

Venezuela: the world's largest classroom

Voluntary national presentation of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the Economic and Social Council on the implementation of the internationally agreed goals and commitments on education

Summary

In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, education is a human right and a fundamental social duty; it is democratic and liberating. It is enshrined as such in the Constitution, which was approved by the people in an exercise of its sovereign powers through a referendum held on 15 December 1999. Education is compulsory and free from the preschool (kindergarten) level to the intermediate level, and undergraduate university education is also free at State institutions. At all levels, education is converted into a social inclusion mechanism that ensures the full integration of vulnerable groups.

At the present time, after 11 years of the Bolivarian Revolution, Venezuela has not only made progress toward the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in respect of education, it has also turned itself into "the world's largest classroom". Of the country's 28,384,132 inhabitants, more than 10 million, or 37 per cent of the total population, are currently enrolled in educational programmes of one kind or another at the various levels of the education system.

The progress achieved in the field of education during the Bolivarian Revolution has been manifest: (a) 1,706,145 men and women have learned to read and write, with the result that the literacy rate is now 98.55 per cent; (b) school enrolment has increased by 24 per cent since 1999; (c) the net preschool enrolment rate has nearly doubled, from 53 per cent in the 1998-99 school year to 71 per cent in 2009-10; (d) the net primary school enrolment rate increased by seven percentage points between 1998 and 2010, reaching 93 per cent in the 2009-10 school year; (e) the numbers of pupils beginning Grade 1 and continuing through to the final grade of primary school increased by 18 percentage points over a period of six years, reaching 35 per cent in the 2009-10 school year; (f) the net intermediate school enrolment rate was 72 per cent in 2009-10, a 24 per cent increase compared to 1998-99; (g) at the intermediate level, enrolment in science and the humanities rose by 98 per cent during the Bolivarian Revolution, while the corresponding increase for technical training programmes was 76 per cent; (h) enrolment in special education increased by 257 per cent between 1998-99 and 2009-10; (i) indigenous people have been integrated into the education system, which recognizes and respects their cultures (at the present time, 110,851 indigenous persons are enrolled in the system, attending schools some of which are within indigenous areas and others elsewhere); (j) university enrolment increased by 192 per cent between 1998 and 2010: in the former year there were 735,285 students attending universities, while by 2010 the total had increased to 2,293,914; and (k) in 2010, 70.3 per cent of all students attending university were enrolled at State-run institutions, while 29.7 per cent were enrolled at private institutions. This situation indicates a reversal of the former trend toward the privatization of higher education.

In addition, the Bolivarian Revolution has a number of other significant achievements to its credit in the field of education, including the proclamation of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela as an illiteracy-free territory and the fact that the country has been recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as ranking fifth world-wide, and second in Latin

America and the Caribbean, in terms of its gross university enrolment rate.

Not only have strategies been introduced into the formal education system, but cultural management has been consolidated throughout the country, which is advancing toward the democratization of culture and the integration of population groups that have traditionally been excluded from the cultural sphere.

In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, education is the main strategic factor in the task of upgrading social welfare as well as the key to promoting full social participation by both women and men, without discrimination of any kind, and equality in gender relations. Under the Constitution, gender has no effect on an individual's status before the law (article 21), and equality between men and women is a recurrent theme throughout. Furthermore, the educational traditions of indigenous peoples are recognized and respected through the institution of a system of bilingual intercultural education.

The Constitution states that education is a public service, and that it is pluralistic and grounded in respect for all lines of universal thought. The purpose of education is to promote the full development of the student's personality for the greater enjoyment of a life of dignity sustained by an awareness of the ethical value of work and active participation by human beings in all processes of social change, on a basis of solidarity.

To these ends, the Venezuelan State has instituted an ongoing, incremental social investment process designed to ensure that education is available for all and compulsory from the preschool level to the intermediate and diversified levels. It is also free up to the undergraduate level. Education has thus become a foundation-stone for the purposes of the State, in accordance with the recommendations of UNESCO.

The development of public policy in the field of education has brought about far-reaching changes in the ways knowledge is accessed, constructed, produced, transmitted, distributed and used. This is particularly true of university education, which has been reinstated as a humanistic endeavour serving to guide the integral training of human talents within a transforming, participatory and inclusive process characterized by constantly critical thought.

These achievements are owing primarily to the policy of abolishing registration fees at all State-run educational establishments, the implementation of the school meals programme (from which 4,055,135 pupils benefited in 2010, up from 119,512 in 1998, for an increase of 3,293 per cent), the introduction of educational missions (Robinson I, Robinson II, Alma Mater and Sucre), the building of 4,037 new State schools, a 161 per cent increase in the number of teachers, and the strategies that have been successfully designed and implemented at all levels and modalities of education.

Particularly significant among these strategies have been the introduction of the Simoncito programme in preprimary education, the Bolivarian Schools at the primary level, and the Bolivarian Secondary Schools and Robinsonian Technical Schools at the intermediate level. Another aspect that should be emphasized has been the integration of information and communication technology as a feature of curriculum development in primary education.

Noteworthy innovations in the university education subsystem have been municipalization and the launching of the Robinson I, Robinson II and Ribas educational missions, the aim of which is to resolve the issue of school exclusion in primary, intermediate and diversified education, and the Sucre and Alma Mater missions, which are strategies for the universalization of university education through municipalization. This consists of a public policy aimed at offsetting regional disparities by bringing education into communities.

In 2010, six university institutes of technology were converted into the first six regional polytechnic universities. Five universities were established in Venezuela between 1989 and 1998, while between 1999 and 2010, the Revolution has established

25 official institutions of university-level education. Nineteen of these are national experimental universities, while the other six are conventional universities.

The establishment of specialized universities has been particularly noteworthy. These include the Experimental University of the Arts, the National Experimental University of Security, the Bolivarian Military University of Venezuela, the Venezuelan University of Hydrocarbons, the Jesús Rivero Bolivarian Workers' University, and the Sports University of the South. The establishment of the Paulo Freire Latin American Institute for Agroecology and the Mayor (AV) Miguel Rodríguez University Institute of Civil Aviation have been other significant achievements. In addition, 32 national training programmes have been organized, and two indigenous universities have been founded.

Venezuela's international cooperation is predicated on the effort to build a multipolar world, with a fundamental concern to promote a Latin American and Caribbean union and the establishment of strategic political, economic and cultural alliances with a view to fostering the proliferation of new power groupings and thereby contributing to the advent of a new global geopolitical configuration.

Education has been viewed as a strategic factor for cooperation on a basis of solidarity and unity among peoples. Accordingly, interinstitutional relations and international mobility for students and instructors have been encouraged and joint training and research projects developed. International cooperation initiatives have included the Cuba-Venezuela Convention, the International Robinson Mission, the Grand National ALBA Education Project, the cooperation agreement between the People's Republic of China and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the international scholarships programme, university degree recognition agreements, and cooperation with Africa.

The strategic priority informing Venezuela's international cooperation effort in the field of education is relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, both bilateral and multilateral. In addition, priority is given to South-South relations with Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

As will be clear from the foregoing discussion, Venezuela can reasonably be said to have become "the world's largest classroom".