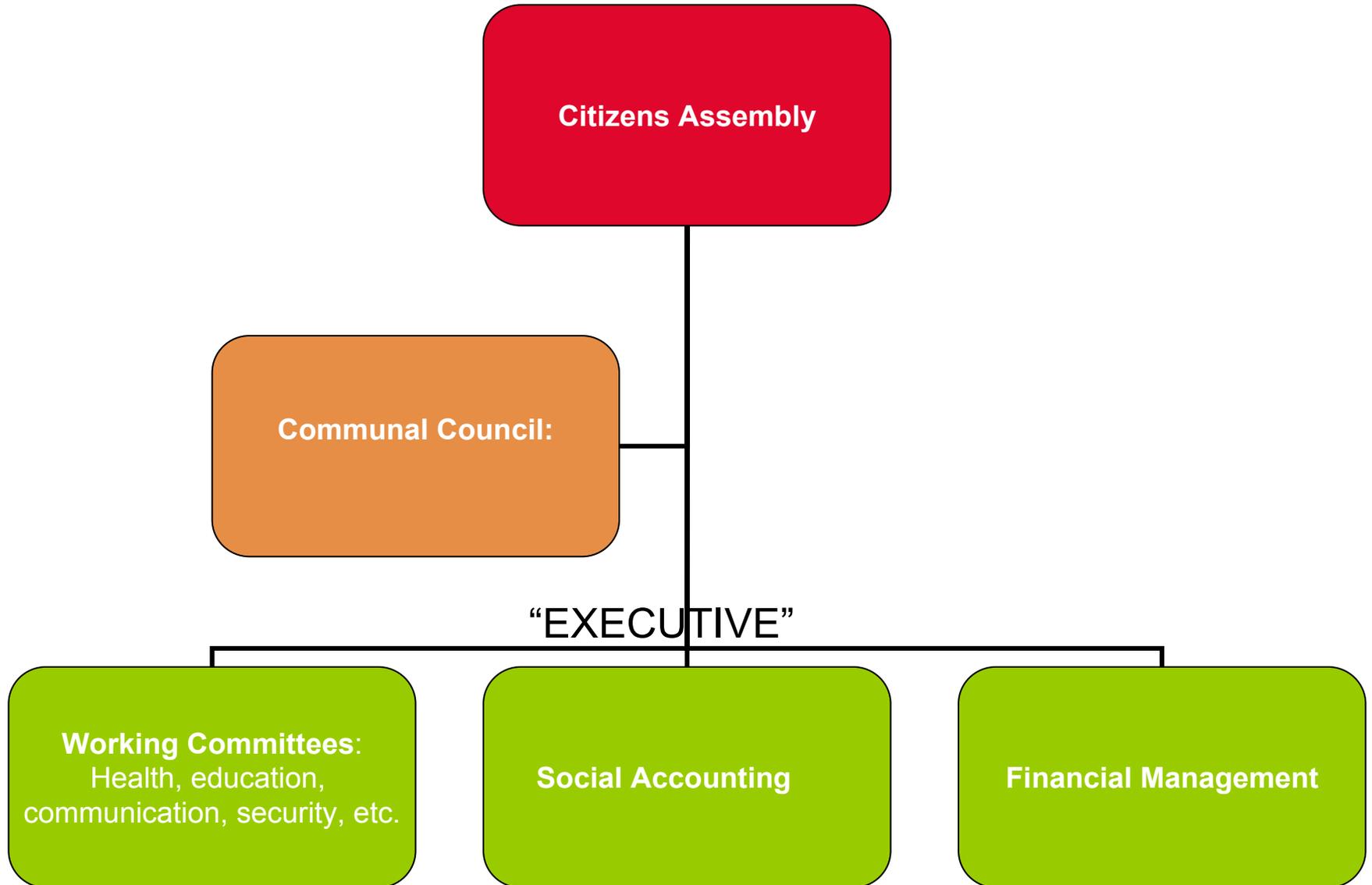
- Formulation, implementation, control and evaluation of public policy by the people



# Law of Communal Councils: Article 182

“[The communal councils] are manifestations of participation, expression and integration between diverse community organizations, social groups and citizens that **allows organized society to directly manage public policy and projects** that respond to the needs and aspirations of communities, and the construction of an equal and just society.”

# Communal Council Structure



# Structure of Communal Council

- **Promoter's Commission:**
  - Organizes community participation and first constituent assembly
- **Community Constituent Assembly:**
  - Min. participation: 10% of community
  - Min. age of participation: 15 yrs.
  - Determines CC's geographic scope/# of families
  - Establishes Communal Council structure
  - Establishes **working committees**
  - Establishes electoral commission: organizes election of CC spokespeople
  - Approves community development plan / CC projects

# Structure

- **CC Working committees:**
  - Spokespeople: 2 yr. term, 1 time renewal, revocable mandates
  - Make-up varies by community, based on priorities
  - Types of committees: health, housing, water, energy, culture, endogenous development, etc.
- **Finance Committee**
  - Communal Bank
- **Social Comptroller**



# What does a Communal Council do?

- Carry out decisions of Citizen's Assembly
- Organize community / promote ongoing dialogue and deliberation
- Develop participatory community diagnosis, budget and community development plan
- Collaborate with other social orgs. and levels of govt.
- Administration: social comptrollership, finance and evaluation



# Barinas

- At least 75 communal councils (14 parishes)
- Community priorities: **infrastructure and/or service-related, such as roads, sewage, water, electricity, buildings (community centres, health clinics, schools), sidewalks, housing; and healthcare, recreation, security, programs aimed at youth, children, women, homeless**
- Avg. project funded at 15K



# Misión Barrio Adentro: Inside the Barrio

## Participatory Health



# The Bolivarian Constitution: Articles 83 & 84

- “Health is a fundamental social right and the responsibility of the State, which shall guarantee it as part of the right to life.
- The organized community has the **right** and **duty** to participate in decision-making concerning policy planning, implementation and control at public health institutions.”



# Barrio Adentro Mission

- More than 2,500 (2004) clinics constructed (including remote areas)
- 20,000 Cuban doctors and sports trainers in Vzla
- # of patients/year: 18,366,628
- 254 diagnostic clinics constructed (Barrio Adentro II)
- Bolivarian University and Latin American School of Medical Sciences are training VzIn doctors



# How are they formed/ What do they do?

- Health Committee formed as part of the communal council: i.e. the Bolivarian Health Committee
- The Health Committee manages the building, schedule, equipment, and doctor's residence, and introduces the doctor to the neighborhood.



# Results

- Democratization of Democracy!
- Dignity
- Local decision-making by the people
- High rate of participation – especially women
- Stronger citizenship / greater influence in public policy
- Redistribution of resources/wealth
- Transparency (equal access to info)
- Collective thinking
- Increased employment?
- Respect for existing structures/cultures
- Political AND administrative decentralization

# Enablers

- Leadership:
  - Political (all levels)
  - Community
- Institutionalization of participation:
  - Constitution
  - Legislation/policies
- Empowerment/devolved or shared decision-making
- Strong participatory culture
- Focus on decentralization and redistribution
- Regional cooperation/collaboration

# Problems:

- 40 yrs. of representative democracy:
  - reluctance to cede power
  - paternalism/clientalism
  - “old garde” bureaucrats blocking change
  - uneven level of grassroots organization
  - challenges to existing associations and organizations
  - external pressures to focus on institutional/representative democracy
  - inherited apathy, skepticism, fragmentation
- uneven application of participatory laws
- lack of planning
- International interference / misinformation

**¡Gracias! Thank You!**

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