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**The promise of transformation through participation:  
an analysis of Communal Councils in Caracas,  
Venezuela**

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# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	4
1 INTRODUCTION	5
2 PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY FROM A RADICAL APPROACH: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK	6
2.1 Participatory democracy and its study in the city	6
2.2 A radical approach to participatory democracy	7
2.3 Assessing spaces of community participation	8
2.4 Proposing indicators to analyze spaces of participation	9
1- The recognition of ‘the other’	11
2- Mobilization of the community	11
3-Autonomy from state institutions	12
4- Design and internal dynamics	12
3 COMMUNAL COUNCILS: THE BASIC UNIT OF THE POPULAR POWER	13
3.1 CCs in a model of transformation	13
3.2 CCs: meaning and implementation	14
3.3 The literature on Communal Councils	15
4 IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF SELECTED COMMUNAL COUNCILS IN CARACAS	16
1- The recognition of ‘the other’	16
2- Mobilization of the community	18
3- Autonomy of spaces of participation from state institutions	19
4- Design and internal dynamics	20
5 CONCLUSION: COMMUNAL COUNCILS AND ‘CONDITIONED PARTICIPATION’	20
APPENDICES	23
Appendix 1. Geographic location of the sample	23
Appendix 2. Map of Caracas divided in Municipalities and Parishes	23
REFERENCES	24

## **Abstract**

Communal Councils (CCs) in Venezuela are deemed as part of a greater project of social transformation under a radical approach to participatory democracy. The Hugo Chavez's administration endorsed the creation of thousands of allegedly self-governing CCs in every neighbourhood of every city or town in the country. The initial goal was to address people's most urgent needs while including them in the decision-making process in their communities. The passing of President Chavez, a charismatic leader who was the driving force behind Chavismo and the Bolivarian Revolution, represents a challenge to the participatory process where CCs have been framed. Within this overall context, a radical approach to participation should lay the foundations of a State-led process of social transformation of the left. Based on this, the objectives of this paper are: on the one hand, to propose a set of indicators to study spaces of participation at the community level framed in a State-led process of social transformation; on the other, to show the viability of these indicators in the analysis of Communal Councils in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. These indicators refer to the recognition of 'the other'; autonomy from state institutions; mobilization of the community; and design and internal dynamics. In order to advance these objectives, this paper explores how participation in the CCs has been operationalized under the Bolivarian Revolution. Therefore, this research has empirically implemented the proposed indicators in six CCs of Caracas through semi-structure interviews with community leaders. The results suggest that the type of participation offered is one strongly conditioned by an ideological system which promises transformation but impedes this transformation in practice. I have called this situation a 'conditioned participation'.

## **Keywords**

Participatory democracy, radical democracy, spaces of participation, community, Bolivarian Revolution, Communal Councils

# The promise of transformation through participation: an analysis of Communal Councils in Caracas, Venezuela<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Introduction

Communal Councils (CCs) in Venezuela are deemed as part of a greater project of social transformation under a radical approach to participatory democracy. The Hugo Chavez's administration endorsed the creation of thousands of allegedly self-governing units in every neighbourhood of every city or town in the country. The goal was to address people's most urgent needs while including them in the decision-making process in their communities.

Participatory approaches to democracy, conceived in a model of local governance, have had a quite long history in Latin America (Participatory Budgeting in Brazil, Dominican Republic, Peru, Montevideo, Villa El Salvador, among others) (Goldfrank, 2011: 43). The implementation of several institutionalized spaces of community-driven development have come as an answer to the perceived inefficiency of the model of representative democracy in the delivery of public goods to the citizens.

In Venezuela this implementation was framed under the Bolivarian Revolution and the construction of the so-called Socialism of the XXI century. This socialism aspires to the transformation of all social, economic and political relations by giving the highest degree of participation to the people in the decision-making institutions (Dieterich cited by Marcano, 2007).

Against this background, a radical approach to participatory democracy should lay the foundations of a State-led process of social transformation of the left (Hickey and Mohan, 2007). Therefore, transformation should be understood as the change of those political practices that perpetuate the social and economic exclusion of groups traditionally marginalized by the State and elites. Citizen participation, from this perspective, sets out to change the processes of exclusion and inclusion so that individuals and groups acknowledge their rights and resources (Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 250).

In the case of Venezuela, Goldfrank (2011: 45) states that participatory democracy has been explored from a perspective that assesses the democratic quality of CCs in a framework of transformation from a radical approach. This has entailed framing CCs under an ideal of transformation constructed from a top-down direction. This construction has been quite problematic since CCs are designed and implemented through the intermediation of the Venezuelan government in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution. Further, the passing of President Chavez, a charismatic leader who was the driving force behind the Bolivarian Revolution, represents a challenge to the sustainability of the participatory process already started.

Within this context, the *objectives* of this article are: on the one hand, to propose a set of indicators to study spaces of community participation; on the other, to show the viability of these indicators in the analysis of Communal Councils in the context of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. These indicators refer to the recognition of 'the other'; autonomy from state institutions; mobilization of the community; and design and internal dynamics. These indicators intend to reflect an encounter between theories on

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a previous research made by the author at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), in The Hague, The Netherlands in 2008 under the supervision of Dr. Kees Biekart. Special thanks to Dr. Rosalba Icaza for her very helpful comments and support.

participation and radical democracy that are based on normative aspirations about community and transformation.

In order to advance the objectives aforementioned, this paper explores the operationalization of participation in the CCs under a process of social transformation. This operationalization implies understanding how the community represented in these CCs and the authorities implementing them interpret the right to be part of these spaces. Hence, I present the results of an exploratory research<sup>2</sup> on the praxis of selected CCs in Caracas. This gives an idea on the working dynamics inside these spaces of participation as well as the environment surrounding them.

The results seem to suggest that the type of participation offered is one strongly conditioned by an ideological system which promises transformation but impedes this transformation. I have called this situation a ‘conditioned participation’ in an invited space. Hence, based on this I argue that the CCs studied offer the characteristics of a type of participation which far from bringing transformation is deeply rooted in dynamics of exclusion based on ideology.

The article is divided in four sections. First, I build an analytical framework based on the definition of participatory democracy from a radical approach and the proposition of a set of indicators of participation to be used in the analysis of CCs. Second, I explain what CCs are, how they are framed in the general ideal of the Socialism of the XXI century and what the literature have said about them. Third, I present the results of the analysis of six CCs in the city of Caracas by using the indicators of participation previously proposed. Finally, I present some conclusions which will summarize how participation in the CCs has been operationalized.

## **2 Participatory democracy from a radical approach: an analytical framework**

This section is divided in two parts: the first one explains how participatory democracy is understood in this paper by following a radical approach to democracy. The second one will propose a set of indicators to explore participation in invited spaces of community participation which are framed under a process of social transformation.

### **2.1 Participatory democracy and its study in the city**

It is believed that the more efficient political institutions are in the delivery of goods the more open their mechanisms of democratic participation are. The crisis in the model of representative democracy and the search for new mechanisms of citizen involvement through civil society has forced the State “to construct new kinds of relationships between ordinary people and institutions which affect their lives” (Gaventa, 2004: 25). This new type of relationship has been based on broader forms of participation aimed at efficiently solving problems affecting communities at the local level.

Participation has emerged as an all-encompassing concept which is good for local governments to the right, left or centre of the political spectrum and also NGOs and

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<sup>2</sup> I conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation in six CCs of Caracas. The semi-structured interviews were based on eight interviews with spokespeople from the selected CCs, three with officers from Fundacomunal, two with practitioners from the state-run Social Management School (FEGS) and two with researchers from the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV).

international financial institutions (Shah and Shah, 2006: 3). However, if participation is to be framed under a democratic approach, then the expectation is that this will entail a change in the structures that deliver goods and in the involvement of citizens in the development of their own communities.

Taken from Hawkings (2010: 32), participatory democracy refers to “the use of mass participation in decision making to complement or (in the most radical versions) replace the traditional institutions of elections and lobbying associated with representative democracy.” In more concrete terms, it is to create channels for the direct participation of citizens in spaces where their decisions are binding to their communities and immediate geographical boundaries.

Participatory democracy, as a channel for creating new relationships between the state and the citizenry, has been a determinant characteristic of the so-called New Left in Latin America (Garavito et al., 2008:25). The most famous and studied experiment of participatory democracy in the region has been the Participatory Budgeting (PB) in Brazilian cities. Implemented by leftist local governments in the 1980s, the emblematic case of the PB has been praised in the literature as having positive effects for the poor, including a reduction in clientelism and patronage (Abers, 2000; Avritzer, 2002; Navarro, 2004).

From a liberal perspective to democracy, PB has been perceived as a way to support the state decentralization and diminish its role in a context of economic liberalism. On the other hand and from a radical approach, PB or similar attempts of participation at the local and community levels are seen as a tool to legitimate the state’s role in their quest to show it as effective, redistributive and transparent (Goldfrank, 2006: 9). However, analysts of these spaces of participation at the local level and under a radical approach warn that these attempts are not about deepening liberal democracy but proposing a new approach to participation based on a change in the socio-political structures (Katz, 2007: 7).

## **2.2 A radical approach to participatory democracy**

In order for participatory democracy to be considered transformative under an ideologically progressive system, it is necessary to locate it under a radical approach opposite to the traditional liberal view. Locating participation under radical democracy implies creating the necessary tools so traditionally marginalized groups can be beneficiaries of new social practices that break the patterns that perpetuate political and economic exclusion (Hickey, 2003). Under this concept radical is defined in broad terms, as being transformative, alternative and of the political left (Mohan and Hickey, 2003:3).

In order to achieve the societal transformation that participation implies in this context, it is necessary not only for the State but for the private agents to apply a mentality of democratization through broader channels of participation (Sousa Santos, 2006:275). Therefore, participation should engender a redistributive democratic perspective which reinforces a culture of participatory democracy (Sousa Santos, 2006: 275).

Citizenship under a radical approach is a larger concept than the liberal, more legal-based, one. Centred in a rights-based approach; this concept constructs participation as a right that can be exerted by those who have been marginalized (Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 257). The central idea of placing citizenship within participation is that it increases people’s control and power over socio-economic resources; this in turn challenges dysfunctional forms of rule (Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 253).

The community under this view becomes the backbone of the whole process; this should lead to the development of the popular power. As its name indicates, the popular power comes from the people who are given the highest degree of participation in the decision-making process. Consequently, the idea is that the citizens through their participation and decisions in the community are able to manage the means of production and the direction of the public resources (Katz, 2007: 7). De la Torre (2009:12) warns that the term community is not an unproblematic one. By acknowledging the community, it is being recognized that there might also be power imbalances in terms of gender, authority, ideology, education, among others

Transformation through a radical approach to participatory democracy implies a broader participation of citizens in the decision-making process. It entails changing the liberal and legal conception of citizenship for one based on a participatory-based approach, where being a citizen means getting involved in the decisions affecting their lives (Cohen and Fung, 2004: 23-24). Hence, under this view, transformation implies locating community participation within the boundaries of a radical change which aims to transform the political, economic and social structures through rational deliberation.

### **2.3 Assessing spaces of community participation**

Analysing spaces of participation under a radical approach is vital in the construction of a truly pluralistic and inclusive society. Andrea Cornwall states that: ‘thinking spatially can help towards building strategies for more genuinely transformative social action’ (2004:74). The way people perceive themselves affects the way how they contribute, decide or acquire knowledge in processes of participation in their communities.

Cornwall (2004: 5) classifies spaces of participation as popular or invited. Popular spaces refer to all those which come in the form of collective action, self-help initiatives or just as part of everyday life; these are spontaneous (no external intervention), voluntary spaces, where people, mostly with similar characteristics, get together. Conversely, invited spaces are those which are created in a top-down direction and where people are offered the opportunity to use participatory channels as a potential tool for transformation.

Under a radical approach, a State-led process of social transformation requires the institutionalization of invited spaces as part of the construction of new relationships with the citizens. This is linked to the belief that the state’s attitude is what nurtures the whole process of transformation. Cornwall and Coelho (2007: 5) argue that an active role of the people in invited spaces means the construction of participation as an extension of the meaning of citizenship and the deepening of democracy. Even more, this type of space is useful in the context of this study to understand the implementation of participation as ‘constructed opportunities’ for citizens to interact with their communities and public authorities (Cornwall, 2004: 76).

Invited spaces of participation at the community level cannot be seen as unproblematic entities which are ready to produce changes just by institutionalizing them. These spaces run several risks from the ideological and practical sides. From the ideological side, these spaces might create new forms of exclusion derived from different views among their members. From the practical one, a poor design in terms of membership, provision of material resources and unclear legal status can produce larger power imbalances and their co-optation by political elites (Hedmont, 2008). Thus, an inefficient implementation of these spaces can affect the credibility in the government and their political project (Sousa Santos, 2007: iii).

In order to locate participation as a beneficial for the citizens, the literature on participatory democracy has broadly tackled the aforementioned issues by developing several typologies which can allow researchers to locate participation as truly empowering or not on the participants' side (Pretty, 1995; White, 1996).

Pretty (1995:1252) developed a typology which classifies the level of autonomy of participants in the decision-making process in these spaces. This typology divides participation in seven rungs: 1) Manipulative (participants are used as a rubber-stamp mechanism); 2) Passive (participants are just informed of the policies and projects done by external agents); 3) By consultation (External agents consult with the community a specific policy without considering their opinion); 4) For Material Incentives (the external agents offer material incentives to implement a project); 5) Functional (participants are seen as a means to achieve the external agent's goals); 6) Interactive (Participation is perceived as a right); finally, 7) Self-Mobilization (Participation comes from the people's own initiative).

White (1996), on her part, offers another typology which is based on the analysis of the interests at stake in various forms of participation. This typology implies identifying four types of participation: 1) Nominal (Searches for institutional legitimacy); 2) Instrumental (It limits funders' input to make projects more efficient); 3) Representative (The community influences the shape of the project and the management); 4) Transformative – Empowering (Enables people to make their own decisions).

These typologies should be seen as attempts to assess the benefits of citizens' involvement in these spaces. Nevertheless, a criticism that they have received is that their operationalization proves to be difficult since they become more ambiguous when they are contextualized (Cornwall, 2008: 273). An example of this is White's typology and the understandings of empowerment as 'do it yourself'. This might become problematic since it could imply the State quitting its responsibilities.

As a way to tackle this problem, these typologies should be complemented by indicators which can offer a complete picture of the dynamics of participation in these spaces. This entails including selected contextual factors which reflect the internal and external processes underpinning citizen participation. Against this background, a context of social transformation implies proposing indicators that acknowledge the construction of citizenship as part of the transition to a new type of relations of power between institutions and people.

This understanding is heavily influenced by the conception of participation as a dynamic right which entails involvement and activism inside communities. This understanding also entails including those groups traditionally marginalised from the political system –namely the poor, women, black, indigenous communities, ethnic minorities and LGTB population. Hence, the next section is an attempt to propose contextual indicators which are informed by logic of political inclusion as an exercise of citizenship.

## **2.4 Proposing indicators to analyse spaces of participation**

The main issue identified in the existing typologies which explore community participation in invited spaces is their difficulty to adapt to different settings. This might be derived from the lack of contextual indicators which can capture the participatory dynamics inside and around these spaces. Hence, it is necessary to complement the study of spaces of participation by proposing sets of contextual indicators. Next I will present a set of indicators to study invited spaces of community participation in a State-led process

of social transformation. Before presenting them, I need first to introduce some general positions which will guide them.

Firstly, the proposed indicators are an attempt to offer a model which can be implemented in invited spaces of community participation framed under a radical approach to participatory democracy. This implies acknowledging that the radical approach is related to a process of social transformation led by the State. Hence, social transformation here is informed by a discourse of the left which defends a type of society where economic redistribution, social equality and political inclusion are at the core (Hickey and Mohan, 2033: 3).

Secondly and related to the previous point, an ideological frame of the left, which normatively claims participation as a right which transforms societies, entails paying attention to those elements facilitating the political inclusion of the community in these spaces. Political inclusion here acquires a different perspective from spaces of participation created as a complement to representative (liberal) democracy. This is because the discourse of social transformation places political inclusion as the driving force of change (Hickey and Mohan, 2007). This implies linking participation in the community with citizenship as the channel to reach the mentioned transformation.

A discourse of social transformation which promotes political inclusion makes citizens active agents in their own development. Further, this active citizenship should act as the foundations to bring social and economic redistribution. Hence, the proposed indicators should take into account elements of political inclusion inside these spaces as well as those regarding their independence from political pressures exerted by state or state-related actors. Although issues of representativeness in terms of gender, age, class, race and religion are highly relevant, ideology and political inclusion are at the core of the proposed indicators because of their importance in a context of social transformation.

Thirdly, these indicators should be considered an imperfect attempt to understand how specific state and non-state actors understand citizen participation inside and around these spaces. From a democratic approach and connected to the previous point, these indicators are good to the particular study of spaces of participation from a radical approach. This entails focusing on the process of participation in the community and what this process represents to the participants of these spaces.

Fourthly, these indicators are based on an ideal-type strategy where their definitions are wide and abstract but their implementation are adapted to the empirical specifications of the context. This is why they should be able to identify how the understanding of participation in this ideological frame affects internal and external relations. Talking about ideology and power relations imply developing relational indicators regarding the actors participating in these spaces. Accordingly, participation must be understood as part of a particular process which should lead to an outcome in terms of power relations at the micro (community) and macro (the State) levels.

Fifthly, framing analysis of the discourse seems to be the best strategy to capture the information necessary that allow exploring these indicators. Since these indicators are considered to be an ideal-type, the study of the discourse used by different actors inside and outside the community allow understanding them in relation to the specificities of the context.

Based on these positions the proposed indicators refer to:

- 1) The recognition of the 'Other'
- 2) The mobilization of the community
- 3) The autonomy of these spaces from state institutions
- 4) Design and internal dynamics

## ***1- The recognition of ‘the other’***

Social transformation through spaces of participation implies the recognition of the right to participate of ‘the other’ despite ideological differences. It implies accepting different views in the same community to tackle common problems (Gaventa, 2004: 29). The goal under this indicator is to reach what Chantal Mouffe (2000: 16) defines as ‘agonistic pluralism.’ This is for the members of a community to pass from being antagonists to agonists; this is from enemies to adversaries. Consequently, legitimating the adversary, from an ideological point of view, enriches the democratic debate and constructs stronger foundations to reach the desired goal of social transformation (Mouffe, 2000: 17). However, if a part of the community feels marginalized from these spaces, then they will hardly achieve their inclusionary potential.

In a context of social transformation through a radical approach to democracy, an ideological discourse rooted in redistribution and equal opportunities inform the perceptions about ‘the other.’ Therefore, ‘the other’ is defined in ideological terms as someone who do not share the way the political discourse of social transformation is being *implemented* by those leading the process. The participation of ‘the other’ in these spaces is constrained by their different political vision on the process of transformation vis-à-vis their communities. This position can expose ‘the other’ to a situation of isolation, exclusion or self-exclusion from these spaces.

In practical terms this indicator refers to two basic elements: first, how the members of a space of participation refer to those perceived as opponents to the government and second, how the participation of those opposing the government is perceived by other members of these spaces. Under this indicator political inclusion implies either extending citizenship to every member of the community or limiting this citizenship to only those ideologically committed to the process of social transformation.

In this indicator the participation of ‘the other’ can be framed under three types of attitudes from those members considered loyal to the process of transformation: a) An *open* attitude where everyone can participate without reservations, b) A *restrictive* attitude where everyone can participate but not everyone’s decision should be included and c) An *exclusionary* attitude where only those who abide to the majority’s views are entitled to participate.

## ***2- Mobilization of the community***

It is commonly believed by the institutions fostering the opening of these spaces that just by their mere existence people are going to participate because they have been waiting for this opportunity (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007: 9). However, the mobilization of a group of citizens to open and maintain a space of participation has deeper motivations which can be related to ideology, material incentives, need for recognition, among others.

In a process of participation from a radical approach to democracy, the mobilization of the community is an essential component for creating these spaces and sustaining them through time. This mobilization is based on *internal* factors such as the leaderships inside the community and the overall willingness to improve the community and *external* factors such as the incentives provided by the State to those who participate in these spaces. These incentives are related to material and/or ideological elements.

Based on the mobilization of the community, a practical operationalization of this indicator should look at:

First, the *internal* leaderships in these spaces of participation and how they relate to the community at large. This entails recognizing who took the initiative to open a space

of participation, what the reasons to open one were and which strategies were used to convince the community to participate.

Second, the external incentives which have motivated the opening of these spaces. This entails exploring three areas: the promise of material benefits (better physical conditions for the participant and/or the community and better access to public services), conviction in the cohesiveness of the community ('my participation makes my community proud') and conviction in a larger process of transformation ('my participation contributes to the revolutionary process').

### ***3- Autonomy from state institutions***

The autonomy of the communities from the State is vital for the sustainability of spaces of community participation and the credibility of the process underpinning them. Autonomy can be defined as the independence that marginalized groups enjoy so they can increase their bargaining power to a point where interveners cannot impose their conditions and regulations (Verhagen cited by Carmen, 1996: 52). It also implies respecting and supporting the decisions of the community by State and non-State actors. A space of participation which is not autonomous implies the perpetuation of malpractices such as clientelism, patronage or elite capture. These situations might hamper their potential social benefits (Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999: 6).

In order to explore the independence of these spaces from state institutions, it is necessary to focus on three types of autonomy: political, technical and financial. Although all of them can be interrelated, the first one refers to the intervention of external political actors in these spaces by exchanging intermediation with public institutions in exchange of electoral support, the second one refers to the inference of technical actors who try to impose in the community the ideas of what is needed or not and the third one refers to the use of state resources in the implementation of community projects as a tool of political loyalty to the government.

### ***4- Design and internal dynamics***

Spaces of participation run the risk of being captured by non-democratic elements which can affect the goal of transformation through civil society. We have to remember that spaces of participation are as democratizing as its practitioners (Chandoke cited by Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). Therefore, a successful decision-making process in them entails having a clear design which illustrates the procedures of decision-making, investment of resources and social accountability. The way the participants and the community at large perceive these elements is paramount in reinforcing the discourse of social transformation promoted by the State.

This indicator refers to the internal management of these spaces of participation. Therefore, it focuses on understanding the way decisions are taken by the different participants (e.g. simple majority, absolute majority, qualified majority), the way the projects are implemented (e.g. through community work and/or hiring experts; the CC or the spokespeople decide how to implement the project), the process of accountability of the leaders of these spaces to the community and finally, the strengths and weaknesses found in the implementation of the framework which should guide practical issues (e.g. frequency of meetings, process of decision-making)

The development of participatory democracy in the literature has implied moving from the more technical and project oriented strands to ones more focused on the acknowledgment and practice of participation as a right that enhances people's

citizenship. The development of these indicators should allow analysing in a critical way how participation have been framed in spaces which should lead a process of social transformation. In the next part, I will explore how CCs, as a space of participation, has been framed under the Bolivarian Revolution and the concept of popular power in Venezuela.

### **3 Communal councils: the basic unit of the popular power**

This section seeks to explain how the CCs are conceptualized under the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela and how they have been established as part of the participatory approach the government aims to implement. In order to do so, I will locate the CCs in the contour of the Bolivarian Revolution from ideological and legal perspectives. I will also elaborate on the nascent literature around the creation of CCs.

#### ***3.1 CCs in a model of transformation***

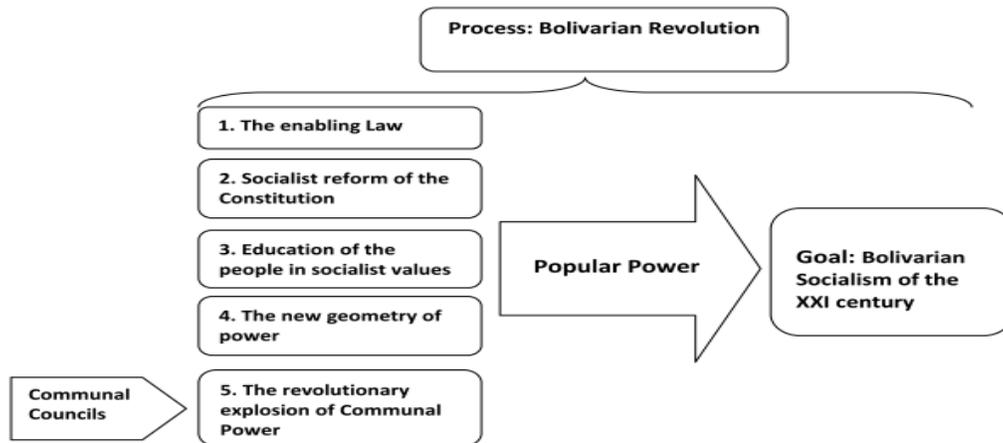
Participatory democracy has been the underlying logic behind the creation of CCs in Venezuela. Consecrated in the 1999 Constitution, under the first Chavez administration, this model was meant to co-exist with the traditional model of democratic representation. The type of participatory democracy that the Venezuelan government aims to implement is framed under the ideal of the Socialism of the XXI century. In order to reach this goal the construction of the Popular Power is essential through the implementation of community-based power units. The whole process from Popular Power to the Socialism of the XXI century has been denominated the Bolivarian Revolution; which is named after South American independence hero Simon Bolivar.

Deep transformations always entail rethinking all the structures that support an old model. When Hugo Chavez got elected president of Venezuela, he promised to rebuild the nation over a new and alternative model that would defeat the historical social inequality in the country (Chavez, 2007:10). According to the German sociologist Heinz Dieterich, the Bolivarian Revolution is a process of transformation which covers four areas: an anti-imperialist revolution, a democratic-bourgeois revolution, a neoliberal counterrevolution and the aspiration to reach a socialist society of the XXI century (2005).

The Hugo Chavez administration drawn the ideological road to reach the Socialism of the XXI century by proposing the 'Five Constituent Engines for the consolidation of Socialism' (Los Cinco Motores, 2008). The five engines are: 1. The Enabling Law (Special powers conferred to the President to shape the law according to the new socialist model); 2. Socialist reform of the National Constitution; 3. Education of the people in socialist values; 4. The new geometry of power (A new form of socialist distribution of power based on the communities); finally, 5. The revolutionary explosion of Communal Power (Communal councils as the mechanism for social and economic redistribution).

The last engine is what gives substance to the implementation of CCs vis-à-vis the participatory model in Venezuela. The prominence of the majority in all the national projects is an obsession that the revolution institutionalized through the Constitution approved in 1999. In this Constitution, participatory democracy (Popular power in the decision-making at all levels) is given a predominant role and it is the blood which gives life to the new structure.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Location of the Communal Councils in the model of societal transformation**



In light of this, Communal Councils are the vehicles to reach the full implementation of a system that aims to give a protagonist role to the citizens in the decision-making process. In few words, they are supposed to be autonomous, flexible and self-ruling community entities, ready for the proposition and execution of projects led by their members in their geographical spaces (Garcia-Guadilla, 2008: 6). Their importance lays on the expectation that they will become incubators of self-managing, critical citizens who can be leaders in their communities. This will lead to a society formed by associations and self-sustainable economic units which trigger the transition to new structures (Maingon and Sosa, 2007: 2).

### 3.2 CCs: meaning and implementation

Legally speaking, CCs are supported by the Laws of 2006 and 2009. Communal Councils were originally incorporated as part of the former Local Councils of Public Planning (CLPP) which were established under the Constitution of 1999. Accordingly, CLPP should become part of the decentralization process of the Venezuelan. However, the lack of popular support for the CLPP and the ideological deepening of the Revolution led to the dismissal of the former and the placement of the latter in a much more prominent position (Vasquez, 2010).

The procedure to create a CC is ruled by the Law of the Communal Councils (2009). This law established that they could be created in a geographical area which included from 150 to 400 families in urban settings and 20 families or more in rural ones. In order to start one, a community must follow a well-established process which starts by creating a promoting commission which should set the geographical boundaries of the community (Villasmil, 2007: 121). After this, the commission invites all member of the community to an electoral assembly. This assembly is supposed to lay the foundations for a Communal Council constitutive assembly which must include at least 30% of all adult members (older than 15 y/o).

The constitutive assembly has an essential role in the process: it lays the foundations of the CC and elects the spokespeople. These are ad-hoc delegates who serve for a 2 year-period with the option of re-election and who present their candidacy to different committees created according to the interests of the community (e.g. health, family and

gender, economy, security, housing, education, among others). After the whole process is completed, the CC is registered before Fundacomunal. This is the national agency which overlooks the whole process of formation and implementation of the CCs. By 2010 this office had in its census 21.050 CCs (Fundacomunal, 2010) which had roughly received USD 1 billion for projects in 2008 (Safonnacc, 2009).

Every CC is divided in three branches: an executive unit (Working Committees); financial and managerial unit (Budget execution) and a social control unit (Transparency and Accountability). When the citizens' assembly has finally elected the spokespeople the communal cycle starts. This cycle refers to the steps followed in order to address the needs of the community. The first step is making a communal diagnosis which is meant to identify the community's most urgent needs. After being completed, the citizens' assembly proceeds to make a communal plan. This is the action plan which should guide the execution of the actions that will tackle those things that are considered a priority. When the plan is ready, the citizens' assembly agrees on a budget to execute it. Finally, the communal cycle is closed by the completion and control of the projects approved by the community through the social control unit.

### ***3.3 The literature on Communal Councils***

Research on CCs is a quite recent phenomenon which has studied them from a perspective of democratic inclusion. Different from scholarly literature on similar experiments of local governance in other Latin American countries with leftist regimes (Avritzer, 2002; Chávez and Goldfrank, 2004), the literature on CCs has focused on the quality of these spaces vis-à-vis participatory democracy and in a context of latent political polarization and deep transformation.

Although most of the studies have been written in Spanish, the results portray two very clear paths. There is one group of studies which have explored these spaces of participation as part of a process of change to a socialist society. From a more ideological perspective, these studies praise the deepening of democracy in the communities through the creation of the CCs (Machado, 2008: 9). Even more, they recognize that the participatory process implemented by the Bolivarian Revolution through the CCs created a clear popular understanding of who should be the participants and beneficiaries of this tool of participation; in this case, the poor and traditionally marginalized sectors of the population (Lander, 2007; Wampler, 2007).

On a similar line of analysis, Hawkings (2010: 31) argues in his quantitative study on participatory democracy that the different tools of participation implemented in Venezuela (CCs, Missions, Land boards) were promising attempts to empower broad sectors of the population; however, he warns about the uniqueness of the Venezuelan model and the difficulty to replicate it in other countries. From a more technical perspective in the design of CCs, but still focusing on their transformative character, Irazabal and Foley (2010:98) warn about the importance to promote a change of mentality in these spaces of participation from a technocratic to a more ideological-based focus.

There is another group of studies (García-Guadilla, 2007; Corrales and Penfold, 2007; Vásquez Vera, 2010) which perceived CCs to be part of a larger strategy by President Chavez to occupy popular spaces. This line of research refers to the change to a model of participatory democracy which has entailed a process of deinstitutionalization of previous structures of decision-making, as well as the emergence of political tensions and conflicts (Vasquez Vera, 2010:4).

This situation has made CCs to be under heavy criticism because of their alleged hasty implementation, impractical design and possible co-optation by the central government (García-Guadilla, 2007; López Maya 2008). An example of this is the study made by Vásquez (2010: 135) who criticizes the use of these spaces as a way to promote the loyalty of the beneficiaries to the central government through the exchange of material resources for political support.

Communal Councils have been conceived as a tool of the Bolivarian Revolution in the construction of the popular power and the Socialism of the XXI Century. The promise of transformation that these self-governing units should bring have been analyzed through a literature which have identified strengths but also shortcomings in their implementation. Next, I will present the results of analyzing these spaces through the lens of the indicators of participation proposed before.

#### **4 In-depth analysis of selected Communal Councils in Caracas**

This section seeks to understand the operationalization of participation in selected CCs in Caracas, all this framed under the process of social transformation promised by the Bolivarian Revolution. In order to do so, I present the results of a sample of six CCs located in Chavistas neighbourhoods in the west side of Caracas.

CCs in the west side of Caracas have been selected because this area is considered to be the stronghold of the Bolivarian Revolution in the capital. This side of the city is home to the working class and new rural migrants and it is mainly formed by neighbourhoods where most of the low-income classes live.

The results have been examined according to the four indicators of participation proposed for the analysis of spaces of participation. The use of indicators in a sample of these characteristics has been helpful to draw the on-going dynamics in some CCs. They have also allowed identifying strengths and weaknesses inside the selected spaces while signalling possible routes to conduct more research on them.

The outcomes of this section should be considered exploratory and limited to showing certain trends that reflect how a State-led discourse of social transformation is understood in spaces of participation at the community level. I present hereafter the results organized along the proposed four indicators, namely: 1) The recognition of the 'Other'; 2) The mobilization of the community; 3) The Autonomy of these spaces from state institutions and finally, 4) Design and internal dynamics.

##### ***1- The recognition of 'the other'***

In the Venezuelan context, 'the other' refers to that person perceived to be against or apathetic to the revolutionary process; this is, someone who do not strongly believe in the proposed transformation offered by the Revolution. Accordingly, Chavistas (Pro-Chavez) referred to those in the opposition as *escuálidos* (Eng: scrawny) and to those apathetic to the process as *ni-ni* (Eng: neither-nor); conversely, those in the opposition called the Chavistas *rojitos* (Eng: the red ones).

The inclusion of those who were perceived as not sharing the ideals of the Bolivarian Revolution was a recurrent issue mentioned by the spokespeople interviewed. In their answers they defended the CCs as a model which accepted and included a plurality of political views and opinions. According to them, this was derived from the conception of the CCs as an open space where the whole community was invited to participate.

“The Communal Councils are totally pluralists; they allow the entrance of everyone. For instance, in the CC I belong to there are 9 spokespeople out of 25 who are part of the opposition [to President Chavez]; however, they were elected by the community.” (Emilse, CC Urbanización Bello Campo).

“In my CC we do not exclude anyone, what matters here is the work we do, at the end the community is the one which rules.” (Hernando, CC Los Lideres Revolucionarios del Siglo XXI).

Connected to the previous point, the sense of community was mentioned as a relevant element in the construction of the CCs and the transformation it should bring to their immediate settings. The spokespeople interviewed expanded this view by agreeing that the community’s views were more important than any political difference. They saw this acceptance as a positive attitude that any revolutionary person should have. This was clearly exemplified by a spokesperson who stated that:

“If we need sewage for the streets, we are not going to ask to our neighbours whether they belong to the blue, red, yellow or green party and decide if they can benefit from it based on this. I mean, the bad smell is for everyone so it has to be solved for the good of the community.” (Deysi, CC El Valle).

For the spokespeople, the CCs have become an answer to the material needs of the community; this situation has contributed to the cohesiveness of the community. This cohesiveness has also been favoured by settings where the neighbours have known each other for a long time. Further, it was mentioned by one of the spokespeople that the success of these spaces of participation was good for the community and good for the Revolution since it increased the credibility in the process.

When the spokespeople were asked about the election process, the presence of opponents to the government and the working dynamics inside the CCs, their answers tended to idealize a space where spokespeople and participants were loyal to the Revolution. Additionally, when asked about the presence of participants who were opponents or Ni-Ni their answers reflected in some cases concern and the identification of these individuals (‘the other’) as a potential obstacle to the CC’s goals.

“100% of the people from my Council are revolutionaries (Pro-Chavez), so we do not have any conflict at all” (Juan Pablo, CC Esperanza Revolucionaria).

“In our communal council there is no opposition, thanks God” (Mireya, CC Esperanza Revolucionaria, WSC).

In some interviews it was detected some levels of distrust and concern when they referred to those who did not get involved in the CCs or who were identified as part of the opposition. Loyalty to President Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution seemed to be the guarantee that those involved in the CC were working for the same goals.

“...there are insiders from the opposition; however, the community knows who they are. There are CCs where the scrawny ones [those in the opposition] are not accepted at all.” (Hernando, CC Los lideres revolucionarios del siglo XXI).

## ***2- Mobilization of the community***

This indicator is related to the internal and external incentives that led a community to establish a CC. This is related to the leaderships but also to the material and the ideological incentives provided by the Bolivarian Revolution.

Through the interviews to the spokespeople it was established that the particular leaderships in each community were essential in the process of mobilizing the neighbours and starting a CC. Interestingly enough, all the interviewees had been community leaders or had had some position of leadership before. Therefore, the election of the spokespeople was the product of personal assets such as community recognition, the perception of honesty, and in some cases the revolutionary spirit.

“I was elected spokesperson because I have experience in different grassroots organizations. I have worked in the Bolivarian Circles and in a group started in my community before Chavez” (Domilsa, CC Cacique Katia).

When asked about the strategies to mobilize the community, the spokespeople assured that this was done through strategies promoting *material incentives* which could bring more people to the citizens' assemblies. Among the most used strategies were the organization of service fairs where different government institutions sent representatives to offer the registration of citizens (IDs), mobile MERCAL (State owned supermarket with subsidized food prices) or mobile medical units. Other strategies included the organization of communal parties, cultural activities, and the delivery of printed material (leaflets, brochures) informing the neighbours of the importance of their participation.

“When we were going to elect the spokespeople, we contacted several public institutions so they came here to vaccinate the children, educate people and register them [in the national database].” (Eglis, CC Urbanización Bello Campo).

Also the motivation was based in the possibility to solve immediate needs of the community such as housing refurbishing, street pavements, building a park or a sports' centre. As a spokesperson states:

“People find motivation to go to the CCs because of the possibility to solve the problems of the community.” (Mireya, CC Esperanza Revolucionaria).

The motivation *to promote the cohesiveness of the community* was another important aspect for some members of the CCs. The first impression a visitor gets when visiting a CC in a low-income sector of Caracas is the feeling of ownership and dignity that the participants have. According to the interviewees, CCs were perceived as the *only* working channel between the State and the community where their claims were truly listened.

“The Communal Councils are a very important part of the community. We are the ones who run the community; we know their problematic, their happiness, their ailments, everything.” (Mireya, Spokesperson CC Esperanza Revolucionaria).

The *conviction in a larger process of transformation* was another element that motivated the participants who were already involved in the creation of the CC. Although this feeling was strengthened with time and results, the participants felt that they were contributing to the strengthening of the Bolivarian Revolution. The ideological incentive was a very important characteristic among the spokespeople interviewed.

“The process of participatory democracy [implemented by President Chavez] comes to cover a historical debt that the State had with the people.” (Eglis, CC Urbanización Bello Campo).

### ***3-Autonomy of spaces of participation from state institutions***

In Venezuela, CCs are supposed to be spaces of participation and articulation of public policies where the community decides what their needs are and how to address them. In this process, the non-intervention of external political actor is vital in the success of this model. This indicator focused on three different types of autonomy: political, technical and financial.

The first aspect involved the *political* autonomy enjoyed by the Councils. This part included finding out whether these councils suffered from certain external intervention. In this aspect, the interviewees referred to the case of local politicians trying to cultivate a beneficial relationship for both sides by offering connections to State institutions in charge of the financial resources of their projects. Interestingly enough, the sense of community and the fear that spokespeople felt from their communities made them reject this kind of offer.

Nevertheless, it was grasped from the interviews with the spokespeople that in some cases there were member of the CCs who had connections with well-established politicians and civil servants inside the State institutions or with the PSUV, President Chavez's political party. These connections were used in order to 'move' faster the allocation of resources for a project presented by certain council. Although it was not seen as a problem, or something outside the rule, all of them mentioned that by using these contacts the financial resources for the projects came faster.

"The PSUV [President Chavez's political party] is carrying out a mission, because what our president wants is the PSUV to be integrated in the community problem." (Juan Pablo, CC Esperanza Revolucionaria).

The second aspect studied was the *technical autonomy* that CCs enjoyed in the proposition and implementation of projects. According to several sources, such as the spokespeople themselves, Fundacomunal experts, FEGS experts and scholars, all assured that the CCs had total freedom to decide what to do and how to do it. The spokespeople stated that the financial resources received were spent in the projects approved by the community and there was no imposition from the institutions to spend it in certain ways.

The funds for financing the projects came mainly from allocations given by institutions of the central government like Fundacomunal, or from decentralized territorial entities like municipalities and parish boards. However, if a municipality or the State or an institution had a specific program that they wanted to implement and the CC wanted to participate in them, then, the aforementioned institutions had the authority to decide how and where to allocate the resources.

The third and last aspect studied was the financial *autonomy* that the CCs enjoyed. A perception obtained from the interviews was that 'depending to where the money comes from, your loyalties will be with.' Since most of the financial resources come from institutions which belonged to the central government, therefore the Presidency of the Republic, the spokespeople tended to refer to President Chavez as the one allocating resources to the poor through the CCs.

"We need to follow the leader (President Chavez), because he is the one who knows better." (Domilsa, CC Cacique Katia).

According to this, the personification of the State in Chavez's persona erased the existence of institutions. This was obvious when spokespeople referred to the way resources came thanks to President Chavez. This also fed the feeling that associated these spaces of participation with their importance as an ideological fortress which should defend the Revolution started by the President.

#### ***4- Design and internal dynamics***

The implementation of this indicator in the cases studied aimed to identify the perceived transparency in the process of formation of the CCs, their running on a day-to-day basis and the projects' implementation. This included the spokespeople's elections, the perception of management and organization of the councils and the perceptions from the institutional and Communal Council perspectives.

The spokespeople interviewed and members of the opposition agreed that the process of formation and election of the spokespeople were done without any major problem. The only problems that they might have encountered were more related to the practicalities of the electoral process and the registration of the CC before Fundacomunal.

From the institutional perspective, Fundacomunal stated that there were problems related to the processes of social accountability. They mentioned that they had information on certain CCs where the participants had accused the spokespeople for bidding for projects that would financially benefit them. Another issue was the fact that many CCs did not send the accountability reports to Fundacomunal on certain projects.

The legal framework of the CCs was mentioned as one of the obstacles in the correct implementation of these spaces of participation. All the spokespeople and experts familiar with the CCs complained about certain vacuums in the law which gave space to conflict and confusion. This was related to the fact that several CCs were given the technical responsibility of designing their projects without having the capabilities to do so.

“The internal regulations of the CCs are left to the councils themselves; however, these regulations are not done in many of the councils because the law does not force them to do so.” (Sociologist, Central University of Venezuela).

Derived from this legal issue, there were complaints on the lack of clarity on the functions of the CCs vis-à-vis other public institutions. This situation gave the impression that there was an overlap on the functions between institutions, affecting the image of the councils before the community and the level of institutionalization they had in a framework of decentralization.

The implementation of the proposed indicators in six Communal Councils of Caracas provided an idea of how participation was being operationalized in these spaces under the ideological framing of the Bolivarian Revolution. It also showed the strengths and weaknesses that the creation of these spaces under a State-led process of social transformation has for those who have been traditionally excluded from the decision-making spheres.

### **5 Conclusion: Communal Councils and ‘conditioned participation’**

Participation under a process of social transformation is a promising effort to give power to wide sectors of the population which had traditionally felt neglected by the State. More than changing macro-structures in the short run, what this type of participation might change is how citizens see themselves in the equation of power and the role they have in building a state which is truly redistributive. However, from the idea to the practice there is a long road as the Communal Councils seem to prove.

If the discourse on participation in the CCs has to be placed under a typology, ‘Interactive participation’ according to Pretty’s description (1995) would seem to be the

most suitable option. Under this type, participation is acknowledged as a right to be part in the joint analysis and development of projects according to people's needs. However, based on the implementation of the analytical indicators for spaces of community participation, the study of Communal Councils seem to require another typology which can really capture a type of participation that in the discourse seems to give a lot of power to the people but in practice suffers from several shortcomings.

This situation is sustained by four issues that I explain next and which can be drawn from the implementation of the four indicators of participation in the selected CCs in Caracas.

The *first issue* is related to the concept of political inclusion and the recognition of 'the other.' In the CCs visited, two trends were detected: there are parts of the community which have been able to identify their right to participate as the exertion of their citizenship in these spaces; nevertheless, there are other parts of the community which have not been able to find a place where to exert this citizenship. This situation reflects somehow the political polarization that the country has undergone during the revolutionary process.

Citizenship in these cases has been connected to the loyalty members of a community had to the Revolution. In the collective imaginary, this was the channel that guaranteed grasping the social benefits promised by the government. Through the interviews with the spokespeople on this matter, the attitude was to restrict the participation of 'the other'. This meant that everyone was welcome to participate but not everyone's vote deserved to be included.

In this scenario, more important than the institutionalization of Communal Councils as spaces of participation, it is necessary to look for the legitimization of CCs as true mediators between the needs of the entire community and State institutions. The understanding of citizenship as the right to participate in the CCs is a challenge which has to be overcome so the goal of transformation through participation can be achieved. This implies recognizing 'the other's' citizenship as the right to participate in the construction of the community no matter different ideological views.

The *second issue* relates to the mobilization process in the selected CCs. In the spaces visited, there was a strong feeling of belonging and ownership to the community for what they have achieved. The feeling of solidarity that CCs have awakened among those participating is a plus that have made them be aware of their own potential to build their future. However, the weight of material incentives in the whole process raises questions about the sustainability of this mobilization: Is all the product of a historic juncture or a true transformation in the communities' political values?

If the main motivation of the people to participate is material, then the formation of the CCs is also material? If the promotion of communities' political values is linked to the formation of these Councils, then is the empowerment claimed by the spokespeople sustainable? Although it seems clear that people nowadays see in Communal Councils a tool that will stay no matter the government in power, these spaces still need to be self-sustainable so they can be truly empowering.

The *third issue* is about the autonomy of these spaces of participation. At first sight CCs are quite independent from different State actors. Even more, the decision-making power in the selection of projects in the CCs and the way resources have been allocated according to the communities' needs seem to confirm that they are self-ruling entities with true power.

Nonetheless, through the fieldwork two major issues were identified. The first one is the dependence on State resources and the second one is the interest mediation which

bypasses regular institutional channels. In the first one, the dependence of these spaces on State resources is quite problematic since this can make CCs expect resources from above not forcing them to be self-sufficient. On the second issue, the use of a political party or certain politicians as intermediaries can feed already existing bad habits which perpetuate bureaucratic malpractices and a political culture based on clientelism and patronage.

The *fourth issue* relates to the lack of a regulatory framework that clearly states the functions of the CCs. Although ideology and financial resources are important in any participatory endeavour, the correct implementation and organization of these spaces from a technical perspective becomes essential to secure the sustainability of CCs. These spaces need to have clear rules so their participants can work well. It is the responsibility of the creators of these spaces, the inviters, to make a technical effort to ensure this.

In conclusion, throughout this paper I have argued that the operationalization of participation in the CCs far from being radical and transformative seems to be strongly conditioned by an ideological system which promises transformation but impedes this transformation. I have called this situation as a ‘conditioned participation’ in spaces of community participation.

A type of participation that is considered ‘conditioned’ refers to one which is based on the allegiance or not of the participants to the ideals defended by a political project. It is a type of participation where transformation is discursively for everyone, but in practice the benefits are reaped by those who are perceived to be part of the process. This is what Thais Maingon has called a type of participation where ‘citizenship is under tutelage’ (Maingon and Sosa, 2007: 33). This kind of situation might not be sustainable in the long-term and in practical terms cannot be considered as empowering –understood as ‘do it yourself’ –for the alleged beneficiaries

The main obstacle in Venezuela to achieve the type of citizenship that a radical approach to participatory democracy promises is that it has conditioned the right of participation to the loyalty the participants have to the Revolution and its leaders. This situation affects other aspects which are vital for the success of these spaces, namely: the way things are discussed inside these spaces or the allocation of resources, among other things. Further, this situation might replicate exclusionary practices by creating first and second class citizens where the former can fully exert their political rights in the community and the latter has to remain in the shadows or in a constant state of confrontation with the community.

In order to have a successful model of participation under a process of social transformation, the design of mechanisms of participation should include elements that promote an ‘agonistic pluralism’ as Chantal Mouffe (2000: 16) states. By recognizing the legitimacy to oppose to others’ political views, the Venezuelan democracy can strengthen the foundations of a true transformation which includes everyone. Additionally, the true transformation comes from the recognition of people's sovereignty by the socio-political structures. Consequently, the leaders have to take the initiative to create these spaces but they also have to step aside so people’s participation can blossom and nurture a truly transformative society.

## Appendices

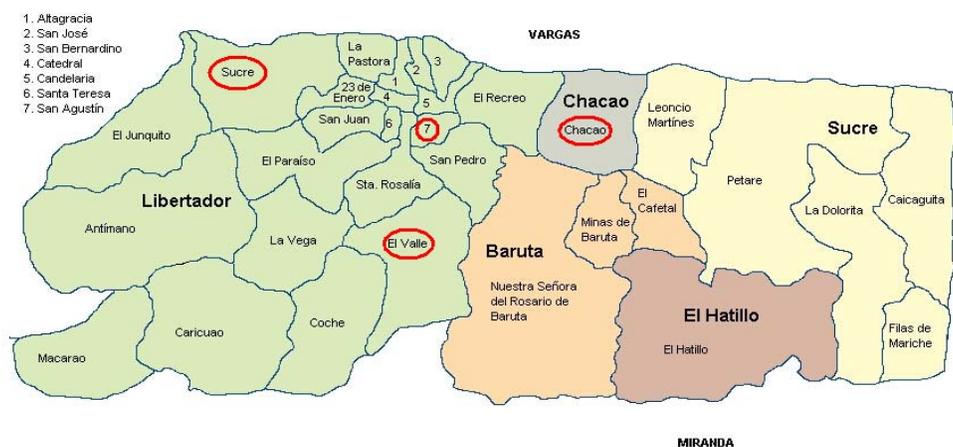
### Appendix 1. Geographic location of the sample

It mainly focused on CCs in the municipality of Libertador (Pop. 2.3 million), considered the Chavista stronghold *par excellence* in Caracas (Pop. 7 million). Covering the centre and west side of the city, this municipality is characterized by working class neighbourhoods grouped in apartment blocks and houses in winding and steep streets on the surrounding hills.

**TABLE 1**  
**List of Communal Councils visited**

Communal Councils visited (Name)	Parish (District)	Municipality
Cacique Katia	Sucre	Libertador
El Conde	San Agustín	Libertador
Esperanza Revolucionaria	Sucre	Libertador
Los Líderes Revolucionarios del S. XXI	23 de Enero	Libertador
Terepaima	El Valle	Libertador
Urbanización Bello Campo	Chacao	Chacao

### Appendix 2. Map of Caracas divided in Municipalities and Parishes (The location of the visited CCs in red).



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