



Community Organisations, *Misiones* and Integration of *Barrios* of Caracas, Venezuela – The Case of the CAMEBA Upgrading Project

AYALA, Alonso

University of Dortmund, Faculty of Spatial Planning, Department of Spatial Planning in Developing Countries (REL/SPRING), 44221 Dortmund, Germany.

alonso.ayala@uni-dortmund.de

The paper is an attempt to analyse the likely effects of compensatory programmes such as Misiones Bolivarianas on community organizations in barrios and their participation in the planning and implementation of barrio upgrading projects, based on the case of the CAMEBA project in Caracas, Venezuela.

THE COUNTRY

Venezuela, a country of 25 million people and rich in oil resources is situated in the northern part of South America facing the Caribbean Sea. Venezuela is one of the most urbanised countries in the region with 88% of the population inhabiting urban areas. Caracas, the capital city with a population of 3.2 million accounts for about 15% of the country's urban population (INE 2004) and continues to be the centre of economic, social, military and political power.

***BARRIOS*: THE NEED FOR INTEGRATION**

Unregulated and rapid urbanisation in Venezuela like elsewhere in the developing world, has led to mushrooming of informal settlements called *barrios* which are built by the inhabitants themselves outside the formal urban regulatory framework. Barrios are characterised by precarious housing, poor basic services, low quality of living conditions, spatial segregation, and social exclusion. Barrios are the spatial translation of urban poverty. All these characteristics underline the need for integrating barrio communities to the urban dynamics of the mainstream city, in order to create a more inclusive city and a society at large. It is estimated that in the metropolitan area of Caracas alone, there are 317 barrios forming 14 barrio agglomerations distributed across the city, occupying 3,446 ha and accommodating around 1,002,780 poor (Villanueva and Baldó 1995)

Empirical studies on urban informal growth usually tend to highlight the lack of physical and social infrastructure as the main problem of barrios. This paper however, assumes that the barrio problem is not merely physical or spatial but has multiple dimensions such as social, economic, environmental and political. Further, it assumes that cities can become more inclusive only when the poor people at the grass roots organise themselves and participate proactively in the development process.

BARRIO UPGRADING PROJECTS IN VENEZUELA

The recognition of barrios as part of the Urban Development Plan was only partially reflected in the urban development policy of Venezuela through the *Ley Orgánica de Ordenación Urbanística* of 1987. This event marked the beginning of a new perspective on interventions in informal settlements. The most important outcome of this policy was a metropolitan-wide barrio integration plan called *Plan Sectorial para la Incorporación de los Barrios a la Estructura Urbana del Area Metropolitana de Caracas y de la Región Central*¹ in 1994 formulated by the National Housing Council (Baldó & Villanueva 1995).

Based on this plan, an agreement for financial assistance was signed between the Government of Venezuela and the World Bank in 1998 for the implementation of Project CAMEBA (Caracas Barrio Upgrading), the largest ever slum upgrading project envisioned in the country. Project CAMEBA had three main components: urban physical upgrading, including land regularization; strengthening of municipal institutions; and house unit upgrading through microcredit programme. One of the major objectives of the project was to establish a programme called 'Social Accompaniment' that aimed at fostering community participation during the entire project cycle through the creation of specific community-based organizations.

The commencement of Project CAMEBA was delayed due to a landmark change in the country's political and administrative regime led by Hugo Chavez who assumed the Office of President in 1998. The country was in the midst of political instability driven by major shifts in public policy and managerial changes. The new policy changes were, to some extent in conflict with the Project CAMEBA partly financed by the World Bank. Though the implementation of CAMEBA officially commenced in December 1999 (Falconer 2005), it gained momentum only in 2003 coinciding with the launch of *Misiones*.

THE NEW CONSTITUTION: A BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The new Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela framed in 1999 envisioned a major change in the governance of the country from a representative form to a participatory democracy. The political parties that had ruled the country during the last forty years were blamed for the widespread poverty and backwardness of the country characterized by rampant corruption in public life, inequality and exclusion of the poor from the mainstream development. The new Constitution exhorted the poorest of the poor particularly those living in barrios to proactively participate in the endeavour of building a new nation founded on social justice (Perez 2005). The Bolivarian Revolution envisaged political empowerment of people through community organisations in order to foster social justice and inclusion. The process of creating community organisations received a fillip in the year 2003, when the

¹ "Sectorial Plan for the Incorporation of Barrios into the Urban Structure of the Metropolitan Area of Caracas and the Central Region"

government operationalised its country wide social development policy called as the *Misiones Bolivarianas* (Bolivarian Misiones).

MISIONES BOLIVARIANAS: A FORMULA FOR FAST TRACK DEVELOPMENT?

According to the Venezuelan Ministry of Communications and Information, the Bolivarian Misiones were created in 2003 with the aim of deepening the Bolivarian Revolution and consolidating participatory democracy. The discourse on social justice was translated into public domain in the form of Bolivarian Misiones to function as quasi organisations outside the purview of public institutions. Their primary goal is to tackle the causes and consequences of poverty and exclusion, through pro-active participation of the people (MCI 2006). The two main objectives of the Misiones were: to achieve universal enfranchisement of human rights; and to promote active participation of the barrio inhabitants through community-based organizations for steering the mass implementation of the new social programmes. Misiones were initially conceived as an operative mechanism to penetrate barrios and assist them in accessing various services as primary health and education (D'Elia et al 2006). The barrios became the core spatial entities for fast track implementation of the government's new social ideology embodied in the Misiones.

MISIONES AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

It seems the Misiones have had an inclusive and empowering effect on the poor who for the first time are feeling important in the process of nation building (Cartaya 2007). Misiones were operationalised in barrios through the creation of community structures in the form of committees to intervene in various social sectors such as health, education, culture, sports, etc. Organizing the barrio communities into mission committees was facilitated by the Bolivarian Circles that were created in 2002 to disseminate the ideology of the Bolivarian Revolution, defend democracy and foster people's participation at the grassroots (Chávez et al 2003).

An evaluation of the performance of the various Misiones compiled by Vanessa Cartaya (2007) points out that the objective of universal enfranchisement of rights has been driven by political loyalty. PROVEA (2005) reports that exclusion of certain people from deriving benefits out of the Misiones has been an act of political discrimination. Estaba et al. (2006) argue that parallel structures have been created for the execution of the Mission driven programmes, while the problems of the public sector continues to persist due to lack of structural reforms whereas policies aimed at achieving social justice have attained the form of compensatory programmes.

The legitimacy of people's participation in the process which was the second major objective of Misiones has also been questioned. According to D'Elia et al. (2006) participation has been undermined by two major factors. Firstly, clientelistic relations are being forged with communities to create vote banks and gain political support by using social assistance programmes in selective ways. Secondly, the non transparent and preferential manner in which community committees have been created using the politically manipulative Misiones has given rise to serious doubts about the legitimacy of their empowerment and autonomy in steering social programmes.

And yet, it appears that the Misiones-driven community committees have succeeded in creating a strong sense of ownership and belonging amongst barrio inhabitants (Lacruz 2006). The government too has proclaimed that "Misiones has been absolutely successful in reaching out to the socially excluded and benefiting them through a wide range of social programmes in the areas of education, science and culture, primary health, food security, employment, social economy, and social assistance". The success of the Misiones is

attributed to the participation of the organised communities and their role in social monitoring to make the public administration accountable (*Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información*, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The field research was focused on analysing the impacts of Project CAMEBA on the socioeconomic and spatial integration of the barrio communities in the context of Misiones Bolivarianas². The study area chosen was the barrio agglomeration of Julián Blanco consisting of nine barrios located in Petare Norte with about 7,800 households. The empirical study was mainly based on a survey of a representative sample of 130 households using a standardised questionnaire. Three focus group discussions were conducted to further validate the findings of the survey. Throughout the field research phase, several structured and semi-structured key informant interviews were held to capture the intricacies of barrio life in the light of project CAMEBA. Secondary sources of data such as articles and papers related to the socio-political situation of the country were analysed to supplement the empirical research.

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS, POLITICAL CONTEXT AND PROJECT CAMEBA

Communities of barrios and the poor in general, who have been victims of a political tradition of unfulfilled promises and manipulation are known to have acquired a heightened sense of suspicion about any new external intervention, be it by the government or otherwise. In addition, the low level of self esteem prevalent amongst communities shaped by a prolonged process of exclusion has been a formidable barrier to sustainable social organisation and community self help projects (Barroso, 1997). The physical interventions in barrio had always followed a piece-meal approach with low quality standards sans community involvement to which the barrio inhabitants had often reacted with a sense of rejection and indifference (Bolívar 1998; 2006). Prior to the onset of Project CAMEBA, the communities in Julián Blanco were already informally organised as neighbourhood associations, and even though their focus was not necessarily or exclusively on physical upgrading, one major purpose was anyway to improve their living environment.

Given this background, the communities' perception of the efforts by the staff of Project CAMEBA to create a new community organisation in order to comply with the project requirements was filled with mistrust and a sense of being imposed with a new organisation. It was in this context that a group of researchers and academics at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, who had been working in Barrio Julián Blanco since 1996, intervened and convinced the community to create a formal organization³ aimed at preparing, managing and implementing a house upgrading project for their barrio as part of project CAMEBA (Bolívar 2006).

Together with the technical staff of project CAMEBA, the members of the newly formed community organisation prioritised the needs and types of interventions. The university group again played a major role in creating the conditions necessary to build trust between the

² This paper draws its conclusions from a research project conducted in Caracas between November 2004 and April 2007, which aimed at evaluating the impact of the project CAMEBA in terms of integrating barrios to the city from a spatial and socio-economic perspective.

³ This organization was registered in October 2000 under the name "Promotion Force of Barrio Julian Blanco Civil Association" (Asociación Civil Fuerza Promotora del Barrio Julián Blanco)

technical staff and the community by ensuring that they interacted with barrio inhabitants, walked through the barrio along with people and explained the project proposal to them to evolve a detailed blue-print of the upgrading project that was eventually finalized in the year 2001 (Bolívar 2006).

Meanwhile, in the year 1999, the newly elected government enacted a new law on housing that recognised and included urban and house upgrading projects for barrios and social housing schemes. It was the first time ever that barrio upgrading was included in the housing law of the country formulated by the National Housing Council. As part of the institutional arrangement to implement the new law it was mandatory to set up Local Offices for Technical Assistance (LOTA) in those barrios that were selected for upgrading projects. The main tasks of LOTA were to establish a link between the barrio community organizations and the technical staff and to provide support and assistance to the housing upgrading process. LOTA was set up in Julian Blanco in the year 2000.

All the preparations were in place for the implementation of CAMEBA in Julián Blanco – community organisation had been created, the blue print for action was approved and LOTA had been set up. Though LOTA was a pilot exercise, operationalising it on a full scale experienced a major setback when the President of the National Housing Council was removed from her office by the President of Venezuela. Subsequently, the operations of LOTAs were also suspended in 2001. This affected the community in Julian Blanco severely as their renewed hopes of a decent house drew blank yet another time, though CAMEBA had already implemented a few components of the upgrading project. However, an even more severe fallout of these developments was related to the community organisation which has shown signs of disintegration (Interview with a Julián Blanco barrio leader and member of the Civil Association 2005)

Given its tentative approach to community participation, Project CAMEBA was anyway ridden with problems of its own since it was not fully grounded in the realities of barrio life. In the ensuing years, the implementation of CAMEBA faced more hurdles owing to some events that created political turmoil in the country such as the Presidential coup in April 2002, a nation-wide strike by both private and public sector employees in 2002-03 and a national referendum to decide if the government should continue ruling.

KEY FINDINGS

Ever since Venezuela became a Constitutional democracy at the end of the 1950s, the approach to poverty eradication has been driven by charity and compensatory programmes. Such an approach has only strengthened the deep rooted dependency of barrio communities on populist measures. Upgrading of urban informal settlements, as conceptualized in the current development practice, has only a recent history in Venezuela. Against the backdrop of an ongoing debate within the country's political fraternity, the upgrading projects are being subjected to conflicting approaches which are driven, on the one hand, by political patronage, and on the other by sheer technical expertise.

Community Awareness of CAMEBA

The survey findings revealed that 56% (N=130) of the respondents were aware of the term CAMEBA. During the focus group discussions (Barrio Julián Blanco 2005 and 2006; Barrio Vista Hermosa 2005; Barrio Bolívar 2006) the general feeling of discussants was that "CAMEBA was there doing something" particularly in relation to visible interventions like construction of roads and retaining walls that were perceived as 'good' for the barrio.

Community Participation in CAMEBA

One of the salient goals of CAMEBA was to mobilise community organisation and participation in both project planning and implementation. Out of those who were aware of the term CAMEBA (N=64) only 56% reported having participated in the planning phase, and 20% in the process of implementation of the project. To a question on whether they participated in any community meeting related to CAMEBA, about 50% (N=64) of the respondents answered in the affirmative.

For a community that is used to live on hope and gifts doled out by the government as a show of patronage, participation is inseparably linked to expectations of immediate material benefits. Therefore, participation levels were high at the start of the upgrading project cycle and declining over time as the community grew to realise that no immediate benefits are forthcoming (focus group discussion in Julián Blanco, 2005; interview with barrio leader in Julián Blanco, 2005). It is interesting to note that all those involved in one or the other project activities were women. This is also substantiated by one of the survey findings where 69% (N=130) of the respondents stated that women in general participate more than men in community activities. One of the major reasons for this could be that women spend more time than men in the barrio as mothers and housewives and are affected far more by the quality of community infrastructure and public services.

Though one segment of the community understands integration as a reciprocal process where community organisation is envisaged to play a major role, a majority of the members are driven by short sightedness. Even when upgrading measures such as retaining walls and paving of streets aimed at improving the physical living conditions in barrios were being implemented right in front of their houses, most inhabitants neither paid attention to them nor were aware of the intentions of the upgrading project (observations made during the implementation of the survey in UDU 4.4. Julián Blanco, 2005). This corroborates the findings from the focus group discussions that a culture of voluntarism and participation is practically non-existent in the barrio under study. The residents' feedback also reveals that participation demands a great deal of time, effort and financial resources, which poor people find an additional burden in their eternal struggle to secure urban livelihoods.

Community Organisation and CAMEBA

Respondents were asked if they belonged to a community organization created by any upgrading project or government programme, and an overwhelming 92 % (N=130) of the respondent answered negatively. Twelve of those who responded affirmatively declared to belong to an organisation created by a mission, of which four said they belonged also to a neighbourhood association, and three of them belonged to a neighbourhood association exclusively. Only one person admitted belonging to a community organisation from CAMEBA.

CAMEBA staff in-charge of project management revealed that their task was rendered difficult due to lack of well established community organisations. Since deeper participation of the community in upgrading projects was not coming forth, alternatives had to be sought. Construction work was awarded to sub-contractors, which were bound to hire at least 70% of the labour force from the barrio itself. Local community members had to be trained and employed as inspectors to inspect the status of the works and report to the community (Interviews with CAMEBA Project Manager for Petare Norte, CAMEBA Project Director and construction site engineer, 2006). It appears that the community could not be motivated enough to play a proactive role in CAMEBA.

It is crucial to note that even after eight years since the commencement of implementation of the CAMEBA project in Julián Blanco, not a single self-reliant community organisation has been created for the purpose of steering the upgrading project. During initial years of the project, there was greater participation of residents owing to raised expectations. In the

following years, however, participation declined drastically since the project components being implemented were perceived as scattered, insufficient and devoid of immediate benefits. Currently, only a few organisations are active, run by a handful of community leaders (including the Civil Association). Interviews with some of them revealed that the tendency is towards low levels of participation (interviews with Sra. BM and Sra. MH in the Barrio Julián Blanco; with Sr. JC in Sector La Montañita; with Sra. ME in the Barrio Bolívar, and with Sr. SG in Sector Vista Hermosa 2005 - 2006).

Community's Disappointment with CAMEBA

During one of the 'study walks' in a CAMEBA intervened barrio called Vista Hermosa (2005), with a group of women and the president of the local neighbourhood association, it was observed that houses had problems due to water leakage resulting from lack of proper underground drainage and sewerage even after those facilities were supposedly upgraded under CAMEBA. People were generally disappointed with the quality of some of the public works such as construction of staircase, storm water drains and sewerage connections as they were already showing signs of deterioration. The problem has worsened due to negligence of community members who continue to dispose garbage and litter into the storm water drains. This indicates that CAMEBA did not fully comprehend the barrio realities and its failure to educate the community on the importance of maintaining the physical infrastructure.

The Conflicting Effects of CAMEBA and Misiones

Apart from the land regularisation component of CAMEBA which had to co-ordinate with the Urban Land Committee of the Misiones, the two programmes had nothing in common. It was the task of the Urban Land Committees to do a household survey of barrios based on which the decision to regularise land would be made. In the barrio agglomeration of Julian Blanco the status in 2006 was that people were yet to obtain title deeds to the land whereas people in other barrios in Petare Norte have already obtained theirs (status in 2006).

Transition from CAMEBA to Misiones – the translation of disappointment into hope

The most important observation during the study-walk in Vista Hermosa was however, related to the way people's disappointment with CAMEBA was fast translating into hope in the Misiones, as revealed by a group of women who stated their intention to organise the community into committees as urged upon by the national government. For these women, the creation of Mission committees (health, education, sports, culture, etc) appeared to be the only hope to obtain government intervention to resolve community problems and educate people about the importance of community life.

Community awareness of Misiones

In contrast to the 56% awareness rating of CAMEBA, the rating for both national and municipal Misiones was 97%, though Misiones were launched only in 2003, whereas CAMEBA had been in operation since 1999. This is an indication of the propensity of the public communication campaign of the national government. Those who were aware of Misiones recalled on average the names of three Misiones. Most prominent amongst the recalled Misiones were: Mision Rivas and Mision Robinson (for education and literacy), Barrio Adentro (health) and MERCAL (subsidized food market). The recall rate for national Misiones was considerably higher than that for municipal Misiones for house upgrading such as Abispa and Hormiga. Only 12% (N=130) of the respondents said they belonged to a community organisation of which 75% (N= 16) said they were affiliated to community structures created by the Misiones such as Urban Land Committee, Community Kitchen, and Health Committees.

Immediate benefits of Misiones vs. long term effects of CAMEBA

The low level of community (target group) participation in CAMEBA has been compounded by a profoundly paternalistic approach of the national government that promised immediate relief and benefits in the form of compensatory programmes such as Misiones thus reinforcing habitual dependency amongst the poor people. The various Misiones Bolivarianas, being rather innovative compared to their counterparts in the past regimes prescribe quick-fix solutions to pressing problems, e.g. creating a community kitchen which employs women in barrios to provide free meals to all single mothers in extreme poverty, handicapped persons, children with malnutrition and to the elderly. These immediate-benefit programmes seem to have had an inhibiting effect on the community organisation and participation in a project like CAMEBA which had long term objectives and had aspired to create sustainable self-reliant communities in the project areas.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the findings presented in this paper, it would only be fair to state that Project CAMEBA cannot be solely blamed for the observed low level of community participation as the prevalent community habits and behaviours are equally responsible. In these circumstances, the danger however, is that participation can be rendered passive, farcical and ceremonial where community members consent to projects by blindly signing the documents presented to them by officials

Implementation of upgrading projects in barrios within the current political situation poses complex problems and challenges. Upgrading projects can meet their objectives only when they comprehend the cultural context in its entirety. They need to evolve mechanisms for inter institutional co-ordination to educate people about the long term benefits as against expectations for immediate benefits in the form of compensatory programmes.

The compensatory programmes of the government such as Misiones could be justified to some extent for their role in addressing life threatening problems, but they must eventually do away with populism and create enabling conditions to deal effectively with structural problems of society and economy which are the root cause of poverty.

The findings also point out that projects like CAMEBA, if implemented through full participation of the targeted beneficiaries, do have a reasonable potential to transcend into viable paths toward integration. But participation is not possible if a supportive community organisation is not in place. Participation must then be understood as an instrument for effective community organisation and management, and not as a 'decreed must' within the hollow ideal of constitutional democracy.

Although it is generally perceived that CAMEBA has not brought about a substantial change in the living conditions of the barrio, some community members as well as the project staff, particularly those working at the grass roots, do believe that CAMEBA was on the right track towards a positive change. The project staff attributed the limited success to their commitment and active participation. There was a positive sentiment about CAMEBA that "something has been achieved" and "some lessons have been learnt". At the same time, they also acknowledged the serious gaps between planning on paper and the reality of the barrio. They attributed these shortcomings to the widely practiced politics of patronage and the concomitant culture of short sightedness and pursuance of immediate gains on the part of the "patronised" communities. This puts the spotlight back on the earlier critique that adequate efforts and resources are not being invested to understand the cultural ethos and behavioural patterns prevalent in the barrio.

There are reasons to believe that upgrading projects conceived within a sound participatory framework, where the community is involved both in the planning as well as in the

implementation phase should gradually minimise the chronic dependency syndrome on the part of communities. A sound public awareness campaign explaining the goals, objectives and expected results of the project, together with capacity building of the community members for project planning and implementation must be introduced prior to project implementation, thus bridging the gap between professionals, government officials and barrio inhabitants. The stereotypical attitude that such a strategy premised upon active involvement of the communities from the very inception requires too much effort, time and funds, needs to change.

Community inclusion and involvement is a precondition in the process of planning upgrading interventions, if they are to be sustained through time. However such an effort will not yield results if the community is not organised and does not work together as a cohesive reciprocal network and as a collective entity, or if efforts to organize the community are hampered by lopsided social policies and programmes that are not linked to the process of upgrading. It is of utmost importance to effectively tackle the self centeredness, apathy, cynicism and resigned attitude prevalent amongst the barrio inhabitants if the driving forces for positive changes are to be sustained.

REFERENCES

- J. Baldó and F. Villanueva, 1995, *Un plan para los barrios de Caracas*, Concejo Nacional de la Vivienda, Caracas
- M. Barroso, 1997, *La Autoestima del Venezolano. Democracia y Marginalidad*, Editorial Galac, S.A., Caracas
- T. Bolívar, 1998, *Contribución al análisis de los territorios autoproducidos en la metrópoli capital venezolana y la fragmentación urbana*, Urbana, Vol. 3, No. 23, Caracas
- T. Bolívar, 2006, *Barrios en Transformación*, L+N XXI Diseños, C.A., Caracas
- V. Cartaya, 2007, *Agenda para el dialogo sobre la pobreza en Venezuela*, ILDIS Venezuela, Enero 2007
- R. Chaves and T. Burke, 2003, *The Bolivarian Circles*. <http://www.zmag.org> (last accessed 17.08.2007)
- Y. D'Elia, T. Lacruz and Thais Maingón, 2006, *Los modelos de política social en Venezuela: Universalidad vs. Asistencialismo. Balance y perspectivas de la política social en Venezuela*, ILDIS Venezuela, mayo 2006
- E. Estaba, C. Vicentini and L. Bravo, 2006, *Agenda educativa para la equidad*, ILDIS Venezuela, November 2006
- A. Falconer, 2005, *Public works and Citizenship: Empowerment in Venezuela's Barrios*, World Bank, Washington
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), 2004, *Reporte Socio Demográfico. Censo Población y Vivienda 2001*, N.1 Year 2004, Caracas
- T. Lacruz, 2006, *Misiones y participación popular*, Fundación Centro Gumilla, Revista SIC (Marzo 2006), Caracas
- Ministerio de Comunicación e Información (MCI), 2006, *Las Misiones Bolivarianas*, Colección Temas de Hoy, Caracas
- Ministerio del poder popular para la comunicacion y la informacion, 2007. *Misiones Bolivarianas*, Colección Temas de Hoy, Caracas
- A. Perez, 2005, *Las cadenas del pueblo: el populismo chavista*, Fundación Centro Gumilla, Revista SIC, Junio 2005, Caracas
- PROVEA 2005, *Situación de los derechos humanos en Venezuela. Informe Anual octubre 2004-*

septiembre 2005, Caracas. <http://www.derechos.org> (last accessed 10.08.2007)