

Venezuela

By Robi Auscher



While on a one-week vacation in Budapest, in the early-nineties, got a call from the World Bank to check my availability for Venezuela. Was glad that my performance in Paraguay led to further assignments with the Bank's Latin American units. Being a rich oil producing country Venezuela didn't need for years any World Bank credits. Still, the Bank was anxious to reestablish its presence in the country by offering loan for a state agricultural extension-advisory project. Our first mission was for identification purposes and we met the local extension leaders in the framework of a seminar held at a nice mountain resort, Colonia Tovar. The assigned team leader was David Nielson, a young American economist who recently completed his PhD at the University of Chicago. One of the best schools of economy in the US and he had three Israeli professors that he appreciated very much. Although he could have chosen the research path with the Bank, being born and raised on a farm in South Dakota, David preferred to check first the waters of real life, in agricultural extension. He was new to the topic. My role was to represent the nitty-gritty of agricultural extension. Having plenty of mud on my boots, both in my home country and on the international arena, I was expected to put flesh on the bones of the Bank's concept. Since both David's and my Spanish was still frail, a Colombian woman high on her country's extension hierarchy was added to the mission. We got presentations on the country's system, fleshing out their strengths and weaknesses and met the main string pullers. My initial difficulty was the fact that Venezuelans most confusingly didn't pronounce but swallow the "s" consonant, very much as the Andalusians who conquered this part of the continent more than 500 years ago.



With David and the Colombian extension specialist at Colonia Tovar. 1993.

The next missions were fact finding ones and entailed much travel all over the country in order to pick up first-hand information on the research-extension-growers triangle. State extension wasn't well supplied with vehicles, we usually used taxis, American gas guzzler dinosaurs driven by too speedy chauffeurs. When most of the data was in place, the next missions focused on appraisal and besides David and me, consisted of Alfonso, a Mexican engineer who, being acquainted with Latin America, was supposed to play the role of door opener, and Roberto, a US-educated Filipino economist who was handling the Excel spreadsheets to work out costs, budgets and simulations. Alfonso administered our travel, appointments and victuals. He was met with distaste by the local officials. Upfront, most Spanish-speaking Latin Americans dislike Argentinians and Mexicans, since they come from the largest countries, and are regarded as being arrogant. Second, eighty percent of Alfonso's time was devoted to bragging about women or trying to charm them. After a few missions he became more of a burden than help. David took daily Spanish lessons while at the Bank in Washington. I also became more confident with the language. Roberto, despite his Spanish first and last name didn't pay attention to language learning. He wound up sidelined, left out of meetings and decision making and confined to tinkering figures on his laptop.

With David and Alfonso, sitting, and the head of Extension Service, in the World Bank Office in Caracas.



We put together the outlines of the Appraisal Report which was taken by David to the Bank's offices in Washington DC. After reaching home, began to get daily phone calls from Matt McMahon. He was David's supervisor and in charge of project formulation. With every call he tried vigorously to take out from our outline certain components that I have inserted in the program. These were lengthy discussions and I gave my reasoning for having the elements in place. There were at least four such calls. Had to stand my ground otherwise my whole architecture would fall apart. Two months passed and Matt invited me to join him for another Bank mission in Ecuador. Learnt a lesson for life. People do appreciate someone who stands his ground providing reasonable arguments. Years later found out that while we were on our appraisal mission with David in Caracas, Matt was calling him daily from Washington to see whether I don't "contaminate" the program with "Training&Visit" elements. "Training&Visit" was conceived by Danny Benor, the former head of Extension Service in Israel. Danny joined the Bank in the mid seventies, acted as special adviser to the Bank's President and took by storm the chronically ailing extension-advisory agricultural systems of the developing world. He covered on behalf of the Bank 40 Asian and African countries in a few years. T&V is a top-down government-driven system based on fortnightly clock-wise training sessions of advisors and subsequent visiting

of contact farmers, and the precise delivery of messages geared to impact farmers productivity. It did work. Danny invited me to work with him in India, Burma and then I consulted for Bank-financed T&V projects in Thailand and Nepal as well. The Bank's Latin American unit nurtured a different approach to extension. This was one of the reasons I have approached it and keen on working for it. Still, for Matt, I was a T&V person. He didn't want T&V elements in his approach. In his vision government plays a merely coordinating role in agricultural extension, while field work is carried out by private teams of advisors, employed and supervised by growers associations. Basically it's a privatized and decentralized system.

In Ecuador we prepared a comprehensive research and extension project. The World Bank's mission of which I was member was in charge of the extension-advisory component while the research one was handled by the Inter-American Development Bank's (IDB) mission. Have travelled extensively in the country and found challenging needs and opportunities but at the end, the roles were swapped and the World Bank took over the implementation of the research component.

Mid-town Caracas.





On the equator line in Ecuador 1994.

I enjoyed working in Venezuela. We stayed at the Hilton's executive floor where a conference room stood at our disposal. When busy we could live on the complimentary snacks provided on the floor. Otherwise we dined in one of the town's better restaurants. We worked hard. Visited the regions mostly by plane. They were departing from Caracas airport at 7 am. The airport was on the beach while Caracas situated at an elevation of 900 m. Had to get up very

early to catch our planes. It was striking how polarized the town was. Town center in the valley hosted the rich areas while the slopes surrounding the town were slum-covered. There were neighborhoods which were dangerous. Extension Service headquarters were located in a dubious area and we were advised to leave the office before 5 pm. At one occasion, the team stayed late and the warden unaware of its presence, locked the premises. David and Roberto were young and flexible and could easily climb the fences to jump out into the street. Matt, was elder and heavy-set. He had to be lifted first to pass over the fence but got stuck on its top. He was let off the hook with the help of people from the street.



Caracas slums.



A badly unsafe and violent country. For both locals and foreigners. We visited the houses of several of our local colleagues. When leaving the house they followed a meticulous ritual of placing a whole web of more than 10 locks on the doors. Villas used to be surrounded by fences with barbed-wire on their tops. Often employees who used to get to our office by metro would complain that they have been mugged and freed of their watches. Five years after the project's kick off in 2000, Matt led a mid-term evaluation mission. The mission

consisted of two groups. One from the World Bank in Washington DC and another from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) in Rome. We, the Bank group stayed at well-guarded Hilton and the meetings were held there. The FAO group stayed at another less expensive place. At one of our meetings a Chilean consultant from FAO left for his hotel to pick up a few documents and be right back. A couple of hours have passed, then three. No sign of him. The guy calls Matt after four hours exhausted like being run over by a steam-roller. He surprised two burglars as he entered his room. They threatened him at gunpoint. Coerced him to open the safe deposit box. Before leaving with their loot, tied him up with strings and cut the phone line. It took him quite some time to free himself. Had to shout and gesticulate from his high floor window to the street, asking someone to tell reception to release him. Only then was he able to call us and touch base with us the next day. Another lesson learnt: when in a bad place, go for the best hotel. It's safe and cheaper after all.

The project moved forward. Growers associations were established and trained. Nuclei of private advisors were recruited, trained and employed by the associations. Farmers began to be charged at nominal prices for extension-advisory services. Government's involvement reduced to project financing, supervision and coordination. Subject Matter Specialists were recruited in order to liaise with research and resolve upcoming technical problems in both crop and livestock management.

David was in love with Venezuela. It was his first and only assignment with the Bank. He spent much time in the country, was successful professionally and with women. He was a young good-looking bachelor. A gringo working for the Bank and a PhD economist. It was fun to work with him for more than 3 years when at one of the meetings he told us with tears in his eyes that in order to get a tenured position with the Bank he is being transferred to eastern Africa. He is active in Africa until now. He has made a name for himself in agricultural extension and led the Bank's extension team. While in Caracas, he used to invite me every now and then to dance parties where I could leap clumsily with one of his girl friends or their friends. The highlight of these places were the Cuban bands with their exceptional sound and pace.

Roberto had a hard time to stay with the Bank. He saw in me a kind of a father figure. Used to ask for my advice before his meetings in DC with his boss, a woman who didn't appreciate him high. The bank didn't extend his 2 years

contract and he returned to the Philippines. Although afflicted with insecurity and lack of experience, he found a job with the Ministry of Defense and reached the position of Assistant Director General. He was laid off with a change of government. He is still suing them and unemployed for years. After almost 30 years we are still in touch. His bipolar character is expressed in the other hand in his strong devotion to the military. He spends months in a row every year in bootcamps, on reserve duty as regiment commander in the tank corps. He's an active paratrooper, and was recently raised to colonel. Knowing that I also served in the tank corps as reservist, he used to flood my email with tanks and arms of various specifications, calibers and fire speed. He came to Israel twice with his buddies, generals from the army reservists association to visit our military installations. He's particularly in love with the Armored Corps Museum in Latrun. I met him here once a couple of years back. Realized that he is still unemployed, his wife left him with their two kids.

Matt is Irish and educated in the US. Where he got a PhD in agronomy and worked for 20 years as researcher for the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) in Mexico before joining the Bank. He was well acquainted with Latin America, a no-nonsense low key conceptual thinker. I liked his laissez faire when leading his missions. Very much like a coach who picks up good players and lets them play and score. He used to invite in turn each of his mission members for lunch for a relaxed one-on-one, to catch their ideas and to get to know them closely. At the end of the mission came a traditional common meal covered by him.

The country's well-being attracted people from other Latin American countries and we found among the extension executives, people who came e.g. from Peru and Chile. One of my counterparts born on the Margarita Island in the country was of majestic pure Spanish descendance. He could trace his roots back to a given village in Southern Spain. He used to visit the place and to find there families carrying the same last name. Reminds of the pure sephardi lines, S.T. or .D.D

Venezuela is endowed with unusualy rich natural and human resources. Many growers became rich overnight when oil was found in their fields. The population of European descent in the country is very high. It consists of immigrants mainly from Italy, Germany and Spain. The mixture with the indigenous and black populations resulted in crossbred vigor and beautiful women. Miss Venezuela being frequently chosen as Miss Universe.

Unfortunately, most of this belongs to the past. Socialist Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1999 and ruled until his death in 2013. He pushed “21st Century Socialism” leading to a deep economic crisis blamed as usual on the US and international imperialism. He is followed by another Chavista, president Maduros. Maduro's approval ratings hover nowadays at around 20% but he hangs around ruling a once rich country into bankruptcy and exodus of its best. The situation of the poverty stricken didn't improve but the middle class, all impoverished. Typical socialist regime spreading equality at its lowest common denominator. I wonder how will this beautiful country make a way out of no way.