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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Chávez's Legacy of Land Reform for Venezuela

Gregory Wilpert\*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Venezuela's current land reform process is the most important reform of its kind in Latin America in the early 21st Century. Land reform in Venezuela, which attempts to incorporate lessons from earlier such reforms in the region, has thus far reduced land inequality by providing over 180,000 families with land. However, gradual increases in agricultural production have not been able to overcome Venezuela's dependency on food imports, which have increased rapidly due to growth of the population and consumption. Also, in the effort to provide a comprehensive land reform that pays attention to credit, training, and technical support, a vast array of institutions have been created, a process that has led to inefficiency, bureaucratic confusion, and opportunities for corruption. Other challenges include the resistance from large landowners, who are said to have instigated the assassination of over 200 land reform leaders.

**Keywords:** Land reform, Venezuela, Latin America, Hugo Chávez, Bolivarian revolution.

### INTRODUCTION

Of the many legacies that President Hugo Chávez leaves for Venezuela, following his untimely death on March 5, 2013, one of the most important is land reform. Even though the agricultural sector is relatively small in Venezuela, at only about 5–6 per cent of GDP, it is nonetheless an important sector and one where the government's efforts to implement socialist policies are the most visible. It is thus appropriate to examine the extent to which Venezuela's land reform programme, 12 years into its implementation, has been successful and effective, and what its prospects are for the future.<sup>2</sup> However, before we undertake this analysis, it is important to understand the larger policy context in which land reform in Venezuela has been pursued.

\* The author is a freelance writer on Venezuela and founder of Venezuelanalysis.com, gregwilpert@gmail.com, greg@venezuelanalysis.com.

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<sup>2</sup> For descriptive analyses of the early phase of land reform in Venezuela, see Wilpert (2003); Wilpert (2005); and Ramachandran (2006).

President Chávez was elected President of Venezuela on December 6, 1998, as the first in what would become a wave of leftist presidents elected in Latin America in the following ten years. His election represented the first significant electoral revolt against neoliberalism, which, at that point, had been the predominant policy paradigm in the world for over 20 years. More than that, Chávez also represented the culmination of a 20-year process of foment and organising efforts at the grassroots, to not only oppose neoliberalism but to bring about a socialist alternative in Venezuela.<sup>3</sup> Facilitating Chávez's election was a process of economic and political decomposition of the country: poverty had increased from 17 per cent of the population in 1978 to 65 per cent in 1996, and real per capita income had declined by 27 per cent in the same period.<sup>4</sup> Traditional Christian Democratic and Social Democratic political parties, which had up until that point maintained a stranglehold on Venezuela's political system via a clientelist system of distributing the country's oil rent, had fallen apart by 1998, due to a significant drop in oil revenues during this period.

When Chávez won the 1998 presidential election with 56 per cent of the vote, he at first promised mostly a political revolution, a "Bolivarian Revolution," named after the nineteenth-century leader for Latin America's independence from Spain, Simon Bolivar. However, even though this was a mostly political revolution at first, one that promised a complete overhaul of the country's political system via a new constitution, the new constitution did promise an important economic reform, that is, land reform. It was not until much later, in 2005, that Chávez expanded his ambitions beyond the mostly political into the economic realm, by declaring his project to also be socialist – one that he varyingly described as "twenty-first century socialism" or "Bolivarian socialism," which he contrasted to the state socialism of the former Soviet Union.

By the time Chávez died in early 2013, many of the legacies of his political, economic, social, and foreign policies had become clear. Politically, his most important legacy, which was already enshrined in the new constitution of 1999, was perhaps the implementation of participatory democracy. The practical meaning of participatory democracy was to institutionalise direct-democratic processes at the local level and the national level. Nationally, this was done by giving citizens the opportunity to call for a wide variety of referenda, including the recall of elected officials (unsuccessfully applied against Chávez in August 2004), approving laws and constitutional reforms (used in 2007 and 2009), public consultations, and repealing laws. On a local level, participatory democracy found its most important expression in the creation of tens of thousands of communal councils and hundreds of communes, which now function as a basis for community organizing and improvement.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent recent account of this process, see Ciccariello-Maher (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Wilpert (2007), p. 13.

With regard to Chávez's economic legacy, the picture is a bit more complicated and has become even more so recently, given the recent spike in inflation and shortages of various consumer goods – a process which the Venezuelan government refers to as an “economic war” against the government by the country's bourgeoisie. The most important economic reforms of Chávez have been his promotion of self-managed factories, the nationalisation of key industries – such as electricity, telecommunications, cement, steel, and parts of the transnational oil industry, and price controls on basic foods as well as on the dollar. The price and currency controls were introduced as means to control capital flight and inflation, but instead they have recently contributed to shortages and inflation.<sup>5</sup>

Chávez's legacy in the area of social policy is probably best known, and is reflected in the 50 per cent decline in poverty during his presidency, as well as a two-thirds decline in extreme poverty and a significant drop in inequality, with the inequality rate falling from one of Latin America's highest to its second lowest, after Cuba. The achievement of these positive results was possible thanks to strong redistributionary social policies, implemented through so-called “missions,” which tripled pension beneficiaries; increased secondary educational enrolment from 47.7 per cent to 73.3 per cent of the school-aged population;<sup>6</sup> introduced low-cost, state-run food stores and community doctors in poor neighborhoods, which increased Venezuelans' daily consumption of calories by 50 per cent;<sup>7</sup> and provided over 550,000 state-built homes to the poor in the last two years. This tremendous increase in investment in social programmes was possible not only because of a rise in oil price between 2003 and 2008, but also because the government captured a larger share of the oil industry's profits and used these for social programmes. Also part of the social policy legacy is the rural and urban land reform. The urban land reform, which is generally unknown outside of Venezuela, has allowed slum inhabitants to acquire titles to their homes, which gives them greater security with regard to their living conditions.

Finally, in the realm of foreign policy, the Chávez legacy is one of greater regional integration – through the launch of three new regional groupings;<sup>8</sup> opposition to US imperialism; and the promotion of trade based on solidarity and cooperation, instead of competition and free trade, via the regional multilateral body known as ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America).

Of all of these legacies, rural land reform is perhaps one that is most often overlooked, but probably also one of the most lasting in that nearly one million Venezuelans (or about 180,000 families) have benefited from the land reform, receiving permanent

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of the current economic situation, see Wilpert (2013) and Wilpert (forthcoming 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE, National Institute of Statistics), [www.ine.gob.ve](http://www.ine.gob.ve).

<sup>7</sup> Instituto Nacional de Nutrición (INN, National Institute of Nutrition), [www.inn.gob.ve](http://www.inn.gob.ve).

<sup>8</sup> The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America (ALBA).

or temporary titles to 5.7 million hectares of land.<sup>9</sup> Even though this remains a fairly small segment of the population of 30 million, its significance goes far beyond the number of direct beneficiaries in that the land reform lays the groundwork for expanding agricultural production and increasing equality.

#### *A BRIEF HISTORY OF LAND OWNERSHIP IN VENEZUELA*

The extent to which the Bolivarian land reform breaks with the past is best seen relative to Venezuela's history of agriculture and land reform. Venezuela was not always an oil-producing country, but started out as a mostly agricultural country in the nineteenth century. From the start, however, the Venezuelan state played a far greater role in land ownership than in most other Latin American countries, because one of Venezuela's first dictators of the twentieth century, Juan Vicente Gomez (1908–1935), appropriated vast tracts of land for himself during his rule, making him one of the largest land owners in the world at the time, personally owning nearly 10 per cent of Venezuela's 916,000 sq km. It was also during Gomez's presidency that oil was discovered in Venezuela; he promoted the exploitation of this resource and profited from it immensely. After he died in 1935, this land and fortune became state property, thereby concentrating land ownership to a large extent in the hands of the state. During Gomez's presidency agriculture became a far less economically important activity, dropping from 70 per cent of GDP to only 22 per cent, and oil production became the most important activity, so that Venezuela was the world's largest oil producer by the end of the Gomez dictatorship.

By the end of the Gomez era, land ownership was not only concentrated in the hands of the state, but also among a small number of major land owners: merely 4.8 per cent of land owners controlled 88 per cent of the land in haciendas of 1,000 hectares or more, while 57.7 per cent of land owners controlled a mere 0.7 per cent of the land.<sup>10</sup>

The trend of increasing importance of oil and decreasing importance of agriculture continued throughout the twentieth century. By 1990 Venezuela had become Latin America's only net food importer, and 94 per cent of its population was urbanised by 2005 – making it the western hemisphere's most urbanised country. The first concerted effort to deal with this problem took place in 1960, when the government under President Romulo Betancourt, largely to preempt peasant radicalisation, introduced the country's first land reform law. This programme of land reform, in the first few years, gave ownership of almost the entire land that was state-owned to about 200,000 families. The beneficiaries of the land reform, however, did not receive sufficient support or real titles to the land, so that over a third of them dropped out of

<sup>9</sup> Provea (2012), p. 223. Another 5.9 million hectares were “regularized,” which means that their ownership titles were formalised.

<sup>10</sup> Delahaye (2003).

the programme entirely, and by 1997, land distribution in the country was nearly as unequal as it had been before the land reform. According to a census conducted that year, 5 per cent of the largest land owners controlled 75 per cent of the land, and, at the other end of the distributional spectrum, 75 per cent of land owners controlled merely 5 per cent of the land.<sup>11</sup>

### LAND REFORM UNDER CHÁVEZ

Even though Chávez himself was a military man with parents who were schoolteachers, he strongly identified with the peasantry, the *campesinos*, and the rural-plain (*los llanos*) lifestyle in which he grew up in the Barinas State of Venezuela. He idolised Ezequiel Zamora, a *llano* leader who dedicated his life to fighting for land reform in the nineteenth century, under the slogans “hatred to the oligarchy,” “land and free men,” and “disappearance of the oligarchy.” Chávez ended up basing a clandestine revolutionary movement within the military not only on the ideals of Simon Bolívar, but also on those of Ezequiel Zamora.

Thus, even before he was elected President, Chávez promised the Venezuelan peasantry a fundamental change. The first step towards fulfilling this promise was the passage of the 1999 constitution, whose Article 307 states:

The predominance of large idle estates (*latifundios*) is contrary to the interests of society. Appropriate tax law provisions shall be enacted to tax fallow lands and establish the necessary measures to transform them into productive economic units, likewise recovering arable land. Farmers and other agricultural producers are entitled to own land in the cases and forms specified under the pertinent law.

Chávez took the next step towards land reform in November 2001 when he presented 49 law-decrees that the legislature had given him the power to pass via a temporary enabling law. Among these was the “Land and Agricultural Development Law” (also known as the “Land Law”), which set the framework for a comprehensive land reform programme. The Land Law proved to be so far-reaching and potentially disruptive to the country’s old elite that it became one of the main motivations for this old elite to mobilise an effort to overthrow Chávez via a coup. Ultimately, the April 2002 coup attempt failed and the law went into effect in December of that year, in the midst of a second attempt to overthrow Chávez – this time by the opposition’s shutdown of the oil industry. This too failed and Chávez was free to begin implementing the land reform in 2003.

However, the project suffered a major setback when, in November 2002, a Supreme Court dominated by opposition sympathisers (who also exonerated the coup organisers) rescinded two key articles of the Land Law, Articles 89 and 90. Article 89 had allowed peasants to begin cultivating idle land before they acquired formal

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

titles to it. This Article was important because without it, land owners consistently challenged land redistribution efforts by tying the process up in litigation. As such, Article 89 legitimated a land reform process “from below,” which Brazil’s landless workers’ movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra or MST) had pioneered for many years. Article 90 of Venezuela’s Land Law had stated that the government does not have to compensate land owners for investments in infrastructure, such as buildings, roads, or watering systems, they had made on land that they occupied illegally. The rescinding of these two Articles represented a severe blow to the land-reform process because it made it far more expensive and far slower than it would otherwise have been.

The land redistribution process that did take place between 2003 and 2005 thus focused on state-owned land, of which there was plenty. By the end of 2004, the government had redistributed 2.3 million hectares to 116,000 families.<sup>12</sup>

In April of 2005, the legislature finally passed a reform of the Land Law, which essentially reversed the 2002 Supreme Court decision by modifying some of the law’s text. Article 90 – about compensation for infrastructure on illegally occupied land – was reversed almost completely; and Article 89 introduced the concept of “agrarian letters” (*cartas agrarias*), by which farmers were provided government authorisation to develop land even where the ownership issue had not yet been cleared by the courts. Another important reform of the Land Law changed the maximum permissible extent of idle land that a person could own. Previously, that maximum had been set at 5,000 hectares for low-quality idle land and 100 hectares for high-quality land. The revised law stipulated that land would be eligible for expropriation – with compensation – if it was larger than the average-sized land-holding in the region and if its yield was less than 80 per cent of its ideal.<sup>13</sup> Another important change was the prohibition against leasing land to farmers.

In conjunction with the reform in the Land Law in 2005, President Chávez announced a new push for the land reform programme, which he called Mission Zamora, and which would place far more emphasis on redistributing privately held land. Six months into this plan, the National Land Institute (Instituto Nacional de Tierras, *INTI*) identified 48 large and mostly idle estates, with a total area of 5.2 million hectares, for redistribution. The Chávez government recovered several well-known agricultural land-holdings during this time, some owned by foreign investors. By the end of 2011, 2.5 million hectares of privately held land from *latifundios*, or large and idle landed estates, had been “rescued” and turned over to landless farmers.

While the land reform programme initially allowed Venezuelans to apply for land titles individually, the changed Land Law of 2005 gives preference to cooperatives.

<sup>12</sup> Source: [www.inti.gob.ve](http://www.inti.gob.ve).

<sup>13</sup> Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario (Law on Land and Agricultural Development), Article 7.



Participants in the programme thus receive training not only in agricultural production, but also in cooperative management. According to an INTI legal advisor, “It is state policy to give over the land collectively, so that [the beneficiaries] become more attuned to others; so that they stop thinking individualistically.”<sup>14</sup>

A large part of the land reform programme involves not just the redistribution of idle private and publicly owned lands, but also the “regularization” of land tenancy, meaning the verification of existing land-ownership claims. Between 2003 and 2011 the government focused on this aspect and regularised 5.9 million hectares.<sup>15</sup>

Other important sub-components of the programme include the provision of credit, agricultural technology and machinery, infrastructure, and marketing, and the incorporation of agro-ecological practices. It is these additional components of land reform, in addition to the strong political support for it, which make the land reform process in Venezuela today very different from the one that was initiated in 1961, and from those that exist in many other countries around the world. Each of these sub-components of the land reform programme has a different institution behind it, all of which operate under the institutional umbrella of the Ministry of Popular Power for Land and Agriculture (MPPAT).

The provision of agricultural credit, for example, is the primary responsibility of the Agricultural Bank of Venezuela (BAV).<sup>16</sup> Agricultural infrastructure development, such as the construction of watering systems and rural roads, is the main responsibility of the National Institute of Rural Development (INDER). Technical assistance and training is provided by CIARA, the foundation for Capacity Building and Innovation to Support the Agrarian Revolution. Assistance in bringing agricultural products to the market is provided by the Venezuelan Food Corporation (CVAL). Finally, the National Institute of Agricultural Investigation (INIA) provides research and advice on the development of agro-ecological practices.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Enriquez (2013), p. 622.

<sup>15</sup> Provea (2012), p. 224.

<sup>16</sup> There are actually a wide variety of state institutions that provide agricultural credit. Also, Venezuelan banking law stipulates that 20–25 per cent of all private banks’ loan portfolios should consist of agricultural loans.

<sup>17</sup> In addition, there are agro-ecological programmes at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV) and at the Agro-Ecological Institute of Latin America Paolo Freire (IALA). The latter is actually an international programme run by Brazil’s MST and the Via Campesina in Barinas State of Venezuela. Also, there is the National Institute of Holistic Agricultural Health, which is part of the Land and Agriculture Ministry, and which provides resources not only for animal health but also agro-ecological resources. Fortunately, there are other institutions besides the INIA working on agro-ecology because, according to Enriquez (2013), the INIA itself has been rather dysfunctional given its internal divisions between conventional and ecological approaches to agriculture.



## EFFECTIVENESS OF THE BOLIVARIAN LAND REFORM

The effectiveness of the land reform programme during Chávez's presidency can perhaps best be measured by the extent to which it achieved its own objectives. Article 1 of the Land Law identifies at least three strategic objectives: first, establishment of a basis for holistic and sustainable agrarian development; secondly, just distribution of wealth; and thirdly, assuring bio-diversity and agro-alimentary security. The latter two were to serve as prerequisites for the first.

It thus makes sense to first evaluate whether just distribution of wealth and of land has been achieved in the twelve years that the rural land reform programme has been in effect. Here even critics of the land reform concede that rural poverty has diminished significantly.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, the fact that by 2011 the government had “rescued” 5.8 million hectares of land, regularised 5.9 million hectares, and distributed nearly 180,000 titles or agrarian letters,<sup>19</sup> means that nearly 1 million Venezuelans, out of a total rural population of 1.7 million,<sup>20</sup> benefited from the land reform. According to a 2007 agricultural census, the results after the first four years of land reform were relatively modest, with 70 per cent of the smallest land-holdings (20 hectares or less) still accounting for only 5 per cent of the total land under agricultural cultivation.<sup>21</sup> This compares to 1997 – ten years earlier – when 75 per cent of the smallest holdings controlled only 5 per cent of agricultural cultivation.

More important than the bare numbers of beneficiaries, and the amount of land that has been either put into agricultural production, legalised, or redistributed, is the unquantifiable effect the land reform has had on the ability of landless or land-poor farmers to organise and to fight for fairer distribution of land and better living standards. By providing peasants a tool with which to challenge the *latifundios* and to engage in land reform “from below,” where they take the initiative to seek greater social justice, the 2001 Land Law has above all meant an empowerment of poor farmers vis-à-vis the landed oligarchy.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of the third objective, assuring bio-diversity and agro-alimentary security, the effectiveness of the Land Law is more ambiguous. On the one hand, statistics with regard to agricultural production in Venezuela show that there has been a modest increase in production, but on the other hand, this increase has been far outpaced by an increase in demand. This means that imports are up too, in order to make up for the growing gap between domestic production and domestic demand for agricultural products. For example, overall food production in Venezuela increased by 22 per cent

<sup>18</sup> Such as Hernandez (2012).

<sup>19</sup> Provea (2012), p. 224.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/statistics/tags/venezuela>.

<sup>21</sup> Provea (2012), p. 225.

<sup>22</sup> This is a point that is emphasised particularly in Martinez *et al.* (2010).

between 1999 and 2009.<sup>23</sup> However, the amount of calories Venezuelans consume per capita increased by 45 per cent, from 2,202 calories in 1998 to 3,182 calories in 2011.<sup>24</sup> Add to this a population increase of 25 per cent during these years, from 23.4 million to 29.3 million, and one can see that Venezuelan agricultural production would have had to increase by much more than 22 per cent to keep up with growing food consumption levels. Agricultural imports thus more than doubled by 2011, increasing by 227 per cent relative to 1998.<sup>25</sup>

While it is certainly possible that many of the beneficiaries of land reform are now producing diverse (and statistically unrecorded) crops for their own families and not for the market, the increase in production for the domestic market has not been particularly diverse. According to statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture and Land, 97 per cent of the increase in agricultural production has been due to an increase in the production of the traditional staple, corn.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, while diversity and agro-alimentary security are still quite far from being achieved, advances have been made in the achievement of rural social justice, especially in the sense of laying the groundwork for future progress in this area.

#### *PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES*

Major challenges and problems remain, however, for the full success of Venezuela's land reform programme. Among the most important of these are the high degree of bureaucracy and organisational confusion in the programme, corruption among government officials, and resistance from the landed elite who often engage in violence and assassinations. The last of these, assassinations of peasant leaders, is perhaps the most disturbing problem related to land reform. According to the most recent report of the Venezuelan human rights organisation Provea (Programa Venezolana de Educación – Acción en Derechos Humanos, or Venezuelan Programme of Education – Action in Human Rights), 120 peasant leaders have been killed between 2000 and 2012.<sup>27</sup> According to one of Venezuela's most important peasant leaders, Braulio Álvarez, the number of assassinations of land-reform activists is over 260, that is, more than twice as high as reported by Provea; and others put the figure even higher.<sup>28</sup>

Oftentimes, it is not only activists who are targeted, but also government officials from the Land Institute, INTI. Most of the time the crimes remain unsolved, and thus

<sup>23</sup> Provea (2012), p. 225.

<sup>24</sup> Instituto Nacional de Nutrición (INN, National Institute of Nutrition), [www.inn.gob.ve](http://www.inn.gob.ve).

<sup>25</sup> Hernandez (2012).

<sup>26</sup> Provea (2012).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>28</sup> "Braulio Álvarez denuncia que 'en la Fiscalía y los tribunales aún operan fuertes mafias,'" (2012); and Ellis (2011).

far, in the few cases where the killers have been caught, the persons paying for the assassination, presumably large land owners, have not been touched. A large part of the problem is that the police, the national guard (which often acts as a police force in rural areas), and the justice system are all quite corrupt, so that wealthy land owners can easily prevent any prosecution with a few well-placed bribes.

Government officials and peasant organisations have tried to deal with the problem of anti-land reform violence by supporting the development of militia forces in the countryside as a form of self-defence. These militia forces operate under the larger umbrella of Venezuela's military reserve force. The idea of armed self-defence in favour of land reform is also an outgrowth of a longer tradition of rural self-defence that has developed in Venezuela, represented, for example, by organisations such as the shadowy Bolivarian Forces of Liberation.<sup>29</sup> A second and less violent strategy has been to strengthen the judicial system in rural areas with state-appointed "Agrarian Defenders," who act as public defence attorneys for landless farmers in issues relating to land disputes.<sup>30</sup>

A large part of the problem of the high number of assassinations in Venezuela has to do with the demobilisation of paramilitary groups in neighbouring Colombia. After their demobilisation under Colombia's President Uribe, many of them sought lucrative opportunities by moving to the wealthier Venezuela, where they formed mafias involved in assassinations and kidnappings.<sup>31</sup> It is no coincidence that crime, and especially Colombian-style assassinations, skyrocketed in Venezuela at more or less the same time that Colombia's paramilitary forces were demobilised.<sup>32</sup>

The government is confronting the second problem, of bureaucratic inefficiency, institutional complexity, and subsequent opportunities for corruption, with at least two strategies. One of the causes of this problem has to do with the frequent multiplication of state agencies with overlapping responsibilities. For example, there is a wide variety of banking institutions besides the BAV that provide agricultural loans. Also, there are many different state institutions besides the CIARA that provide technical assistance and training. One way the government has sought to deal with this complexity is to introduce "Technical Roundtables," where all the different agrarian reform institutions come together to deal with issues at local, state, and national levels. However, according to some reports, this has not really solved the problem. Enriquez (2013, p. 630) writes:

<sup>29</sup> Ciccariello-Maher (2013), pp. 214–15.

<sup>30</sup> Enriquez (2013), p. 629.

<sup>31</sup> Mallett-Outtrim (2013).

<sup>32</sup> This is a point that Venezuela's Minister of the Interior, General Miguel Rodríguez Torres, made recently: "You can see that from the moment the paramilitary are demobilised, how the influx of Colombians increases into Venezuela, and how crime starts to increase. It not only increases, but crime is also transformed. New modalities of crime begin to take place. For example, here you always had robberies and kidnappings. These types of crime always took place here. However, assassins [*sicarios*] were unknown here in Venezuela. Now we see cases where they kill someone with 20 shots." See Albert (2013).

Yet, cooperative representatives attending these municipal level meetings [of the Roundtables] at times complained about the “disarticulated” functioning of state institutions, saying that there was little coordination between them.

The problem of inefficiency and excessive complexity also leads to opportunities for corruption, where unscrupulous and well-connected individuals try to circumvent the formal land-reform procedures with bribes, or where functionaries within the different institutions take advantage of a lack of transparency. One such opportunity for corruption that has become particularly acute is with regard to the disbursement of agrarian letters, which give peasants the legal right to work on a particular plot of land. According to an internal audit of the INTI, there are about 30,000 agrarian letters in its national and regional offices that have been assigned to particular families, but which, for reasons that are not clear, have not been turned over to the beneficiaries. Regional INTI directors, according to some reports, use this as an opportunity to charge the recipients for the letters, which ought to be turned over for free.<sup>33</sup> The national INTI office has tried to deal with this problem by conducting surprise inspections of its regional offices.<sup>34</sup>

### *CONCLUSION*

In the short term, the most important challenges that need to be overcome for Venezuela’s land reform programme to succeed are acts of intimidation and violence by large land owners, and the corruption and inefficiency of state institutions of land reform. With regard to the first, it helps that the Bolivarian government of President Maduro (and previously of President Chávez) is solidly in favour of the land reform programme, and has devoted significant state resources and policies to support it. Also, Venezuela’s peasant organisations are militant and determined to make sure that the process is not impeded. A combination of these two factors – state support and an organised peasantry – ought to be sufficient to overcome the resistance of large land owners.

The more insidious challenge, however, which could eventually erode peasant support for the government’s land reform programme, is the inefficiency and corruption of state institutions. The government has recognised this problem and is trying to deal with it through measures such as the special agrarian defenders, the technical roundtables, and stricter enforcement of the law (surprise INTI inspections). Another method the government has used successfully in the past is the creation of new institutions that challenge the functioning of older state institutions – a method that some have called “dual power.”<sup>35</sup> However, as long as the underlying causes of inefficiency and corruption are not resolved, which have to do with both structural weaknesses (such as a lack of transparency and a poorly functioning judicial system)

<sup>33</sup> This information is based on a September 2013 interview that I conducted with a former INTI employee.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, “Comisión nacional revisa funcionamiento del Inti Anzoátegui” (2013).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ciccariello-Maher (2013) and Enriquez (2013).

and cultural norms (which tolerate clientelism and corruption), the dual power approach is probably not enough in the long run.

Despite these significant challenges, though, Venezuela's land reform has proven to be an important success in establishing greater social justice in the agrarian sector. Where it has failed, at least until now, is in its effort to create greater agrarian diversity and increased agrarian production. The problem of agricultural production is probably more a result of larger macroeconomic factors, such as the low prices of food imports (due to Venezuela's overvalued currency), than of a failure of the government's agricultural policies. This perhaps relatively modest success of the land reform programme – in a country with a fairly small agricultural sector – is nonetheless a very significant achievement for the Bolivarian socialist government, because it represents one of the few success stories of land reform in the twenty-first century.

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