Venezuela environmental sustainability

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Historically, the rents of oil wealth in Venezuela were not distributed well across the population, and obscene economic inequality led to a disenchantment with capitalism in the 1990s for a majority of the voting populace. The advent of democracy in the country"s 1998 election thus delivered the Marxist populist leader Hugo Chavez, who benefited from a high oil price during much of his tenure to secure his rule. He rallied the public around revolutionary rhetoric with atavistic speeches that claimed the anti-colonial mantle of Caracas-born Simon Bolivar, who had led the movement of independence from the Spanish empire in the early nineteenth century. Chavez"s death of contested natural causes in 2013 left a power vacuum that often follows the passing of charismatic leaders.

My first office visit in Venezuela was to meet the remarkable entrepreneur Juan Jose Pocaterra, who has developed a series of companies that use data analytics for smarter urban planning. His overarching platform, called Vikua, has been recognized by the World Economic Forum where he also serves on the Global Future Council on Clean Air. His business partner (and spouse) Maria Fernandez Vera is the CEO of a transport company that uses data analytics to provide a "micro-mobility" solution through a fleet of minivans across Venezuela"s major cities called Wawa. Their work has been profiled by the Interamerican Development Bank and is being also replicated in other Latin American countries.

Next, I visited an established petrochemical servicing company called Vepica, which has been in operation for five decades but is reinventing itself as an energy services and sustainability solutions provider. They are headquartered in Venezuela"s only LEED certified green building. Vepica has offices in Houston and Beijing and is well-positioned to expand into new markets with easing of sanctions. The CEO Juan Nutt was a professional golfer before taking on the executive role in the family business. He chose to stay in Venezuela despite the turmoil and run the firm. What impressed me further was that the executives I met were trained at Venezuelan universities rather than elite foreign locales as is often the case in other Latin American countries.

I also visited the campus of Universidad Simon Bolivar which hosts the Instituto de Estudios Avanzados (Institue for Advanced Study). This institute is specializing its efforts in biotechnology and has also provided office space for the United Nations University"s Biotechnology Program for Latin America (BIOLAC). At the heyday of Venezuela"s educational investment period several decades ago, the government provided an endowment of $10 million for this program. To this day the returns of this endowment have sustained the program despite all the economic challenges.

The Coordinator of BIOLAC is currently Cornell-educated Dr. Gustavo Fermin, who is poised to develop further research and training capacity for the program. Young researchers were working on a range of innovative projects involving microbes and algae for improved removal of pollutants and carbon sequestration. Such organizations deserve greater attention from development donors and can be a means of fostering science diplomacy (as was argued in a CSIS report as early as 2014), even if the political situation

remains uneasy.

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In July 2020, Venezuela"s state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), spilled over 26,000 barrels of oil into the Caribbean as it attempted to reactivate its El Palito refinery that for years had been lacking proper maintenance. The oil washed ashore Morrocoy National Park, coating nine miles of beaches and damaging one of the country"s most biodiverse ecosystems, one rich in mangroves and coral reefs. Scientists commissioned by the National Assembly projected that the Morrocoy coast could take a half-century to recover. The Nicol?s Maduro regime downplayed the spills, impeding offers to clean up by volunteers and environmental groups.

That same refinery produced two more spills in 2020, just a few of the over 46,000 oil and pollutant spills that have occurred in Venezuela since 2010 as the country"s state oil company operates with inadequate technical capacity and maintenance. The spills are emblematic of a much larger environmental crisis that has afflicted the country for years, damaging ecosystems and endangering local communities from the Caribbean coast to the Amazon rainforest. This environmental component has attracted little international attention with global responses focused on the country"s humanitarian crisis.

This environmental crisis illustrates how extensively Venezuela"s institutions have collapsed during the Ch?vez and Maduro administrations. But just as the environmental situation is inexorably linked to the country"s political crisis, so too must it play a role in an eventual solution.

Venezuela once led the region in environmental policy and conservation efforts. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Venezuela established 29 protected areas, and 70 percent of the country"s south was protected in a combination of national parks, biosphere reserves, and a UN Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site.

PDVSA was once celebrated for its operational capacity and commitment to environmental security. In 1993, the company announced an $800 million environmental protection plan that responded to Venezuela"s uniquely stringent environmental protection laws by establishing plans to control atmospheric emissions, treat wastewater, and treat and dispose of toxic waste. The company also had one of the most comprehensive oil contingency plans in the region.

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