

Small-scale farmers under socialist governments: Venezuela and the ALBA People's Trade Agreement

Lucia Michelutti





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Acronyms and abbreviations

ALBA-PTA	Bolivarian Alliance for Our Americas – People's Trade Agreement
ALBANISIA	ALBA de Nicaragua, SA
BAV	Agricultural Bank of Venezuela
BF/BsF	Bolivar/es Fuerte/s (at time of going to press 1BF equivalent to USD 0.25)
CC	communal council
CECOSOLA	Central Cooperative for Social Services of Lara
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (UN)
FTAA	Free Trade Area of the Americas
GNE	grandnational enterprise
GNI	grandnational institute
GNP	grandnational project
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
MACNDE	Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (Venezuela)
Minep	Ministry of Popular Economy (Venezuela)
NED	Centre for Endogenous Development

Introduction

1.1 Regional geopolitics and the rise of socialism in Latin America

In recent years, socialist politics have re-emerged as a force in Latin America. The geopolitics of the region have been dramatically changing with the declining influence of the United States in what was considered its traditional backyard (*Economist*, 2011). This phase began in 1998, when Hugo Chavez, was elected president of Venezuela. Chavez has been capitalising on the political wave of anger at failed neoliberal economic policies, and the ideological space that the circumstances have produced, to set in motion the creation of a novel realignment of power relationships in the region.

The Venezuelan President was followed by Ricardo Lagos in Chile (2000), Luiz Inacio Lula de Silva in Brazil (2002), Nestor Kirchner in Argentina (2003), Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay (2004) and Evo Morales in Bolivia (2005) – the first indigenous president in that country's history. In 2006, ex-revolutionary leader Daniel Ortega returned to power in Nicaragua, while independent left-wing economist Rafael Correa won the Ecuadorian presidency. By decade's end, leftist candidates had also won in Paraguay (Fernando Lugo) and El Salvador (Mauricio Funes of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front). Leftist presidents or parties were subsequently re-elected in Venezuela (2000, 2006, 2011), Chile (2006, 2011), Brazil (2006, 2010), Argentina (2007), Ecuador (2009), Bolivia (2009), Uruguay (2009) and Peru (2011) (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011).

This unprecedented trend has been accompanied by new forms of policy experimentation; it has been argued that 'the left turn' is changing not only who governs in Latin America but also how they govern (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011: 14). Contemporary left-wing governments in Latin America are often categorised into two types: moderately left-wing (for example Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay) and radically left-wing (Venezuela and Bolivia and more recently Nicaragua and Ecuador). The latter are putting forward the notion of participatory democracy. In economic terms, they have been opposing neoliberalism and explicitly pushing

forward 'socialism'. They have implemented anti-US policies with the aim of opposing the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) and are simultaneously challenging (at least rhetorically) the whole rationale of capitalism and particularly globalisation, which is considered its most recent manifestation.

1.2 Development of the ALBA People's Trade Agreement

It is in this context that we should examine the development and viability of the Bolivarian Alliance for Our Americas People's Trade Agreement (ALBA-PTA), established between Venezuela and Cuba in 2004 and now incorporating Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, St Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and Grenadines. Thomas Muhr (2011a) argues that this is the only agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean that seeks to integrate the entire region. Importantly, in opposition to the FTAA (which is led by the USA), visions of revolutionary socialism are being re-invented as an 'alternative' to a world order deemed to be dominated by a neoliberal hegemony. One of the most striking characteristics of these developments is their abidingly experimental character. ALBA nations confront varied social, political and economic circumstances, and socialist politics is taking on a different character in each of them. What unites these nations however is a self-conscious project of transnational political experimentation, which aspires to refashion political ideologies, policies and new forms of political participation to create 'socialism for the 21st century', as it is often presented in official political discourse.

In terms of food and agriculture, the socialism of the 21st century means returning the means of production to the people through agrarian reform and cooperatively run farms and food-processing factories, as well as treating food as a basic human right rather than a commodity for profit.¹ For the supporters of this anti-capitalist position, the principle of food sovereignty does not oppose trade but rather promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices as long as they work in favour of small-scale farmers.²

1. The socialism of the twenty-first century is a concept first used by Professor Heinz Dieterich Steffan, a German political scientist and sociologist of the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana (UAM), Mexico City who greatly influenced Chavez's alternative project. See also Lebowitz (2006).

2. *La Via Campesina* introduced their original food-sovereignty manifesto at the World Food Summit, Rome 1996, which states that food is a human right, and pushes for genuine land reforms, protection of national resources, reorganisation of food trade and ending of the globalisation of hunger. ALBA has been supported in the fourth CLOC/Via Campesina Latin America Congress (2005, Iximulew, Guatemala) and the third Americas People's Summit (2005, Mar del Plata, Argentina). The CLOC/Via Campesina congress final declaration states: 'We declare ourselves in permanent mobilization against free trade, the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and all the economic domination instruments imposed by the United States and the European Union. We add ourselves to the Bolivarian Integration Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and commit ourselves to contribute to its formulation, development and future application. (...) We support the initiatives for justice for the rural areas and land reform promoted by the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela (CLOC).' (Declaração do IV Congresso da Coordenadora Latino-Americana de Organizações do Campo (CLOC) [Declaration of the Fourth Congress of the Latin American Coordinator of Rural Organizations], 13 October 2005 (<http://www.rebellion.org48> Bumiller).)

As an explicitly socialist-oriented revitalisation of South–South cooperation, the ALBA-PTA set out to operate on principles of solidarity, cooperation, complementarity, sustainability and reciprocity, grounded in the neo-structuralist concept of endogenous development and participatory democracy (Box 1.1).³ Bolivarian endogenous development seeks to revive production for food sovereignty and security by supporting small and medium-size farmers. ‘Development from within’ specifically aims to enhance local agricultural knowledge and traditions (seeds, farming methods and diets) and farmers’ communities (including indigenous groups, Afro-descendants and women). In addition, participatory democracy (mainly through communal councils) is supposed to play a key role in giving means to communities to map out local people’s food and take control of their local food systems.

One aspect which distinguishes ALBA from other regional treaties in the region (such as the FTAA, for example) is its willingness to integrate popular participation from social movements and local farmers in its creation and implementation. Implementation of participatory budgets at local level, the use of referenda and other popular consultation methods, the strengthening of the Latin American Parliament (based in São Paulo, Brazil) and the constitution of the Latin American

and Caribbean Network are fundamental goals of ALBA.⁴ However, there has been little study of whether small-scale farmers are actually benefitting from these policies and participatory spaces. Is ALBA’s ‘food sovereignty’ just a rhetorical statement or a real concern? Do the ALBA-PTA and Venezuela’s national socialist projects have an impact on the improvement and sustainability of small-scale farming and of producers as economic actors/entrepreneurs?

These are very complex questions to answer for three main reasons. First, most of ALBA’s food/agriculture policies and instruments are very young and not yet implemented. It is only since 2008 that ALBA’s key instruments for the organisation of regional agricultural and food production such as the grandnational projects (GNPs), grandnational enterprises (GNEs), and grandnational institutes (GNIs) have been developed, and so it is quite difficult to assess their impact on the ground to date. Second, the available data on ALBA’s intra-trade come mainly from government sources, which are difficult to triangulate. Third, there is no integrated database which combines data on exports-imports and regional production. Further, the available data do not allow a macro-level evaluation of ALBA’s impact which takes into account both the trade and cooperation aspects of the treaty.

3. On development of the concept of endogenous development, see Osvaldo Sunkel (1993).

4. ‘Construyendo un mundo pluripolar’, ALBA TCP, Cumbres 2004–2010. See Cumbre Extraordinaria Caracas, 28 April 2008, Acuerdo para la implementación de programas de cooperación en materia de soberanía y seguridad alimentaria, pp.62–66 (http://www.alba-tcp.org/public/documents/pdf/Construyendo_un_Mundo_Pluripolar.pdf, accessed 5 August 2011). For a summary of the Institutional Principles of ALBA-TCP, see http://www.alba-tcp.org/public/documents/pdf/Construyendo_un_Mundo_Pluripolar.pdf (accessed 5 September 2011). For updated data on ordinary and extraordinary ALBA meetings, see <http://www.alianzabolivariana.org/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=2097>

Box 1.1 ALBA's guiding principles: an alternative to competition

1. Key principles are '**complementarity**, as an alternative to competition; **solidarity** as opposed to domination; **cooperation** as a replacement for exploitation; and respect for sovereignty rather than corporate rule'.
2. Financial cooperation is an integral and major element.
3. Social cooperation is an integral and major element.
4. 'A la carte' participation and 'negotiated flexibility': each member accedes on individually negotiated terms and its participation in trade and ALBA projects is negotiated on a case-by-case basis.
5. Trade can be a means of settlement of financial and/or social cooperation.
6. Asymmetrical and non-reciprocal market access in favour of smaller and/or weaker member economies.
7. Tariff protection of infant industries is allowed.
8. Provision for counter-trade arrangements, i.e. direct product exchanges.
9. Creation of the 'sucre', an accounting currency unit used to value bilateral and multilateral trade among the members and to settle balances. In effect, this permits multilateral counter-trade. Participation is not mandatory for members.
10. Recognition of the role of the state in development and in economic regulation.
11. Public procurement as an instrument of national economic development.
12. Protection of citizens' rights to basic social services (i.e. from privatisation and commercialisation).
13. Protection of labour rights.
14. Protection of the rights of indigenous people.
15. Protection of 'Mother Earth' (the environment).
16. Rights to development and health take precedence over intellectual and industrial property rights.
17. Privileging of production for the national market and satisfaction of the needs of the population.
18. Privileging of communal and cooperative enterprises and of small and medium enterprises
19. Submission of foreign investors to national law in dispute resolution.
20. Rapid responsiveness and creativity in developing new programmes; e.g. ALBA Food Security Initiative and ALBA Haiti Earthquake Relief Fund.
21. Formation of grandnational enterprises – multi-country state-to-state joint ventures for dedicated purposes in several areas.
22. Political solidarity on threats to member states (such as the US embargo on Cuba, the Honduras coup of 2009, the Colombia–US bases agreement of 2009, and the attempted coup in Ecuador in 2010). Member countries are free to abstain or reserve their position.

Source: Girvan (2011: 6)

1.3 About this paper

Building on the insights provided by a case study of Venezuela and the ALBA experience in Bolivia and Nicaragua, the goal of this paper is to 'map the field' and prepare the ground for further micro-level studies in the region by drawing attention to the social, economic, political and cultural domains in which the impact of ALBA-PTA on small farmers' agency can be studied. This programmatic exploration is guided by the following questions:

- Are small-scale farmers in ALBA countries benefiting from policies or public and private institutional arrangements that empower them to enter and stay in markets in good conditions?
- Do they have better possibilities to improve or exercise their individual and collective agency and to make better-informed choices about the markets in which they operate?
- Do small-scale farmers in ALBA countries influence policies? If so, through which formal and informal organisations or institutions do they do this?

Following this introduction, this paper is divided into three main sections. Section 2 provides an overview of ALBA food and agricultural trade policies and illustrates the status and progress of their implementation in terms of food production for the domestic market and for export within ALBA countries.

Section 3 reviews institutional arrangements promoted to enable small-scale farmers to produce, organise/cooperate and compete successfully in their markets in Venezuela. These arrangements

include cooperatives, producer associations, NEDs (Centres for Endogenous Development), social missions, subsidised food distribution, agro-ecology institutes and research, and the role of communal councils. This section also aims to understand the meaning of 'food sovereignty' a country which has traditionally been practising 'food security' through imports with oil revenues.

Section 4 explores how national policies and ALBA's policies and their institutional arrangements are having an impact (or not) on the technical capacities, entrepreneurial skills and bargaining power of small-scale farmers in Venezuela. Producers' agency will be explored through the cases of cocoa producers in Aragua State and of agro-vegetable producers in Lara State.

In conclusion, Section 5 highlights a number of contradictions between how ALBA is visualised and how it works in practice. Popular participation from the bottom ('the people') is central to ALBA's rhetoric and vision. However, as of today, ALBA is mostly top-down, managed by government heads with little involvement from stakeholders and ordinary people. The case study of cocoa farmers in Chuao shows however that ALBA has gradually become part of everyday parlance and how its localised implementation is also debated through citizen participation in assemblies within and outside newly established cooperative and communal councils. Local-level data also show the impact of rhetoric and ideologies in instilling hope in a new generation of young farmers, and how the logics of the market and social/community dynamics are interlocking on the ground in often surprising and contradictory ways.

Food and agriculture policy instruments within ALBA-PTA in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia

Key instruments of implementation in ALBA's food policy are grandnational projects, enterprises and initiatives (GNPs, GNEs and GNIs) – mixed state firms constituted by enterprises of two or more ALBA member countries that share ownership and a focus on intra-ALBA trade.⁵ Conceptually, the category of grandnational was introduced in 2008, although mixed state enterprises have been functioning since 2005 when the Cuba–Venezuela Strategic Agreement was signed.⁶

Besides food production and security, grandnational enterprises are being organised in the following areas (Muhr, 2010):

- finance and investments (the Bank of ALBA and the 'sucre' virtual currency for exchanges between member states)
- education (literacy and post-literacy campaigns)
- infrastructural projects (ports, railways and airports)
- energy (oil and gas companies)
- environment (forest management companies, and water and sanitation projects)
- health (production and distribution of pharmaceutical products and provision of medical services and training); fair trade (import-export companies and ALBA stores)
- tourism (university of tourism and development of national tourist industries)
- industry (industrial enterprises and investment projects)
- culture (ALBA Cultural Fund and cultural centres) sport (the ALBA games)
- telecommunications (telecommunications company and ALBA use of a Venezuelan satellite and a submarine fibre-optic cable between Venezuela and Cuba).

The Agro-food Grandnational Enterprise (*Empresa Grannacional de Producción de Alimentos*) funded in 2009, is set to have a fundamental role in the organisation of the internal food production

of ALBA (ALBA, 2009). This project (which incorporates the Food Bank) is supported by Alba Bank (BALBA). In the case of Venezuela, government data claim that agricultural production increased by 44 per cent in 12 years: from 17 millions of tons of food in 1998 to 24.6 million in 2010. According to a 2009 study of the new Venezuelan food and agricultural system, Venezuela has now reached levels of self-sufficiency in its two most important grains, corn and rice, with production increases of 132 and 71 per cent respectively since 1998 (Schiavoni and Camacaro, 2009). Production increases are also reported in black beans (143 per cent), root vegetables (115 per cent) and sunflowers for cooking-oil production (125 per cent) (Schiavoni and Camacaro, 2009).

The increase in agricultural production is a result partly of land reform and partly of government efforts to diversify the economy. Key to this restructuring has been to revive agricultural production in areas in which Venezuela was strong in the past such as beans, corn, sugar, cocoa beans, and coffee as well as the development of subsidised food markets (such as Mercal stores) which sell domestically produced food (MAMC, 2006). The development of state/ALBA-run agro-industries within key strategic sectors such as milk production (CVA (Corporación Venezolana Agraria) Lacteos), sugar (CVA Azucar), coffee (CVA Cafe), grains (CVA Cereales), cocoa (Cacao Oderi), meat and fish (CVA Leander Carne y Pescado), poultry (Avicola del Alba) and beans (Empresa Mixta Socialista Leguminosa del Alba) are also having a key role in increasing national agricultural production.⁷

However, the number and nature of small-scale farmers in today's Venezuela are still unclear. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that there are roughly 400,000 farmers in Venezuela. According to the last official agricultural census in 1997 conducted by Venezuela's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAC), there were only 113,421 small-scale farmers who were each cultivating less than two hectares of land. Mission Agro-Venezuela is currently conducting a national

5. For a list of ALBA projects, see ALBA (2011).

6. The grandnationals often are implemented through public–private links. In Nicaragua the cooperative Nicaraocoop, for example, is constituted by a private entity with links to the FSLN government and is said to distribute fertilisers selectively to farmers with support from Venezuela which is channelled through ALBA officials and agreements (<http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3920>, accessed 10 November 2011).

7. See CVA's government website for details on the agro-state companies (http://www.cva.gob.ve/sitio/quienes_somos.php).

census 'to understand in greater details the situation of all producers in the country, so as to fine tune agricultural policy' (Reardon 2011).

In Nicaragua in 2008 and 2009, exports to all world areas declined by between 6.6 and 37.5 per cent, while exports to Venezuela increased by almost 300 per cent (Banco Central de Nicaragua (2010, 2011a), cited in Muhr (2011b)). Exports from Nicaragua to Venezuela rose from US\$ 6.3 million in 2007 to 30 million in 2009 and 220 million in 2010, which represents 14.5 per cent of total Nicaraguan exports. The evolution of Nicaraguan trade over the last decade shows an increase in value of trading of products and commodities such as meat, coffee, sugar and beans.⁸ Cattle farming, however, is usually managed by big commercial business in Nicaragua, and so it is still not clear if and how small farmers are receiving or not receiving benefits from this trade.⁹

Venezuelan cooperation through ALBA in the agro-food sector led to the creation of a private company called ALBANISIA (ALBA de Nicaragua, SA), which manages investment funds. ALBANISIA as a privately held company does not require the disclosure of its funds to the public, and many claim lack of transparency and corruption in the management of ALBA's funds.¹⁰ Another heated issue is whether the Venezuela–Nicaraguan cooperation is having an impact or not on the development of social programmes. At first sight it may seem that the beneficiaries of ALBA's trade agreements are merely big agro-industries and exporters. However, some observers note that ALBA's cooperation is also having an important indirect impact in improving the health system and education, as well as food and housing (Guharay, 2011). This impact is difficult to quantify. Available data for Nicaragua suggest that extreme poverty declined by 7.5 per cent and extreme rural poverty by 12.3 per cent between 2005 and 2009 (UN 2010).¹¹

Since 2007, the Nicaraguan government has introduced the Alimentary Productive Programme (PPA) (known as Hambre Cero, or HC). The central feature of this programme is the 'bono producción'

(production voucher) for poor households, which enables them to receive seeds, plants, animals, training and technology. The government has also introduced a Food and Nutrition Security and Sovereignty Bill (la Ley de Seguridad y Soberanía Alimentaria y Nutricional, LSYSAN). According to a report by CEPAL-STAT (2009), food production in Nicaragua can now supply 75 per cent of the national demand for basic grains. However, ALBA is not the only player in the development of national 'food sovereignty/security', and the Nicaraguan government has also been financed by other sources such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and through cooperation with countries such as Taiwan.¹² There is considerable debate about who are the real beneficiaries of these social programmes, and whether these programmes have been created to enhance the quality of life of poorer sectors of society or whether they are merely populist devices to create political support.¹³ The concluding part of this paper returns to these debates.

By comparison, ALBA is playing a minor role in the current Bolivian economy and in particular in supporting small-scale farmers. Bolivia joined ALBA in 2006, soon after the election of President Evo Morales. Venezuela is currently providing cooperation in the restructuring of Bolivia's gas and mining industry and Bolivia's contribution is in the form of exports of natural gas as well as agro-industrial, livestock and industrial products such as soya and beans (ALBA, 2006). In January 2009, food sovereignty was included in Bolivia's new constitution.¹⁴ In July 2011, President Evo Morales signed the Law of Productive, Communal and Agricultural Revolution. The government plans to invest \$500m (£308m) annually for 10 years in sustainable policies that guarantee the local and self-sufficient production of high-quality food, while preserving and respecting the country's immense biodiversity. The tension between agribusiness, the landed elite and small-scale producers and indigenous organisations has been considered a major obstacle in implementing food-sovereignty goals in Bolivia. The ALBA-TCP hence has the potential to support the cause of small-scale farmers in Bolivia, but ALBA is not as visible (in both rhetorical and empirical senses) in this country

8. See also <http://cetrex.gob.ni/webseite/servicios/estadisticas.js> and <http://www.alianzabolivariana.org/comercio/FichaNicaragua.pdf>.

9. For a critique of ALBA's impact on small-scale farmers in Nicaragua, see <http://www.coha.org/nicaragua-albanisa-the-privatization-of-venezuelan-aid/>.

10. On ALBANISIA, see <http://www.confidencial.com.ni/articulo/3388/las-cuentas-secretas-de-albanisa>; <http://www.confidencial.com.ni/albadocs/0>; <http://www.eldiariointernacional.com/spip.php?article3178>; <http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/en-portada/portada-nicaragua-alba/1076729/>.

11. For an examination of the indirect social impact of ALBA in Nicaragua, see <http://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/en-portada/portada-nicaragua-alba/1076729/>.

12. See, for example, Acevedo (2011).

13. According to a recent survey, 'only 12.5% of the population claims to have been the beneficiary of government social programmes that are mentioned here... 87.5% of the population claims not to have been a beneficiary' (Acevedo, 2011).

14. Included in Articles 16, 310 and 404 of the 2009 constitution.

as it is in Nicaragua and Venezuela.¹⁵ Similarly, the number of pro-farmer policies and social projects are very few in Bolivia, compared with Nicaragua and Venezuela.

The available data on ALBA intra-trade so far presented come mainly from government sources like the Banco Exterior de Venezuela, Banco de Nicaragua, and the Bolivian Instituto Nacional de Estadística.¹⁶ There is no integrated database which combines data on exports-imports and regional production. Non-government agencies such as UN Comtrade collect data on international trade but do not provide data on who is actually exporting. Are small farmers and cooperatives exporting, or are big agro-industries? This is a question which remains mostly unanswered. Also unexplored is how regional production maps out on the ground. Using UN Comtrade data plus qualitative data on regional production, Aponte-Garcia (2011) is pioneering a new framework of analysis to understand how ALBA is working in practice. Her preliminary results show a rise of ALBA intra-regional trade during its first five years of implementation. According to her study, intra-ALBA trade has grown considerably from the pre-ALBA to the post-ALBA period from approximately \$US 5 billion to almost 9 billion. Contrary to ALBA's critiques, which often picture ALBA as an

international treaty incapable of generating real economic development and dominated by the Venezuelan petroleum industry, Aponte-Garcia shows that the petroleum-industry category did not reflect the greatest growth for the 2005–09 period. Indeed, 'food and beverages' is the category which has become increasingly important in ALBA intra-trade flows, growing from approximately 12 to 32 per cent by 2005. By 2009, intra-ALBA trade was dominated by food, agriculture and livestock.

What this analysis does not take into account is the impact that the funds generated by grandnational enterprises have directly and indirectly on the life of small farmers through the implementation of a variety of national and local social programmes. To measure this impact is indeed very complex as it is almost impossible to map out the actual levels of funds that go to these projects. There has been criticism of low levels of transparency of ALBA's implementation policies, and of the shady side of ALBA's implementation process.¹⁷ It is not clear who decides how the aid should be distributed. What are the technical criteria applied? Vulnerable rural groups are prioritised on paper but on the ground often the trend is to favour particular groups following patron/client political relations. Section 3 explores how Venezuela is attempting to implement national/ALBA food policies.

15. Bolivia's trade with ALBA countries in the agro sector did not change significantly between 2006 and 2011 (Bolivian Instituto Nacional de Estadística). I thank Luis Galleguillos for providing me with data on commercial exchanges between Bolivia and ALBA countries.

16. See new data for 2011 at <http://www.bancoex.gov.ve/web/index.php/operaciones-en-linea/repositorio?func=select&id=26>.

17. For example, in Nicaragua actors such as FENACOOOP say there are still no available details about the implementation of this and other programmes, projects and plans of Daniel Ortega's government. They indicate that governmental decision-making has been so centralised that even ministers and public functionaries are unsure where the limits of their authority lie, given the firing of certain officials whose declarations to the media were considered unacceptable criticism by Daniel Ortega's government (<http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3920>, accessed 12 November 2011).

‘Planning socialism, harvesting sovereignty’: agricultural transformations in contemporary Venezuela

Venezuela has been the economic and ideological laboratory of the ALBA-PTA. It is in Venezuela since 1998 that the politics, principles and practices of 21st-century socialism have most significantly unfolded. In the early 20th century, Venezuela was a predominately agricultural country, with 70 per cent of the population living in rural areas. By 1935, Venezuela had become one of the largest exporters of oil in the world, while its agricultural sector had drastically collapsed. By 1960, the number of people living in rural areas had decreased to 35 per cent and by 1990 was only 12 per cent. Venezuela was by then a net importer of agricultural goods, with a mere 6 per cent of GDP coming from agriculture (see Wilpert, 2007). Consequently, land reform and agricultural policy were key components of the 1999 Bolivarian Revolution following the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998, and have become a crucial concern of ALBA-PTA.

Agriculture still contributes only 6 per cent of GDP in Venezuela. Despite the 1960 agricultural reform law, by the late 1990s just 5 per cent of the largest landowners controlled 75 per cent of the land, and smallholder farmers were controlling only 6 per cent of the land (FAO, 2002). Today, 92 per cent of Venezuelans live and work in urban centres and only 8 per cent in rural areas. In 1998, Venezuela was importing some 80 per cent of the food products it was consuming.

Box 3.1 Food sovereignty and pro-small-farmer institutional arrangements in Venezuela

- Bolivarian constitution: Articles 305, 306 and 307, 1999
- Land Law, 2001
- Law on Food Security and Food Sovereignty, 2008
- Law on Integrated Agricultural Health, 2008
- Law for the Development of the Popular Economy, 2009
- Law for the Promotion and Development of Small and Medium Industry and Units of Social Production, 2009

The transformation of Venezuela’s food and agriculture system started in 1999 when Venezuela approved by popular referendum the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela. Articles 305, 306, and 307 address portions of the food-sovereignty framework (Box 3.1). In tandem, the Venezuelan government developed extensive programmes for implementation of its new pro-farmers and pro-food policies (Box 3.2).

Box 3.2 Measures to implement food sovereignty and food security in Venezuela

- Cooperatives
- Social Missions (Mission Alimento, Mission ‘Return to the Countryside’, Mission Agro-Venezuela)
- Subsidised food distribution (Mercal and PDVAL, Agricultural Bank of Venezuela)
- Communal councils
- Land reform and agro-ecology
- Institutes and research

In 2010, the government announced that there had been a 48 per cent increase in lands under cultivation since 1998. Over the same period, production of some staples had increased substantially: rice production rose by 84 per cent, reaching nearly 1.3 million tons per year, while milk production rose to 2.18 million tons, a 47 per cent increase. In 2010, the Agricultural Bank of Venezuela was funded and the Plan Zero Debt was initiated. This programme compensates farmers facing crop failures. Finally, in January 2011 Mission Agro-Venezuela was launched to strengthen food security and to provide low-interest loans, machinery and technical assistance to farmers enrolled in the initiative (*Alo Presidente*, 2011a). US\$ 2.3 billion have been committed to the programme, which also includes a census of Venezuela’s agricultural sector (BMI, 2011). By mid-April 2011, 586,000 growers had registered for the programme, according to government data.

According to the Minister of Agriculture and Land, Carlos Loyo, 'One of the objectives of the mission is to ensure the harvest and the implementation of distribution policies so that products can reach consumers'. He stressed that, with Mission Agro-Venezuela, an increase in food production is anticipated, from 9 million to 12–14 million tons approximately in the next two years. As part of the drive to increase food production in Venezuela, Minister Loyo cited international agreements with Argentina, Brazil, Belarus, Uruguay and Iran for the purchase of grain crops, technology transfer, agricultural mechanisation and provision of animals, which have contributed to improved production.

The Socialist Agricultural Development Fund and the Agricultural Bank of Venezuela (BAV) have provided funding to more than 170,000 farmers for an amount of up to \$1 million. Ten months into Mission Agro-Venezuela, public banks had given loans to cultivate strategic food in over 775,000 hectares as announced by President Ricardo Sanchez in the Agro-Venezuela Day radio programme on RNV (Radio Nacional de Venezuela).¹⁹ Priority has been given to corn, rice, soybeans, sunflowers, vegetables, sugar cane, coffee and cocoa.

Mission Agro-Venezuela attempts to interconnect previous agriculture- and food-related 'Bolivarian projects' including those concerned with endogenous development, urban allotments, and *Misión Che Guevara* (see below) under the new 'revolutionary' slogan 'Sembrando Socialismo, Cosechando Soberanía' (Sowing Socialism, Harvesting Sovereignty). However, the number of programmes and government institutions involved in the establishment of food sovereignty and food security in Venezuela is increasing rapidly.

It is very difficult to keep up with the innumerable projects and to assess which programmes are implemented, which are not implemented and indeed if local farmers contribute to the elaboration and implementation of such projects.²⁰ Undoubtedly, the rhetoric and the propaganda on food sovereignty and security have been central to Chavez's speeches and policies since 2009. Venezuela's countryside features many gigantic posters which signal the establishment of new ALBA agro-food grandnational enterprises, and the media report the support and participation received by Mission Agro-Venezuela as massive.

By 2011, over 700,000 families are said to have benefited from Chavez's land/food reform, which is a substantial number in comparison with previous land reforms in Venezuela and outside. However, there is no shortage of critiques of Chavez's land reforms and agricultural policies. In his paper 'Land for the People not for Profit in Venezuela', Gregory Wilpert (2007) argues that the prohibition against selling titles acquired through the land reform is creating a black market in land titles; titles end up then being traded below their true value and this has a detrimental effect on already poor farmers. Most importantly, he points out that Venezuela's peasant organisations are very weak due to the agricultural history of a country shaped by the oil economy. This means that small farmers often do not have the organisation to press the government and make sure that land reforms are properly implemented. Finally, another problem related to poor governmental support is that, even though the banks are required to dedicate a certain percentage of their loans to the agricultural sector, most of these loans do not reach the small farmers, but go mainly to large farmers.

18. <http://www.venezuela.foodsovereignty.com.au/news/thegreatagrovenezuelamissionadvancesthroughfoodsovereignty>

19 [http://www.mat.gob.ve/modulos/detalenoticias.php?iddetalleN=10843&strtitulo=Sánchez: Gobierno Bolivariano sigue impulsando la agricultura en Venezuela;cargar Contenido\(modulos/fotonoticias.php?iddetalleN=10843,'lateral'](http://www.mat.gob.ve/modulos/detalenoticias.php?iddetalleN=10843&strtitulo=Sánchez: Gobierno Bolivariano sigue impulsando la agricultura en Venezuela;cargar Contenido(modulos/fotonoticias.php?iddetalleN=10843,'lateral') (accessed 31 October 2011).

20. I counted more than 10 government institutions currently involved in the promotion of agriculture and programmes to support small farmers: MAT, *Ministerio de Agricultura y Tierra*; CVA, *Corporación Venezolana Agraria* (<http://www.cva.gob.ve>); FONDAS, *Fondo per el desarrollo agrario socialista* (<http://www.fondas.gob.ve>); BAV, *Banco Agrícola de Venezuela* (<http://www.bav.com.ve>); INIA, *Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Agrícola* (<http://www.inia.gob.ve>); REACCIUN, *Red Académica Nacional Venezuela* (<http://www2.reacciun.ve/reacciuncms>); Fundación CIARA, *Capitación Innovación para Apoyar la Revolución Agraria* (<http://www.ciara.gob.ve>); INDER, *Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo Rural* (<http://www.inder.gob.ve>); INSOPESCA, *El Instituto Socialista de la Pesca y Acuicultura* (www.insopesca.gob.ve); INSAI, *Instituto Nacional de Salud Agrícola Integral* (www.insai.gob.ve); INTI, *Instituto Nacional de Tierras* (<http://www.inti.gob.ve/index.php>).

Case studies on the roots of agency: agricultural cooperatives in Venezuela

4.1 Cocoa producers in Chuao, Aragua State

This section explores how cocoa farmers in the village of Chuao are receiving pro-farmer alternative Bolivarian policies, based on the author's fieldwork in Chuao since 2005. The site is famous for a hacienda (plantation) widely recognised as producing the best cocoa beans in the world. The village is still mostly inhabited by Afro-Venezuelans who are descendants of former slaves who worked on the plantation during colonial times. The village of Chuao is accessible only by boat and is therefore somewhat isolated. This seclusion allowed the retention of many religious and cultural traditions lost in other parts of the country. The village has, therefore, the history, the afro-religious culture, the spiritual and religious traditions, the economic products (cacao) and importantly the racial make-up to be a national symbol of the new Bolivarian socialist Venezuela. It is from this iconic village that President Hugo Chavez in his weekly TV programme, *Alo Presidente* (Hello President) laid down his food and agricultural agenda and the promotion of cocoa as an indigenous and national 'revolutionary' product (*Alo Presidente*, 2008).

Chuao has been a *Nucleo de Desarrollo Endógeno*, (NDE, or Centre for Endogenous Development) since May 2005. NDEs aim to implement holistically the concept of 'endogenous development' and their fundamental units are the cooperatives. The 1999 Bolivarian Constitution recognises cooperatives as key economic actors within the nation's social and popular economy (articles 118 and 308). Cooperatives are described as a tool to promote economic inclusion and participation (article 70) and state decentralisation (article 184) (Harnecker, 2005). An NDE is formed by one or more cooperatives that design a project with the assistance of specialists from the Ministry of Popular Economy (Minep). When the project proposal is accepted, the cooperatives

receive on-site technical support and funds, generally without interest charges.

For example, Chuao's NDE involves creating cooperatives for: strengthening the hacienda (its cocoa production and artisanal transformation into chocolate); the development of local tourism and artisanal fishing; and the construction of local infrastructure such as roads, bridges, a health centre, a high school and houses. The NDEs are supposed to bridge cooperatives, the social missions and new Bolivarian institutions (like Bolivarian schools and communal councils) and the local community (Minep, 2005).

Since 2003, the social missions have been at the heart of the Bolivarian project. These programmes cover a wide range of social fields, including health, education, housing, employment, nutrition, sports and culture. Their aim is to improve the social and economic situation of poor Venezuelans. The social missions are funded by the redistribution of oil profits and each mission is generally associated with a famous Venezuelan patriot.²¹ In January 2006, *Misión Vuelvan Caras II* was inaugurated. *La Ruta del Cacao y Chocolate* is a special programme within this social mission and aims to enhance the production of cocoa beans and improve the quality of life of the cocoa-bean farmers, their traditional techniques and cultures. The majority of the farmers who live in cacao areas are of African descent, and many programmes associated with the revitalisation of cacao are also linked to the making of a political Afro-Venezuelan community.²² For example, the grandnational enterprise 'El Cimarrón' produces chocolate for ALBA countries. This firm takes its name from Guillermo Rivas who was a popular Afro-Venezuelan leader who fought against slavery from 1768 to 1771 in Barlovento and Miranda. Cocoa is hence linked to rebellion and to the Afro-Venezuelan movement which aims to recognise Afro-Venezuelans as an official minority.²³

21. For example, *Misión Robinson* (the literacy campaign) was the pioneer of the missions and takes its name from Simon Bolivar's teacher. This was followed by: *Misión Mercal*, whose aim is to guarantee nutrition to the poor; *Barrio Adentro*, a general health programme supported by Cuban doctors and hospitals; *Misión Ribas*, a programme which promotes secondary-school education; and *Misión Sucre*, a mission which promotes university education.

22. For work on the development of an Afro-Venezuelan community, see Ramirez (2005; 2009).

23. In 2006, the government started to work on a cocoa-processing plant (Cacao Oderi (*Empresa Bolivariana de Producción Socialista*)) and a chocolate company (*El Cimarrón*) in the region of Barlovento (Miranda State). 'The region has one of the most developed networks of community integration in the country with 120 communal councils, over 2,000 small family producers, and up to 6,500 cooperative producers. Key to this development has been technological help from Cuba. Oderi was created with an initial credit of BsF 2.8 bn from the Intergovernmental Fund for Decentralisation (*Fondo Intergubernamental para la Decentralización*, FIDES), and was one of the country's first experiments with an EPS, 51 per cent state-owned and 49 per cent worker-owned. Financed through the Venezuelan Bank of Agriculture, the key government mechanism to distribute ground-rent exercised through the plant is the "fair price" (*precio justo*) of 10.3 BsF/kg of cacao, about 20 per cent above the market rate (as of 2008), which is designed to be extended to all the surrounding cacao producers. The national executive granted 7,000,000 BsF (US\$3,255,813) in 2007 and 5,000,000 BsF (US\$2,325,581) in 2008 for this purpose, thereby creating the possibility for small producers to improve income available through cacao production in the region' (Purcell, 2011).

This trend is not exclusive to Venezuela but is also part of ALBA transnational initiatives supporting solidarity among the ALBA countries' Afro-descendants (*Afrodescendiente de los países del ALBA*). The ALBA cultural unit (*El Proyecto Grannacional ALBA Cultural*)²⁴ has been organising for the past four years an annual meeting of Afro-descendants' groups from ALBA countries. The third meeting was hosted by Venezuela and took place in Maracay in July 2010. A delegation from the village of Chuao participated in the event and followed various workshops on topics such as 'Afro spirituality and cultures of resistance in the ALBA countries'; 'the social Afro-Venezuelan movement and the Bolivarian process'; and 'participation of indigenous and Afro-descendants in the construction of Bolivarian socialism'.

Chuao's inhabitants have hence started to be involved directly and indirectly with ALBA food (and cultural) policies over the past two years. This participation has been prompted by the listing of cacao first as a national Venezuelan strategic product in November 2010²⁵ and then as a 'first need' or basic staple product in April 2011.²⁶ The fact that the production of this commodity has been mainly dedicated to export markets and reserved for privileged social classes has been criticised by the Venezuelan government. The government is now developing regulations for the production, distribution, commercialisation, storage, import, and export of cocoa. As part of these activities, the Venezuelan Cocoa Socialist Corporation (*Corporación Socialista del Cacao Venezolano*) was established under the Vice-Presidency Office in June 2010.²⁷ The vice-president, Elias Agua, announced that Venezuela's cocoa production will reach 30,000 tons in 2012 and 60,000 tons in 2019. At present, according to data of the Venezuelan Cocoa Socialist Corporation, the private sector still controls 95 per cent of the cocoa-beans market. There are nine companies in Venezuela which process cocoa, and only one of these (Cacao Oderi) is state run.

The Oderi cocoa-processing plant (*Empresa Bolivariana de Producción Socialista*) and the chocolate company *El Cimarron* were founded in 2006 in Barlovento (Miranda State). The region has one of the most developed networks of community integration in the country with 120 communal

councils, over 2000 small family producers, and up to 6500 cooperative producers (Purcell 2011). Key to this development has been technological help from Cuba. The Venezuelan state aims to control 50 per cent of the national processing of cocoa beans, through the new *Empresa Mixta Socialista* 'Cacao del Alba' in Carúpano, in Sucre State, by 2012. This is again in collaboration with Cuba, which is developing a twin company in Havana. In February 2011, as part of this Cuba–Venezuela collaboration, the ALBA School of Chocolate was established in the Venezuelan state of Aragua. Chuao's farmers' lives have been affected and will be affected directly and indirectly by the nationalisation of cocoa processing. This is a substantial change which will affect their market strategies and the life of the hacienda/cooperative as an exporter of first-quality cocoa beans to the foreign market.

Cooperativism is the strategic pillar of Chuao's NDE state-led development programme. The hacienda has been run as a cooperative, *La Asociación Civil Empresa Campesina Chuao* (Chuao Civil Association Rural Enterprise) since 1976, hence the cooperativist model is not new to Chuao. According to Marcel, formerly of the Communal Council, 'this culture has always existed in Chuao, Chuao is naturally socialist'.²⁸ Indeed, people who visit Chuao for brief periods often note that the village is 'naturally communist' (ethnomusicologist, 33 years old) and that it is perfectly suitable for testing the economic theory of *desarrollo endógeno*. 'In Chuao people share food, they share childcare and they even share their women' (entrepreneur, 56 years old), and 'In Chuao everything is "endogenous". What do you think can be more endogenous than Chuao, one of the few places on earth that is still not reachable by road?' (journalist, 40 years old). And, endlessly, people observe that '*en Chuao todos es de todos*' [in Chuao everything belongs to everybody]. However, longer-term residents of Chuao tend to feel differently.

Money is usually the cause of internal village struggles, and money in Chuao has always meant state funds. Economically the population of Chuao (about 2000 inhabitants) is rather homogeneous with some exceptions at both ends of the scale. At the top of the economic hierarchy we find

24. For information about programmes in ALBA Cultural, see: <http://www.alianzabolivariana.org/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=2066>.

25. *Alo Presidente*, 2 November 2010. http://www.alopresidente.gob.ve/info/6/1954/el_chocolate_consiguiaaroma.html (Accessed 25 October 2011).

26. Cocoa was declared '*bien de primera necesidad*' (Decreto No 8.157, *Gaceta Oficial* 39.655, 12 April 2011).

27. *Gaceta Oficial* 39.441, 8 June 2010.

28. These quotations from people in Chuao are drawn from the author's fieldwork. The names of the people of Chuao discussed in this paper are pseudonyms.

cocoa leaders, fish leaders and political leaders. The general view from the street is that the most powerful of Chuao's families got their money from political and state contacts and state funds. Despite its isolation since colonial times, Chuao has been in close contact with national politics and the state. First the church and then various dictators and politicians took particular interest in the village and often owned its famous cocoa plantation. Hugo Chavez is hence just one in a long list of political figures to have directly affected the lives of the people of Chuao.²⁹

In the last 50 years the state has heavily subsidised the hacienda and lots of the money is said to have gone directly into the pockets of its administrators who changed according to the political party that was in power at national level (AD or COPEI). In general local people seem to expect that the state is there to help them. Power is often conceived as something outside the community which needs to be courted and not as something which exists within the community. It follows that cooperativism is often understood in Chuao as a way to get to higher powers, and to gain state patronage, and not as a way to create unity and collaboration within the community. This is not atypical in Venezuela. Several observers have described the Venezuelan state as 'magical',³⁰ referring to how the Venezuelan state has been seen in the last 60 years as a dispenser of money and modernity and how the deification of the state took place as part of Venezuela's transformation into an oil nation. People do not even ask for funds; they don't need to ask because money seems to appear in their pockets as if 'by magic'. The general idea is that Venezuelans are all naturally rich or are entitled to be rich because they have oil and oil belongs to all Venezuelans. But what is happening to the magical state in the Chavez era? What kind of magic (if any) is there for the *campesinos*?

From its beginning, the implementation of the development project in Chuao has been perceived by many local people as another magical performance – but one in which they need to participate in order 'to be blessed'. As a schoolteacher noted, 'Chuao is blessed by God. So much money has been poured in through the years... and so it will continue'. The magical

performance this time was considered to be even more magical, because state funds came with the promise (from Chavez himself) that money will be equally divided among community members. Importantly, Chavez's promise comes with the caveat that people have to 'participate' and get organised into cooperatives and in the communal councils. Government people in charge of the implementation of the project stressed and re-stressed that funds were supposed to be equally redistributed to all the people of Chuao and that representatives of the municipality together with the military were there to check that the work proceeded smoothly and that there was no corruption or unequal distribution.

One of the first examples of this new government orientation was the choice of holding a democratic election to choose the maid of the newly appointed doctor. When a new doctor was posted in Chuao, he needed a maid to clean and cook for him. There were several candidates and the mayor suggested a democratic decision. One 70-year-old man (Federico Perez), considered one of the 'natural' leaders of the community, commented: 'This is democracy gone mad! Are we expected now to vote for everything?' Patrick (20 years old), an enthusiastic supporter of Chavez, noted that it was only through a true participatory democracy that the corrupted and nepotistic culture of the country could be defeated: 'They all know that in Chuao only a few people and families had benefited from state funds so far. It is by starting by small things like voting to decide who should be the cleaning lady of the doctor that we will be able to defeat the oligarchy'.

The new forms of participation, including cooperatives' assemblies and workshops are directly and indirectly changing Venezuelan political and economic arenas. Whether or not Chavez's discourse and policies are understood as 'clientelist and populist' or 'transformative and socialist', how people think about politics and the economy have been fundamentally re-shaped over the past decade. For example, how have the NDE's policies and more recently ALBA's food-related programmes affected the productivity of cooperatives and the 'agency' of farmers? Alcide Herrera (current president of the hacienda) observed, 'We will never change the cooperative

29. Since colonial times, the hacienda passed from being the property of the 'encomendero' to the Church, to the University of Caracas and then finally various dictators like Antonio Guzman Blanco, Vicente Gómez, and Marcos Pérez Jiménez. In 1959, after the implementation of democracy, the National Agrarian Institute (Instituto Agrario Nacional – IAN) took over the administration of the hacienda from Fortunato Herrera (el 'Platinado'). It inherited a solvent and productive plantation, but in 30 years of bad administration it made the hacienda an unproductive unit, which survived mainly on government funds.

30. See for example Coronil (1997) and Taussig (1997). 'The state by manufacturing dazzling development projects that engender collective fantasies of progress, it casts its spell over audience and performers alike. As a "magnanimous sorcerer" the state seizes its subjects by inducing a condition or state of being receptive to its illusion – a magical state' (Coronil, 1997: 5).

model, we all gain the same, and nobody is the boss: all the decisions are taken by the national assembly, we all receive the same benefits, basically we are all equals... we all fight for our cacao'. Thanks to the help provided by the NDE, the hacienda increased its production from 5000kg to 20,000kg. By 2000 the hacienda had started to sell beans to the Italian company, Amedei, and the value of the crop has sharply increased since then. In 2008 the year's harvest (25,000 kg) was sold at \$9/kg. In 2011 however, only 136 hectares of the hacienda are cultivated, out of a total of the available 254 hectares. In order to be in profit the hacienda needs to produce at least 32,000kg per year (Herrera, 2011).

From 2005, the number of people working in the hacienda grew from 70 to 127 (72 women and 55 men). However, an average of only 85 people work regularly in the hacienda. Cocoa is a very labour-intensive crop and Chuao's hacienda due to its particular geological structure needs high levels of labour in order to improve its production and profitability. In the hacienda everyone receives the same weekly salary regardless of how long they have been with the cooperative, and an equal share of profits. This should indeed be an incentive to increase production. However, workers often tend to prioritise short-term profit and choose for example to work in other places for a month or two, if the opportunity arises, and they can earn more. For example, during September 2011, the government started construction of new housing sponsored by the new social mission, *Misión Vivienda* and was hiring workers on a weekly basis for \$80/week, more than the rate then paid to the Hacienda's workers (\$50/week). Cooperative workers have a number of social advantages such as insurance and pension, which makes working in the cocoa plantation attractive. However, they do not lose these advantages if they go to work for short times outside the hacienda; they lose only the salary for the period that they did not work in the cooperative.

In this way, social projects created within the NDE are at times in competition and are weakened by this. Nevertheless, people in Chuao are today visibly much wealthier than in 2005. Houses now have fridges, washing machines and tiled rather than corrugated-iron roofing. Residents report that they have more cash in hand to buy things such as motor bikes or clothes. Many villagers have

learned new skills and obtained diplomas from *Misión Robinson*, *Misión Ribas* and the courses provided by the *Ruta del Cacao y Chocolate* which trains local artisans in the transformation of cacao into chocolate, cakes, sweets, chocolate rum and beauty products.

Some people however are concerned that the government has stopped or delayed the implementation of NDE projects since 2009. It was only from April 2011, when cacao was declared a national product, that attention was fully re-directed to the hacienda, and the village state-led development project regained energy. In September 2011, the hacienda did not have funds to pay the workers and had to stop working for a month, but the mood of the village remained quite positive. And yet the hacienda was going through a difficult time. Funds were allegedly stolen from the hacienda's bank account through an internet scam, and between 20 and 25 per cent of national cocoa production was affected by rains in December 2010. Despite this, local farmers were positive and were expecting new loans and benefits from the new Mission Agro-Venezuela.

In April 2011, the sixth meeting of ALBA cocoa producers was organised in Chuao by Mission Agro-Venezuela and the Venezuelan Socialist Cocoa Corporation. Five workshops were organised on topics such as 'The socialist revolution of cocoa', and 'The organisation of popular power and local communal power and development'. As these topics suggest, pro-farmer cocoa projects are not only economically driven but also contain an important social and communal dimension. Participatory democracy is a central feature of the new Mission Agro-Venezuela. But how does this work in practice? Do Chuao farmers participate more? From August 2001, representatives from the hacienda became members of the National Assembly of Cocoa Producers and Popular Power (*Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular de Productores y Productoras de Cacao*). This assembly brings together Venezuelan cocoa producers on a bi-monthly basis.³¹ Chuao's farmers seemed enthusiastic about this new development.

Herrera Alcide (president of the hacienda) said that Chuao's hacienda workers did not talk with Choroní's cocoa farmers before last year.

31. The cocoa producers are now organising themselves into regional assemblies: Asamblea Central (Aragua, Carabobo y Yaracuy), Asamblea Capital (Miranda y Vargas), Asamblea Los Llanos (Apure, Barinas Cojedes, Guárico y Portuguesa), Asamblea Occidente (Mérida, Táchira, Trujillo y Zulia) and Asamblea Oriente (Sucre, Monagas, Delta Amacuro, Bolívar y Amazonas). In the meeting in Sucre, two main workshops (*mesas de trabajo*) were organised: 'El Poder Popular como Herramienta para la Construcción del Socialismo' and 'El Cacao como Instrumento para la Liberación'. Central topics included 'cacao' as an instrument of the revolution and as an agricultural product which enshrines rebellion and liberation.

Choroni is a village only 20 minutes by boat from Chuao. 'Now it is different, we are collaborating, exchanging tips on cacao cultivation and transformation and forming *Cuerpos Combatientes Productivos* to help other cocoa producers in need', said Alcide. These groups are formed of 15 persons elected by the communal council or by the cooperative (as in the case of Chuao hacienda). The voluntary groups help to clean and rehabilitate small farmers' haciendas, and help producers who are encountering difficulties because they are old and do not have enough labour or financial support. Leila (hacienda worker) noted, 'It is very important that cacao producers meet together, that we exchange ideas on different phases of the production of cacao; to understand that not all the cocoa beans are the same and of course to ensure that the Venezuelan cacao is the best in the world'. Crucially, the *Corporación del Cacao Socialista* is also creating pensions and housing development.

The declaration of cacao as a national product has hence been generally positively welcomed by local farmers. However, there are also some concerned voices. A number of farmers are worried about the future of their special cacao. The cocoa which grows in Chuao is supposed to be one of the best (and most expensive) in the world. The state has promised to buy it at the same price paid by foreign companies for the past ten years.³² In 2011, 35 per cent of annual production was still sold to a German firm, 35 per cent to the Cacao Socialist Corporation, and 30 per cent to local producers for artisanal transformation. By 2012, 75 per cent of production will go to the state. A number of Chuao's villagers are questioning whether quality will be maintained, and some have hinted that the alleged black market will further thrive under the new policies. Chuao's cocoa beans are said to fetch \$25/kg on the black market. Raw cocoa beans used to make premium chocolate have never been in higher demand over the last ten years. As Arturo (a hacienda worker) commented, 'In our history we have been often exploited... but over the past ten years we are getting a good deal for our cocoa beans. This does not mean that we are not exploited any more, but at least we are getting something out of it'.

Dignity and pride is one of the symbolic and non-material benefits that are often difficult to measure in economic terms. However, non-material benefits are central in understanding the impact of pro-farmer socialist 'alternative' Bolivarian policies. Chuao's farmers report that they feel

much more empowered than ten years ago and that they can now speak up for themselves. For example, hacienda associates often pointed out that they previously found exporters or importers and their intermediaries very intimidating. They vividly recalled going to meetings organised by *Fondo del Cacao* in grand hotels, and finding themselves intimidated by educated people and unfamiliar protocols. Now they report feeling *cómodo* (comfortable and at ease). The meetings organised by the state-run corporation are described as 'very simple', and cocoa producers feel relaxed and able to express their opinions. Meetings, seminars, workshops and assemblies have become part of everyday life for local *campesinos*, and this form of participation has become routine in Chuao. Cooperativism and participation are hence seen not only as a way to reach higher powers but also to build up a new sense of community and solidarity among cacao producers of the region. This is also contributing to the creation of an Afro-Venezuelan community, and to include formerly excluded groups in economic and political processes.

Workers and farmers in Chuao have shown in the past ten years that they are capable of making their voices heard. By 2007, the communal councils (CCs) became the arena in which the municipality and the local elite in charge of implementing the NDE's funds are criticised and held accountable. The villagers staged an impressive media campaign via radio and local journals against the mayor and his entourage in 2007. They accused him of corruption and theft. By the end of 2007 through the CC the villagers went directly to the Mobile Presidential Cabinet and the Minister of Popular Economy and obtained the promised funding for infrastructural projects (new houses, restructuring of housing, potable water, a new sewerage system, and improved communication through internet and telephone lines).

Paradoxically, the CC was taken over initially by 'anti-Chavez' groups who started to use this institution to contest and criticise the 'revolution' (Michelutti, 2009). 'The CC had done a brilliant job in Chuao and importantly they are not poisoned by clientelism and corruption' (Laura, 40 years old, working in the hacienda). On the contrary, the CC has provided an arena through which a fresh leadership developed. This institution is also teaching local people to participate collectively, or as some locals noted, to rediscover how to participate collectively: 'with the communal

32. From 2000 to 2008, all the cocoa beans were sold to an Italian company (Amedei) and from 2008 to a German company

councils we are going back to our roots and indigenous ways of doing politics, with consensus not with opposition' (Ameila, 36 years old, teacher). 'And the *camaleones* [chameleons, meaning those presented as 'Chavistas' but still linked with 'old' politics] have now to go!' The cocoa cooperative has a number of mechanisms to keep the management accountable, and workers have also chosen to go directly to the Minister of Agriculture in Caracas to make their voices heard.

Villagers began to participate in the activities proposed by NDE not only for ideological reasons but also because of pragmatic choices to do with domestic economy. A number of people did not believe (or were not interested) in the 'democratising' nature of the cooperatives and in the theory of *desarrollo endógeno*. Some believed that cooperatives were good to spread solidarity, democracy and equality and but others remained suspicious. Fewer liked the fact that cooperatives were meant to provide only for basic needs and were not supposed to make you rich. Despite these opinions, local people (*Chavistas*, anti-*Chavistas* and neutrals) began to organise themselves into cooperatives by invoking the ideas of collectivity, social economy and solidarity which shape the Bolivarian Constitution. In short, they began to participate and become part of the revolution without necessarily being particularly 'revolutionary'.

By participating in the activities of the NDE, people have begun to learn a new economic model and to digest a revolutionary ideology, including ideas and practices of participatory democracy. Importantly, participation in the NDE has begun to reshape ideas and practices of kinship, family and religion in the village. For example, the massive participation of women in the local project is redrawing gender and family structures. The levelling of class and racial hierarchies that the project is prompting is also producing greater economic autonomy for women and strengthening matrifocal houses. By the same token, the availability of doctors in the village has increased the number of women who choose to be sterilised in their twenties as a method of controlling fertility. This remarkable phenomenon is also reshaping the local matrifocal society and women's authority in the village.

Equally, the creation of new employment in Chuao by government projects has produced some migration from nearby cities and this in the long run may change the local social fabric. The

construction of new village-based political, cultural and economic institutions (popular assemblies and the Bolivarian system of education, among others) is also promoting the realignment of new political hierarchies as well as the spread of the Bolivarian ideology among young children. Hence, 'the revolution' is profoundly changing the everyday lives of Chuao's farmers in areas not necessarily perceived as political/socialist or revolutionary in themselves. It is changes in these realms, however, that have the potential to consolidate Venezuelan social economy and farmers' agency.

4.2 Producers of fresh fruit and vegetables in Lara State

CECOSESOLA (the Central Cooperative for Social Services of Lara – from 2001, *Organismo de Integración Cooperativa Cecosesola*) was founded in 1967, thus this cooperative predates by almost 20 years Bolivarian socialist pro-farmer reforms (del Pozo-Vergnes, 1999). This section will explore how this 'old' cooperative has been integrated (or not integrated) into Bolivarian forms of cooperativism and how CECOSOLA's associates provide a critique of the implementation of Chavez's policies. CECOSOLA now has over 556 associated workers (200 involved in the weekly *ferias* or markets), 20,000 associates, and is composed of over 60 cooperatives involved in savings, agricultural production, small agro-industries, funeral services, and transportation and medical insurance (CECOSOLA, 2007). The weekly markets are now the most popular and profitable of CECOSOLA's activities. CECOSOLA is often described as one of the most successful examples of cooperatives working inside or outside Venezuela.

In Lara State, 'cooperativismo' was spread by Jesuits and the liberation theology movement of the 1960s. CECOSOLA started as a funeral service, to which was added a successful bus service. The first weekly markets were organised in 1983. The founders of CECOSOLA creatively thought of using their buses to run mobile farmer's markets in which fruit and vegetables were taken directly from the farmers to the consumers. This service proved to be a great success and CECOSOLA became a very profitable cooperative. CECOSOLA's associates emphasise 'work' and 'working hard' as the main tool to achieve success within a cooperative.³³ They also often provide a direct or indirect critique of how the current Bolivarian project is implemented.

33. This section also draws on the author's fieldwork. The names of CECOSOLA workers discussed in this paper are pseudonyms.

Romulo Bolivar (a 25-year-old CECOSOLA associate) notes that, 'In order to produce "the new man", we do not need many theories, we need to work. CECOSOLA privileges practices versus ideology. It is what differentiates it from the new Bolivarian Cooperatives'. His colleague Maria Soza commented on the Bolivarian endogenous economic model: 'In theory I agree completely with Chavez's socialist ideas and programmes but the practice is very different. People do not work in Chavez's cooperative, they steal... It is through working hard that one learns *cooperativismo* not by reading and listening to rhetoric'. Anselmo (35 years old) added: 'To make a profit is not our goal. The economic activity is giving us the opportunity to meet up and through working going through an educational process. Most of the time the people who speak about socialism are armchair socialists. They do socialism from their offices but when they have to deal with the practice and the everyday life they are at a loss... at CECOSOLA we are trying to create a different way of organising ourselves through practice and essentially by working. The profit that we gain from the weekly market is not our goal, our goal is to learn and to create a new way of working and living collectively.'

Lara State is one of the seven Venezuelan states governed by the opposition. The brother of CECOSOLA's president, Henrique Salas Romer, a political economist trained at Yale and former governor of the Venezuelan state of Carabobo (1990–96), contested the presidential elections and lost to Chavez in 1998. His nephew (Henriche Salas Feo) is the current governor of Carabobo state. In the Venezuelan polarised political context, these family connections are not taken lightly. Pro-Chavistas describe CECOSOLA as a business run by the opposition. The workers interviewed were keen to make it clear that they were anti-Chavez. CECOSOLA members describe themselves as a big family whose kinship ties are created by participation and consensus – and also by an anti-Chavista version of socialism. Individualism and protagonism are seen as the biggest obstacles to the 'educational process'. 'Working for CECOSOLA is one thing, but becoming a member of CECOSOLA is a different matter. People, like me, started to work because we needed a job but then you realise that you enter a family, you enter a new way of life. Some people never get it and end up stealing and never get what CECOSOLA means... CECOSOLA has a spirit and this spirit is created every day by creating consensus and through participation' (Antonio Lopez, 30 years old).

CECOSOLA's work ethic is often emphasised by informants and described as the vehicle through which 'the spirit' of the cooperative is created. Associates say that they have their 'own process' versus the 'Bolivarian state process' ('el proceso' is the colloquial term for the Bolivarian Revolution). Despite this, CECOSOLA has been collaborating with SUNACOOOP – the government agency that regulates the establishment and lives of cooperatives – and helped with workshops and seminars on the development of a Bolivarian 'cooperativismo'. CECOSOLA has not been undermined by the new Bolivarian cooperatives and is indeed still a very successful business. During the *ferias* about 250,000 kilos of vegetables are sold every weekend at very competitive prices. The vegetables and fruits are acquired from 11 groups of local producers and Community Production Units (smaller cooperatives producing products for the *ferias*).

The *ferias* are still very popular in Barquisimeto, but similar weekly markets started by CECOSOLA in other areas (for example, in Barina and Caracas) have now closed. Today it is possible to get discounted food in other places. The government organises markets supported by FONDAS (Fondo para el Desarrollo Agrario Socialista). It should be emphasised that state-subsidised markets are not undermining CECOSOLA's successful cooperative model, and CECOSOLA is still doing very well in terms of sales and popular support. However, small-scale farmers from three of the oldest associated Production Units (Alianza, Sanare, and La Montana) voiced concern about the lack of enthusiasm of the younger generations. Their sons do not start new agricultural cooperatives or take charge of older ones. The majority of the current associates of the production units associated with CECOSOLA still belong to the very founding groups who organised themselves into cooperatives in the 1960s. In short, there has been hardly any generational change.

Younger people do not seem to be interested in agriculture, although this trend is not a consequence of the implementation of Chavez's Bolivarian socialism but more an expression of a generational mood. If anything, Bolivarian pro-farmer policies are actually counteracting such a trend and producing a new sense of pride in agriculture and for producing 'national' and 'ethnic' products such as cocoa, coffee or plantain. This trend could certainly be observed in Chuao in 2011, where younger people are happy and proud of working in the hacienda and tend not to leave the village as they did two decades ago.

On the contrary, there are many former Chuao residents who migrated to urban areas and are now willing to come back. The main criticism from small-scale farmers associated with CECOSOLSA is that now young people who start up cooperatives (and usually these are not agricultural cooperatives) do it just in order to access state funds. 'They start

with a lot of money but they do not have much willingness to work. They survive a year and then when the money has gone, they go to look for other credits' (Bartolomeo, cooperative, Sanare). Here, Bolivarian 'cooperativismo' is perceived as a way to access state funds and not as a way of life or a way to construct an organisation 'which is like a family'.

Conclusions

Working from the little empirical documentation available, this paper attempts to paint a picture of what ALBA may eventually mean for small-scale farmers. The paper started by asking if small-scale farmers are benefitting from policies and novel institutional arrangements under alternative socialist governments. Do they have better possibilities for improving or exercising their individual and collective agency and for making better-informed choices about the markets in which they operate? Do small-scale farmers influence policies? If so, through which formal and informal organisations or institutions? This paper has provided an overview of the institutional arrangements promoted to enable small-scale farmers to produce, organise/cooperate and compete successfully in their markets in Venezuela (in particular cooperatives, NEDs, social missions and communal councils). Finally, the paper has explored how national policies and ALBA's policies and their institutional arrangements are affecting the everyday lives of smallholder farmers in the Venezuelan states of Aragua and Lara.

ALBA is a very new institution, and food and agricultural policies within ALBA and its country members are even younger. In Venezuela, Mission Agro-Venezuela began only in 2011, so it is difficult to measure ALBA's impact at the local level at this stage. However, the two case studies presented in Section 4 above offer important insights. First, they suggest that it is misleading to portray the 'Bolivarian revolution' in binary terms, as either a successful endogenous revolution with an innovative protagonist democracy or as a semi-authoritarian and populist government. The situation is much more complex both between supporters and opponents, and within and among supporters themselves. Importantly, the two case studies reiterate how it is a mistake to treat 'small farmers' as a homogeneous and undifferentiated social group. The ways in which the cocoa farmers of Chuao and the vegetable producers of Barquisimeto are affected and view ALBA's policies and/or Venezuelan pro-small-farmers' policies are very different.

Chuao's cocoa farmers have managed to enter a niche elite market for their unique, high-quality cocoa beans since 2001. The recent nationalisation of cocoa by the Venezuelan government, and its internationalisation through ALBA's grandnational enterprises, are seen by some farmers as a threat to the quality of their product and by others as an

opportunity to be part of a transnational movement of Latin American cocoa producers. It is not yet clear if Chuao producers will lose, how the black market will gain, or if both producers and the black market will gain. What is clear however is that Chuao farmers' voices are much more powerful and effective now than ten years ago, and that there are many spaces which allow their discussion and 'agency'. In addition, the village/plantation project linked to the NDE are profoundly changing the everyday lives of Chuao's farmers in areas of life not necessarily perceived as political/socialist or economic – in the domains of family life, kinship structures, education and health. Changes in these realms have the potential to effect significant consolidation of Bolivarian pro-farmer social and economic policies.

The CECOCESOLA case offers a different set of insights. The new Bolivarian socialist policies are now competing with old cooperatives established in the 1960 and 1970s. The agency of CECOCESOLA's workers has not been undermined in the process. Indeed, some of the older cooperatives are using both CECOCESOLA's credits and state credits to support their business. While CECOCESOLA's core ideology and Bolivarian socialism follow very similar principles, the point of contention is that the first is coming from the bottom up (and hence 'authentic'), while the second is top-down (cooperativism as clientelism). However, several voices point out that these distinctions are blurred in practice, and it is extremely difficult to separate political, social and economic questions in the Venezuelan polarised political scenario. To understand the impact that alternative socialist governments and ALBA's internationalism have on smallholder farmers, it is necessary to adopt an holistic approach. We need to take into consideration the changes and transformations that ideologies, rhetoric and programmes are creating simultaneously in political, socio-cultural and economic spheres of society, and to ground rhetoric in empirical frameworks. In addition, the existence of socially and historically differentiated peasantries, and what these differences imply for the implementation of ALBA, require careful examination.

A great number of national and ALBA pro-farmer policies discussed in this paper emphasise the social/political aspect of development rather than trade. ALBA's international trade agreements

alone might not have had a significant direct impact on small-scale farmers' agency. Often, the big exporters are not the small farmers; even if any cooperative can theoretically export (as in the case of the cacao of Chuao), this seldom happens in practice. At first sight it may seem that those benefiting from ALBA's trade agreements are merely big agro-industries and exporters (grandnational enterprises). However, the impact of hundreds of social projects (also often supported by grandnational enterprises) is considerable on small-scale farmers' lives. This is of course difficult to quantify. In Venezuela, there are hundreds of local projects which aim to enhance the technical capacities, entrepreneurial skills and bargaining power of small-scale farmers. The large quantity of projects at times in competition with each other adds to the difficulty for farmers and stakeholders of assessing their performance.

One of the biggest dangers of ALBA's top-down projects/funds is that local elites could end up controlling resources without downward accountability. Equally, Venezuela's social spending through social missions (and also through ALBA in Nicaragua and Bolivia) are often perceived as a way of 'buying' support and votes. Hawkins *et al.* (2011) find that, rather than fostering civil society, the social mission are 'very top down' and 'heavily dependent on funding and decisions made by national leaders', but nonetheless manage to create a 'participatory and protagonist democracy' by energising local party activists and creating a 'sense of idealism and autonomy'. Similarly, the case study of Chuao in this paper shows how *cooperativismo* and associated forms of participatory democracy are used not only to 'soil the oil' but also to empower groups marginalised by previous forms of clientelism. Old forms of patronage have been broken down by the Bolivarian Revolution and state resources are being redistributed locally and more equitably than before.

Being included, gaining dignity and other symbolic or non-material benefits are among the most important outcomes of current alternative socialist policies. The emphasis on participatory and community-based approaches of ALBA's philosophy (and the educational programmes attached to them) are providing communities with voices on policies that affect them, and creating

spaces for small-scale farmers to gain dignity. These projects are generating capacity to dialogue with dominant 'traditional elites' while inculcating the 'capacity to aspire' – the ability to envision a collective path out of poverty. ALBA means 'daybreak' and hope. Hope is a pivotal process in the lives of people; as the ability to relate the future to the past, hope operates on different scales at once. The anthropologist Appadurai (2004) argued that strengthening the capacity to aspire could help the poor to contest and alter the conditions of their poverty. He suggested that policymakers must approach the creation of a culture of aspiration through capacity building and this is what ALBA's programmes and related national policies have the potential to achieve at local level.³⁴

Perhaps one of the challenges of building an inclusive 'Grand Homeland' (*Patria Grande*) following Simon Bolivar's vision of Latin America through a novel form of transnationalism is the integration of three dimensions of time: looking backwards to the past, the needs of the present, and expectations for the future. 'In this context, the definition of the right to imagine and the development of the capacities to aspire could be considered as another or the emergent right in the region at the beginning of the third millennium' (Gutman, 2007). Hope therefore should be considered an important component of 'agency' in the small-scale farmers' case studies presented in this paper.

ALBA demonstrates how this transnational project is a political and economic experimentation – shaping itself in the process and very much work in progress.³⁵ The result is a multi-layered project, at times confusing and contradictory. The image of Che Guevara, which has recently become one of the testimonials of the Venezuelan Bolivarian revolution, reflects both continuities with 'past' socialisms and at the same time the desire for change and for a new social order. Che Guevara is said to be 'the favourite son of the unfinished (if unrealisable) revolution' (Wiener (1999: 222), cited in Ram, 2009: 254).

Now, with the contemporary global economic crises, high levels of inflation and a battle against cancer, it remains to be seen how 'magical' Chavez can still be and importantly how 'the desperation'

34. Following Appadurai (2004), the conditions that may prevent smaller farmers from building a culture of aspiration include: social structures that specifically constrain them and force them to subscribe to norms that further diminish their dignity, exacerbate their inequality, and deepen their lack of access to material goods and services; lack of voice necessary to engage in civic action, preventing participation in policy decisions that affect their lives; constraints on opportunities – where pathways between aspirations and reality exist, they are likely to be rigid.

35. *Vamos inventando* is one of Chavez's mantras: 'Hay que inventar el nuevo socialismo, hay que inventar el socialismo del siglo XXI, vamos a inventarlo, vamos a discutir, aquí no hay temor, mucho menos a las ideas' ['We need to invent the new socialism, we need to invent the Socialism of the 21st century, we need to discuss, we do not lack courage and ideas'] (Chávez llama a la construcción del nuevo socialismo a través de la discusión y el debate. Aporrea.org <http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n56847.html>, accessed 10 February 2008).

that he has managed to transform into hope as a generous and charismatic leader in the past ten years, can become a base from which to develop and consolidate a genuine and innovative transnational socialist project like ALBA. In short, will 'hope' and 'the capacity to aspire' retain their power in a possible post-Chavez context? Will the participatory dynamics pushed forward by Chavez's government and ALBA's internationalism survive under another government?

In order to secure food sovereignty and security for its citizens, the Venezuelan government needs to protect the domestic market by restricting food imports while also maintaining heavy subsidies of national production and the new 'created' farmers. Inflation has averaged about 30 per cent per year in Venezuela for the last four years. This means that goods imported into Venezuela, if imported at the official exchange rate, can be bought at prices far lower than what it costs to produce them in Venezuela. 'Venezuela will probably have to devalue their currency in order to increase domestic production but the fear is that this will further the already strong inflationary pressures in the economy and anti-government [sic] cause political unrest. When the currency is devalued, it should be done in such a way that the real incomes of the popular classes are not reduced' (Weisbrot, Ray and Sandoval, 2009; Bohmer, 2009).

Presidential elections are due in Venezuela in 2012. Chavez will not put forward policies which could cause popular discontent, and his public support inside Venezuela is still quite solid. His domestic opposition has not managed to organise itself into a coherent force and it appears likely

that that he will win the 2012 presidential race. In December 2011, after a quick (or 'miraculous' as his supporters like to describe it) recovery from a cancer operation in August 2011, Chavez emerged as a powerful and charismatic leader in the first meeting of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) which assembled 33 sovereign states of the Americas (excluding the United States and Canada). The creation of this alliance represents yet another step away from Washington's hegemonic influence in the Americas and strengthens multilateralism between countries that share a similar history and present, and the Bolivarian dream of 'La Patria Grande'.

It remains to be seen how the new regional bloc will expand and relate with existing regional projects such as UNASUR, Mercosur, Petrocaribe, and ALBA, in constructing an alternative framework for economic, social and political cooperation between Latin American governments. The new regional integration projects which have been developing over the last decade have been fundamentally re-shaping the political arena of many Latin American countries and in the process they are framing 'the right to imagine' of an entire generation. It further remains to be seen what kind of economic and social developments these geo-political initiatives will be capable of generating in what are considered highly uncertain political and economic times. The promotion of information, transparency and accountability of ALBA's projects, and a larger inclusion of farmers' organisations and stakeholders in the formulation of its food/agricultural policies are certainly of paramount importance for the development of a 'real' transnational and regional social economy based on equity and solidarity.

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Knowledge Programme

Small Producer Agency in the Globalised Market

The Knowledge Programme Small Producer Agency in the Globalised Market aims to map, elicit and integrate knowledge on the dilemmas confronting small-scale producers in global, regional and national markets. The programme works with different actors to bring new voices, concepts and insights into the global debate. It thereby seeks to support the development community, including policy makers, producer organisations and businesses in their search for better informed policies and practices. The programme is led by the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (Hivos) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), and integrates a global learning network, convened by Mainumby Ñacurutú in Bolivia.

Small-scale farmers under socialist governments: Venezuela and the ALBA People's Trade Agreement

The Bolivarian Alliance for Our Americas People's Trade Agreement (ALBA-PTA) was established between Venezuela and Cuba in 2004 and now incorporates several other Latin American and Caribbean countries. Venezuela and ALBA are interesting to study from the perspective of producer agency as both attempt to give voice to previously marginalised groups such as peasant farmer organisations. This paper, the fourth in a series from the Knowledge Programme Small Producer Agency in the Globalised Market, examines some of the social, economic, political and cultural aspects of ALBA-PTA in relation to small farmers' agency in two cooperatives: one promoted by the government and the other a long-established autonomous organisation. Building also on insights provided by the ALBA experience in Bolivia and Nicaragua, it explores contradictions in rhetoric and practice related to food security and food sovereignty. It assesses whether small-scale farmers in ALBA countries are benefiting from policies or public and private institutional arrangements that empower them to enter and stay in markets, what opportunities exist for them to exercise agency and to make better-informed choices about the markets in which they operate, and whether and how they influence policies.

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