

Do initiatives such as the “Consejos Comunes” in Venezuela create a culture of true participatory democracy in the decision making process of the “Bolivarian revolution”?

**Lorenzo Vidal-Folch
PAIS Department
04/10/2007**

Funded by:

The Reinvention Centre
For Undergraduate Research

Abstract

The “Consejos Comunales” are a form of community organization that can administer certain public funds. The initiative is still in an embryonic stage and most neighbourhoods are in the process of forming their “Consejos Comunales” or developing their initial projects. However, after over a year and a half of expansion of Communal power across Venezuela, some observations and conclusions can be drawn from both the legal and political framework as well as from the practical experience of implementation. My research included interviews of participants and attendance of meetings and assemblies as well as media and government documents. The “Consejos Comunales” are examples of predefined and restricted participation in public policy. The participatory local bases struggle in challenging as well as cooperating with government bureaucracy. Tendencies towards clientelism, attempted political party or government cooption and mismanagement of public funds exist. These make it difficult, but not impossible, for the “Consejos Comunales” to become a genuine participatory and democratic initiative.

Keywords: community organization, participatory and democratic.

Introduction

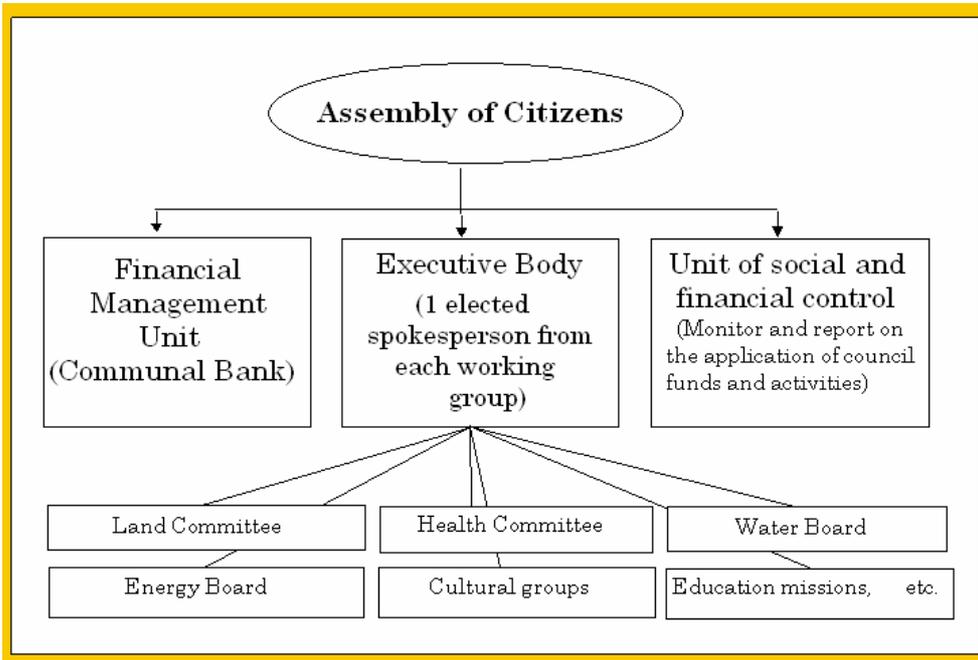
The research concerns the nature and organization of the “Consejos Comunales” and their potential for developing into the principal organs of a participatory democratic model in Venezuela. The main objectives of the project were to observe the practical implementation of the initiative and to uncover the degree of autonomy of the Communal Councils. The research seeks to understand this initiative in the context of the “Bolivarian Revolution”. Previous literature is mostly limited to local as well as international media coverage and to government documents, reports and laws. Although these are privileged in terms of access to information and resources, their objectivity is clearly limited by ideological and power interests. Moreover, whilst most inquiry has looked at the macro or theoretical level, few documents reflect the practical issues that arise on the ground. The project attempts to surpass the play of interests and feed from macro-data but especially from the experience of citizens directly involved in the process. The current crisis of traditional representative democracy makes initiatives like these incredibly important and thought provoking.

Since the election of President Hugo Chavez in 1998, the Venezuelan government has been attempting to incorporate more participation in to the decisions of the state. The “Consejos Comunales” (Communal Councils) are neighbourhood community organizations that are being created to serve as the principal organ of formulation, execution and control of public policies at a local level and foster community autonomy and sustainable development. The Venezuelan government started promoting Communal Councils in late 2005 and passed the “Communal Council Law” in the Venezuelan National Assembly on April 10, 2006. This law established the councils’ right to legally receive and administer resources from government institutions. These resources are geared towards responding to the infrastructure, service and cultural needs of the community.

The councils are started up by interested neighbours. They are generally composed of between 200 and 400 families in urban areas, 20 in rural areas, and 10 in indigenous areas. Final decisions are made by the Council’s Citizens Assembly (residents of the community over the age of 15) which is the primary body for the exercising of power. At least 20% of the voting population must be present in order for a decision to be valid.

Local community spokespeople are elected to represent the community in larger regional council assemblies and also as an intermediary with the state.

The structure of a Communal Council:



By March 2007, 19,500 Communal Councils had been formed and the goal of 30,000 has been set for the end of this year. The budget for financing projects is \$5 billion for 2007. Communal Councils are given \$14,000 each to finance their initial projects.

Methodology:

- Short individual interviews and focus group discussions with participants of various Communal Councils (both spokespersons as well as un-elected citizens including both Chavez supporters as well as opposition supporters)
- Attendance at Citizens Assemblies and meetings of the Executive Bodies.
- Collection of data from national newspapers and publications of all political tendencies.
- Examination of legal documents and governmental reports.

These methods have given me an insight into the experience of citizens participating in this initiative without ignoring the ideological, political and legal context. The project was carried out initially collecting background information and analysis from Venezuelan media websites, alternative analysis portals and governmental websites containing legal information. Once in Caracas, research focused on capturing the practical implementation of the initiative via interviews and by attending assemblies and meetings. Also, more analysis and information was gathered by closely following media coverage in local newspapers and TV as well as visiting governmental buildings to gather pamphlets and presentations.

Results

The findings of the project are presented within the framework of three issues I have identified as key to the nature and development of the Communal Councils and are summarized below.

1. *The scope of participation*

- *Local concerns*

The Councils are effective in tackling local needs that have local solutions, for example the construction of a public football field or the repair of homes. However, with larger issues, the Councils face difficulties with coordination and rely on the functioning of the structures of representative democracy.

- *The building of a community*

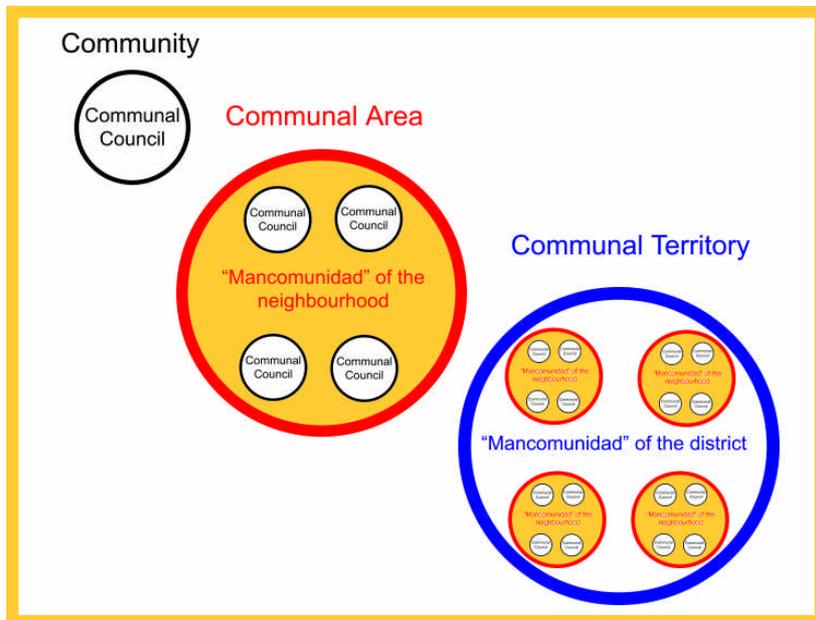
Face-to-face assemblies and working on common projects creates communication between neighbours, knowledge of each other's problems and encourages solidarity and community spirit. The Councils facilitate the participation of groups traditionally excluded from public life such as women and teenagers.

- *Pressure groups*

Organized communities are more effective in pressuring the authorities for improvement of services, increased transparency, etc., than individual complaints.

- *The development of communal power*

In the aim to transcend the local sphere, Communal Councils work towards forming "Mancomunidades" - larger regional councils, grouping all the Communal Councils of an area, and successively to larger territorial areas through elected delegates. This is however at a very embryonic stage. These structures are in a delicate situation balancing issues of conflict, competition and co-operation with traditional local authorities.



- *Tasks and framework set from above*

Currently the Communal Council's scope of action is set on infrastructure, services and culture. Participation goes as far as the government prescribes.

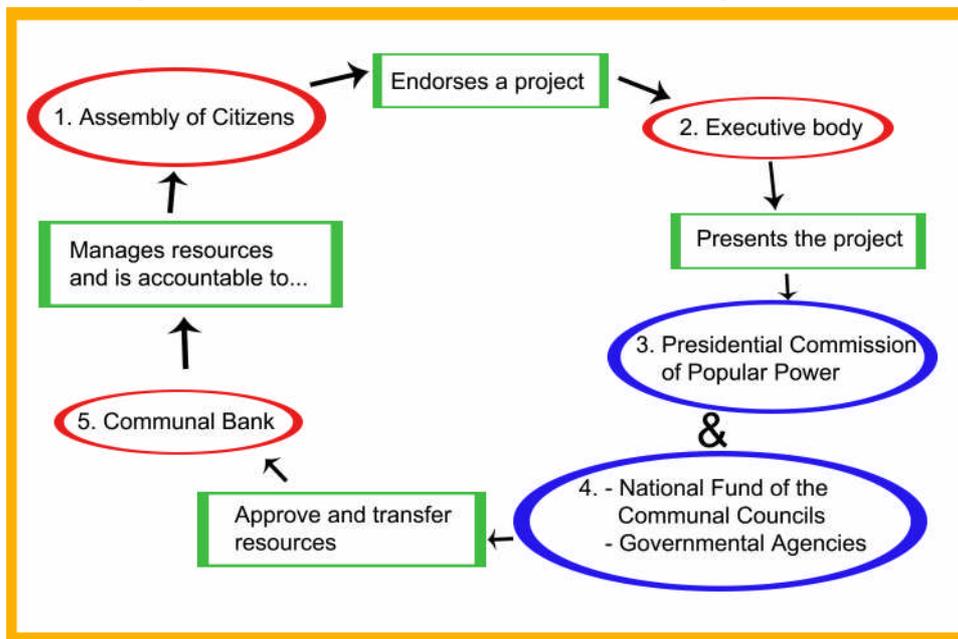
2. *Autonomy or dependence*

- *Communal democracy*

The decision-making procedure of the Communal Councils is democratic and horizontal, the spokespersons (which cannot also occupy a traditionally elected post in the government or authorities) are voted by secret ballot and the final say in all major decisions is reserved for the Assembly of Citizens. There are no “presidents”, “bosses” or “leaders”.

- *Financial dependence*

The projects undertaken by the Communal Councils depend almost entirely on financial resources transferred from government institutions. There is a risk of developing clientelist tendencies and a bias in financing.



Dependence. The cycle of presentation and financing of Communal Council projects.

- *Tendencies of centralisation of power*

The directors of the “National Fund for the Communal Councils” as well as the “National and Regional Presidential Commissions for Popular Power” which approve and finance projects presented by the Communal Councils are directly nominated by the President of the Republic. The Communal Council spokespersons are allowed to participate in the Commissions albeit as lesser partners. These structures are not in tune with the decentralization of power undertaken in the past through regional and local elections and tax devolution.

- *Pressure from the political party paradigm*

Despite the Communal Councils being a social and “non-political” space, political parties both pro and anti Chavez have attempted to influence them to suit their party interests. However, most Communal Councils have resisted this threat as it denaturalises their communal character.

3. Efficiency

- Diagnosing needs

The community itself is more aware of its necessities and priorities than any government official or bureaucrat. Developing projects that reflect this local knowledge is more effective and responds better to the particular circumstances of each community.

- Mismanagement of funds

Financing Communal Council projects directly intends to circumvent the corruption, inefficiency and mismanagement of resources which plague Venezuelan regional and local authorities, governors, mayors, officials and bureaucrats. However, corruption and mismanagement have also manifested themselves at the communal level. Insufficient training and a lack of experience in the management of resources, combined with few mechanisms of accountability, auditing and financial control are a risky combination.

- The bureaucratic transfer of resources

The bureaucratic apparatus involved from the moment in which the Communal Council requests funds for a project, up until the transfer of financial resources to the Communal Bank means that many times resources arrive late and not in full.

Conclusions and outcomes:

The Communal Councils are instances of restricted and predefined participation. Although their essence is horizontal and democratic, they are placed in a structure in which functions, resources and organization are planned hierarchically by the government and state apparatus.

Still in a very embryonic stage, the development of Communal Councils and communal power in "Mancomunidades" has not yet reached a stage in which a final evaluation and conclusion can be made. It is yet unclear whether communal power will settle at the base of the political pyramid, as participatory pockets in the state apparatus, or will become an autonomous parallel power to the traditional authorities.

For the development of communal power to have any meaning in the future:

1. It must continue to reject political party influences or cooptation by the government.
2. Citizens of all political tendencies must actively participate.
3. Further education and preparation has to be imparted to improve the management of resources and the formulation of projects.
4. A deep democratisation of the "top" managing and funding agencies is necessary and possibilities for managing financial resources in a less dependant way must be enhanced.

If community organization continues to grow, so will demands for a more efficient transfer of resources and for a larger say in the running of regional and local authorities and public policies. The challenge to state bureaucracy and the frustration resulting from un-materialized promises might render the Communal Councils less tame than expected. Although the government is currently in a position of control, the creativity and drive of ordinary people organized in the attempt to improve their daily lives should not be underestimated.

The project has allowed me to mature my skills in political, social and economic analysis. I have realized that analysing on a macro level or at micro level greatly effects the scope and depth of an investigation and that both must be explored to present a more accurate account. Linking and contrasting the direct experience of participants of the Communal Councils against the ways in which the media and government

represent the initiative was crucial in understanding subjectivity of one same reality. It has been an insight into the web of interests that influence the representation of the same reality. I have also gathered valuable experience through the challenges of carrying out an investigative study on the ground for the first time.

Conducting innovative research has motivated me go beyond the traditional paradigms of what is expected from an undergraduate student. I have disseminated my work in a poster form during the Student as Producer Conference and will shortly have the poster hanging in the PAIS department. I have also written an article on Venezuela's current events, including the Communal Councils, for a student political publication soon to be released in the university. I have posted my article on the Indymedia UK website so as to contribute to the efforts to present an alternative coverage of important social and political issues. I also plan to write an academic piece for the journal "Reinvention: a Journal of Undergraduate Research" about the Communal Councils later this year. The research I have carried out will be integrated into my dissertation on local power and participatory democracy.

Photographs:



Citizens Assembly of the Communal Council of a small community in Figueroa (outside Caracas) on insecurity and crime. The local policeman was invited.



Training workshop on formulating communal projects in San Antonio de los Altos, in the outskirts of Caracas.