



FIGHTING POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN VENEZUELA

Though Venezuela has long been an oil-rich country, its people have also suffered historically from severe poverty and social exclusion – so much so that a package of neoliberal economic reforms proposed in 1989 sparked a popular revolt known as the “Caracazo,” laying the groundwork for the election of President Hugo Chávez almost a decade later.

Since taking office in 1998, President Chávez has spearheaded an aggressive campaign to combat poverty and social exclusion through innovative social programs, increased spending on social development and consistent engagement with local communities and civic organizations. Ending the poverty and social exclusion that have been so common in Venezuela has been a goal of singular focus and effort, and has produced important results that have affected the lives of millions of Venezuelans.

SOCIAL ADVANCES IN VENEZUELA

A May 2010 government report assessing Venezuela’s progress towards meeting its UN Millennium Development Goals found that on most indicators, Venezuela had reached its goals over five years ahead of the 2015 deadline set by the international community.

Both the levels of **extreme poverty and poverty have fallen dramatically** in Venezuela over the last decade.

In 1996, extreme poverty stood at 42.5 percent, and in 2002, due to political instability caused by a coup against President Chávez, it remained unacceptably high at 29.8 percent. Since then, it has consistently fallen, reaching 7.2 percent in 2009. A similar trend can be seen with the level of poverty, which dropped from 32.3 percent in 2002 to 21.3 percent in 2009.

At the same time, **inequality in Venezuela has diminished**. In 2009, the country’s Gini coefficient –a

Social Indicators in Venezuela

↓ Extreme poverty *fell* from 42% in 2002 to 7% in 2009

↓ Poverty *dropped* from 32% in 2002 to 21% in 2009

↑ Social spending has averaged 17.5 percent of GDP

↑ Total social spending, 1999-2009: \$330 billion

↑ Human Development Index ranking *rose*, 68 to 58

measure of inequality where being closer to zero implies more economic equality – reached 0.39, the lowest level in Latin America and lowest during President Chávez’s tenure. (In 2002, it peaked at 0.49.)

Other indicators also show the advances made in Venezuela. Unemployment

at the end of 2009 stood at 7.5 percent, down from 16.8 percent in 2003. **The level of under-nutrition in Venezuela fell from 11 percent in 1990 to 6 percent in 2007**, while the number of children starting and finishing primary school was 5.6 percent higher from 2000-2009 than it was for the decade prior. Similarly, nationwide literacy rates rose almost continuously from 1999-2009, standing currently at 98.95 percent for men and 98.34 for women.

Other advances have been seen in the realm of gender equality. From 1994 to 2009, the index of parity in higher education has increased from .99 to 1.46, indicating a higher proportion of women attending institutions of higher learning. Additionally, the percentage of women employed in non-farm jobs has increased from 34.81 percent in 1990 to 41.96 in 2009. Women are also playing more significant roles in government, representing 18 percent of the country’s legislature, 31 percent of its judges and **leading four of the five branches of government**.

INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL PROGRAMS

The social advances Venezuela has seen over the last decade are the product of innovative social programs and a dramatic increase in social investment.

Facing a political and economic crisis in the wake of the 2002 coup and sabotage of the oil industry, in 2003 President Chávez called for the creation of special social programs that could address long overdue basic needs such as health, education, housing, food security and job



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

training that were not being dealt with rapidly enough through traditional government mechanisms.

These programs came to be known as *misiones* – “missions” – and were crafted to serve particularly Venezuela’s poorest areas and encourage participation from members of the communities in which they were present.

What started as a small number of missions in 2003 has grown to **26 missions today** covering a large number of social needs, including health, education, housing, job training, food security, employment, legal identity, gender equality, and land use.

With these social missions, government investment in social development has increased dramatically. **While spending on social programs amounted to 11.3 percent of GDP in 1998, it reached 21.9 percent in 2006 and settled at 19.5 percent in 2008.** The accumulated government investment in social investment from 1999 to 2009 stands at **\$330 billion, five times the investment made in the decade prior** and the equivalent of more than 60 percent of all national revenues in those years.

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Venezuela’s advances in social development have been recognized by various international organizations and agencies.

According to a 2009 report, Venezuela rose four spots on the UN’s Human Development Index over the course of one year from 62 to 58 out of 182 countries on the list – and has jumped 10 spots over the last decade.¹ The “Social Panorama of Latin America 2009” report published by the UN’s Economic Commission for Latin America (**ECLAC**), ranked Venezuela second in the region behind only Argentina in terms of decreases in poverty and indigence between 2002 and 2008.²

The 2010 UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report found that literacy rates in Venezuela rose from 90 percent of the population in the period 1985-1994 to over 95 percent in the period 2000-2007. The report also notes that the percentage of the Venezuelan people with access to pre-primary education rose from 45 percent in

1999 to 62 percent in 2007 and that the percentage of students finishing their primary education jumped from 88 percent in 1999 to 97 percent in 2006. More broadly, the report finds that Venezuela made “significant reductions” in reducing its out-of-school population from 1999 to 2007.³

According to the 2010 **World Bank Human Opportunity Report for Latin America and the Caribbean**, Venezuela ranks amongst the best countries in the region in terms of the availability and equitable distribution of key social services like education and housing.⁴

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For More Information Visit our Website:

[http://www.venezuela-us.org/
prensa@venezuela-us.org](http://www.venezuela-us.org/prensa@venezuela-us.org)

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**Press and Communications Office
June 16, 2010**

¹ “Venezuela Moves Up Four Positions in U.N. Human Development Ranking,” Venezuelanalysis, October 7, 2009. <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/4849>

² “Social Panorama of Latin America 2009,” ECLAC. <http://www.eclac.cl/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/publicaciones/xml/0/37840/P37840.xml&xsl=/dds/tp-l-i/p9f.xsl&base=/tpl-i/top-bottom.xsl>

³ “UNESCO: Venezuela Reaches High Level in Education,” Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic in the U.S. January 21, 2010. <http://venezuela-us.org/2010/01/21/unesco-venezuela-reaches-high-level-in-education/#more-8027>

⁴ “Venezuela Improves on World Bank Human Opportunities Rankings,” Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in the U.S., May 24, 2010. <http://venezuela-us.org/2010/05/24/venezuela-improves-on-world-bank-human-opportunities-rankings/>