

# **Building democracy in a Community Center in Venezuela**

Today, as I will be discussing building democracy in a community center in Venezuela, I would like to start things off with a short concept. We must look to understand how, in the classical sense; a community center is inherently a PROMOTER of democracy and not necessarily a BUILDER of democracy.

It focuses on integrating a small population while offering services in order to allow for the community to develop and grow. Not substituting or circumventing government's responsibilities, but simply working to offer society more.

In a functioning democratic state, government works for the betterment of society, and is held accountable by the people for the mistakes it makes. When the state is so weak in delivering progress and development, then society looks towards other powers and bodies through which they may develop a stronger community.

In the context of Venezuela, democracy as a system for the betterment of society has had a huge regression.

This is no longer a theory but a fact, and one that we have seen not only by witnessing the different political events in the past 18 years, but through our work in the community center. In the vacuum of having effective executive, judiciary and legislative bodies, Venezuelan society has looked to supplement these in order to continue developing.

Our community center has had to fill this void, and not due to our own original project but out of the necessity and evolution of the community. This in turn called for us to reform our approach and understand our new role as an important actor in local issues, lending to our expansion of responsibilities in areas such as education, health and working with local government.

Furthermore, we understood and implemented the idea that the empowerment of the community for the betterment of society requires the strengthening and exertion of democratic principles with a focus on INCLUSION, TOLERANCE and PARTICIPATION.

## INCLUSION

Comunidad Camuri Grande acknowledges the concept of inclusion in its motto:  
“A space to grow together”

It is in the firm belief in our principle of JOINT RESPONSIBILITY that our motto emerges as a new way to become a Community.

There are several ways in which we promote inclusion. Allow me to mention two prime examples:

1. Initially we monitored the number of beneficiaries of a program in general. As we realized that the positive results on the number of beneficiaries did not necessarily imply inclusion and opportunities for all, we developed a more detailed set of impact indicators that would allow us to measure and evaluate the level of inclusion.

Therefore, in every program we developed then onwards, we introduced specific indicators such as: gender, area where they come from and age.

We see our role not only as a provider of services but also as a guardian, maintaining a balance among the audience of beneficiaries so that all have the opportunity to be included.

1. The local grassroots constitutional organization is called Consejos Comunales (Communal Councils). There are 3 in our town and 22 in the parish of our scope of action.

For several years we worked only with the three Communal Councils from our town. As our expertise grew we developed a program, sponsored by the Canadian Aid Agency, which included all 22 Communal Councils in a financial training program and rewarded the 3 best achievers with an additional technology training program.

This strategy of work based on inclusion and opportunities for all has had an important positive impact not only on the self-esteem of the participants but on their attitude towards citizenship and collective work.

## TOLERANCE

Tolerance has become a fundamental aspect in the quest of strengthening democratic values in Venezuela. Given that we are a deep divided society, anger, hate and resentment are very strong in all sectors of society. Comunidad Camuri Grande promotes tolerance through its organizational values: Responsibility, Work, Solidarity, Justice and Honesty.

The first step has been to recognize the existence of the other party or group, therefore in the face of anger and hate we have responded with recognition and respect. In particular, Justice and Solidarity, as we believe in them, reinforce the action of respect for diversity and effective support to the needs of others which lead to tolerance. We particularly believe in not only “say what you do”, but more importantly “do as you say” (walk the talk.)

For example, our latest project “Sport and Ecological Beaches” encourages sports activities in our youth and children to reduce the use of drugs and promote the good use of free time. Initially there was a strong concern by the beach local cooperative on their role within the development of the project, even though the first event was a great success. However, the manner in which this concern was expressed was through anger, derogative expressions and sabotage.

The first step accorded was accepting their call to convene and meet at the community center. After recognizing the anxiety that the project could bring, we asked that each individual expresses their issues and concerns.

This approach allowed us to identify how much of the discontent was motivated by political beliefs and how much by legitimate issues.

In order to minimize the aspect of anger due to wrongly interpretation of political beliefs we convened in an extended meeting where the discussion on the effectiveness and feasibility of the project was evaluated.

At the end the greater majority advocated for the program as highly beneficial for our children and youth in proving new opportunities through sports to make a better use of their free time.

The legitimate mistakes were addressed and the intolerance of the few was disjointed by the resolution and compromise of the greater community.

Thus by exerting respect and recognition we have been able to build bridges, connect members and establish a new way of building relationships.

## PARTICIPATION

The Vision of our organization is to be a promoter, protagonist and an expression of a local community model that is creative, innovative, dynamic and flexible; in order to promote the creation and development of organizations and initiatives that once integrated on a social network, empower the economic and social activation of the area.

This can only be achieved by the active participation of individuals and organizations within and outside our community.

Our strategy includes creating spaces for discussion of issues, decision making by consensus after deliberations and promoting the presence of all sectors, private, public and neighborhood. We believe that it is through this strategy that we enable participation given that different actors feel taken into account.

An interesting example relates to the strategy designed to resolve the most compelling issue in the community which refers to minimizing the impact of the probability of the river flooding.

In an emergency situation, as the one lived in 2005, the immediate response to participate gave action to a series of meetings in which we built together a strategy. First we prioritized the needs and jointly decided that the number one was the canalization of the river.

For this purpose the empowerment of the people on the construction project was decisive.

Once this was in place, a series of Community Forums were set that allowed the open interaction of public, private and community in a more balanced forum.

It was the active participation of all what pushed forward in a successful manner the project.

By integrating all individuals and local organizations from different walks of life and different interests in a common goal not only the community solves satisfactorily their most pressing issue but it demonstrates the importance of the effective participation of all.

## TODAY

As a result of 12 years of reinventing and designing innovative strategies to build community capacity with emphasis in democratic principles, several of our most important achievements up to date are the following:

We have built a preschool that has 11 graduating classes, with more than 600 children benefiting and currently 72 attending students, ages 3 to 6,

Since 1998 we have provided an afterschool music program in alliance with the today famous El Sistema (Venezuelan Youth and Children Orchestra Network), for children ages 5 to 17. Currently attended by 160 students.

Concurrently, we offer health services in dentistry, gynecology, vaccination and ophthalmology with more than 24.000 beneficiaries in 11 years.

Also, more than 29.000 users have benefited from our technology program and more than 400 individuals have participated in different special training programs that we have created alongside the local university.

Finally, we constantly foster capacity building for the local grassroots organizations and encourage the empowerment of the community.

The community center has become a beacon of understanding and support, where people can come together and work in search of progress and development.

As builders of democracy we have gained the strength of becoming a legitimate actor in social advocacy and policy making.

What developed after more than 12 years of this work was exactly what either the municipality, state nor national government could offer:  
Local support for local problems in search of effective local solutions.