

USAID/OTI Venezuela Field Report

January - March 2008

Program Description

In August 2002, USAID initiated a program in Venezuela to provide assistance to maintain democratic stability and strengthen the country's fragile democratic institutions. The program operates out of the U.S. Embassy and is part of a larger U.S. Government effort to promote democracy in Venezuela. The current FY 2008 budget for Venezuela includes \$4 million in Transition Initiatives funding.

The Venezuela program has two main objectives: (1) strengthen democratic institutions and promote space for democratic dialogue, and (2) encourage citizen participation in democratic processes. USAID works with several implementing partners drawn from the spectrum of civil society focusing on dialogue, public debate, citizen participation, and training for democratic leadership. These partners offer technical assistance to political parties, provide technical support to human rights practitioners, and support civil society.

Country Situation

At the beginning of the second quarter of FY 2008, many Venezuelans were focused on the fallout from the December 2 vote that defeated the Venezuelan Government's proposed constitutional reform package. Initial news reports focused on the strategies the government and the opposition might adopt as the country looks toward state and municipal elections to be held in the fall.

During the second half of the quarter, local media attention shifted to regional events, focusing mainly on the potential for conflict with Colombia over Colombia's cross-border operation against a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) camp in Ecuador. Other noteworthy developments during the quarter include the following:

- President Chavez announced the passage, by decree, of an Amnesty Law that will apply to selected cases that remain open against people charged in the 2002 coup attempt. Debate continues about certain cases that have been excluded from the amnesty.
- Shortages of essential goods continued during the quarter. Producers of basic foodstuffs have blamed shortages on government controls. Contrarily, the government has blamed the shortages on the private sector and announced plans to expropriate some food industries.
- Elections for governors and mayors have been tentatively set for November 23, 2008.
- According to government statistics, violent crime in Caracas has dropped, with the murder rate falling by more than 60 percent. It is too early to tell if the reduction is a result of increased police presence in violent areas - a policy of the new Interior Minister, Rodrigo Chacin - or if other external factors influenced the drop. It is also too early to tell whether the reduction is sustainable over time. Several respected nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and criminologists dispute the government's claims.
- Petr6leos de Venezuela S.A., the state-run oil company, successfully contested a London court's decision to freeze about \$12 billion of its assets in an ongoing dispute with ExxonMobil Corporation related to the nationalization of certain oil projects.
- Discussions continue about reforms to the educational system and the effects of these reforms.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

The Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) reviewed its Venezuela strategy with project counterparts during the quarter and agreed to continue support for public forums on the major issues as well as support for nonpartisan education campaigns. Based on lessons learned in the last quarter, it was decided that activities would focus on civic

participation from all sectors and political parties as well as good governance. Programmatic highlights from the quarter include the following:

- OTI and the Canadian Embassy are funding grant activities to produce and distribute materials on the functions and role that the Venezuelan Constitution gives to mayors and governors.
- OTI partners met to discuss work plans for the next 9 months and to determine how partners can best collaborate to share information and training materials and implement complementary activities.
- OTI continued to work with political parties to improve their capabilities in constituency outreach and institutional development. All activities were open to any interested political party.

B. Grants Activity Summary

USAID/OTI, through its implementing partners, has approved 455 grants totaling \$11,300,500 over the life of the project. Sixteen grants were active in the second quarter.

C. Indicators of Success

During the quarter, the program strived to implement recent lessons learned. In addition, the program focused on collecting and disseminating accurate information in an attempt to understand the environment in which activities are implemented.

Reports and public activities by grantees have been successful in disseminating information about areas critical to a functioning democracy, including human rights and other important social issues. These activities demonstrate the success of efforts to build the capacity of civil society organizations to play a meaningful role in Venezuelan society.

Program Appraisal

The Venezuela program is like USAID programs in other countries in this hemisphere and around the world in that it seeks to strengthen democracy and its supporting institutions. The program in Venezuela is designed to strengthen civil society and political parties, the key components of a healthy democracy and the channels through which citizens often express their desires, needs, and concerns as well as find ways to collectively address them.

Threats continue to be made against program counterparts. A recent event held by the Inter American Press Association in Caracas highlighted ongoing threats to journalists, as did a report by the Inter American Human Rights Commission. The report also noted that human rights defenders were at risk. Legislation to restrict international support of Venezuelan NGOs is pending.

Efforts to reach a variety of organizations and states have generated new opportunities to work with emerging actors in Venezuelan civil society.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

The program will continue its work in the areas of civic education and citizen participation and will continue to support human rights defenders as they improve their ability to research, report on, and present cases of human rights abuses. Work will also continue with all political parties that wish to receive training in the areas of platform development and voter outreach.