

Food sovereignty policy. “The Venezuelan experiment”

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Abstract. The research article is concerned with the analysis of agri-food policy in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. With the help of historical analysis, the author found that the main problems in the agricultural sector of the country are its strong dependence on agri-food imports, disproportion in the structure of land ownership and a high level of urbanization. The author used an institutional analysis and a comparative approach to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the main government programs for the implementation of the food sovereignty strategy, which was used as a tool to remedy the crisis situation. It was found that the receipt of food aid and the availability of government-subsidized food blocked the desire of Venezuelans to work in rural areas. It was found that despite the usefulness for a certain number of citizens, government programs for the “re-peasanzation” and “agrarization” of the population did not stimulate an increase in the area of cultivated land and did not provoke the desired increase in productivity of plant crops. It is proved that the shortage of domestic food products, increased food imports and demographic disproportion forced the Venezuelan government to deviate from the postulates of food sovereignty in favor of ensuring the country’s food security “by any available means”.

Keywords: Venezuela, Latin America, food sovereignty, food security, globalization, international relations, world politics

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Политика продовольственного суверенитета: «Венесуэльский эксперимент»

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу агропродовольственной политики в Боливарианской республике Венесуэла. С помощью исторического анализа было установлено, что основными проблемами в сельскохозяйственной отрасли страны является ее острая зависимость от агропродовольственного импорта, асимметрия в структуре землевладения и высокий уровень урбанизации. С опорой на институциональный анализ и компаративный подход были выявлены преимущества и недостатки главных государственных программ по реализации стратегии продовольственного суверенитета, используемой в качестве инструмента по исправлению кризисной ситуации. В частности, было установлено, что получение продовольственной помощи и доступность субсидируемых правительством продуктов питания купировали у граждан страны желание трудиться в сельской местности. Установлено, что, вопреки полезности для фиксированного числа граждан страны, профильные правительственные программы по «ре-крестьянизации» и «аграризации» населения не способствовали существенному увеличению площади культивируемых земель, а также не спровоцировали ожидаемый рост производительности растительных культур. Доказывается, что дефицит отечественных продуктов питания, возросший ввоз продовольствия и демографическая диспропорция вынудили правительство Венесуэлы отступить от постулатов концепции продовольственного суверенитета в пользу обеспечения продовольственной безопасности страны «любыми доступными средствами».

Ключевые слова: Венесуэла, Латинская Америка, продовольственный суверенитет, продовольственная безопасность, глобализация, международные отношения, мировая политика

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Introduction

One of the fundamental and extremely negative circumstances for the present and future of humanity is the deterioration of the food problem in the world, leading to such a devastating humanitarian disaster

as famine. Today, despite scientific and technological progress, about 800 million inhabitants of our planet still suffer from chronic malnutrition¹. The problem of food shortages is also relevant for 57 million residents of such a dynamically developing historical and geographical region as Latin America and the Caribbean². The leader State of this negative trend in this region is the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, a quarter of whose population suffers from food shortages today³. The authorities decided to use the concept of Food sovereignty [Малов 2018, с. 137; Чырпов, Малов 2019, с. 668] as a strategy capable of qualitatively changing the situation in the agricultural sector of the country. This article is devoted to the study of the main details of this management event, entitled as the “The Venezuelan Experiment”.

Food sovereignty in Venezuela: political context

To understand why such an oil-rich country as Venezuela decided on such an ambitious experiment to introduce food sovereignty into its constitution, it is important to clarify the basic political context that served as the basis for the spontaneous uprising known as “Caracazo”. The slums that densely cover the hilly terrain of the Venezuelan capital have become a symbol of the state that has changed the domestic agri-food industry to the booming oil industry [Schiavoni 2017, p. 7]. The discovery of “black gold” deposits at the beginning of the 20th century devalued government interest in the domestic agricultural sector, investments in which were significantly reduced. Since then, the slogan “sowing oil”, meaning a government promise to use the revenues of the oil industry to diversify the country’s economy, has been firmly entrenched in political discourse, and the lack of financing for rural areas has provoked the migration of peasants to cities, especially to Caracas [Clark 2010, pp. 135–136; Hellinger, Spanakos 2017, pp. 7–8]. Unemployment, poverty and hunger sent many Venezuelans into the category of surplus populations [Li 2010, pp. 66–77]. Moreover, due to the neglect of the domestic agricultural sector, Venezuela is not only one of the most urbanized countries in Latin America (Figure 1), but is also a gross exporter of energy (today, 70% of its revenues the state re-

¹ FAO. The State of Food and Agriculture 2021. Making agri-food systems more resilient to shocks and stresses. Rome: FAO. P. 34.

² FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, WHO. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable. Rome: FAO UN. P. 10.

³ Ibid. P. 144.

ceives from the export of fossil fuels⁴) and a net importer of food (since 2017, the national agri-food sector the country provides only 30% of its population with food⁵).

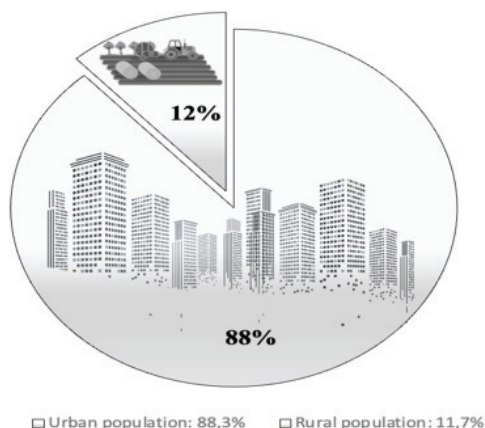


Figure 1. The proportion of urban and rural population in The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in 2021

Note: Compiled by the author.

Source of information: FAO. The Food and Agriculture Organization Corporate Statistical Database (FAOSTAT). URL: <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#country/236> (Accessed 23 June 2023).

The Bolivarian revolution – the beginning of the food sovereignty experiment

The election of Hugo Chavez as President of Venezuela in December 1998, which took place on a wave of social indignation, represented a new era in Latin American politics [Wilpert 2014, pp. 1–2]. Chavez

⁴ ATLAS of economic complexity. Center for International Development at Harvard University. URL: <http://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/explore?country=236&product=undefined&year=2017&productClass=HS&tradeFlow=Net&target=Product&partner=undefined&startYear=undefined> (Accessed 24 June 2023).

⁵ Invertalia. Venezuela only produces 30% of the food needed to maintain its population. 11 Dec. 2017. URL: <https://nz.invertalia.net/news/venezuela-produces-only-30-of-the-food-needed-to-maintain-its-population-13013> (Accessed 24 June 2023).

came to power on an anti-neoliberal and populist platform, launching reforms aimed at changing both the political and agricultural food system of the country [Orhangazi 2014, p. 223; Wilpert 2014, pp. 1–2; Enríquez, Newman 2016, p. 595].

Despite the fact that the "Organic Law on Food Security and Sovereignty of Venezuela" was approved only in 2008⁶, elements of food sovereignty already appeared in the new Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of 1999 (in particular articles No. 305, 306 and 307⁷). After integrating aspects of food sovereignty into the Constitution of the State, the Bolivarian Government has launched a number of initiatives aimed at transforming the country's agri-food system. The primary administrative action aimed at modifying the agricultural situation of the state was the ratification of the "Law of the Land and Agrarian Development"⁸, which signaled the beginning of the war against Latifundism [Wilpert 2014, p. 4; Enríquez, Newman 2016, p. 604].

According to the Venezuelan authorities, the elimination of asymmetry in the land tenure system was supposed to reduce social inequality, as well as raise the level of domestic food production [Orhangazi 2014, p. 229]. However, similar pro-government beliefs have caused discontent among the country's rural elite, mobilizing opposition forces to overthrow the Chavez regime. Attempted coup d'état by sabotaging the energy industry led to the mass closure of supermarkets, provoking a shortage of food products and, as a result, an increase in the number of malnourished citizens [Wilpert 2014, p. 4].

Chavez, in connection with these events, on the air of the TV show "Aló Presidente", explained that the lack of food sovereignty (dependence on food imports and large international corporations) is a huge danger for his country [Rosset 2009a, p. 16]. The humanitarian project "Mission Mercal" was the response of the Chavez government to the food shortage formed during the corporate boycott [McKay, Nehring, Walsh-Dilley 2014, p. 1177].

⁶ Ley Orgánica de Seguridad y Soberanía Agroalimentaria de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. No. 5.891, de 31 de julio de 2008. URL: http://www.fao.org/pgfra-gpa-archive/ven/ley_soberania.pdf (Accessed 26 June 2023).

⁷ Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. No. 36.860. Publicada en Gaceta Oficial del jueves 30 de diciembre de 1999. URL: <https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Venezuela/ven1999.html> (Accessed 26 June 2023).

⁸ Ley de tierras y desarrollo agrario. Decreto No. 1.546/01, de 9 de noviembre de 2001. URL: <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/es/c/LEX-FAOC028661> (Accessed 26 June 2023).

National food program “mercal”: pros and cons

Mission Mercial (Span. – *Mercados de Alimentos*) is a network of state-subsidized grocery stores that provide low-income citizens with basic food necessities [Morales 2009, p. 128]. At the same time, the prices for the entire basic grocery set (meat, fish, eggs, milk, cheese, bread, cereals, pasta, rice, flour, tomato sauce, fruit, coffee, margarine, butter, sugar and salt) were 40% cheaper than in the conventional supermarkets. The low cost was achieved through the direct purchase of food from domestic producers (small and medium-sized), as well as the profitable import of that category of goods that are not produced in Venezuela. The state has created large warehouses, logistics centers and transport networks against the dangerous speculations of compradors. Since 2010, there have been 16,600 stylized retail outlets in Venezuela, which were visited by two-thirds of the population, and where about 85,000 employees worked [McKay, Nehring, Walsh-Dilley 2014, p. 1183]. Moreover, since 2004, the Mission Mercial has established more than six thousand Food banks, providing free meals to about one million Venezuelans [Purcell 2017, p. 302; Schiavoni, Camacaro 2009, p. 129].

However, Mission Mercial had a palliative effect, despite the high humanitarian significance and positive feedback from the international community. The vulnerability was that the country's authorities continued to pay great attention to imports, and large domestic distributors simply shifted the vector of food dependence from the United States and Colombia (the main geopolitical opponents of their country) towards Argentina and Brazil [Kappeler 2013, p. 10]. As a result, the energy sector of the Venezuelan economy continued to play the role of the main source of financing for food imports. This scheme has ruined domestic agriculture, because the import of food is easier and more affordable than the development and implementation of national production practices. At the same time, receiving government food aid and subsidized food products stimulated the majority of Venezuelans unwillingness to retrain as peasants and return to work in the field. Subsequently, positive government actions evolved into a curious socio-cultural phenomenon known as *Bachaqueo* – resale of government-subsidized food products for profit [Kappeler 2017, p. 259; Purcell 2017, p. 297]. The practice of *Bachaqueo* is popular in the country, as a result of which many Venezuelans willingly devote their entire working week to standing in queues for the purchase and resale of subsidized goods (especially food). The former chairman of the National Assembly D. Cabello, recognized this phenomenon as “a plague” that harms the people, and the

current President of the country, N. Maduro, adopted amendments to the criminal law of the country providing for punishment in the form of imprisonment for up to 5 years. However, the tightening of the legislative system was not able to eradicate the activities of *Bachaqueo*, since every Venezuelan, upon presentation of an identity card, could still purchase a quota number of essential products at fixed prices and independently dispose of their appointment.

National food program "Zamora": competitive advantages

Along with the food support of the population of the Mission Mercal, the Venezuelan government initiated another Agri-food program, known as the Mission Zamora. The purpose of this program was the process of democratization of agricultural lands – the dismantling of *latifundia* and the fair redistribution of land resources [Wilpert 2007, p. 111]. The Zamora mission was designed both for landless peasants and for those who left the village in search of "a better life". Thus, the Venezuelan Government initiated the process of *deurbanization* of the population (Span. – *Vuelta al campo*), giving slum residents the opportunity to feed themselves and their families through the provision of loans and subsidies, specialized training and technical support [Page 2010, p. 251; Morales 2016, p. 18; Purcell 2017, p. 299; Wilpert 2014, p. 4].

A fund program (Span. – *Fundo Zamorano*) was developed for the development of the Zamora Mission. The purpose of the special program was to consolidate the production activities of dozens of peasant families on the basis of collective ownership and the principles of cooperative management [Loyda 2006, p. 60]. It should be added that the implementation of the *Fundo Zamorano* project was made possible due to the general trend of Venezuela's transition from representative to participatory democracy. One of the main mechanisms of such transit were Community Councils – local government bodies through which communities could articulate their interests, form a budget and interact with the government [McKay, Nehring, Walsh-Dillely 2014, p. 1184; Marcano 2009, p. 75; Schiavoni 2015, p. 470]. A relevant example of community control in the process of food supply and their proportional distribution is the special Local Committees of Supply and Production (CLAP).

It is necessary to include, that to regulate the process of implementing land reform, the Venezuelan government has created three main governing bodies: the National Institute of Lands (INTI), the Institute of National Rural Development (INDER) and the Venezuelan Agricul-

tural Corporation (CVA). Moreover, The Ministry of Agriculture of Venezuela (MPPAT) has established three institutes responsible for promoting the agrarian model of socialist development based on the principles of food sovereignty: the National Institute of Agricultural Research (INIA), the Foundation for the Development of Science and Technology (Fundacite) and the Educational and Innovation Foundation for the Support of the Agrarian Revolution (CIARA). A wide list of administrative authorities also implied programs for interdepartmental cooperation, in which joint projects aimed at ensuring food security and the sovereignty of the country were organized.

From food sovereignty to food security

The Government's program on Agri-food transformation did not lead to the expected result, even despite the transfer of arable land into the hands of small farmers and investments in rural development that took place by 2006 [Orhangazi 2014, p. 229].

Due to the rapid growth of food imports and a weak rise in the productivity of the domestic agri-food sector, the attention of the authorities turned towards the creation of a new, more advanced Socialist production model [Rosset 2009a, p. 21; Purcell 2017, p. 303]. Consequently, the state created Socialist Production Units (UPS), which took the form of State farms formed on expropriated agricultural land [Enríquez, Newman 2016, pp. 595, 617].

Along with this, the Venezuelan government established special socialist production companies designed to purchase, process and sell agricultural products manufactured at new "UPS-state farms". The emerging trend towards increased state intervention in the commercialization of food production and distribution was supported by three administrative decisions: 1) expansion of credit lines; 2) transformation of more arable land from the latifundios category into large-scale state farms (UPS-state farms); 3) confiscation and nationalization of agro-industrial food processing companies [Orhangazi 2014, p. 223].

However, the logic of state intervention in the agri-food agenda was the intensive ideological propaganda of Socialist humanism⁹. Thus, the process of forming UPS-state farms represented a deviation from the previous strategy of the state to ensure food sovereignty, based on the transfer of agricultural land into the hands of small farmers, cooperatives

⁹ Ellner S. Chavismo on the horns of a dilemma: populism and pragmatism in Venezuela. *Venezuelanalysis*. 11 May 2015. URL: <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/11391> (Accessed 26 June 2023).

and Fundos Zamoranos [Enríquez, Newman 2016, pp. 617–618]. The emerging deviation from the previously set course on food sovereignty was officially verified by the Venezuelan authorities in January 2011.

Then, in the context of a low level of food self-sufficiency and permanent dependence on imports, the government presented a new program for the agrarian transformation of the country – Gran Misión Agro Venezuela (GMAV). The main objectives of the established program were: 1) expanding the area of cultivated land; 2) increasing the yield of major crops; 3) promoting the practices of Urban farming. The adoption of new administrative guidelines meant a refusal to further develop the country according to the principles of food sovereignty. As a result, the state initiated a return to the pre-revolutionary policy of ensuring food security “by any available means”. The consequences of this strategic regression were the non-interference of the state in the business relations of large commercial producers, as well as stimulating the growth of the number of UPS-state farms and industrial enterprises for processing agricultural products [Enríquez, Newman 2016, pp. 616–617].

Thus, the beginning of 2010 can be considered a “point of return” to the pre-revolutionary phase of Venezuela’s agri-food policy. Since that period, the government has radically changed its views on the structure of land ownership, leading to a shift in priority from small peasant farms to large-scale commercial farms and UPS-state farms.

Conclusion

Despite the significant contribution of the personality of H. Chavez to the process of restoring the socio-humanitarian state of society, cardinal changes in the agricultural sector of Venezuela have not occurred. President N. Maduro also failed to achieve significant changes. In particular, fundamental government goals have not been achieved: 1) to cure the country of the Dutch disease [Auty 1993]; 2) to “emancipate” from agricultural imports; 3) to correct the asymmetry in the structure of land ownership¹⁰; 4) to reduce the critical level of urbanization (Figure 1). The introduction of the idea of food sovereignty into the constitution of the State, reflected in two government initiatives (Mision Mercal and Mision Zamora), failed to stabilize the flawed situation, leading to extremely contradictory consequences.

¹⁰ Hungry for land: small farmers feed the world with less than a quarter of all farmland. GRAIN. 2014. URL: <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/284666/> (Accessed 26 June 2023).

The mission of Mision Mercal was to reduce food imports by creating a state-owned network of specialty stores that supply the population with food at reasonable prices. Food production was assigned to the domestic agricultural sector, relying primarily on small producers. However, a colossal demographic disparity (in favor of the urban population) prevented the peasantry from carrying out the government's instructions, which increased the country's dependence on agri-food imports.

The Government presented the Mision Zamora initiative to eliminate the demographic imbalance, inventory of agricultural lands and their transfer into the hands of peasants. With the help of the ruralization and re-peasantization programs, the Venezuelan government decided to achieve a numerical increase in campesinos. Despite the fact that the "Vuelta al campo reforms" have benefited more than one million people, they have not led to a significant increase in the area of cultivated land [Gutiérrez 2015, p. 40; Morales 2016, p. 18; Purcell 2017, pp. 299–300], nor have they provoked the expected increase in crop productivity¹¹.

The main obstacle to re-peasantization was 1) the loss of communication between generations; 2) the transfer of traditional knowledge about farming in a tropical climate [Page 2010, p. 251]. The new peasants, unaccustomed to intensive physical labor, were unprepared to face the inevitable difficulties that forced them to return to the urban slums. The creation of a wide range of institutions designed to provide qualified assistance to newly-minted farmers provoked bureaucratic confusion, providing opportunities for corruption [Rosset 2009b, p. 119; Purcell 2017, p. 308; McKay, Nehring, Walsh-Dilley 2014, p. 1189]. The government was obliged to adjust the agri-food policy due to the shortage of domestic food products, the growth of imports and the lack of demographic balance. Ultimately, this led to a paradoxical situation – since the official adoption of the "Organic Law on Agri-Food Security and Sovereignty", Venezuela has begun to retreat from the postulates of food sovereignty. Confirmation of the change in the agri-food course was the ratification of the Gran Mision Agro Venezuela program, which heralded the country's return to the policy of ensuring food security "by any available means". Since then, Venezuela has returned to neoliberal ideas shared by large industrial monopolies and multinational corporations. However, the completion of the Venezuelan experiment on the introduction of food sovereignty and the subsequent reversal of the neoliberal model of ensuring food security did not contribute to the emergence of a new welfare

¹¹ FAO. The Food and Agriculture Organization Corporate Statistical Database (FAOSTAT). URL: <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data> (Accessed 26 June 2023).

state in the Latin American region. Vice versa, Venezuelan citizens, who had previously discussed the prices of sports shoes, cars and household appliances, henceforth started talking about the shortage and about food prices [Kappeler 2017, pp. 258–259]. The depressive mood "enveloping" modern Venezuelan society, and the aggravation of the machinations of Bachaqueo in it, speak of a new socio-political crisis. In the process of developing programs to overcome a potential (present) crisis, the government needs to take into account the mistakes of past reforms and tighten measures to combat bureaucracy and inefficiency of officials.

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