

“Misiones”: Social Programs of the Bolivarian Revolutionary Government of Venezuela as a development model for alleviating poverty

Introduction

In December of 1998, the world turned its attention to Venezuela. The oil-producing nation elected a leftist president, the very man who had failed to take power via coup in 1992. Because of the amount of American and European business interests in Venezuela, the election of a president who wanted to remove the neo-liberal practices favored by the previous administrations could potentially be problematic. Although he did not declare himself radical or even a socialist at the onset, it was clear that Hugo Chavez Frías intended to make changes in Venezuela. Chavez “eventually declared that he was following and explicitly anti-capitalist and pro-socialist agenda” and “declared his political program to be socialist in January 2005” (Wilpert, 3). He envisioned a new brand of socialism. “The main values of 21st century socialism, according to Chavez, ought to be liberty, equality, social justice, and sustainability” (Wilpert, 188). He instituted the Bolivarian Revolution which permeated all aspects of Venezuelan politics and society. The Bolivarian Revolution is so named in honor of Simon Bolivar, the great liberator of South America. “Simon Bolivar’s vision of a unified nation [is] led by a strong but compassionate Caudillo” (McCaughan, 89). Hugo Chavez perceives himself in just this way: a strong man who is looking out for the best interests of the Venezuelan people. As explained by Javier Corrales, “unlike other caudillos, Chavez approximates a bona fide Robin Hood” (Corrales, 35).

Hugo Chavez’s social programs, including education, land reform, and other projects more commonly referred to as “*misiones*”, are some of the most progressive

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aspects of his government. The connotation of the word *mision* is significant in the message the Chavez is trying to convey to the world about the Bolivarian revolution. It traditionally signifies group of people sent by a church to carry out religious work, especially evangelization in foreign lands, and often to establish schools, hospitals, etc. Not only do the *misiones* provide the social services commonly associated with the word, they also serve as a way to spread the word and ideals of the revolution. In any event, despite his often criticized persona and dubious policies, Chavez has found some success and support for the implementation of his social programs and *misiones*. These programs are notable because of the unique holistic approach that the government adopted in order to address the multi-faceted issues of poverty. The goal of the programs and *misiones* is not only to provide the basic services that the citizens of Venezuela need, but to also insure that everyone is healthy and prepared to be involved in the participatory democracy that “would finally eliminate the vestiges of colonialism and dependency” (Hawkins, 103). Not all recognition of the programs is positive. There are many critics that chalk the *misiones* up as little more than government propaganda or as a vehicle for promoting the revolutionary ideas. This paper seeks to look at both the purported successes of the programs, as well as the evaluations, to evaluate the efficiency of the *misiones* as a development model and a method for alleviating poverty.

Poverty in Venezuela before Chavez

In order to better understand the revolutionary nature of the social programs in Venezuela, it is important to first examine the levels of poverty and existing social programs in the years leading up to the Chavez government. Like most Latin American

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nations, government assistance and social programs especially in the mid twentieth-century generally took the form of land reform. Land reforms directly responded to the *latifundo* tradition that was prevalent both in Venezuela and the other former Spanish colonies. The *latifundo* system is comparable to the plantations in the United States, only exaggerated to such a degree that the *latifundos* operated much like an autonomous state with a feudal system. Under this system the wealthy elite owned the majority of land and thus held all of the power. Redistribution of land, therefore, was one approach to try to equalize power and wealth.

The social programs in Venezuela began to change with the shifts in the economy. As a petro-state, Venezuela experiences booms and busts depending the oil market. During the boom period in the 1970's and 1980's, Venezuela's major preoccupation was modernization causing a movement away from agriculture and thus land reform no longer took center stage. "During the boom years, anti-poverty policies meant providing free universal education, free health care, a decent minimum wage, and massive public works projects" (Wilpert, 106). Most of these programs would not have been possible without the high oil revenues and therefore suffered greatly when the oil prices plummeted during the mid-80's through the mid-90's. During these bust years, the economy of Venezuela suffered greatly, resulting in massive cuts in spending. The newly minted programs of free education and health care could no longer function free of charge and thus required payments from the participants which rendered the poorest Venezuelans incapable of benefiting from the services. Another phenomenon that marginalized the poorest sector of Venezuelans was the shift in the middle class' spending capabilities. "As the country became poorer and poorer the median wages

declined dramatically...as a result the middle class gradually took over the country's public education and public health system" (Wilpert, 106-107). The change was so substantial, that by the late 1990's, "that hardly any programs were left that directly benefited the poor" (Wilpert, 107).

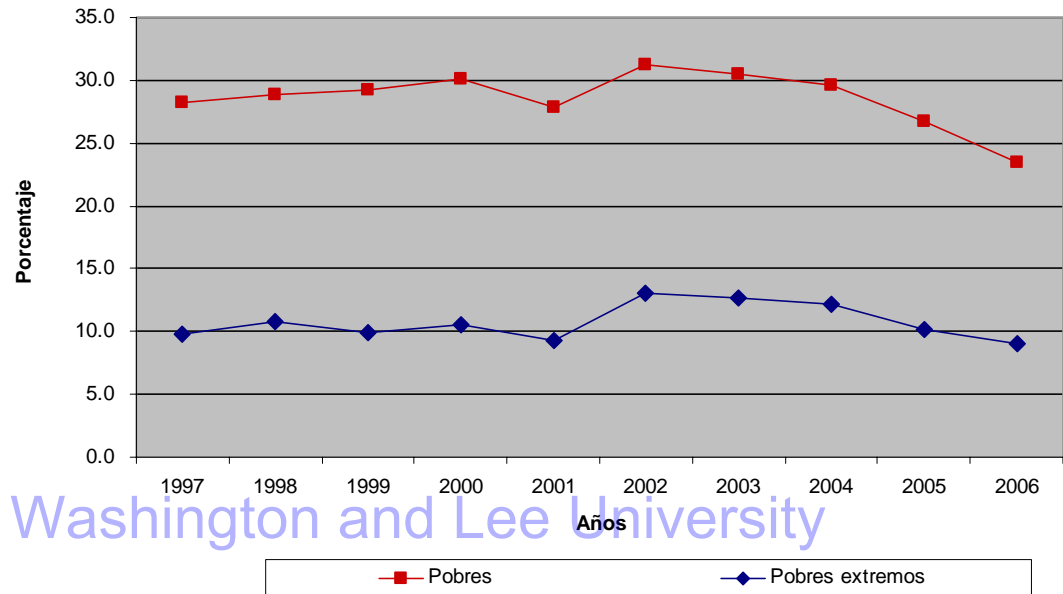


Figure 1: Number of people in poverty and extreme poverty from 1997-2006. Provided by the Venezuelan Government

These difficult years caused Venezuela to have not only the greatest poverty rate increase in all of Latin American, but also to have "the largest proportion of the population living in poverty" (Wilpert, 107-108). These figures are particularly alarming when compared to the extreme wealth enjoyed by the country only twenty years before. These factors were the basis of Chavez's revolutionary approach to social programs and influenced the socio-political atmosphere in such a way that the people of Venezuela were eager to embrace the charismatic Chavez as the leader of their country. The citizens were desperate and looking for someone completely different from the previous regimes

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that would be willing to implement new ways of governing Venezuela and putting the interest of the people before the interests of foreign oil conglomerates. In true populist style, Chavez came from the people and made his campaign on the promises of a new Venezuela. A nation that would stand its grounds against foreign influences and involve the entire *pueblo venezolano*, not just the elites that had been in control and reaping all of the benefits of Venezuela's abundant natural resources. Although the abundance of oil in Venezuela could theoretically fund development, as noted by the philosopher Thomas Pogge, "ample resources can become an obstacle to growth, because they foster coups, oppression, and corruption" (Pogge, 143). Chavez aims to reverse this phenomenon that was prevalent in Venezuela before the nationalization of oil, and funnel the oil revenues into fostering a healthier and more capable populous. He hoped to "deliver a Venezuelan New Deal to the majority poor" (McCaughan, 114).

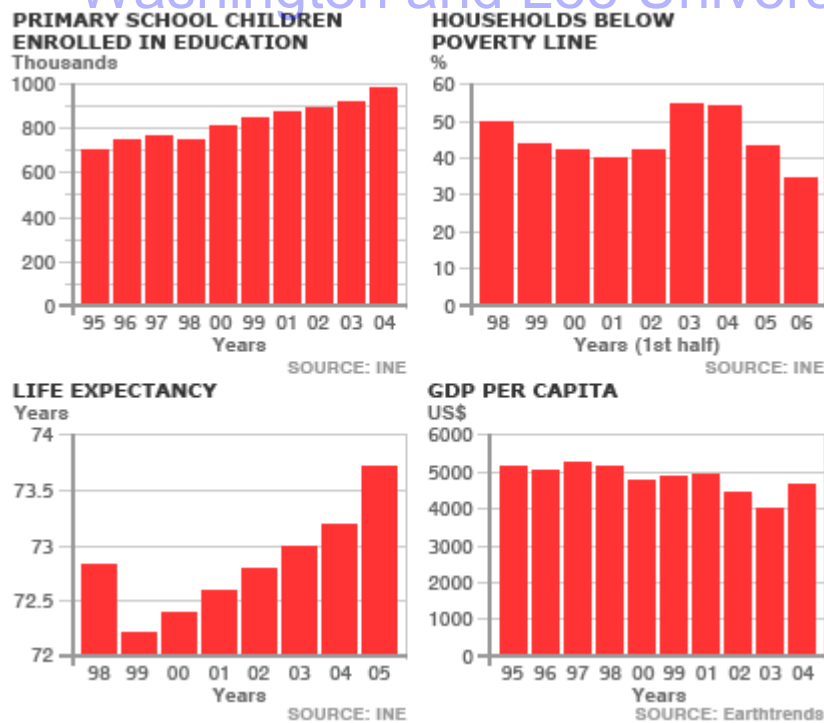


Figure 2: Other measures of poverty from 1995-2004, also provided by the government.

Chavez's Approach to Social Programs

When Chavez first took office in 1998 he signed into affect the *Plan Bolivar 2000*, which was a “quick fix” strategy for the welfare provision for the poor that only addressed the most pressing issues (McCaughan, 89). “Plan Bolivar 2000 and the Constitutional Reform clearly put him on the side of the country’s poor majority, but it was not a radical program” (Wilpert, 185). Under this plan approximately 40,000 troops were used to repair roads and schools, distribute food and build health centers in effort to integrate the military into the process of the Bolivarian Revolution (McCaughan, 88-89). Chavez also implemented the Bolivarian Circles in December 2001, which were the precursors to the later *misiones* programs. These circles were focused on “ raising the consciousness of citizens, developing all forms of participatory organization...and coordinating projects of interest to the community in the area[s] of health, education, culture, sport, public services, housing” (McCaughan, 108). After the recession of the early 2000s, caused not only by a dip in oil prices but also by the attempted coup and subsequent unrest brought on by the opposition, there was an upsurge in the price of oil in 2003. The Chavez government now had the resources that it needed to fund more radical and far reaching programs.

These new programs were called the *misiones* and were part of preparations for the presidential recall referendum that would occur in August 2004 (Wilpert, 109). The recall referendum is a practice supported by the 1999 Venezuelan constitution in which a leader can be recalled if the opposition can obtain signatures for 20% of the voting population in favor of the action. The National Electoral Council (CNE) carried out the recall in August 2004, which Chavez was able to win with nearly 60% of the voters

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opposed to removing Chavez from office. “The missions were established to bypass the lethargic bureaucracy of the state, which had remained largely in the hands of the opposition” (Gott, 256). The four percent of the GDP that he allocated to these programs upped his approval rating from 45 percent in 2003 to 59 percent at the time of the referendum (Corrales and Penfold, 103). Additionally, the *misiones* grew from the increase in the ideological radicalization by the Chavez government in the years following the referendum (Wilpert, 109). These *misiones* have become increasingly specific and cover a wide spectrum of issues ranging from healthcare to reforestation and even improving national identity. Chavez created the Consolidated Social Fund (FUS) to administer resources to the anti-poverty programs (Rodriguez, 1). Now the misiones can be seen everywhere: in government posters, the red shirts given to program participants, and the bloated budget allocations (Rodriguez, 2-3). “Chavez has brought innovative social programs to neighborhoods that the private sector and the Venezuelan state had all but abandoned to criminal gangs, though many of his initiatives came only after he was forced to compete in the recall referendum (Corrales, 35).

Adult Education

Education policy is the top priority of the Chavez government and focuses on “improving education for the country’s poor. The *misiones* are the primary vehicle to provide financial aid for special programs, such as literacy training” thus they have dedicated the “greatest increases in state resources to education” (Wilpert, 120). Chavez has also adopted a new educational philosophy, the Bolivarian model, which “emphasizes cooperation and community in its curricula and universal access and egalitarianism in its

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organization” (Wilpert, 121). Instead of only providing better schooling for the children currently enrolled in school, Chavez decided to take education a step further by providing schooling for adults who either received little or did not complete their educations. In this way, Chavez is not only improving educational opportunities for current and future Venezuelan children, he is grandfathering the services so older Venezuelans who lacked opportunities when they were school aged so that they are able to become educated and literate as well. Like many of the other programs, the educational projects and *misiones* did not really take hold until after 2003 when the economy was able to recover.

The best known of the adult education programs is *Mision Robinson (I and II)*. This *mision* serves primarily as a literacy campaign. They get their name from Simon Bolivar’s tutor. According to government statistics, in the summer of 2007, over a million and a half illiterate Venezuelans had been taught to read and write by *Mision Robinson I* at the one of the nearly 2,000 facilities provided by the government. By the same time, government statistics show that *Mision Robinson II* graduated over 1,300,000 from one of the one-hundred thousand learning centers and gave out nearly 100, 000 scholarships. In addition to just addressing illiteracy, the adult programs also offer options to either finish basic education or acquire additional schooling. The government figures are impressive, but there are critics who question the accuracy of the numbers. Francisco Rodriguez, former chief economist of the Venezuelan Nation Assembly from 2000-2004, claims that *Mision Robinson* is cost inefficient as it requires \$1000 to graduate a single participant whereas other literacy programs in Latin America cost about \$60 per graduate. Similarly, it is suggested that most of the programs are more propaganda than anything else. Some figures show that in regards to *Mision Robinson*, instead of the 1.5 million that the

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government claimed had become literate through this mission, only 1.1 million were illiterate to begin with (Economist.com). Although Chavez announced in 2005 that illiteracy in Venezuela was all but eradicated, Francisco Rodriguez found in his investigation that over 1 million Venezuelans remained illiterate after 2005 (Rodriguez, 3). Also, the investigation conducted by Rodriguez and others found no evidence supporting the government's claims of employing 210, 410 trainers for the literacy misiones (Rodriguez, 4).

Mision Ribas is a program that gives Venezuelans who did not complete their secondary education the opportunity to earn their diplomas. These people may include people who left school for various reasons ranging from economic necessity to the unavailability of higher schooling because of location. Nearly 200,000 Venezuelans had graduated from the program in June 2007 with over 600,000 enrolled at the time, according to government statistics.. For those who have completed the basic levels of education but need further training to either secure better employment or enter into the university system, *Mision Sucre* provides such opportunities. It is primarily comprised of programs that provide additional post- secondary education training in order to enter university. The government claims that it had given out just shy of 100, 000 scholarships for further education by June of 2007. Although the program has an element of poverty relief, critics such as Javier Corrales suggest that it has been used to buy votes (Corrales and Penfold, 106).

The success of the different adult education *misiones*, at least as presented by the government, is noteworthy. In reality, it is probable that the numbers provided by the chavistas are not entirely accurate. In the case of these *misiones*, the critics provide

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compelling evidence that support this doubt. Francisco Rodriguez is an especially credible critic as he worked in the Chavez government for many years and saw the discrepancies first hand. Although these programs are admirable and provide a key element to fostering the capabilities to fully participate in Venezuelan society and government, they have not been as far reaching and impressive as the government suggests. In terms of their efficiency, perhaps the Chavez government should be more frugal and adopt the lower cost programs seen throughout Latin American which are purportedly just as effective, if not more so. The government should definitely continue supporting these *misiones*. However, it might behoove both the government and the citizens to adopt a slightly different, more cost-effective, approach to adult education.

Childhood Education

Although Chavez developed the adult education programs to solve the current illiteracy rates, there has also been a push to reform the childhood education as well in order to ensure a well educated population to carry on with the ideals of the revolution in future years. In order to achieve universal education and implement the Bolivarian model of education, the government started Bolivarian schools ranging from pre-school through the university level. The government describes the Bolivarian schools based on six characteristics:

they seek to transform the children into participatory, critical and integrated individuals who identify with the national identity; they are participatory and democratic, where all members of the school community participated in the decision-making and execution of school activities; they are at the service of the

community; they promote social justice and thus seek to ensure that all children complete their schooling; they are examples of permanent pedagogical renovation, where the school is concerted into a space for the dialogue of knowledge and cultural productions; and they fight against educational exclusion (Wilpert, 123).

The pre-school project, known as the *Simoncito* program, provides universal early education for Venezuelan children. The program not only provides daycare for children of working families, but it also aims to “equalize the starting conditions for children entering school for the first time” (Wilpert, 122). According to the minister of education, “we in the school do not have the capacity to resolve socio-economic inequalities. But we do have the capacity, independently of the origin of the children, to make the conditions more equal before they enroll in first grade” (Wilpert, 122). The goal of the *Simoncito* program, then, is to ensure this starting equality.

The model of the Bolivarian school is set up so that it aims to combat a variety of causes of poverty. The elementary schools are day-long, which not only frees parents “from daily childcare duties, allowing them to work during the day” but it also “allows the incorporation of more cultural and sports activities” (Wilpert, 122). The schools also combat hunger and malnutrition by providing three regular meals a day. Additionally, the schools “are supposed to be more closely integrated into the community than traditional public schools” (Wilpert, 122).

Although the high school model shares many objectives with that of the elementary school model, it emphasizes “retaining students for the entire duration of the

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high school and on relating their school work to the real world” (Wilpert, 125). The “idea is to create a high school curriculum that is oriented more by practical applications, rather than traditional disciplinary divisions” (Wilpert, 126). In this way it is much like a liberal education model, but it also provides training for jobs and stresses civic duties.

The criticisms of the childhood education programs are much less prevalent than those of the adult programs. The only hesitation expressed by the opposition is that the Bolivarian schools serve as a vehicle of indoctrination; that the focus is more on teaching the revolutionary ideas than improving education. Regardless of potential evaluations, any improvement in education is a step in the right direction. As education is the great equalizer and provides an informed population, the government should work towards expanding and improving these projects.

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Health

The Venezuelan government recognizes that health is a key ingredient that ensures a productive and participatory society. Although education is the government’s top priority as far as the *misiones* are concerned, the health programs are the ones that receive the most international attention. The comprehensive health programs are compiled into a mission called *Barrio Adentro*. *Barrio Adentro I* aims to provide healthcare to all Venezuelans, regardless of capability to pay. Free medical treatment is provided by “the people’s hospitals”, *Barrio Adentro* medical centers, and popular clinics. Not only is medical treatment free of charge, there are also free dental, optical, and prescriptive medications. *Barrio Adentro II* takes the program a step further by creating diagnosis centers that are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with emergency

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and diagnostic capabilities. The third part of *Barrio Adentro* includes modernizing the medical technology and developing new models for administration and distribution of care, as well as promoting community participation.

One of the main criticisms of this program is the dependency on Cuban doctors. Although many Cuban doctors came to work in Venezuela in 1999, the establishment of the *Mision: Barrio Adentro* in 2003 brought in 8,000 Cuban doctors to provide health care for the poorest parts of Venezuela. The counter argument provided by the government is that there have also been measures taken, namely the educational programs that provide higher education, that will create a Venezuelan source of trained medical professionals that take charge of the program. Additionally, Venezuelans who needed of further medical attention were sent to Cuba in order to receive the highest quality treatment available (Gott, 257). The number of Venezuelans helped by these help programs, at least the ones provided by the Bolivarian government, are significant. In terms of popular clinics, the government claims to have constructed over 2, 000 and provided over 225 million medical consultations in the clinics. The government goes as far as to claim that it has saved over 40 thousand lives and over two thousand Venezuelan babies were born thanks to the health *misiones*. In response to these impressive figures, some other health statistics suggests that the programs are not as effective as the government would like to suggest. The percentage of underweight babies rose from 8.4 in 1999 to 9.1 percent in 2006 and the number of households without running water rose from 7.2 to 9.4 percent (Rodriguez, 2).

Chavez has also implemented preventative programs that deal with malnutrition, a common cause of poor health amongst the poor. *Mision Mercal* is a *mision* that aims to

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prevent malnutrition by providing access to supermarkets and discounted food. *Mision Alimentación* is another *mision* that aims to combat poor health and malnutrition by providing access to good nutrition. The program involves a food distribution element that involves coops and buying local foodstuffs. The criticism of these programs is that they have created a distorted economy in which the government subsidizes two-thirds of the cost of imports but the poor cannot find basic food items (Rodriguez, 4). Currently in Venezuela there is an abundance of luxury food items such as champagne and Beluga caviar, but basic items such as milk are difficult to find and therefore heavily rationed. There is a disconnect in the objectives of *Mision Alimentacion* and *Mision Mercal* and what is actually occurring in the country.

The programs also go beyond basic healthcare needs and beyond Venezuelan borders. *Mision Milagro* is a unique program provides free eye surgeries to restore sight. As of summer 2007, the government claims that over 200 thousand people had benefited from the operations. As far as the exportation of certain misiones such as *Mision Milagro*, there are critics who suggest that the programs are little more than a front for spreading leftist ideology. In the case of Peru, “they claim that Chavez is trying to export populist left-wing rebellions and further tilt the region away from United States influence” and serve as a catalyst for the “protests against the [Peruvian] governments free market policies (Carroll, Mar 24). Although it is apparent that Chavez is trying to gain support throughout the region, it is unlikely that elderly Peruvians who go to Venezuela for eye surgeries will return and spearhead a political upset. According to Mirtha Noguera, president of the Venezuelan Ophthalmology Society, “she admired any effort to improve

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basic health services, but that Mission Miracle prioritized political objectives while neglecting other pressing health needs in Venezuela” (Romero, Feb 26).

Societal Participation

In addition to improving the quality of life for the Venezuelan population, all of the *misiones* seek to improve society’s participation in the Bolivarian revolution. One of the key elements of the revolution is its emphasis on securing participatory democracy. Venezuela was a democracy before Chavez, but more akin to the representative democracy that is used in the United States. Participatory democracy can be defined not only as a form of government which incorporates a broader range of society in the governmental process, but it also can be used to describe the involvement of society in community programs. Both definitions are useful in the Venezuelan case; the *misiones* provide services from different angles that ensure participatory democracy in both senses of the word.

Many of the *misiones* reach out to marginalized groups, in hopes of incorporating them in both society and the governmental process. One of the primary *misiones* dealing with inclusion is *Mision Identidad*. It that deals with voter registration and provides identity to the thousands of Venezuelans not previously recognized because they are in the excluded parts of the country and/or society. In so doing, the entire population can be registered on the electoral roll. According to government statistics, almost 23 million Venezuelans have received identification, 250, 000 indigenous Venezuelans were given identities, and 425,000 foreigners became Venezuelan citizens as of June 2007. More than 2.7 million new voters have been registered in less than two years (Corrales, 38).

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Other *misiones* reach out to other marginalized or underrepresented groups. *Mision Guaicaipuro* aims at incorporating indigenous Venezuelans, *Mision Piar* addresses problems specific to mining communities, *Mision Madres del Barrio* is designed for housewives living in poverty that has programs that aim at alleviating their own poverty and work towards eliminating poverty in their community, and *Misión Negra Hipólita* aims to help street people or those who live in extreme poverty.

Mision Miranda, another important mission, seeks to secure the success of Venezuelan democracy. Perhaps the least expected program to be considered a *mision*, this program handles the organization of the armed forces in order to secure protection of and order in the Bolivarian Revolution. Chavez seems to have an unorthodox perception of what the military's role should be. He focuses on the patriotic and voluntary nature and stresses that with Venezuela's social ills, "we cannot afford the luxury of having 100,000 men in the barracks...while people starve in the street" (Martinez, 114). Having a loyal military base for the revolution is also key in keeping Chavez in power.

Development and Modernization

As Venezuela is a wealthy nation, the government would like to see it achieve "developed" status. Although it is still considered a developing nation, Venezuela makes multi-million dollar loans to other Latin American nations as well as providing other forms of assistance. Nevertheless, Venezuela must cross certain benchmarks in order to be internationally recognized as such. As seen in the years preceding the Chavez government, most attempts at achieving modernization have occurred at the expense of social programs. Chavez does not choose between modernization and social programs, all

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are included in the holistic approach of the misiones. *Mision ciencia* looks at ways to better the quality of Venezuelan life by science and technological advances. By June 2007, the government reports that over 100,000 Venezuelans became technologically literate, including over 1,000 indigenous Venezuelans. Additionally the government reports indicate that it gave out approximately 5,000 scholarships for further studies in the sciences, and 76 new technological advances were realized. By so doing, Venezuelans are gaining parity and are able to participate in the increasingly technology driven globalized economy.

Venezuela is also following the current movement towards environmentally conscious technology with *Mision Revolución Energética*. This green mission is attempting to lower Venezuela's overall energy consumption by implementing programs to substitute traditional light bulbs with energy-saving bulbs, for example. The government claims that as of June 2007, over a million light bulbs had been exchanged, with energy expenditures at 80% less than when traditional bulbs were in place. Not only are the misiones aiming to improve Venezuela's future environmental contributions, they also aim to repair the current damage. *Mision Arbol* specifically supports reforestation and conservation and finding "greener" methods for development. The program planted over 300 million trees as of the summer of 2007, according to government statistics.

Although Venezuela is working towards developed status and is making significant changes, *Mision Cultura* was enacted to ensure the promulgation of Venezuelan culture and nationalism. It is a *mision* that does not directly attack poverty; instead it aims to reinforce the Venezuelan national identity by virtue of promoting Venezuela culture and traditions. This is a *mision* that seems to be promoting the interest

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of the revolution more than the interest of the people. By building up the nationalist sentiments, especially as associated with Chavez, the government is securing its future.

Land Reform (*Mision Zamora*)

Although it is not solely comprised of *misiones*, the land reforms enacted by the Chavez government go hand-in-hand with the aims of the misiones and the goals of 21st century socialism. As mentioned before, land reform was common in the 1960's and 1970's (Wilpert, 109). Nevertheless, Chavez made it a key goal in his programs and developed new approaches for this traditional problem. The new land reform laws established three institutions to oversee the land reform process:

the National Land Institute, which is responsible for land tenancy and redistribution; the National Development Institute, which is responsible for technical assistance and infrastructure; and the Venezuelan Agriculture Organization, which provides assistance and commercializing the agricultural products" (Wilpert, 111).

Under the law, the controversial practice of recovery "expropriation" of unused land owned by the elite serves as a way to redistribute property amongst the masses. The more innovative approach adopted by Chavez, however, deals with urban land reform instead of the traditional rural practices.

The majority of Venezuelans live in cities, with 87% considered living in urban centers. Many of these people are poor citizens who live in barrios, or shanty towns, along the cities' periphery. These people do not own the land; they are simply building shacks and "squatting" on the land owned by others. Prior proposed solutions to the

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barrio problem included tearing down the barrios and moving their inhabitants into government funded housing, a feat eventually deemed too costly and destructive (Wilpert, 116). Chavez decided in 2002 that he was going to give the titles to the barrios to their inhabitants, but unfortunately this could only be applied to publicly owned lands. A law has been proposed and subsequently held up in the assembly that would allow for the transfer of privately owned lands as well (Wilpert, 117). Of the many reasons that support redistribution of urban land, the director of the National Technical Office for the Regularization of Urban Land Tenancy, Ivan Martinez suggests, “giving title to the barrio inhabitants is recognition of the social debt which the state owes the population” (Wilpert, 117). In this way, “urban land reform is not just a means for advancing capital accumulation in the barrios, but it is also a means for instituting participatory democratic self-help in the communities” (Wilpert, 118). The appeal of such a program is that it addresses many issues simultaneously. When people acquire title to their own self-built home in the barrio, they have some security for the first time that the home is theirs and will not be repossessed by the original owner. They can use the home as collateral for a small loan, to either improve their home, to buy a better home, or to invest in a small business, the process of acquiring urban land titles is a collective process, which brings the neighborhood together in the interest of improving the neighborhood’s infrastructure such as roads, access to utilities, security, comfort, etc (Wilpert, 120).

Government figures show that the program gave out 75 thousand land titles which means that it distributed over 32,000,000,000 sq. hectares of land.

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One of the major criticisms surrounding the land reform *mision* is that the expropriations that the government carries out are a sign in the restriction of security of property rights (Rodriguez, 2). In 2005, more than 250,000 acres were seized by the government and instead of benefiting the poor the majority of such “land grabs” will go to party activists and the military (Corrales, 37). Although land redistribution potentially can be one of the most effective *misiones*, it is also one of the most probable sources of corruption. The government figures may be accurate, but the recipients are more likely to be Chavez’s cronies than the deserving poor. In order for this program to be effective, it would require closer monitoring to ensure that the government gives the redistributed land to those most in need.

Constructive Evaluations

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It cannot be denied that the social programs enacted by the Bolivarian government are extensive, but there are various proven and potential shortcomings that must be considered. The question of sustainability and longevity of the programs is paramount in the discussion of the value of these programs. As has been established, Venezuela undergoes boom and bust periods, contingent on the oil market. These programs are flourishing now, but it is difficult to guarantee that they would continue as is or improve should there come a bust in oil prices (and according to the Venezuelan cycle, there will come a bust). The concern that the *misiones* will follow the same destiny of earlier programs that previous governments enacted during the boom years: they will either be altered to such a degree that they no longer serve the desired demographic or they will cease to exist at all.

There are those that suggest that Chavez's approach is not enough. That is to say, despite the large increases in spending on social programs, Chavez could redirect the large sums of money he spends on loans out to other countries, for example, and channel it back into more extensive programs for the Venezuelan people. Even the money he spends on the program seems to be done inefficiently. Additionally, in the first 8 years of Chavez's government, approximately 25.12 percent of the budget was allotted to health, education, and housing which was essentially the same as previous governments (Rodriguez, 3). Although most Venezuelans would like to see programs such as food subsidies continue, they do not feel that the issue of poverty has been sufficiently addressed (Rodriguez, 4). As of September 2007, 22 % of Venezuelans feel that poverty has improved, and 50% think that poverty has increased (Rodriguez, 4).

Similarly, how Chavez steers commerce not only affects how the *misiones* are funded, but what goods and services are available to Venezuelans. According to Francisco Rodriguez, former chief economist of the Venezuelan national assembly, "neither official statistics nor independent estimates show any evidence that Chavez has reoriented state priorities to benefit the poor" (Rodriguez, 1). There is some evidence that supports the notion that income inequality has increased over the course of the Chavez administration, the Gini coefficient has risen from 0.44 to 0.48 from 2000 to 2005 (Rodriguez, 2). "Rather than killing inflation, which is crucial to alleviating poverty, Chavez sets price controls and creates local grocery stores with subsidized prices. Rather than promoting stable property rights to boost investments and employment, he expands state employment (Corrales, 40).

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The issues of corruption and clientelism are the favorite examples used by the opposition to criticize the programs of the president. It is not at all unusual for a Latin American government to be criticized for these things, but the example of the *misiones* in particular is more complex. Although designed and supported by the government, the *misiones* are funded by PDVSA, the national oil company. This company is owned by the Venezuelan government. The *misiones*, by virtue of funding by the government owned operation, are also government controlled. The interaction of the *Circulos Bolivarianos* with the *Misiones* are also a source of clientelistic or paternalistic practices. The *Circulos Bolivarianos* were “heavily involved in organizing communities, facilitating access to the government’s poverty alleviation programs, and campaigning for the president in elections” (Hawkins, 103). In this way they were brokers of the government benefits and were able to give preference to Chavez supporters (Haskins, 110). When members of the *Circulos Bolivarianos* helped set up and manage different *misiones*, “the programs were subsequently run with the understanding that only people who supported the government were entitled to benefits” (Hawkins, 118). “Venezuela, as in any oil-exporting country in which the state dominates the petrochemical sector, the government controls the fuel both literally and figuratively and can give it to friends while keeping it away from foes” (Corrales and Penfold, 103).

Besides exporting the *misiones* to other Latin American nations, Chavez gives out loans and oil subsidies so other nations can become less reliant on US and international lending firms. Mr. Ortega said Nicaragua’s economy “would have collapsed” if not for the Venezuelan aid (Barrionuevo). This neighborly behavior is questioned, however, in circumstances like the relationship between Chavez and the FARC. The Colombian

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government believes that Chavez has given or plans to give \$300 million dollars to the guerilla group (Carroll, Mar 5) and the recent events in 2008 on the Ecuadorian border make it clear that the relations with Chavez and the governments of the centre right Latin American nations such as Colombia and Peru are less than neighborly.

One final critique of the *misiones* is the question of at what cost do the *misiones* come. As political scientist Maria Teresa Romero suggests, “Chavez will eschew necessary economic reforms in...the name of the people” (Corrales, Ven. Analitica 137-138). Of course Romero was speaking more broadly than just the social programs, but *misiones* are definitely included in this critique. When the IMF, Inter American Development Bank, and the World Bank give loans to help Latin American nations, they often impose spending restrictions which include cutting back on public spending like the programs of the *misiones*. These cutbacks are done so because they are economically needed in order for the country to move forward. Chavez is adamantly opposed to such practices. Not only does he refuse to implement those policies in his own country, he helped found a South American development bank so that other Latin American countries can follow in Venezuela’s path.

Conclusions

Although this investigation is able to provide some preliminary conclusions about the *misiones*, it remains a study in progress. The success of the programs will ultimately depend on the ups and downs of the oil industry, as well as Chavez’s ability to maintain power. Both sides of the issue, the chavistas and the critics, provide their own evidence to support their claims. In the case of the government, it is unclear how accurate the

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numbers are, and there is a clear motive for altering the reported impact of the *misiones*. That being said, the opposition at times is too quick to write the programs off as propaganda. Although the numbers seem to suggest that the effectiveness of the programs has been grossly exaggerated by the government, if they are improving the life of one Venezuelan then they are successful. One powerful question that is raised by the critics worth, however, is how the government has been able to convince so many people, both in Venezuela and in the international community, that the *misiones* have been so successful without providing any real evidence. Whether or not his approach is effective, it is admirable at least that the most prominent political issue under Chavez is poverty, at least in name. This model, when improvements are made, would serve as a useful example for other Latin American nations to follow in their quests for development and to alleviate poverty and the gross socio-economic disparities. Not only could developing nations benefit from a program similar to the *misiones*, if wealthy nations would put the focus on eradicating poverty at the top of the political agenda, then perhaps an even better approach to solving this world-wide issue would be discovered.

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