

Cycles of Violence and Development in Caracas' *Barrio* Communities

DARINA STOYANOVA shows how ineffective development projects in Caracas affect socioeconomic inequality and violence among the most marginalised communities.

Social fragmentation, economic downturn, and urban violence characterise day-to-day life across Venezuela's largest cities. In Caracas, these issues are exacerbated within the improvised urban spaces known as barrios, the informal settlements created and occupied by society's most socioeconomically marginalised individuals. Several political regimes have promoted the development of the barrio communities through the provision of alternative housing as a solution to urban violence and poor living conditions. Despite these efforts, crime and homicide data continues to place Caracas as one of the most 'violent' cities in the world (UNODC 2013; CCSPJP 2019).

It is important to consider the real impact of these development projects from the perspective of the affected communities. Within this context, this article seeks to explain poor violence-reduction outcomes as the result of the ineffectiveness of the development projects in delivering the social change necessary to address socioeconomic marginalisation. As existing social structures are not challenged by the housing projects, marginalisation persists and the spatial practices of

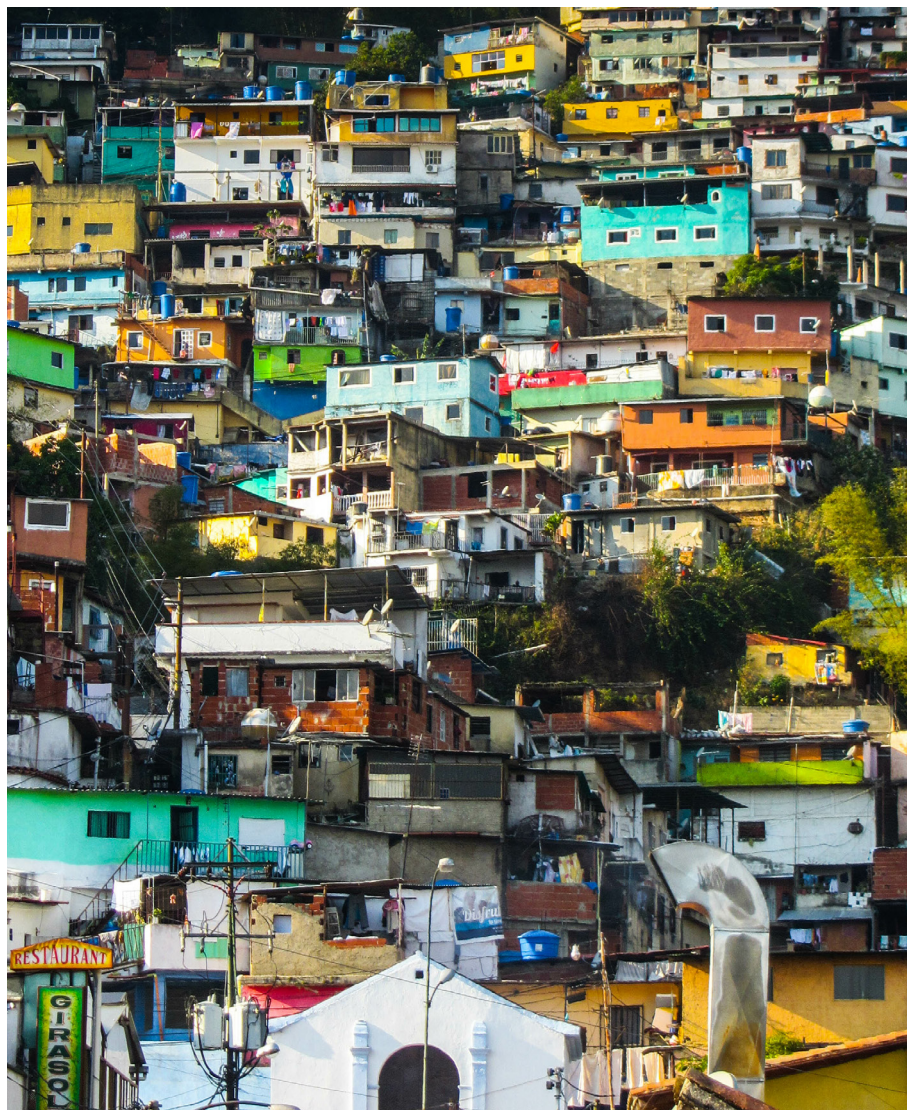


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the informal communities are reproduced in their new settlements, perpetuating an endless cycle of violence and development. In order to accommodate social change within the formalised structures of the political economy, experts must first rethink development and violence in the context of the vernacular experiences at the grassroots.

Inside ‘Violent’ Caracas

Homicide, armed robberies and burglaries, revenge attacks, confrontations between barrio gangs, and contract killings (*sicariatos*) are amongst the leading types of crime across Caracas (Tremaria 2016). Both victims and perpetrators of these crimes come predominantly from the impoverished and overpopulated marginal districts of the barrios, though other urban areas are also affected as a natural result of human mobility (Zubillaga 2013). The type of violence in Venezuela’s capital cannot be solely characterised as a cartel war, civil conflict, or gang struggle (Tremaria 2016; Leon 2020). Rather, it represents an amalgamation of criminal acts, threats, and other harmful behaviours whose main causal determinants are social inequality and economic discrimination (*ibid.*). Consequently, violence in Caracas and other Venezuelan cities can be situated under the umbrella of ‘urban violence.’

Urban violence goes beyond the physical, visible, and criminal acts of harm that occur in the city. In fact, the ‘urban’ does not refer to the place in which instances of violence arbitrarily occur, but rather to the process of neoliberal urbanisation that disproportionately affects some while benefiting others, thus producing the conditions of socioeconomic inequality in which violence manifests (Pavoni and Tulumello 2020). Urban violence should, therefore, be understood as encompassing the physical and psychological, visible and invisible, criminal and structural harms which arise as a consequence of social marginalisation and unequally distributed economic hardship (Luckham 2017). That said, residents of the barrios are not inherently marginal. Rather, they have been marginalised through historical encounters such as rural-to-urban migration, stigmatisation of the barrios as crime-dens and their inhabitants as criminals, and the securitised geographical segregation of the barrio inhabitants away from the central metropolitan areas (Irazábal et al. 2020). Urban violence in the barrios is

therefore not an innate characteristic of the informal community but a grievance that develops as a response to the conditions perpetuated by the chronic alienation of the barrio inhabitants from the formal community of the urban city. Indeed, to understand urban violence and the role of development in Caracas, as anywhere else, we must first consider the historical events and circumstances of marginalisation that have given it impetus.

With the discovery of large oil reserves in Venezuela in the early twentieth century, rapid migration from rural regions fuelled the dramatic expansion of urban areas, where newly arrived communities sought to settle. These migrants, however, did not have the financial means to afford formal homes, and instead created makeshift settlements in the cities’ peripheries, which came to be the barrios (Velasco 2015). In the 1970s, under Carlos Andrés Pérez’s first administration, the country accrued vast revenues from its oil industry, though these profits did not have the desired trickle-down effect of reaching the barrios or the working-class neighbourhoods, thus exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequality (Irazábal et al. 2020). After assuming presidency again in 1989, Pérez imposed sweeping neoliberal economic reforms under recommendations from the International Monetary Fund to the result of severe restrictions in public expenditures and reductions of price controls that disproportionately affected the impoverished countryside and the urban poor (Ellner 2010). The Caracazo protests emerged in February 1989 as a response to these changes, in the form of protests, riots, and mass lootings, which were violently suppressed by military troops, resulting in hundreds of deaths (*ibid.*). Though political unrest somewhat calmed during the subsequent presidency of Hugo Chávez, the heavily segregated socio-spatial composition of the big cities persists today (Irazábal et al. 2020).

In this context, development becomes a series of projects and practises aimed at reducing poverty and preventing violence. The international development



One of the *barrio* communities in Caracas, Venezuela

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community overwhelmingly presents violence and development as somewhat mutually exclusive, implying that one can counteract the other (Luckham 2017). Typically, homicide rates are expected to decrease as development improves, as represented by the negative correlation between homicides rates and Human Development Index values observed worldwide (UNDP 2013). As Tremaria (2016) points out, however, Venezuela is among the few exceptions to this trend. Despite undeniable improvements in the country's overall socio-economic development by virtue of accrued oil revenues, homicide rates have soared (Zubillaga 2013; Leon 2020). The theoretical puzzle of persistently high violence under improving socioeconomic conditions has therefore continued to guide research interest in Venezuela and its capital.

This article seeks to explain how development efforts have not been effective in delivering the social change needed to promote social inclusion and address the unequal social distribution of the benefits from the improved socioeconomic conditions of the nation (Tremaria 2016). The development initiative has, therefore, failed to take the necessary action

against the causal determinants of urban violence in Venezuelan society and has instead offered a type of surface-level remedy, a 'band-aid,' to an otherwise deep-rooted issue (ibid.). The following discussion explores these shortcomings with reference to some of the most notable housing projects.

Developing the *Barrio* Communities

Under the dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952–1958), the state housing institute Banco Obrero was tasked with undertaking an intensive housing initiative to eradicate informal settlements in Venezuela (Foster 2021). The ensuing 2 de Diciembre housing complex of 37 superblocs was a radical effort to modernise Caracas. After a military coup overthrew Jiménez, squatters rushed to occupy the new superblocs and, without state support, gradually transformed the housing complex which was meant to signal the end of the *barrio* into a *barrio* itself (Velasco 2015). The development project thus resulted in the construction of buildings devoid of any greater socioeconomic context and facilitated a movement between *barrios*, not

social classes. In 2012, the renamed 23 de Enero superblocks experienced an annual homicide rate of 105 per 100,000 inhabitants, amongst the highest in the city (Leon 2020). With hindsight, it is clear that the Jiménez mission was little more than an attempt to modernise only the appearance of urban society, rather than to fundamentally transform its composition.

Development projects aimed at providing alternative housing saw better success under the presidency of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013). To the drum of overwhelming public support, the Chavista government adopted various social programmes, known as the Bolivarian Missions, to address issues concerning food, housing, medicine, and literacy. Within the area of housing, barrio inhabitants were offered new legal opportunities to occupy a housing unit under Misión Hábitat and its successor, the Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela (GMVV). The latter's objective was to address the issue of the national housing deficit by building 300,000 homes on average per year from 2011 to 2019, or the exceptionally ambitious figure of over 1,000 homes per working day (Passarello Luna 2019). Since the passing of Chávez in 2013, President Nicolás Maduro has taken charge of the GMVV and other projects. As of 2019, the Maduro government claims to have successfully built more than three million housing units, though the accuracy of these figures has been called into question, given that many of the buildings are left unfinished and the demand for public housing continues to exceed supply (Passarello Luna 2019; Irazábal et al. 2020).

Despite the large-scale efforts devoted by the government, these projects have failed to solve the problem of urban violence. For instance, the socialist project Ciudad Caribia, Chávez' idealised planned community located to the west of Caracas, where some barrio inhabitants have been relocated, has in recent years been placed under surveillance for rising criminal activity (Venezuela Investigative Unit 2016). Furthermore, these communities remain excluded from the rest of society, both in terms

of geography, since they are usually relocated elsewhere in Caracas' periphery, and in terms of their social position relative to other urban inhabitants (Irazábal et al. 2020). In some instances, their socioeconomic situations may even have worsened, as they have been relocated far from the city jobs and are susceptible to additional risks such as road cave-ins and forced reliance on buses, only half of which are operational (Passarello Luna 2019). Thus, as these communities are impeded from accessing other areas, hospitals, or their city jobs, their social struggles to participate in society continue without much improvement, despite better housing conditions. Moreover, Irazábal et al. (2020) report that the former barrio inhabitants continue to suffer from stigmatisation and discrimination, as the housing projects have not improved their social standing and economic ability to afford the same opportunities as other urban inhabitants. Consequently, even the development projects under the Chavista vision have failed to resolve issues of social exclusion and marginalisation, which continue to act as catalysts for urban violence.

Central to understanding why an element of social change is necessary for the success of such development projects is the concept of spatial practises, namely the ways through which a community deciphers and alters its space as it masters and appropriates it (Lefebvre 1991). As the informal communities occupy the new housing spaces, they seek to include the vernacular spatial and technical experience obtained through building and maintaining the barrios, transposing it onto their new homes and thus reproducing the spatial practises already known to them. These practices include challenging the rigid physicality of the buildings by repurposing physical spaces to allow for greater functionality, securing windows and doors to protect from burglary, as well as other technical conventions of barrio construction and collective social traditions (Rohde 2017; Irazábal et al. 2020). As a result, new housing complexes in fact become physical vessels that facilitate the sustenance

of existing social structures (ibid.). Therefore, without delivering social change to improve social inclusion and address the informal communities' marginalisation, the reproduction of existing spatial practices will continue to perpetuate urban violence. To accommodate such change, future governments and development experts must recognise the importance of re-evaluating their assumptions about development and violence against the vernacular experiences of the communities they aim to aid.

Violence and Development at the Grassroots

A grassroots approach to development emphasises the importance of local knowledge as opposed to representational knowledge, as images portrayed by professionals are 'universal, reductionist, standardised and stable,' but the realities of marginalised people are local, complex, diverse and dynamic' (Chambers 1995, 173). Placing development in the sphere of the vernacular allows us to extend the development discourse from the expert to the local individual, thus transforming an exclusionary discourse within a homogenous group into a dialogue between groups with different knowledge and lived experiences. By doing so, we allow for a diverse discourse that can better understand the challenges faced at the local level and generate alternative solutions which are tailored to address specific needs, as opposed to relying on broad assumptions as to what these might be. As in the case of development, local knowledge is also at the core of understanding urban violence. Placing violence reduction in the vernacular emphasises that informal communities are not just social categories but groups that perceive, cope with and respond to violence in ways that may differ from external assumptions (Luckham 2017). The focus of any development project aimed at violence reduction should therefore rest on understanding how these groups perceive violence, how they navigate its threats, and how they envision their own security (ibid.).

Once actively pursued, the inclusion of grassroots knowledge and experiences in the planning of development projects can then connect local realities to the makings of power, society, politics, and economics—the interactions of which occur far beyond the local level. There cannot be any significant transformation of the informal communities without social changes that take into account their perspective, thus allowing their voices to be heard and their social and economic hardship to be eased in the long run. Otherwise, the size of the impoverished and overpopulated barrio-like spaces will continue to grow, as will the number of people who have been pushed to the margins of society. Until action is taken to address the structures that produce inequality and marginalisation, there is no end in sight for the cycle of violence and development.

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