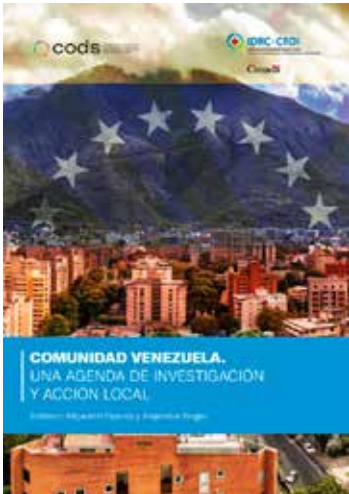


Democracy, governance and civil society in Venezuela



About this briefing note

This briefing note summarizes the conclusions of the chapter “Democracy, governance, and civil society in Venezuela” by Roberto Briceño-León from the book *Community Venezuela: An Agenda for Research and Local Action*, edited by Alejandro Fajardo and Alejandra Vargas. The book features contributions from various researchers working on Venezuelan issues and is informed by a series of discussions that took place between July and September 2020. The initiative was coordinated by the Center for Sustainable Development Goals for Latin America at the University of Los Andes in Bogotá, and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Introduction

The fundamental structural cause of Venezuela’s current crisis is the deterioration of its political institutions. Although the resulting economic collapse and the humanitarian catastrophe afflicting the country are the most pronounced consequences, at the root of the crisis is the way in which Venezuelan society has organized power structures. In the political realm, current discussions tend to revolve around contemporary events: for example, the holding of elections or shifting alliances of political coalitions. Although relevant, these events do not necessarily inform the more fundamental questions at hand. How did this political crisis come about in Venezuela? How was the democratic

progress during the second half of the 20th century lost? Based on the work of Briceño-León (2021), this summary seeks to respond to these questions, emphasizing the role of civil society, which is frequently neglected in discussions of the country’s political landscape. It concludes by offering recommendations on a research agenda that can strengthen civil society and improve local governance, two spaces of resilience in the midst of the crisis.

The rise and fall of Venezuela’s civil society agenda

At the end of the 20th century, civil society in Venezuela expanded and strengthened its political function. Amid greater decentralization of government, civil society groups were able to participate more significantly in public life and exert growing influence over the selection of local authorities. This was also partly owing to the falling credibility of politicians and political parties at the time. A growing middle class was expanding its influence, including through its relationship with sectors of the business community. And yet a perception also prevailed among some Venezuelans that living conditions were not as good as they could be. Venezuelans were demanding and expecting more.

Contrary to what many expected, however, the strengthening of civil society and its agenda came to an abrupt end. This was due in large part to the clash between traditional political structures on the one hand, and the emergence of the new movement led by President Hugo Chávez on the other. The victory of the Chavista project, which evolved from a messianic military crusade to a hegemonic political project, was the definitive obstacle to the advancement of civil society. Lost with the civil society agenda was the relevance of prior efforts to strengthen local governance and bolster decentralization.

The political project led by President Chávez tried to exercise strict control over the initiatives and organization of civil society from the start. Although rhetorically Chavismo proposed a move from “representative” democracy to “participatory” democracy, in reality the new government ended up strengthening the concentration of power in the figure of the president. With the political opposition ultimately discredited and unable to compete, the main obstacle to political hegemony remained in organized civil society. From that point, the government and ruling party prioritized weakening civil society.

Political scientists have described the evolution of the last twenty years in Venezuela in various ways. Briceño-León chooses to divide the analysis into two periods: 1999–2012 and 2012–2020. Between 1999 and 2012, Venezuela was governed under a charismatic, clientelist hegemony. Politics in this period were driven by the charisma of the leader and a clientelist apparatus financed by the revenue windfalls from high oil prices during the first years of the new millennium. The death of President Chávez and the progressive deterioration of the economic situation mark the second period—from 2012 to 2020—of repressive authoritarian hegemony. With no charisma in leadership and a decline in the financial power to support clientelism, power has been maintained through more blunt instruments of authoritarianism and repression. Electoral competition, which was fundamental in legitimizing President Chávez’s rise to power, has been progressively undermined, while growing human rights violations by the state’s security forces have been documented (Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos, 2020).

The enduring foundation of democracy in Venezuelan civil society

Evidence shows, however, that in spite of immense difficulties, civil society still exists in Venezuela. A recent mapping coordinated by Briceño-León et al. (2019) found 958 civil society organizations active in Venezuela, distributed in each of the country's 24 states. Most of these organizations are dedicated to the defence of economic, social, cultural, and/or political rights. A hypothesis can be drawn from this statistic: Forty years of living in a democracy have, for many Venezuelans, left an enduring commitment to preserving an open and plural society.

Although the authors found that 20 percent of the organizations were “weak” the mapping affirms that there remains an active and diverse civil society to be strengthened. This is not common to all authoritarian regimes and represents a fundamental entry point, from the local level, to fostering Venezuelan democracy.

Briceño-León argues that specific forms of research and action can be deployed in this environment to help strengthen democratic life. For instance, Venezuelan civil society needs to retain the capacity to monitor, document, and—when necessary— denounce rights abuses to avoid their normalization. Forms of civic education—especially those emphasizing liberal democratic values and peaceful conflict resolution—are also vital. Civic education can be especially effective when citizens “learn by doing” in the context of local association life. Finally, civil society and allies in the research system must also sustain the organizational structures, both formal and informal, that facilitate meetings, communication, and consensus building among stakeholders.

Conclusions and recommendations for action research

Participatory and action research, connected to these spaces of civil society resilience in Venezuela, could be a powerful tool for strengthening the remaining foundations of democracy in Venezuela. Four streams of action research are proposed that could simultaneously strengthen civil society and generate rigorous and essential information. These proposals could be implemented in the short term if focused on objectives that transcend the current political context.



Photo by Carlos Becerra/Getty Images

Strengthen cultures of democracy and pluralism

Training programs should be implemented, at various educational levels, that focus on the following:

- Reinforcing the importance of the freedom to choose in a society
- Elucidating the difference between the act of voting and the right to elect representation
- Promoting respect for differences and pluralism

In the initial phases of these programs, research questions could inform a baseline of public understanding. What is the level of knowledge and acceptance of liberal democratic values among social and political leaders at the local level in Venezuela? How do they understand the participation of civil society in the process of the country's recovery? Is the act of voting viewed as a transaction of patronage, or are there aspects of a substantive democratic culture that should be identified and reinforced? How do citizens obtain information about the policies that affect their lives? To what extent do the Venezuelan people tolerate different political and social groups?

Several groups and organizations already contributing to the betterment of Venezuelan society—including schools and universities such as Fe y Alegría and the Catholic University Andrés Bello—could help implement an educational program of this type. Several nongovernmental organizations operating in the country—such as the Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, Caracas Mi Convive, Acceso a la Justicia, and Provea—could also lend their experiences and capacities.

Strengthen the social fabric

To strengthen local governance, action-research projects in Venezuela should pursue three main objectives:

- Salvage local leadership and provide local leaders with tools so that they can better promote democratic local governance through civil society or municipal government
- Support peaceful conflict resolution in local communities, including through the use of justices of the peace and neighbourhood commissions
- Strengthen non-state mechanisms of social pressure that are proven to contain or regulate the use of force in daily life

To begin with, it would be necessary to assess and monitor in each of the country's territories where local political and economic forces have an opportunity to play a larger role in local governance. Subsequently, specific questions could inform project selection and design. In which areas is greater participation in local governance most desirable and most feasible? What is the feasibility, taking into account the existing social context, of establishing municipal courts? How can the practice of justices of the peace be reinstated and in what type of communities? How can they be protected from being co-opted by organized crime?

Networks currently exist in Venezuela that could facilitate the identification of organizations and individuals committed to understanding and improving the dynamics of local governance in the country. One idea worth reviving in this effort is the notion of justices of the peace, which were first created by law in 1994 but had a short-lived existence. Justices of the peace were intended to be elected directly by the people but linked to municipal government with a mission of providing local leadership on mechanisms of reconciliation (Acceso a la Justicia, 2020).

Strengthen public-private cooperation at a local level

Action-oriented research projects could strengthen public-private cooperation by pursuing one objective: establishing incentives for private volunteering in public activities and organizations so that a culture of cooperation and joint responsibility can grow with regard to the public interest.

The design of incentive systems can be informed by the answers to a few fundamental questions. What are the models of public-private cooperation that allow for the contribution of civil society to public management? What are the political obstacles to a public-private cooperation model in health and education? What are the areas and levels of care in which a mixed management model could be applied? Finally, what is the desirable level, and potential limit, of community or private companies in the management of public services?

There are several successful examples of what is proposed here, including the Cecosesola Cooperative in Lara State, which for several decades has managed a market in Barquisimeto for small or medium-sized farmers. The private educational organization Fe y Alegría has schools in the poorest and most isolated sectors of the country. On the island of Margarita, the Council for the Alliance for Nueva Esparta provides cooperative governance aimed at economic prosperity.

There are also cases of public-private collaboration in the health sector, including at the Hospital de los Tucaní in the state of Mérida. Despite being an institution dependent on the central government, it was local businesspeople and leaders of the community that established the guidelines for the hospital's operation. Finally, in matters of public management policy, the experience of the Barquisimeto Advisory Council continues to define the development goals of the city, maintaining a space for citizens to participate in economic and territorial management.

Valuable knowledge and expertise on public-private cooperation exists in Venezuela that can be documented, transmitted, and even replicated.

References

Acceso a la Justicia. (30 de julio de 2020). Propuesta para la reinstitucionalización de la justicia durante la transición. <https://accesoaljusticia.org/propuesta-para-la-reinstitucionalizacion-de-la-administracion-de-justicia-durante-la-transicion/>

Briceño-León, R. (2021). Democracia, gobernanza y sociedad civil en Venezuela. En A. Fajardo, A. Vargas García (Eds.), *Comunidad Venezuela. Una agenda de investigación y acción local* (pp. 11-40). CODS-IDRC.

Briceño-León, R., Falisse, M., & Ávila, O. (2019). Mapeo de actores de la sociedad civil en Venezuela. Laboratorio de Ciencias Sociales. LACSO. Working Paper.

Carrillo Peraza, M. R., & Espinoza, L. M. (2008). La victoria del ciudadano. Un modelo de acceso a la justicia a nivel local. Alcaldía de Chacao.

Hernández, M., & Chacon, A. (2015). Dinámicas municipales contra la violencia: el caso Chacao. En R. Briceño-León (Ed.), *Ciudades de vida y muerte* (pp. 255-282). Alfa.

Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos. (2020). Venezuela: Informe de la ONU insta a la rendición de cuentas por crímenes de lesa humanidad. <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26247&LangID=S>

Zubillaga, V., Llorens, M., & Souto, J. (2015). Una tregua es posible: la violencia y el pacto del cese al fuego entre mujeres y jóvenes armados. En R. Briceño-León (Ed.), *Ciudades de vida y muerte* (pp. 225-254). Alfa.