

# **A DECENTRALISED PARTICIPATORY PLANNING PROPOSAL BASED ON THE EXPERIENCES OF BRAZIL, VENEZUELA AND THE STATE OF KERALA, INDIA**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

1. These words are aimed at those who want to build a humanist and solidarity-based society. A society based on the complete participation of all people. A society focused on a model of sustainable development that satisfies people's genuine needs in a just manner, and not the artificial wants created by capitalism in its irrational drive to obtain more profits. A society that does all this while ensuring that humanity's future is not put at risk. A society where the organized people are the ones who decide what and how to produce. A society we have referred to as Twenty-First Century Socialism, Good Living or Life in Plenitude.
2. The question is how can we achieve this complete participation? How can we guarantee as much as possible that all citizens, and not just activists or leftists, take an interest in participation? How can we achieve the participation of middle class sectors alongside popular sectors? How can we ensure that solidararian interests prevail over selfish ones? How can we attend to the concerns of the poorest and most forgotten and repay the social debt inherited by previous governments?
3. I am convinced that it is through what we have called "decentralized participatory planning" that we can achieve these objectives. We have reached this conclusion not on the basis of reading books and academic debates, but through the study of practical experiences of participatory budgets and participatory planning, primarily in Brazil, Venezuela and the Indian state of Kerala.
4. We were very attracted to the experience of participatory budgeting undertaken by the regional Workers' Party government in Porto Alegre, Brazil, because we saw it as a new, transparent, rather than corrupt, way of governing, that delegated power to the people.
5. In Venezuela, we got a strong sense of how the popular subject was strengthened through the initiative taken by Chávez to promote the creation of communal councils and his decision to grant them resources for small projects. This was not done in a populist manner, with the state coming in to satisfy the community's demand; rather it occurred after a process of participatory planning where the citizens of the community implemented what he called "the communal cycle", which

involved the following actions: diagnosis, elaboration of a plan and budget, execution of the project, and control over how it was carried out.<sup>1</sup>

6. Lastly, our work was been greatly enhanced by what we learnt from one of the first experiences in the world of “decentralized participatory planning” that occurred in the Indian state of Kerala. There, a communist government decided to carry out an important process of decentralization, not only of monetary resources, but also material and human resources, to aid with the implementation of local development plans that were based on the active participation of local residents. The end result of this has been a more egalitarian economic development when compared to the rest of India, and a growth in resident’s self-esteem and self-confidence. This type of decentralization allowed for greater local government autonomy when it came to planning their development, which facilitated the progress of a much more effective participatory planning.

#### **I. A DECENTRALISED PARTICIPATORY PLANNING PROPOSAL**

7. The type of planning we advocate is the antithesis of the centralised planning implemented under the Soviet Union. In the old USSR, it was thought that to coordinate all efforts towards building a new society, a central authority was required to decide objectives and means. It was a process in which decisions were always made from above, on many occasions without taking into consideration that down below was where people best knew the problems and possible solutions.

8. Similarly, often processes that claim to be participatory limit themselves to being processes of simple consultation. Rather than promoting a process of decision-making by citizens, local politicians limit themselves to consulting citizens. The people in the local area are called upon to participate in working groups where they are asked to point out their main priorities for public works and services for their respective communities. A technical team collects these and **it is the technicians and not the people** who decided upon which projects to implement. We don’t deny that a willingness to listen to people represents a step forward, but it is very limited.

9. We advocate a more integral process in which it is the people who genuinely discuss and decide upon their priorities, elaborate, where possible, their own projects and carry them out if they are in the condition to do so without having to depend on superior levels. We seek to fully involve citizens in the planning process, which is why we refer to it as participatory planning.

10. To achieve complete citizen’s participation we must take the plans of small localities as our starting point, where conditions are more favourable for peoples’ participation, and apply the

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*\* This speech is a synthesis of ideas that are more fully developed in a book I am currently working on, with the help of José Bartolomé and Noel López.*

1. *De los consejos comunales a las comunas. Construyendo el socialismo del siglo XXI* (2009) Online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/docs/97085.pdf>

principle that everything that can be done at a lower level should be decentralised to this level, and only keeping as competencies of higher up levels those tasks that cannot be carried out at a lower level. This principle is referred to as subsidiarity.

11. Of course, we are not talking about an anarchic decentralisation. The ideal situation would involve the existence of a strategic national plan that could integrate community, territorial/communal and municipal/canton plans with plans developed by other levels of government.

12. Moreover, we are thinking about a decentralised that is infused with a spirit of solidarity, that favours those localities and social sectors most in need. One of the important roles of the state and local governments is to redistribute resources in order to protect the weakest and help them develop.

13. The type of planning, while recognising the need for a central national plan, allows local institutions to play a fundamental role. They do so not only by contributing to the elaboration of the central plan, but also by having the autonomy to plan within their own territory and carry out an important part of the plan.

14. In order to emphasise the issue of decentralisation as a crucial aspect of planning we are proposing, we have called this process decentralised participatory planning.

15. You might be asking why are we talking about participatory planning and not the more commonly used concept of participatory budget.

16. We cannot ignore the contribution made by participatory budgeting, a process whereby people participate in the elaboration of annual investment plans, that is, in making decisions regarding where resources assigned to municipal public works and services are invested. This process has been implemented in various regions across the world and has helped increase the level of resident participation in public policy making, as well as helping improve the performance of municipal governments and, above all, made municipal governance more transparent, thereby benefiting the most helpless sectors.<sup>2</sup>

17. It has become an excellent means for monitoring the actions of administrations and an effective weapon in the fight against corruption and the diversion of funds as people not only prioritise certain public works and services but also organised themselves to ensure they are carried out, monitor to make sure that allocated resources are used for their specific objective and not for others, and that quality works or services are carried out.

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2. See Marta Harnecker, *Delegando poder en la gente: presupuesto participativo en Porto Alegre, Brasil, Monte Ávila, Venezuela*, 2004. Online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/docs/95167.pdf>

18. It is also an ideal means for speeding up the administrative machinery, making it more efficient and decreasing bureaucracy given so many eyes are monitoring the process and pressuring to make sure public works are completed in time.

19. This process has also achieved a decrease in tax evasion because when people see the efficiency and transparency with which resources that come from their taxes are used, they begin to feel more willing to comply with taxation regulations.

20. However, the participatory budgeting process also has its limitations.

21. For example, the fact that participatory budgeting is restricted to the framework of an annual investment plan limits the scope and horizon of the government's actions and, in many cases, public works and services prioritised by the population do not fit within any plan, which can lead to chaotic development.

22. Moreover, given that the objective of participatory budgeting is to determine what public works or services should be prioritised given the resources available each year, the discussion tends to focus solely on these issues rather than on longer term goals that can allow us to move towards the kind of society we want to build.

23. On the other hand, participatory planning is not limited to discussing public investment in public works and services that the population deems necessary, it goes further. It propose actions that affect society as a whole: the development of cooperative industries that offer employment to underemployed or marginalised sectors; finding self-sustainable solutions based on the natural and human resources available within the territory; the elimination of intermediaries in the distribution of food produce; mechanisms for the redistribution of natural resource rents, etc. In sum, we aim to use participatory planning to lay the basis for a new, more just and humane society.

## **II NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR PARTICIPATORY PLANNING**

24. The following conditions must exist in order to carry out a genuine process of participatory planning.

### **1) CREATION OF SUITABLE TERRITORIAL MEETING SPACES**

25. The first step that a municipal council must take if its wants to implement a process of participatory planning is to create territorial meeting spaces within which this process can be carried out.

26. This is one of the most serious problems that those in local government who advocate an increasingly participatory and protagonistic democracy face.

27. In many cases, there are territorial subdivisions, such as *parroquias* (parishes), that date back to colonial times and no longer response to any rational criteria. There are municipalities that have

a large population, enormous *barrios* (slums) that are much bigger than many other municipalities, while there are other much smaller ones. These distortions have negative repercussions on a just, equitable and efficient territorial distribution of resources and make it more difficult for the population to participate. That is why there is necessary to move towards a new political-administrative division of the national territory.

28. In rural municipalities, these sub-divisions tend to be more suited to peoples' participation.

29. Based on the experiences we have studied, it seems that the ideal scenario for carrying out a process of participatory planning involves municipal territorial sub-divisions that are or can be transformed into spaces of self-government that can assume competencies previously handled by superior bodies. At the same time, the territory should have the conditions to generate its own resources, allowing it to operate in the most autonomous manner possible, without this meaning that it no longer articulates its actions with those other levels of government.

30. Before turning to the issue of spaces for self-government, I would like to reflect on what is the ideal space for citizens' participation.

31. In Venezuela, after much debate and studying successful experiences in community organisation such as the urban land committees (CTU), which involved 200 families organising to fight for titles to the land their homes were built on, and health committees, which united 150 families with the objective of supporting doctors working the poorest areas, it was decided that the idea space was the community.

32. What did they understand community to mean? A community is a group of families that live in a specific geographic space, that know each other and can easily relate to each other; that can meet up without needing to rely on transport; and that, of course, share a common history, the same cultural traditions, use the same public services and share similar economic, social and urban planning problems.

33. The number of people that make up a community can vary greatly from one reality to another. In a densely-populated urban area, where barrios and urbanisations exist with tens of thousands of residents, it was decided that the number oscillated between 150 and 400 families. On the other hand, in rural areas a community is seen to made up of between 50 to 100 families and even less in remote rural areas where residents formed small villages.

34. Now, each community is different to the next. Some have an important tradition of organisation and struggle, and therefore house various community organisations. Others only have one or two organisations, and other perhaps have none. Among the organisations we can find in a community are: health committees, cultural groups, sports clubs, neighbourhood associations, environmental groups, grandparents clubs, cooperatives, micro-businesses, and others. Each of these organisations tends to do their own thing.

35. President Chavez's idea was to create an organisation that would be able to cohere all of these organisational efforts into one body that in turn could act as a community government. He called this organisation "communal council".

36. And what is the best instrument for cohering the different demands and organisational efforts of a community? Chavez had the brilliance to see that the best instrument for this was the elaboration of a single work plan dedicated to resolving the community's most deeply felt problems.<sup>3</sup>

37. Designing this single plan is therefore one of the key tasks of the communal council. To do this, it is necessary to start with a participatory diagnosis that allows residents themselves to detect the biggest problems that exist in their community. When it comes to prioritising problems, I believe that a method should be used that ends up prioritising those problems that the community can resolve with its own human and material resources.

38. This methodology was proposed by the World Health Organisation and was successfully put into practice in various Cuban communities in the period following the collapse of the old socialist bloc, when the economic situation in the country was critical and the Cuban state did not have sufficient resources – as it always had until then – to attend to peoples' demands.

39. Setting realistic goals that can be achieved in the short-term and with the active participation of as many community members as possible allows one to more quickly realise a project, meaning residents see quick results and with this the self-esteem of the community increases and people become more motivated to participate with greater enthusiasm in future tasks. What tends to occur when a diagnosis is not carried out with these criteria is that, rather than stimulating participation, the community remains with its arms folded waiting of a higher up body to resolve problems.

40. When the cost or complexity of the solution is too much for the community, the communal council should come up with a list of problems, ranking them from most to least pressing, and elaborate project ideas to resolve them. These should be presented during the process of participatory planning to other government bodies.

41. Another function of the communal council is to promote community supervision over all projects carried out in the community by state, community or private entities.

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3. This method was successfully applied in the rural Cuban community of Guadalupe, in the province of Ciego de Ávila, and is outlined in the book Marta Harnecker, *Buscando el camino (método de trabajo comunitario)* Cuba, MEPLA, 2000. Online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/docs/95168.pdf>. A documentary on this experience can also be viewed online at: <http://videomepla.wordpress.com/documentales-de-participacion-popular/ciclo-video-debate/5-buscando-el-camino/>

42. Residents should be elected to the communal council by citizens' assemblies within the community.

43. Those that are elected are called spokespeople because they are the voice of the community. When residents lose confidence in them, they should be recalled, as they can no longer be said to be the voice of the community. Venezuelan activists refuse to use the term "representative" because of the negative connotations this term has acquired in the bourgeois representative system. Candidates only talk to the community at election time, promising "all the gold in the world", but are never seen once they are elected.

44. I think it is important to point out that in Venezuela, they discussed whether this communitarian body should simply be the sum of the leaderships of the different organisations that exist within a community or whether it was better to hold a citizen's assembly and let the assembly elect its spokespeople. The second option was agreed upon because reality dictated that the leaderships of many of the existing community organisations had become removed from the grassroots that had elected them. Elections via assemblies allowed them to correct this situation. If these leaders have popular support, then they will surely be elected.

45. Each member of the communal council elected by the community fulfils a different function, but it is the residents who, in an assembly, get to analyse, discuss, decide and elect. **The citizen's assembly is the highest decision-making body in the community.** Its decisions are binding on the communal council. **This is where peoples' sovereignty and power reside.**

46. That is why it is so important to ensure that the public invitation is issued as broadly as possible, and that effort is made to guarantee that those who turn up genuinely represent the interests of all residents. We have to avoid situations where the only people invited are friends, acquaintances or those who share the same political outlook, thereby leaving out those who have different opinions or who don't follow the same local leaders. The best way to avoid this is by ensuring that quorum requires the presence of people from every corner of the community. No important decision should be taken if some of these spaces are not represented in the assembly. What spaces are we referring to? The street, the stairwell, the laneway, the apartment block, the building, the block....

47. These spaces tend to be made up of small groups of families that, due to the fact they live close together, maintain a deeper relationship and bond. A community could therefore be made up of various neighbourhood areas. Some places have decided the best way to elect spokespeople is to first get families to elect a spokesperson and then bring them together so that they can elect one of them to act as spokesperson for the area on the communal council.

48. The idea of a delegate (spokesperson) per neighbourhood area is very important to ensuring the proper functioning of the assembly. It is a manner by which to ensure that assemblies are

representative of the entire area that the council covers and the different political opinions that exist within it.

49. Furthermore, it should be clear that the formation of a communal council cannot happen overnight. The community has to pass through a process of maturation. That is why an external promotional team has been proposed to promote the formation of an internal promotional team that is elected in an assembly by the community.

50. The main task of this internal promotional team would be to create the conditions for residents to elect their own communal council with complete understanding of what is occurring. This team has to elaborate a database of the community based on information obtained by visiting families door-to-door. Entrusting them with these tasks means that the potential future members of the communal council will have been involved in grassroots work, have intimate knowledge of the problems in the community, and have shown in practice their consistency and dedication to work. Depending on how they carry out this task, all or some of the members of the promotional team may be elected as communal council spokespeople

51. I want to insist a lot in the need to avoid any political, or other type of manipulation during the process of forming communal councils.

52. It is not about creating communal councils that only involve government supporters; these communitarian institutions should be open to all citizens, regardless of their political stripes.

53. President Chavez initially thought that the community was the ideal space for participation, and that therefore the communal council could be the first level of government. However, he later realised that in order to transfer competencies that belonged to the municipal council, it was necessary to organise on a larger territorial scale, one that he called commune. Therefore, the ideal space for peoples' participation does not necessarily seem to also be the ideal space for self-government, if we understand self-government to mean "system of territorial units of administration that have autonomy to administer themselves".

54. Now, having the capacity to administrate oneself does not mean ignoring the necessary interrelationship that must exist between the various government levels and bodies.

55. Further, not every form of self-government implies participation. There could be territorial units whose governments have administrative autonomy but are run undemocratically.

56. When we use the term self-government, we are referring to peoples' self-government, that is, where the people govern themselves. In this sense, there is no self-government without full citizen's participation, which means that we are talking about a process that can always be improved.



57. I believe this issue can be clarified by looking at the **example of Kerala**.<sup>4</sup>

58. This densely populated state in India is one of the few states in the country that has put into practice article 40 of the 1950 constitution. This article establishes the need to organise “Grama Panchayats” (village or rural town governments), giving them as much power as is necessary to allow them to function as units of self-government. At the same time, it is one of the few states that put into practice the idea of incorporating peoples’ participation in the process of drafting up development plans.

59. In 1992, amendments 73 and 74 were introduced into the Indian constitution, giving the Panchayats constitutional status and laying the basis of a process of decentralisation at a national level. These amendments proposed the decentralisation of administration via the creation of three levels of local self-government: the lowest level of self-government is the Grama Pachayats, that is, the village or town government (the equivalent of our territories, or rural parishes in Ecuador, or communes in Veneuela); this is followed by the Block Panchayats, which for us would be the equivalent of municipalities or cantons; and lastly, the District Panchayats or provincial governments.

60. In 1994, the government of Kerala passed the Panchayat Raj Law, thereby providing a solid legal basis for the system of local government and unifying the transference of institutions and personnel to local self-governments according to the principle of subsidiarity.

61. This meant that the Grama Panchayats began to assume many of the functions that were previously carried out at a higher level.

62. In 1996, the Communist Party of India – Marxist led a coalition of progressive forces to electoral victory, winning a majority in the state parliament. That year they launched the “Peoples’ Campaign” for decentralised planning.

63. This campaign signified a fundamental change in the role that the different levels of local and regional governments would play from then on.

64. The starting point for the Peoples’ Campaign was an afternoon long citizens’ assembly held in the community, where people could express these most deeply felt needs. In order to stimulate peoples’ participation in these assemblies, the State Planning Commission decided to hand over

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4. See Richard Franke, Marta Harnecker, Andrés Sanz Mulas & Carmen Pineda Nebot, *Estado Kerala, India, Una experiencia de planificación participativa descentralizada*, Centro Internacional Miranda. Online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/docs/97086.pdf> ). I would also recommend reading T.M. Thomas Isaac & Richard W. Franke, *Democracia local y desarrollo (campana popular de planificación descentralizada de Kerala)* Diálogos L’Ullal Editions, Xativa, España, junio 2004, and Rosa Pinto y Tomás Villasante, *Democracia participativa en Kerala: Planificación descentralizada desde la base*, El Viejo Topo, España, 2011.

35-40 per cent of the money dedicated to its development plan to local governments. Of this money, the Grama Panchayat (that is, the local village government, which represents the lowest level of the decentralisation structure) received around 70 per cent; the following level, the Block Panchayat (rural municipality) received 15 per cent; and the District Panchayat received the other 15%. As you can see, there was evidently a clear desire to decentralise the majority of resources to those local governments closest to the people.

65. This meant that the people who participated felt that they were the ones making decisions regarding investments in their community, rather than being restricted to simply approving decisions made from on high.

66. The following stages of the campaign involved additional assemblies, the election of delegates to various specialised meetings, the recruitment of volunteer technical personnel from among retirees, the prioritisation of projects by elected rural or urban councils, and community control and evaluation of the process. The administrative apparatuses of higher up levels of government were equipped in order to be able to insert local projects into regional plans. A massive educational campaign was launched and there was an exchange of experiences among activists across all levels. It was a very ambitious initiative that demanded the mobilisation of energies and resources of the whole society.

67. The essential components of the decentralised participatory planning process in Kerala were the following:

- a) Each level of local government must be autonomous from the functional, financial and administrative point of view. Central government supervision should be limited to setting out general guidelines.
- b) Everything that have be done at a lower level should be carried out at that level and not at a higher up level. Only residual and complementary functions should be carried out at higher levels.
- c) The different levels of decentralisation need to understand exactly which functions they have to carry out, in order to avoid overlap and crossover with other levels of government.
- d) Functions should be complemented via horizontal and vertical processes of integration.
- e) The norms and criteria for selecting who to benefit and which activities to prioritise should be the same for all programs.
- f) It is necessary to foment the maximum level of participation possible at all levels and in all phases of the process.
- g) There must be permanent community control over elected representatives and over the entire participatory planning process.
- h) People have to have the right to be inform about every detail of the process.

68. After much reflection and investigation, it was decided that the most appropriate geographical and demographical unit for self-government that was most closely tied to the people would be the rural village or town called "Grama", which is why the rural government is called Grama Panchayat

(government of the town or village). Alongside the three levels of self-government in more rural zones, there exist urban municipalities and municipal corporations in the big cities.

69. Once the lowest level of self-government was defined, it did not take long for those overseeing the process of participatory planning to realise that convening an assembly of all residents in a town, in such a densely populated territory as Kerala, implied having to hold assemblies of more than 1000 people, something that did not facilitate peoples' participation. That is why they decided to hold popular assemblies (grama sabhas) not at the level of the village but instead at the level of the electoral wards they were divided into.

70. The meetings in the wards included plenaries involving all participants and working groups that were working on different issues, with the aim of ensuring that people could more efficiently participate. Yet, even then these spaces turned out to be too large. That is why for some task they set up **neighbourhood groups** (40-50 families) that began to carry out many of the functions of the grama sabha, such as discussing the local plan, revising the plan's implementation and selecting which people or entities should receive resources.

71. It is very likely that in the majority of municipalities in Latin America, the first step that will need to be taken by a municipal government in order to advance the process of participatory planning will be establishing territorial sub-divisions whereby the territories (communes, areas, parishes or villages, depending on the name each country uses) will become the first level of self-government.

## 2) DECENTRALISING COMPETENCIES

72. Where no national policy exists in terms of transferring competencies from municipalities to territorial sub-divisions, another step that municipal governments should take, and that is even more complex than the first one, is the decentralisation of competencies to the territorial sub-divisions, applying the principle of subsidiarity, which we referred to above. For example, it is necessary to transfer competencies over resource administration, tax collection, civil registry, administration of state companies, urban planning, surveillance and security, asphaltting roads, attention to homes with elderly people and popular feeding halls that might exist within its territory, along with the general maintenance of infrastructure related to healthcare, education, culture and sports.

73. It is not possible to set rigid criteria for this decentralisation. Each reality needs to be taken into consideration. For example, while the centralised management of services such as sanitation and street cleaning might seem reasonable in a city due to economies of scale and the possibilities available for mechanisation, it is obvious that in the case of a relative isolated rural area with small communities, decentralised management would not only be possible but would in fact ensure better results.

### 3) DECENTRALISING RESOURCES TO THE TERRITORIES

74. The other fundamental premise of participatory planning is the decentralisation of resources to the territories, including material resources (finances, equipment) and human resources (personnel).

#### *a) Financial resources*

75. Where existing regulations did not foresee the possibility of decentralisation, the municipal or communal government could take initiatives in this direction.

76. In the experience developed in Torres municipality, in the state of Lara, Venezuela, the municipal government transferred the resources it had for public works to the 17 parishes so that they could decide upon and carry out the works they wanted to prioritise.<sup>5</sup> The fundamental criteria used to transfer monies were: size of territory (much of which was rural), number of inhabitants, population density and an index of inter-territorial compensation that Venezuela uses when handing over budgets in order to lessen inequalities between territories.

#### *b) Equipment and personnel*

77. It is also necessary to transfer personnel, that is, relocate functionaries by taking them out of the central apparatus and deploying them in the community. There is also a need to provide offices and equipment.

### 4) TRAINING UP PARTICIPANTS

78. Nevertheless, it is not enough to simply transfer human resources and hope that citizens will participate to the maximum extent possible. It is also crucial to train up technical personnel, elected representatives and the population itself, providing them with instruments that can help them to partake effectively in the process of decentralised participatory planning.

79. One of the strongest points of the participatory planning process in Kerala was precisely the big emphasis they placed on training up different participants: residents, technicians, representatives, volunteers. One piece of information demonstrates the emphasis they have places on training cadres: in the first year alone, they provided one-day workshops to 100,000 activists in a state with a population of 38 million people.

### 5) GENERATING A DATABASE

80. Another fundamental premise for decentralised participatory planning is the need to generate an up-to-date database that can allow planning to occur on the basis of a complete knowledge of the local reality. A fundamental element in this is mapping the presence of social actors. There is generally a lot of data at the central level, but this data is not organised and available in such a

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5. For information see Marta Harnecker, *Transfiriendo poder a la gente. Municipio Torres, Estado Lara, Venezuela*, CIM-Monte Ávila, Venezuela, 2008. Online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/docs/97082.pdf>

way that it can be used for participatory planning at the local level. It is therefore important to have access to this data in order to complement it with data obtained in the local area itself, with the participation of experts and local residents.

## **CONCLUSION**

81. The more the participatory planning process is able to count upon a biggest number of organised communities in the municipality, the more fully developed it will be. Citizen's participation is greater when the diagnosis and prioritisation of problems occurs in much smaller assemblies.

82. As well as elaborating their own communitarian development plan, these communities should: issue statements regarding proposals for territorial divisions elaborated by the municipal council, the decentralisation of competencies, the distribution of resources to territories, and the areas of development they consider should be prioritised; raise demands on higher up levels of government, and their prioritisation; be present via their representatives (spokespeople, delegates, councillors) in the remain levels of the participatory planning process; and be informed and consulted on plans elaborated on the basis of these processes.

83. The participation of communities organised into communal councils is the most specific and enriching contribution of the Venezuelan experience to the process of participatory budgeting carried out in municipalities governed on Workers' Party mayors in Brazil and the experience of decentralised participatory planning in Kerala.

84. Finally, I am convinced that such a planning process can ensure that society as a whole, and not only an elite, manages the wealth of society and begins to put it at the service of society. That is why I believe that decentralized participatory planning is an essential feature of the new democratic society we want to build.

85. As this process should have no political coloration, with all citizens invited to participate in the elaboration of the development plan, contribute their criteria and collaborate in the diverse tasks involved in this process, it can help facilitate a broad space for an ideal encounter of people from across the political spectrum, those that have never been members of a party, and those that reject parties and politicians due to their bad practices.

86. This form of planning is the ideal instrument for achieving complete citizens' participation in the management of public affairs, and at the same time, the people involved in the planning process feel dignified, increases their self-esteem and, what's most important, no longer feel like beggars demanding solutions from the state. On the contrary, they feel like they are creators of their own destiny and society.

87. In this activity, as in all human activity, there is a double product: the first product which is objective and material for all to see, in this case the plan, which has been elaborated in a

participatory manner; and a second subjective, spiritual product, which is much less tangible and can only be seen by an attentive eye: the transformation of people through their practice, their human development.

88. The whole process is an educational process in which those that participate learn to inquire about the causes of things, to respect the opinion of others, to understand that the problems they face are not exclusive to their street or neighbourhood but are related to the overall situation of the economy, the national social situation, and even the international situation. They learn that everyone's problems and every community's problems should be examined within the context of the reality of other people and other communities that may face a much more difficult and urgent situation. Through this, new relations of solidarity and complementarity are created that place the emphasis on the collective rather than the individual.

89. All this means that those who participate in this process broaden out their knowledge in political, cultural, social, economic and environmental terms, and thereby become politicised in the broader sense of the term. This allows them to develop an independent mind that can no longer be manipulated by a media that remains overwhelmingly in the hand of the opposition.

90. Although an ideal scenario would involve the central state deciding to decentralise an important part of the nation's resources designated to development, there is no doubt that a majority of countries are a long way from finding themselves in such a situation. Nevertheless, we believe that this should not stop local authorities who want to kick start decentralised participatory planning processes in their local area from doing so, thereby contributing to training up residents, through practical experience, to become protagonists of the new society we want to build, one in which peoples' participation is a central feature.

91. Our greatest hope is that we might be able to interest and enthuse some mayors into implementing our proposal as a pilot project that can be enriched through practice. ◀