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Venezuela Celebrates Five Years Free of Illiteracy

By Edward Ellis
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In 2005, UNESCO affirmed that more than 95 percent of the Venezuelan population is literate, qualifying the country for the title of “Territory Free of Illiteracy”.

The free government program, Mission Robinson, is largely responsible for the success, teaching more than 1.5 million people to read and write in the first two years of its existence.

“This achievement is not something small”, said Marisol Calzadilla, President of the government foundation responsible for implementing Mission Robinson.

“For Venezuela it’s something very important and not only because it’s recognized by the world but rather for our development as a country and the development of our people. The consciousness that the people have today, what is happening all over the country, the level of participation in the construction of popular power, is a product of education. The people have taken control over their lives through knowledge”, Calzadilla said.

Robinson was initiated by the government of Hugo Chavez in 2003 as part of an educational reform strategy using the proven literacy training methods created in Cuba called “Yes, I can” (Yo si puedo).

Rosa Gonzalez, a 53-year old graduate of the program, expressed her satisfaction with the government's policy during an act celebrating the 7th anniversary of the mission last week.

“For so long, I had been unable to know a marvellous world, the world of literature”, she exclaimed.

Nearly 2.3 million Venezuelans have now benefited from Mission Robinson which boasts over 38 thousand teachers, known as facilitators, and is divided into two phases – literacy training and primary education.

A third phase is currently being developed for the creation of reading circles, mainly for elderly graduates of the program.

A POLICY OF INCLUSION

Over the past 7 years, the mission has focused much of its attention on reaching out to geographically isolated and historically excluded members of the population including indigenous groups and Afro-descendents.

The physically challenged and people who suffer from substance dependency have also been brought into the program and according to official numbers, Mission Robinson is now present in 24 prisons, benefiting nearly 1,000 inmates.

Brizeida Quiñones, a government official working for the mission in the state of Bolivar, explained the goal of the educational policy.

“The principal aim [of the mission] is to assist the population excluded from the formal educational system, offering a holistic and quality education for everyone at all times and in all spaces at the national and international level, converting people into protagonists of their own learning and development through training that sparks liberating processes”, Quiñones said.

Robinson's success in Venezuela has carried it across borders to countries such as Bolivia and Nicaragua where the program has been implemented through agreements signed between member states of the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America (ALBA).

BOOKS FOR THE PEOPLE

Alongside the rise in the number of Venezuelans now able to read has been a concerted effort on the part of the government to increase access to books.

The Ministry of Culture reports that 80 million new publications have hit the streets since 2003, providing the reading population with books that are either distributed freely or at very low costs.

“We have been thinking about the readers and we’ve been accompanying them”, said Miguel Marquez, President of one of the ministry’s publication foundations, which has spearheaded the supply of new low-priced books across the country.

According to Marquez, books in Venezuela were “almost like jewels” until recently.

“Few people had access to books with the salary that they had”, he explained. “Today you can find Venezuelan books very cheap and we also have a great diversity of themes and genres”.

Examples of the titles being published en masse and distributed freely include Miguel Cervante’s Don Quijote and Victor Hugo’s Les Miserables, as well as works by the poet Miguel Hernández.

Extensive collections of both fiction and nonfiction that explore Venezuelan history and culture are also being made available through popular book fairs and the government run Libreria del Sur bookstore.

BEYOND LITERACY

With the problem of illiteracy now tackled in Venezuela, the Chavez government has turned its attention to providing basic education to all of its citizens.

According to Brizeida Quiñones, the country must go beyond literacy training and achieve primary education for all.

“The struggle for literacy is also a struggle for [primary education]. We’re not just going to sit with the declaration [of Venezuela] as an illiteracy-free territory.

We need to work on ‘Yes, I can’ and ‘Yes, I Can Continue’ where the fundamental purpose is to reach the basic level of sixth grade and prepare citizens for life”, Quiñones affirmed.

Providing work opportunities for students of the educational program has also been a strategy of Mission Robinson.

Under the scheme Robinson Social-Productive, graduated members of the program have the opportunity to apply for government funding for economically productive projects aimed at advancing the communities where they are implemented.

Groups of five to ten students have the possibility of presenting proposals that value economic cooperation over competition.

The mission has thus far financed a total of 796 such projects in the areas of agriculture, fishing, handicrafts, construction, textiles and tourism.

