

Interview

21st Century Eco-Socialism? Struggles over Nature in Venezuela

Tuesday 1 January 2013, by [McMILLAN Rebecca](#), [RODRÍGUEZ Santiago Arconada](#), [SPRONK Susan](#) (Date first published: 23 December 2012).

Santiago Arconada was the first Community Coordinator for the Caracas metropolitan region of HIDROCAPITAL, the city's water utility, and subsequently held several prominent positions in HIDROVEN, the national water company. He was part of a team of reformers responsible for implementing the participatory model of the technical water committees (mesas técnicas de agua, MTAs) throughout Venezuela beginning in the mid-1990s. He currently teaches at the Universidad Indígena de Venezuela and has written extensively about decolonization, socialism, the MTAs, and the Bolivarian Process. In this interview, Santiago discusses the peaks and valleys experienced by the mesas técnicas de agua and the differences between 21st century socialism and eco-socialism. He concludes by proposing a radical rethinking of the human-nature relationship.

— Susan Spronk and Rebecca McMillan.

Susan Spronk and Rebecca McMillan (SS and RM): What is the history of your involvement with the mesas técnicas de agua?

Santiago Arconada (SA): In 1999, Jacqueline Faría [1] approached me and asked me to start the community management office in HIDROCAPITAL.

I had been a militant my whole life, and when Chávez was elected in 1999, it was a major turning point for leftists of my generation. Prior to Chávez, we had always organized against the government - protesting, organizing unions in the textile factories, etc. And then in 1999, all of a sudden it was our turn to govern! We had to totally change our state of mind.

One of the first things the government did when Chávez came into office was to establish the community management office in HIDROCAPITAL. That was important because Venezuelan cities were plagued by water and sanitation problems. At the time, there were protests around water almost everyday.

So when Chávez arrived, he inherited a water supply system that had been abandoned for 40 or 50 years; people had enormous expectations of him. It was like they were waiting for the ticket to heaven. But Chávez handled this challenge marvellously. He rose to the occasion in such a forceful, convincing way that during the first few years the water experience was really the face of the Bolivarian Process.

We supported the government and the experiment wholeheartedly. I gave up all that I had, including time with my family. I would pick up and leave my wife and kids and go wherever the government sent me.

SS and RM: Can you tell us more about your personal background?

SA: Before becoming a unionist, I only had a high school education. After high school, I didn't feel the need to continue studying. Now, because of my work at the *Universidad Indígena de Venezuela*, I decided to go back and get a university degree. I am currently studying education at the *Universidad Nacional Experimental Simón Rodríguez*. One of the Bolivarian Process's most amazing contributions has been its attention to education, particularly during the early years.

For me, the time of unionism was also the time of socialism because unionism and socialism were like two sides of the same coin. When socialism came into crisis in the 1980s, so too did unionism. The union crisis was also brought on by Venezuela's neoliberal reforms. During the neoliberal period, the textile industry, where we had been organizing, virtually disappeared. But we remained committed to the idea of workplace organizing and wanted to continue experimenting with self-management. So we started to do ideological work with the carpenters between 1983 and 1999. When 1999 rolled around, I was working as a carpenter and also spending time on my writing and other personal projects.

It might be hard for you to imagine what the Bolivarian Process meant for someone like me. When I was working in carpentry I was trying to build a little bubble where I could live free from exploitation, in harmony with the environment. However, I knew that this wouldn't go beyond me and my children and my grandchildren. I wanted to prepare a little safe space for them and also a space where I could write and work on art. Then in 1999, they knocked on my door and said, "Now you have to come out from your space and govern!" (Gasp). It was a huge surprise. It was a life-changing event.

SS and RM: Why do you think the mesas técnicas de agua have been so significant for the Bolivarian Process?

SA: During the first six years of the process, the MTAs were the most significant spaces for public participation in Venezuela and had the biggest impact. That's why in 2005 Chávez said that he was in love with the *mesas técnicas de agua*.

The *mesas técnicas de agua* have enabled people to overcome incredible situations of adversity. In 2000, the MTAs spent the entire year dealing with the Vargas landslide. [2] There had been a long period of heavy rain and the results were tragic. To put things in perspective, when the USAID worker responsible for the recovery (back when USAID still worked in Venezuela) flew over the site to survey the damages, his reaction was "three Mitches!" He said that what he saw was three times as bad as the devastation caused by hurricane Mitch. So we knew it was a real tragedy. The water supply was totally destroyed in the state of Vargas.

Then, we faced the collapse of the Barlovento dam, which left many parts of the capital without water. The *mesas técnicas* made it possible for people to face so much adversity.

It's also important to note that the significance of the *mesas técnicas de agua* is intimately related to the *consejo comunitario de agua* [the community water council, the space where multiple *mesas* from the same water system come together with representatives from the water utility]. The *mesas técnicas* alone do not have political power without being members of the *consejo comunitario de agua*, which is a space of popular power.

SS and RM: Can you tell us more about how the mesas técnicas de agua came about?

SA: The first experience with the mesas técnicas de agua was under the mayorship of Aristóbulo Istúriz. [3] When Aristóbulo's administration began in 1993, the water crisis was dire. We only had water once every two months! And during the times when we didn't have piped water, we had to wait in line to get water from tanker trucks. It was horrible.

Aristóbulo first used the term '*mesas técnicas de agua*' during the first parish assembly in 1993. Parish assemblies were part of a new organizational structure that we were trying to develop called the parish government (*gobierno parroquial*). At the first meeting, everyone was up in arms about the water situation. Aristóbulo responded to their concerns by saying, "Bueno, we're going to establish some *mesas técnicas de agua*." That was the idea that started the whole process. At that time Jacqueline Faría was the Manager of the Metropolitan Water System for HIDROCAPITAL, and a relationship developed between the water utility, Aristóbulo's government, and the community.

The parish governments and the MTAs were developed primarily in two parishes: Antímano and El Valle, and they were very successful. To give you an idea, in the 13 years of the Bolivarian Process in Caracas, we have never managed to gain the power that we achieved as organized communities in the parish government of Antímano between 1993 and 1995, with respect to the management of *all* of the information and *all* of the decisions. I hope we achieve it, but we haven't yet.

The experiences were so successful that from 1999-2000, they implemented the model in all six systems of the capital region. The six systems developed marvellously. The outreach capacity of the MTAs was tremendous. Their success in Caracas led to the 2000 decision to transform the *mesas técnicas de agua* into national public policy.

So in 2001, HIDROVEN, the national water company, sent me to Zulia to help consolidate the model there. I was to go to two sites that had terrible services: the Guajira Peninsula, home to the Wayuu indigenous people, and San Francisco, a municipality south of Maracaibo. They intended to resolve the water supply problem by encouraging people to participate in the *mesas técnicas de agua*, which we ultimately achieved.

Around that year, Victor, Manuel, Anselmo, and I [4] started pushing to have mesa representatives from across the country come together to share their experiences. We knew that kind of exchange would generate tremendous momentum. When the first *Encuentro Nacional de Experiencias Comunitarias de Agua y Saneamiento* (National Gathering of Community Experiences in Water and Sanitation) finally took place in 2003, it was just as we had predicted. The event was extremely powerful. It was during the third encuentro in 2005 that Chávez said that he was in love with the mesas técnicas. Remember that this was long before there were consejos comunales or comunas or anything. He said it because the mesas técnicas embodied his vision of people's participation.

The real beauty of the *mesas* was their public character, because the MTAs convened all of the people, regardless of their way of thinking, condition, or political opinions. It was like: "You have water problems? Come!" We insisted that the *mesa técnica* wasn't a club with a membership list. It wasn't a closed space, but rather one moment in the life of the community when the community looked at water. At that time one would form a *mesa técnica* without a founding document, without asking for ID cards or numbers, without a stamp, not like now where the *consejo comunal* needs to have its stamp. Without the stamp it doesn't exist! The stamp, the bureaucracy, it's all rigorously supervised.

I think that today the Bolivarian Process is trying to impose itself in a restrictive way. For example, before no one would have dared to say that the *mesas técnicas* were only for Chavistas. That would

have been a grave sin, but not anymore. Now they will tell you, “We are going to make a *consejo comunal* and if you aren’t socialist, please abstain.” This is a restriction of public space. Before, openness was the process’s strength. It corresponded with the desire to be transparent, to be honest, to maintain administrative propriety. And when I meet with my group of friends now [those who were involved in the reforms] I can tell that this isn’t as important.

In my opinion, the people who say that the *consejos comunales* are only for socialists are responsible for the process losing strength. It’s not just that they aren’t building strength, but that they are actually weakening the process. And they will pay the consequences in terms of lost votes.

SS and RM: What is the significance of the October 7 presidential election for the Bolivarian Process?

SA: It is still crucial that Chávez win these elections. I am working on an article right now that’s called *El Proceso* (The Process), like the novel by Kafka. One of the things I mention in the article is how what Capriles [5] is proposing with his ‘*Hay un Camino*’ [‘There is one path’] campaign is a return to the past in every sense. The only path that exists is the path backwards, because the path of the future hasn’t been made yet. As the Spanish poet Antonio Machado says, “*Caminante no hay camino, se hace el camino al andar*” [“The path is made by walking”].

I may be against the policy of ‘socialism’ [editor’s note: 21st Century Socialism, which he criticizes below for its developmentalist character], but I am even more against returning to capitalism. Running back to capitalism would be much worse! That is the main thrust of the piece.

In the article, I am also going to outline the reason why I am voting for Chávez on the PCV (Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Communist Party of Venezuela) ballot. I want to be able to support Chávez and oppose Capriles, but with a bit of criticism. I have never been a member of the PCV. I have good friends in the party, but I have always strongly disagreed with the PCV’s politics because the party is deeply Stalinist.

Only recently have they become critical of Stalinism. Why? Because Stalinism has come at them from the outside, from Chávez. Now they are saying, “No, we don’t support your authoritarianism,” and they are proposing a more collective direction for the revolution. So this is very important. I want to vote for the PCV in order not to vote for the PSUV (the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – Chávez’s party).

SS and RM: Can you talk about the influence of municipal politics on the MTAs?

SA: This is a very sensitive issue for me. I hate to tell you but during the three years under Aristóbulo, from 1993-1996, the development of popular power was much deeper than over the 14 years of mayors who think they are Che Guevara incarnate. Since they are so ‘revolutionary,’ they think that it doesn’t matter if the people around them are or not.

What I know is that we don’t have access to information: information that belongs to us, information about money and our budget, so our planning capacities are very minimal. There has been some talk of participatory budgeting but it has never truly happened in Caracas, not under Mayor Juan Barreto [2004-2008], nor under Peña [2000-2004]. These mayors never had the courage to say, as Aristóbulo used to say: “democracy is exercised between equally informed citizens.”

If the government assumes that it is the one who knows, while the citizen knows nothing, then there is no democracy. So, management of information is key and the mayors of Caracas-Libertador municipality have taken it upon themselves to ensure that the organized communities never have

access to all of the information they need to plan. It's very Stalinist. The people are only there for the photo shoots.

Not like under Aristóbulo, where there was an organic relationship between the communities, HIDROCAPITAL, and the municipality, which had the potential to generate real results.

The problem is that the mayors and governors and all of the forces that are part of the 'constituted power' do not like to be submitted to the 'constituent power,' which is the power in the mesas técnicas de agua and the consejos comunitarios de agua. The mayor doesn't like to be subject to constituent power and he tries hard to guard his own privileges.

SS and RM: When talking about participation in water and sanitation, you often hear the term 'co-responsibility.' What does this mean to you?

SA: For me, this is something from the past, a liberal policy. It's as if I do my part and you do your part, but it doesn't evoke the idea of a political and social space that concerns us all equally.

Co-responsibility implies that the government gives a little space of participation to the people. It is still based on the idea that the logical and conventional thing is that the government is responsible, that that's what the government is for. But since I, the government, want to be benevolent, I am giving a portion of responsibility to the people and say to them, "now we are co-responsible." For me, this breaks with the concept of participatory democracy, which is so essential to the Bolivarian Process. In an ideal context, I wouldn't let there be a boundary between the government and the people. I also don't think that there should be areas in which the government participates and not the people.

SS and RM: What other challenges do the MTAs face today?

SA: In the second phase I am discussing (2007-2012), the MTAs began to independently consider more ambitious projects and objectives, but they haven't been realized because certain elements of the water utility are resistant to transferring more power to the communities. It's important to recognize that just because a company is in theory publicly owned and belongs to everyone doesn't mean that it doesn't operate like a private company that restricts any participation. As the American *compañera* Winona Hunter said, "Water can't only be public, it has to be democratic." That's something different.

When the reforms were first introduced in 1999, the water utility was in a state of commotion. Giving people control over the water service was very disruptive. It was a major change to have people showing up and demanding their rights: "Give me this. That engineer has to inform me. That señor has to tell us how it's going to be in this sector, etc." Many engineers left. An engineer came to me and said, "I didn't graduate from engineering to have to explain hydraulics to a poor neighbourhood at 8 o'clock at night." And I responded, "Well, you'll have to find work elsewhere because from now on the engineers are going to have to explain hydrological engineering to people in the barrios at 8 o'clock at night." And he quit because he wasn't willing to do this.

Today, in my opinion, these tensions have been lessened. Now participation has been formalized. We have the red t-shirt, the slogan, and the uniform, but I don't think this necessarily reflects the organizational capacity of the movement. Before, we saw the problems of water delivery and the right to sanitation as motors of popular organization. Now, I think that they are too pressured by the question of *la plata* (financial resources).

In the beginning, we were working with limited resources. Remember that at that time Chávez was

only receiving about \$7 per barrel of oil. It was practically more expensive to produce it! So we were working without resources, without thinking about or wanting money, without having the financial part weighing so heavily on people's minds. It meant that there was creativity. It meant heroism. It meant generosity. Now the resources have perverted things.

Before, the most important thing was the pedagogy. What was the basic process of the *mesas técnicas*? First, the census. Why? Because we can't resolve a water problem if we don't know how many people are affected; second, the plan or sketch, which had a tremendous political significance. Why? Because the people weren't on the map. The barrios weren't on the map of the city. Historically, cartography has been a powerful tool for exclusion. For example, in 1993 when we were working in Antímáno, we were working with a relatively new map from 1989 and the entire parish of Antímáno - its immense barrios that are home to an enormous number of people - appeared on the map as a 'green zone'! Because the barrio wasn't permitted by the state, the barrio didn't appear in the photo. The plan was extremely important because 'putting yourself on the map' means 'putting yourself in the plans,' assigning yourself importance in political priorities. The third step was to diagnose what was happening. Why is it that I have this water problem? Then we would organize the project to solve the problem.

With this basic process, the *mesas técnicas de agua* were established. It meant so much. It was based on Paulo Freire's philosophy that everyone has knowledge. It's not that there is one engineer who knows everything and then all of the others who don't know anything, but rather that everyone has knowledge to bring and gets involved.

So I think that you can clearly distinguish between two phases of the Bolivarian Process: between 1999-2006 and 2007-2012. However, I have made some enemies for saying this.

SS and RM: In 2005, Chávez announced that the goal of the Bolivarian Process was to achieve '21st century socialism.' What is the significance of this concept?

SA: What I think is very important about the Bolivarian Process's socialist proposal is that all of the socialisms it has envisioned need a qualifier: "Socialism of the 21st century"; "Bolivarian Socialism", but not socialism pure and simple. When the term "socialism of the 21st century" was coined, I thought it was marvellous. It resolved an important conceptual problem: I don't know what socialism of the 21st century is but I know it is not socialism of the 20th century.

Why should we say no to socialism of the 20th century? Because socialism of the 20th century is purely a product of Western culture. It's as if the West had two children: one greedy child that they named "Capitalism" and one generous child that they named "Socialism." But neither of them questions the fact that development and progress are the essential goals of humanity. It doesn't matter that the planet is burning. "Development! Progress! Liberation of the productive forces!" 20th century socialism was purely Western. All of the other forms, all of the other cultures, all of the other world views that humanity has developed over the millennia were left behind, because there was only one goal. This was the only way of thinking; it was 'the end of history,' like Fukuyama said.

So despite all its problems, I really liked that the process needed to qualify socialism. It needed to attach an adjective to it, to distinguish it from 20th century socialism, which was only one experience of humanity. That experience culminated more or less in 1989, with the disappearance of the Soviet Union, and more importantly with the appearance of Russia.

Of course, many would say that wasn't true socialism. I agree that it couldn't have been socialism because it maintained the class structure, and the separation of manual and intellectual labour. But then what was socialism?

I think that's the problem with aspiring to socialism as if it's something that everyone knows about, rather than being a question, a problem, an interrogation. For example, it was much more politically fruitful to reject capitalism and pursue an alternative path than to choose a path that was problematic because it had already been travelled. So they had to start to qualify it. Socialism? Yes, but not Soviet-style. Yes, but not Cuban. Yes, but not Chinese. They had to start putting the entire experience in quotation marks: "Yes, but not like that; Yes, but not like that; Yes, but not like that."

SS and RM: And how do you see the human-nature relationship in your concept of socialism?

SA: Has socialism ever conceived of water any differently than capitalism? No. In both socialism and capitalism, water is seen as something without a spirit, as a service. The World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba in 2010 [see Bullet No. 347] was the first time that people declared that nature had rights, and not from a Western perspective. No socialism has ever thought that nature had rights because socialism is the direct daughter of Western culture and Western society is based on anthropocentrism. It is rooted in the Bible, where nature is for humans to dominate. Not to co-exist with, but to dominate.

Just as a side note - you know, in Venezuela we don't say medio ambiente to refer to the environment, we say only ambiente. This was something that we started, and I think it's very valuable. Medio ambiente means everything that is around me, so it means that I am not part of the environment. It's an anthropocentric concept. Before, the ministry was called the *Ministerio del Medio Ambiente* and now it's been changed to the *Ministerio del Poder Popular para el Ambiente*. I think it is a point worth insisting on.

So my work on sanitation challenges the mainstream approach to sanitary engineering. Sanitary engineering is based on a flawed understanding of the basic principles of water. As indigenous people believe, water is sacred. It has a spirit that prevents us from doing anything we want with it. I can use water to clean up shit and the water doesn't get angry because water is very content to clean, but I can't use water to carry my shit away because that's not what water is for. That's why the indigenous people of the Bogotá savannah have a phrase: "Whoever shits in the water deserves to die of thirst." I think it's very deep, but the engineers at HIDROVEN and HIDROCAPITAL would think I was crazy!

Returning to an understanding of the human-nature relationship would mean understanding that each day humans produce soil and energy in a way that is ecologically sound and completely renewable. Our natural outputs are soil and energy, two of the things that humanity needs most.

But Western sanitary engineering took it upon itself to transform my waste into a hugely expensive source of contamination: wastewater. Based on what criteria? Comfort! You could say it was for sanitary and health reasons. But for who? For the people who live along the Guaire River? Certainly not. I flush the toilet, the water flushes everything away, and I am comfortable in my clean, odour-free home. But where did it go? Where on the planet did it go? Let's see if there's still a nice odour and clean environment there.

We now know that the infinite water upon which Western society based its model for sanitation is a myth. We know that the water that I have to flush my toilet might have been the same water that the woman in the barrio couldn't get for her baby's bottle. There had to be a decision of how to allocate those few litres, whether it was for the baby's bottle or for my toilet, because there is a limited amount. Today we acknowledge: "Oh, we have to be careful with water because there is only a little bit," but with this little bit, Western society still thinks it can do whatever it wants.

And, unfortunately, you can't say that socialism has proposed an alternative to this model of engineering. For socialists, mass production isn't the problem; the problem is that the poor have to use miserable latrines while the rich have their toilets. But no, the real problem is the need for an alternative vision of water, and '21st Century Socialism' hasn't arrived at that. Why not? Because socialism is a Western construction, and Western society has been built on the idea of dominating nature.

This is what a new process like the Bolivarian Process should have said. If they had presented these problems, if they had presented goals for humanity other than development and progress, if they had understood that the liberation of the productive forces conspires against the life of the planet, because we are a finite planet, which has limits...

And why liberate the productive forces? What are we aiming toward with that? A singular sense of happiness where happiness is a collection of material things, which don't have anything to do with community, sharing, spiritual values, solidarity, company, presence?

SS and RM: You've made a critique of conventional, infrastructure-intensive water-borne sanitation. What do you see as alternatives?

SA: I first want to point out the problem with how we ask, "What is the alternative?" Asking what the alternative is serves as a justification for what exists. And that's already a problem. It operates as a limitation on our thinking.

I can give you my personal 'alternative.' I am designing a composting toilet system in my house in Santa Ana. But this is only my personal solution; I am not going to try to sell it to other people. Not even my children would use this system because they think that it's just something that their crazy old man does. Why? Because it is 'alternative.'

I could tell you "I don't know what alternatives there are!" But I know that this is no longer possible. There just isn't enough water to maintain our current system. The only real alternative I have is to start thinking about the problem.

The Guaire River has been destroyed as a result of this way of thinking, and not only the Guaire. It has affected all of the rivers in all of the world's cities. It also treats waste as something that needs to be cleaned up, rather than as a source of nutrients or even energy. The transformation of human waste into fertilizer is an ancestral practice of all human societies. Based on what criteria, on what concepts of society and water, of the environment, of nature, were we capable of breaking that cycle? I believe that the answer lies in the dawn of the city.

SS and RM: In your opinion, why are the rates of coverage for water always higher than those for sewerage?

SA: I would go as far as saying that it has to do with demagogic populism. I say this because the manual of conventional engineering says that you can't build a drinking water supply system without constructing, in parallel, a system for collecting the wastewater. So it has to do with the fact that the water that sells votes is the water that I drink. The water that I collect is less politically eye-catching. I think that's the reason.

But I think that this could actually be advantageous in the long term. Restoring the Guaire River is really complicated and infrastructure-intensive, and this complexity may eventually inspire us to generate alternatives that are small-scale.

I think that there is something 21st century about this. I believe that we need to take advantage of

the new technology that the turn of the century brings to reconsider our relationship with nature.

The experience of the conference in Cochabamba had a big influence on me. Our Bolivian comrades made me realize that we can't hope to understand this all at once. We have to change our vision of many things. Are you able to look at this mountain [pointing to El Ávila, the mountain that borders Caracas to the north] and really believe that it has a spirit? That the spirit would prevent you from blowing a big hole in the mountain to take out what it has inside?

They would ask me, "You don't believe it?" and I would say, "No, I don't believe it." I can't just wake up the next day and believe it. I can't just acquire this vision. And they would say, "Exactly, this is the problem." We need time to be able to understand that nature has rights because nature is a living being. It isn't a thing. It is someone, not something. To our western mentality this seems like witchcraft. It seems esoteric. It seems like anything but science!

SS and RM: Can you comment on the distinctions between the water challenges in rural and urban areas?

SA: The differences are tremendous, but the mesas are helping to resolve this problem. I can give you the concrete example of the Consejo Comunitario del Clavallino where there was a struggle for water between the country and the city. In that case, the community water council had to resolve the water conflicts between the smallholder farmers in the state of Sucre and the resorts and attractions of Isla Margarita, the tourist jewel of Venezuela.

Thanks to the community water council, they have managed to allocate water in a just and equitable way: giving both the city and the country the water that they need, without prioritizing the rich city over the poor country.

SS and RM: Some people critique the top-down nature of participation in the Bolivarian Process. How would you respond to that criticism?

SA: For some purists, the mesas técnicas aren't a genuine popular organization because the government proposed them. However, I maintain that the Bolivarian government was correct in creating the popular organizations as a tool for resolving problems. If I defend anything, it's that.

The deviations from the original intent of the process are another thing altogether. For example, the fact that today the mesas técnicas de agua are not considered a public space, that the mesas técnicas de agua aren't a space where a Capriles supporter could go - that shouldn't be the essence of the mesas técnicas. The essence of the mesas técnicas was that the revolutionary government of the Bolivarian Republic said to the people that organizing is the shortest route to solving problems. And I maintain that it was valid. Not only was it valid, it was the only possible path for a government that said it was 'revolutionary.'

I don't think that the PSUV [the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela - Chávez's party] should be a space for everyone. It doesn't have a reason to be. Who goes to the PSUV? Those who have decided on their own that they want to be there. But the government can't say that people who aren't Chavista can't participate in governance, for example of water and sanitation. They can't do this, and they are doing it. And what's more, they're doing it thinking that they are Che Guevara incarnate, instead of realizing that it is weakening the process.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Jacqueline Faría was appointed as president of HIDROCAPITAL when Chávez came into office. She had previously served as Manager of the Metropolitan Water System for HIDROCAPITAL under the mayorship of Aristóbulo Istúriz. Faría is currently the Head of Government for the Capital District.

[2] The tragedy struck December 15, 1999 in the coastal state of Vargas. Over the course of three days, torrential rains, floods, and landslides killed tens of thousands of people, destroyed thousands of homes, and completely disrupted the state's infrastructure.

[3] Aristóbulo Istúriz was mayor of the Libertador municipality of Caracas from 1993-1996. During his term, he experimented with forms of participatory local governance, which were precursors to the more widespread initiatives under Chávez.

[4] Anselmo Rodríguez, Santiago Arconada, and Manuel González were among the team of reformers who spearheaded the implementation of the participatory model in HIDROCAPITAL beginning in 1999.

[5] Henrique Capriles Radonski is Governor of Miranda state and was the primary opposition candidate in the 2012 presidential race.