



Fact Sheet:

**PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AS
REVOLUTIONARY PROTAGONISTS**

A Genetic Research Centre, specific classrooms for Venezuela’s children with special needs and a centre for disabled persons are just some of the most recent achievements of this government in its efforts to properly address the needs of people with disabilities. Unfortunately, the concerns of people with disabilities have not always been a major issue for Venezuelan governments. In fact, historically, people with special needs have been excluded from public participation, says Ludyt Ramirez, the President of the Venezuelan National Council for Disabled Persons (CONAPDIS).¹

When President Chávez took office in 1999, one of his main objectives was to repay a historical debt to those who have long been ignored by previous governments. Such groups included women, indigenous peoples, African-Venezuelans and people with special needs. The 1999 Constitution was drafted on the premise that Venezuela can only flourish if all sectors of society enjoy full citizenship rights and are able to participate in all aspects of social life. With *participatory democracy*² a top priority, people with disabilities who make up around 1.2% of the national population (335,000), as well as other historically marginalised groups, today enjoy the rights and freedoms due to them, and can now act as vital participants in the construction of a truly democratic society.

Constitution and Specific Laws

The **Venezuelan Constitution of 1999**³, in **Article 81** states specifically that: *“Any person with disabilities or special needs has the right to a full and autonomous exercise of his or her*

rights and to full integration into the family and community. The State, with the solidarity participation of families and society, guarantees them respect for their human dignity, equality of opportunities and satisfactory working conditions, and shall promote their training, education and access to employment appropriate to their condition, in accordance with the law. It is recognized that deaf persons have the right to express themselves and communicate through the Venezuelan sign language.”

Based on the Constitution the **“Law on Persons with Disabilities”**⁴ was passed by the Venezuelan National Assembly in November 2006, assuring disabled people access to medical assistance,

“In Venezuela not one single person with special needs can be left without appropriate care. That is socialism.”

President Chávez, October 2009

better access to public transport and adequate representation in the work place, to name just a few of the guarantees provided in the legislation . Under the new law employers need to ensure that at least 5 % of positions are held by disabled persons (Article 28). In comparison, the

prior law only required a representation of 2% in the workplace and it only applied to companies with over 50 employees. Furthermore the 2006 law requires public and private media to incorporate mechanisms such as sign language in their programmes and calls for special facilities to make it easier for people with disabilities to use public transportation. Regarding health, the law foresees preferential treatment for people with disabilities, as already exists for those suffering from diabetes, heart and liver problems.

In terms of international conventions, Venezuela adopted the **“Inter-American Convention on the**



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elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities”⁵ in 2005.

While preventing and eliminating discrimination, this charter also promotes the full integration of people with disabilities into society, and is in accord with the government’s general vision of participatory democracy.

While legal guarantees are fundamentally important, because they create the basis upon which to act, they really are only of use to the people if they are put into practice and provide the benefits they talk about! The next section will detail how new institutions have been established and have led to actual improvements in the lives of people with disabilities over recent years.

Institutions and Concrete Achievements

National Council for Persons with Disabilities (CONAPDIS)

This council was among the first institutions to focus solely on the needs and requirements of people with disabilities. It grew out of an older institution formed in 1993, “The National Council for the Integration of Incapacitated Persons”. As the term suggests, integration previously was based on the premise that people with special needs were “incapacitated”!



Ludyt Ramirez – Head of CONAPDIS

This vision clearly changed with the Chávez government, as people with special needs may be disabled in all sorts of ways, but are certainly, except in very rare cases, fully ‘incapacitated’. The name change was brought about with the new constitution and reflects a change in the way people with special needs are treated in Venezuela today, not as “incapacitated persons” but as human beings who are in need of particular care and who are clearly capable of making a valuable contribution to the

development of Venezuelan society. This is best reflected in the leadership of CONAPDIS, which is headed by Ludyt Ramirez (picture above), who although suffering from a physical disability has successfully led this institution for many years. Under her guidance thousands of Venezuelans with special needs have received the attention they deserve and have been included in areas formerly closed to them.⁶

Social Programme “Jose Gregorio Hernandez”

To support the long-standing work that CONAPDIS has been carrying out over the years, in March 2008 the government introduced the programme “Mission Jose Gregorio Hernandez”, named after a famous Venezuelan community doctor. This ‘Mission’ is one of the government’s latest social programmes and focuses on the health aspect of Venezuelans with disabilities. The main goal of the Mission is to carry out a door-to-door, nation-wide census in order to find out how many people have disabilities or genetic diseases in Venezuela and what kind of specific needs they have. Furthermore, the mission is also entrusted with the training of doctors, psychiatrists, language and physical therapists expert in the causes, prevention, treatment and social connotations of disabilities.

programme hand-in-hand with Cuban doctors specialised in areas such as defectology, clinical genetics, neuropediatrics, etc. To carry out the census they visited 640,000 households all over the country, studying more than 330,000 individual cases.

Based on the results of this study, technical equipment, medicines and other support material has been made available to people with special needs. For example, in Tachira state alone more than 40,000 items of support material have been provided to disabled people.

The study furthermore revealed that 61,165 people with special needs are still likely to hold a regular job; however, only 20% of them do actually have links to some kind of regular work. President Chavez said explicitly that this will require



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specific training programs so these people can be fully integrated into work as well.

The success of this programme inspired the Ecuadorian government to initiate a similar one and Venezuela agreed to donate \$20 million worth of wheelchairs, crutches, and other special equipment to support Ecuador's programme which they called "Manuela Espejo Solidarity Mission". Both programmes receive support from Cuban community doctors.⁷

Genetic Research Center

As an extension of the Jose Gregorio Hernandez Mission, the first Genetic Research Centre was inaugurated in Venezuela this month. The centre is equipped for research into genetic engineering, neuroscience, child neurological development, molecular biology, cognitive neuroscience and many more related areas. With the assistance of Cuban specialists, this centre will help treat tens of thousands of people who suffer from genetically-incurred disabilities. President Chavez noted that "Many of these studies are costly and some had to be done outside the country. With this centre, the Venezuelan people will benefit for free".⁸

Classrooms for Venezuelan Children with Special Needs

Nearly 400 classrooms specifically designed for disabled students are currently under construction in Venezuela and will be incorporated into the nation's public schools approximately by the end of this year. The classrooms will allow more than 3,800 children with special needs to attend school. This is another initiative that came into being thanks to the study undertaken by Mission Jose Gregorio Hernandez, which revealed that more than 18,000 students with disabilities had not been able to attend school in the past.⁹

Centre for Disabled People

The first centre for people with special needs was inaugurated in Aragua state in June this year. The centre functions as both a place of care for the disabled, as well as a space where the public can propose policies and projects to improve the situation of people with special needs. Mission Jose Gregorio Hernandez, as well as CONAPDIS, operate out of this centre.

As can be seen from this paper, much has been achieved in Venezuela in terms of empowering people with special needs. Of course, there is still much left to do, but the facts show that initiatives have already resulted in real improvements for the people. And President Chavez made it clear in one of his recent speeches in October this year that: "***In***

Venezuela not one single person with special needs can be left without appropriate care. That is socialism".¹⁰

London, October 29, 2009



¹ Venezuelanalysis, "Venezuela Launches New Mission for Health of the Disabled", <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/3279>, (retrieved October 29, 2009).

² For a more thorough discussion of participatory democracy, see "Myth and Reality about Democracy in Venezuela", http://www.venezlon.co.uk/pdf/fs_democracia.pdf (retrieved October 22, 2009).

³ Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 1999, Free Translation, http://www.venezlon.co.uk/pdf/constitution_eng.pdf (retrieved October 22, 2009).

⁴ Venezuelan Law for Persons with Disabilities (in Spanish) <http://www.conapdis.gob.ve/archivos/2.pdf> (retrieved October 22, 2009).

⁵ "Inter-American Convention on the elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities "



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<http://www.oas.org/juridico/English/treaties/a-65.html>

(retrieved October 22, 2009).

⁶ Consejo Nacional para las Personas con Discapacidad,

<http://www.conapdis.gob.ve/resenia.php>, (retrieved

October 29, 2009).

⁷ Venezuelanalysis, "Venezuela Launches New Missino for Health of the Disabled",

<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/3279>,

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⁸ Venezuelanalysis, "Government Builds Genetics

Research Center and Special Classrooms for

Venezuela's Disabled",

<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/4866>,

(retrieved October 29, 2009).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ [http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/internacionales/2009-](http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/internacionales/2009-10-15/inauguro-chavez-centro-nacional-de-genetica-medica-de-venezuela/)

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