



Fact Sheet: **AGRICULTURE**

Background

The discovery of vast petroleum reserves and the subsequent development of a major oil exporting industry led to the neglect of the Venezuela's agriculture sector over the course of the twentieth century, as an influx of foreign currency made it relatively cheap to import food and other goods.¹

Migration to the cities

An **abandoned agricultural sector meant abandoned rural communities**, leading to a mass exodus of people from the countryside into urban areas, particularly in and around the capital of Caracas. Farmers who once worked in the countryside planting and harvesting crops such as coffee and cocoa, moved to the city in search of a better life.

By 1960, the percentage of the population living in rural areas had dropped by nearly half to just 35 percent, and then to a mere 12 percent by the 1990s, making Venezuela home to one of the most urbanised populations in Latin America.

By the time President Chávez was elected at the end of 1998, Venezuela's remaining rural

¹ Gregory Wilpert, "[Land for People Not for Profit in Venezuela](http://www.venezuelanalysis.com)," [Venezuelanalysis.com](http://www.venezuelanalysis.com), August 23, 2005.

communities were in crisis, and the majority of those who had migrated into cities and urban margins faced substandard housing and sanitation, lack of adequate social services, and lack of decent job opportunities. Over half of the population lived in poverty, and 42.5 percent lived in extreme poverty.

Unfair land distribution

Venezuela has a long history of *latifundismo* in which the majority of agricultural is in the hands of a small elite. Before President Chavez's election roughly 75 to 80% of the country's private land was owned by 5% of all landowners. Regarding agricultural holdings, that figure drops to a mere 2% of the population owning 60% of the country's farmland, much of which was left fallow.

**"We will convert
Venezuela into an
agricultural power
house"**

***President Hugo
Chavez***

Dependence on imports

With domestic food production greatly reduced, Venezuela became the only Latin American country to be a **net importer of agricultural products** as oil rents created a disincentive to maintaining agricultural production.

Venezuela depended on food imports for more than 70 percent of its food supply, putting many staple foods out of reach for the poor. This dependency on food imports also put the population as a whole in a highly vulnerable situation.



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Following the devastating rains of December 2010, agriculture policy is of key importance. It is estimated that 35% to 40% of the country's plantain crop, one of Venezuela's most important staple foods, was damaged as a result of rains and some 10% of milk and meat production in the area south of Lake Maracaibo lost.

Venezuela's agricultural revolution

The transformation of Venezuela's food and agriculture system is part of the country's broader national process of social change, the Bolivarian Revolution.

Constitutional rights

Venezuela's constitution, adopted by popular referendum in 1999, laid the foundation for agricultural rights and food sovereignty through several key articles. For example, article 305 states:

“The State shall promote **sustainable agriculture as the strategic basis for overall rural development**, and consequently shall guarantee the population a secure food supply, defined as the sufficient and stable availability of food within the national sphere and timely and uninterrupted access to the same for consumers....Food production is in the national interest and is fundamental to the economic and social development of the Nation.”

Government programmes

Misión Agro-Venezuela

Mission Agro-Venezuela was launched in January 2011 and has three main goals:

- Increase production of staple crops
- Increase the amount of land under production
- Promote and stimulate urban agriculture

The programme provides **low-interest loans, machinery, and technical assistance** to farmers all over the country. A fund of one billion bolivars (\$232 million) has been earmarked.² **Over half a million agro-producers have already registered** with the project following a national agricultural census to help the government understand the needs of producers in the country and fine tune agricultural policy.³

This is part of wide range of support to nurture the success of small and mid-scale farms, from credit and technical assistance to social services and market access.

The government aims to **cut food and agricultural imports by 30% in the first year of Mission Agro-Venezuela**. Ivan Gil, Vice Minister for Agro-productive lands at the Ministry of Land and Agriculture said: “We are currently producing 90% of the chicken we consume. With Mission Agro-Venezuela, we can eliminate these imports. The Mission

² Mission AgroVenezuela:
<http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/5976>

³ Mision Agro Venezuela:
<http://www.avn.info.ve/node/43581>



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will result in a 34% increase in vegetable production and an 8% production in livestock for 2011 alone.”⁴

Urban agriculture

Venezuelan Agriculture and Land Minister, Juan Carlos Loyola, also announced plans to create **10,000 “urban harvest points”** in cities throughout Venezuela. These sites will be owned and operated by communal councils and the national government will provide seeds, training and market access to encourage their success.⁵

The Viceminister for Rural Development, Danicxe Aponte, said “urban agriculture is fundamental for the food needs of those Venezuelans who live in the urban centers of major cities”

According to Foundation of Capacity-building and Innovation to Support the Agrarian Revolution (CIARA), at the start of 2011 Venezuela had almost 2,860 urban gardens in operation.⁶

Banco Agricola de Venezuela

(Agricultural Bank of Venezuela) - The bank was launched in 2005 and offers small agricultural producers financial assistance and other services.⁷

⁴ <http://www.avn.info.ve/node/49498>

⁵ http://www.fonendogeno.gob.ve/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=731&Itemid=2

⁶ CIARA: <http://www.ciara.gob.ve/news/show/id/321>

⁷ <http://www.bav.com.ve/>

There is a wide range of support to nurture the success of small and mid-scale farms, from credit and technical assistance to social services and market access.

There are also laws requiring both public and private banks to provide credit to farmers at reasonable interest rates.

According to Eduardo Escobar, former president of the Agricultural Bank of Venezuela, "Formerly, agricultural planning was top-down and imposed upon communities. Now it is a much more participatory process."⁸

Food sovereignty

There has been a growing emphasis on ensuring not only the human right to food, but also the ability of Venezuela to *feed itself* and determine its own agricultural policies.

Control over food distribution and food production is being taken back from corporate agribusinesses and international financial institutions and given to ordinary Venezuelans.

Improvements in food sovereignty since 1998

By 2008, Venezuela reached levels of self sufficiency in its two most important grains, corn and rice, with production increases of 132 percent and 71 percent respectively since 1998.

⁸ http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/4873?quicktabs_2=2



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The country also achieved self-sufficiency in pork, representing an increase in production of nearly 77 percent since 1998. Furthermore, Venezuela is on its way to reaching self-sufficiency in a number of other important staple foods, including beef, chicken, and eggs, for which domestic production currently meets 70 percent, 85 percent, and 80 percent of national demand, respectively. Milk production has increased by 900 percent to 1.96 million tons, fulfilling 55 percent of national demand.

Many other crops have seen significant increases over the past decade, including black beans (143 percent), root vegetables (115 percent), and sunflowers for cooking oil production (125 percent). This suggests a prioritization of culturally important crops and a focus on matching domestic agricultural production with national consumer demands.

The country is already in a position to export pork-currently at 113 percent of national demand-and is projected to have a sufficient surplus of corn for export within a year

International cooperation

Venezuela is collaborating with China to import the latest **agricultural machinery** with a view to building an **assembly plant** in the region to manufacture agricultural machinery.⁹

China has also helped Venezuela with various varieties of seeds, such as rice, corn, Venezuelan black beans, vegetables, as well as with livestock and milk. Rice seed planting in Apure state will begin this June.

⁹ Venezuela/China cooperation:
<http://www.avn.info.ve/node/47821>

ALBA

Many of ALBA's regional integration programmes include the trade of Venezuelan oil for food, such as Argentine meat or dairy and Bolivian soybeans.

In 2009, the ALBA countries agreed to create a grand-national food production company called **ALBA Alimentos** (ALBA Food). The ALBA nations signed agreements to form mixed enterprises that will promote **technological cooperation and training, invest in rural infrastructure, and integrate regional food distribution.**

ALBA Food, one of many grand-national companies set up between the ALBA countries, also counteracts the dependence on transnational companies and the vulnerability in the region in the face of market speculation in the event of another food crisis.¹⁰

Redistribution of land

According World Bank statistics, before Chavez took office in 1998, **Venezuela was home to the second greatest land inequality in Latin America.**

The Venezuelan constitution deems *latifundios* to be contrary to the interests of society and charges the state with guaranteeing the food-producing potential of both privately and collectively held land.

Law on Land and Agricultural Development requires that agricultural land be used for food production and gives communities a legal

¹⁰ ALBA Food:
<http://www.alternativabolivariana.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=5923>



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framework for organising themselves to settle and farm idle lands.

The goals of this legislation were as follows: to set limits on the size of landholdings, tax unused property as an **incentive to spur agricultural growth**, redistribute unused, primarily government-owned land to peasant families and cooperatives and, lastly, expropriate uncultivated and fallow land from large, private estates for the purpose of redistribution. On the last and most controversial goal, the landowners would be compensated for their land at market value

According to government figures released in January 2009, nearly 2.7 million hectares (6.6 million acres) of latifundio land have been returned to productivity since the passage of the Law of the Land. Most of the recovered land is now directly under the stewardship of farmers, many of whom have organised themselves into cooperatives.¹¹

Sustainable farming

In 2008, the Law for Integrated Agricultural Health officially established agro-ecology as the scientific basis for sustainable agriculture in Venezuela and mandated the **phasing out of toxic agrochemicals**.

Venezuelan farmers are reclaiming agricultural **practices that respect both ecology and culture** and are returning to traditional crop varieties and growing techniques, composting to boost soil fertility, saving and exchanging traditional seeds,

¹¹ <http://rbv.info/en/venezuela-news/economy/23053-law-on-land-and-agricultural-development-an-achievement-that-was-about-to-miss-the-11a>

diversifying crops, using natural forms of pest control.

The government has also launched twenty-four laboratories for the development of biological pest control and fertilizers, "in an effort to eliminate the toxic agrochemicals of Bayer, Cargill, Monsanto."¹²

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For more news and information about Venezuela, please visit our website:
www.embavenez-uk.org

¹² <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/4873>