

SURVIVING IN VENEZUELA

december 2017



Dear friends of Centro Madre

Daily life in Venezuela is becoming increasingly more difficult and stressful. The downward spiral of social and economic breakdown continues. The new U.S. trade embargo will certainly make things even more difficult.

Buses in Caracas, and around the country, are few, causing people to stand in long lines to get to work and back home. It is hard to find reasonably priced tires, batteries, motor oil and other parts to fix and maintain the buses. The drivers want to raise the bus fares, but the government does not allow them. To pressure the government, they put fewer buses on the streets. The Caracas metro is very cheap, but is now totally overcrowded, causing very unpleasant situations of people pushing and shoving. The metro is also having electrical problems due to lack of generators. Sometimes a metro train full of people gets stuck for at least an hour in a hot tunnel due to electrical failure.



More and more people in Venezuela are going hungry. Every day people turn over the garbage piled up in the streets, looking for something to eat. Thousands of people are leaving Venezuela, escaping hunger and violence. This leaves the country with fewer and fewer professionals and people with technical skills in the hospitals, the airlines, and other crucial areas.

The banks are giving out very little cash. Though many things can be bought with a debit card, other things cannot. Many of us go to the bank almost every day to get the little cash we can get to pay for transportation, salaries for workers who don't have a bank account and certain food items. If you really need cash, you can go to certain stores who will sell you cash from your debit card, charging a huge 20% fee. It is illegal, but it happens everywhere.

Franci, the wife of Marco who has worked for Centro Madre for many, many years, came to Caracas to give birth to her fourth child. The doctor prescribed a cesarean. She went to several public hospitals, but was turned away because one did not have antibiotics, another had no water or gloves, etc. After several days she was finally accepted in one hospital, but the result was a still born baby and a hysterectomy. According to her, the hospital staff mistreated her and that is why the baby died. Venezuelan public hospitals are notorious for mistreating women who come to give birth. It is so bad that even the government had to launch a movement for the humane treatment of pregnant women in hospitals.

CENTRO MADRE

In January this year, the incidents of armed robberies, threats of kidnapping and personal harm around Centro Madre became so bad, that we decided I should leave the place. Never during the 17 years of working on the project did I think it could come to this, so it was quite a shock. Now a year has passed. Nelson continues to live in Centro Madre to guarantee the project continues. Marco, our agricultural worker, who had stopped working at Centro Madre out of fear, is coming back again. Though thieves are no longer entering the house, they continue to steal our crops. We are planting different crops now that have no value for robbers such as tumeric and hibiscus tea. We advise the neighbors to do the same and promise to help them sell their produce in Caracas.

Food is a major concern for many Venezuelans. Basic staple foods such as rice, corn flour, oil, sugar, and wheat flour are hard to find, and when available, unbelievably expensive for a person living on a minimum salary. In response, fruit and vegetable stands have popped up everywhere in Caracas, giving much relief. Many of these fruits and vegetables come from the states of Tachira and Merida, which border with Colombia. Rumor has it that next year the Colombians will buy up all these fruits and vegetables because for them, the produce is very cheap, and they can pay a higher price to the farmers. I pray it is just a rumor.

Venezuela's political leaders did not develop its agriculture and local industries to guarantee the local production of basic necessities. The few industries that were started are almost all closed now. For their basic food needs, the people are at the mercy of politicians and importers. Nelson in Centro Madre is designing and making machines for small scale industries that process corn into corn flour to make arepas, the national staple food. Through small industries that process locally grown crops such as corn and yuca, people can get back control of their basic necessities.



A popular organic farmers market, La Feria Conuquera, continues to take place once a month in a Caracas park. We sell the products of Centro Madre and our neighboring farms together with other organic farmers.

YARACUY

When heavy rains, floods, and landslides hit Venezuela in December 1999, Nelson Bernados, Erika Rehm and I did relief work with the international disaster relief organization AMURT. Nelson and I went east from Caracas to Barlovento where we started Centro Madre. Erika stayed in Caracas but also went west to the state of Yaracuy where she bought some land. A Mexican/Venezuelan couple has been living and working there with their son for more than three years slowly developing the project. They live in a small house, with 10 hectares for planting sorghum, beans, and other products. They do community service projects such as making simple water purification filters for all the schools in the area. Though crime is a problem throughout Venezuela, Yaracuy is much safer than Barlovento. As Erika is going back to Germany to take care of her elderly parents, we are extending the support and experience of Centro Madre to the project in Yaracuy.



JUAN DAVID



Juan David is three years old now and lives with me in Caracas where he attends preschool. During vacations, he stays with his mother and stepfather in Barlovento. The last few weeks he had on and off a fever. I took him to a clinic where a doctor gave him a checkup. At that moment he got a seizure. The doctor and nurses immediately treated him and got it under control. It turned out he had a bad lung infection which caused the high fever. Now we will have to be very careful whenever he gets a fever, as convulsions could occur again.

OUR MISSION

Despite all the turmoil in Venezuela today, our mission has not changed: to improve the quality of people's lives through personal and community transformation. We stimulate self-sufficiency and empower the local population through community development projects. Your contributions allow us to help more. Especially during this crisis, we are deeply grateful for whatever support you can give us.

Hendrika Renkers
Director Centro Madre
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For more information about Hendrika's work in Barlovento please refer to her website www.centromadre.org . If you want to contact her, or support a project, please write to centromadrebarlovento@gmail.com

You can also contact our Dutch organisation: www.centromadre.nl

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