

# Obstacles to the Consolidation of the Venezuelan Neighbourhood Movement: National and Local Cleavages\*

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*Abstract.* The tenuous organisational structure of the Venezuelan neighbourhood movement explains its failure to live up to the lofty expectations which social movements created in Latin America in the 1980s. To understand why structural looseness prevails, it is necessary to examine social cleavages as well as the disparity between the theoretical model which underpins much discourse and legislation, on the one hand, and the daily practice of neighbourhood associations, on the other. An additional area of enquiry is the division in the national leadership between an apolitical current and one that views electoral politics as a natural avenue for the movement to pursue. Scholars, even those who have recently emphasized the importance of links between social movements and political structures, overlook the importance of organisational unity at the national level.

The burgeoning literature on social movements in Latin America in the 1980s developed in two general directions, and both raised great expectations which were not met in the following years. The first, ‘autonomist’ school emerged in response to the role social movements played in the transition from military to democratic governments throughout the continent. Far from tightly interacting with political parties and the state, the social movements set their own agenda and organised protests which created a climate adverse to these repressive regimes. The most telling example of this intransigence was the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, which refused to negotiate the site of its manifestations and assumed a defiant attitude perfectly compatible with the emotional nature of their cause, namely, uncovering the truth about the murder of their children. It is not surprising, then, that much of the writing of the period emphasised the autonomy of social movements and their consciousness-raising impact rather than their political function as interest groups which negotiate with power brokers. If the mundane world of

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politics entered into the picture in those nations, it was the outcome of the general ‘climate’ created by social movements. In depicting social movements in these terms, many writers utilised the ‘new social movement’ paradigm developed in the European context that postulated the emergence of new cultural modalities and stressed direct citizen participation in decision-making with respect to horizontally structured organisations completely independent of political parties and the state.<sup>1</sup>

With the consolidation of democratic governments in the late 1980s, social movements were no longer outsiders defying a hostile military government. A second, ‘political interaction’ school (influenced by North American social movement scholars) analysed social movements from the perspective of their day-to-day performance under democratic regimes in which a premium was placed on political influence and in which clientelistic and other political networks often entered into play.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the social scientists who subscribed to the ‘autonomist’ school (with its emphasis on political culture) as well as those who focused on political interaction, envisaged social movements as a vehicle for achieving a thorough transformation of society. Some writers pointed out that these multi-class organisations were displacing labour unions as the principal interlocutors of non-privileged sectors of the population.<sup>3</sup> Unlike organised labour, the social movements that emerged during this period counted on the participation of a large number of women as activists and local leaders. Social scientists were also attracted by the wide diversity of causes that the movements took in, including those related to squatters, neighbourhoods, women, ethnic groups, human rights, ecology, religious base communities, and cooperatives.

Social movements, however, have fallen far short of these lofty expectations.<sup>4</sup> Just as they were not catalysts of a radical cultural transformation in the 1980s (in accordance with the autonomist school’s predictions), so have they failed to become the major actors which continuously interact with others as equals within the political system (as

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of this position by one of its leading exponents, see Tilman Evers, ‘Identity: The Hidden Side of New Social Movements in Latin America’, in David Slater (ed.), *New Social Movements and the State in Latin America* (Amsterdam, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> The terms ‘autonomist’ and ‘political interaction’ are mine. For a discussion of the literature on social movements in Latin America which embraces these two approaches, see Steve Ellner, ‘Two Conceptual Approaches to Latin American Social Movements from the Perspective of Activists and Scholars: A Review Essay’, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Fall 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Dick Parker, ‘Trade Union Struggle and the Left in Latin America, 1973–1990’, in Barry Carr and Ellner (eds.), *The Latin American Left: From the Fall of Allende to Perestroika* (Boulder, 1993), p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Lawrence Haber, ‘Identity and Political Process: Recent Trends in the Study of Latin American Social Movements’, *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1996), pp. 172, 174.

prescribed by the political interaction school). Nowhere, for instance, has the equivalent to a Green Party emerged which commands the support of a sizeable block of the electorate (in spite of efforts along these lines in various countries). In sharp contrast to organised labour, the loose structure of these organisations undermines their capacity to aggregate demands and make their influence felt where it is most important, namely, at the national level. Working mechanisms have not been established which facilitate input into decision making on a regular basis.

The recent history of the neighbourhood movement in Venezuela follows this pattern. An examination of Venezuelan neighbourhood associations is especially revealing because their proliferation in the 1980s marked a sharp contrast with the traditional weakness of civil society – a near vacuum that had been occupied at an early date by political parties. Analysts viewed the fledgling neighbourhood movement as an exciting development with a great potential to counter the ossification of the political system and its vertical forms of decision-making. Nevertheless, the neighbourhood movement (similar to social movements throughout the continent) has lost momentum in recent years, and some observers go so far as to assert that it has succumbed to tight party control, much as organised labour did at an earlier period.<sup>5</sup>

A logical place to begin an analysis of this stagnation is the conflicting policies and models formulated by the nation's two major neighbourhood organisations. One, *the Federación de Asociaciones de Comunidades Urbanas (FACUR)*, focuses on political struggle whilst the other, the *Escuela de Vecinos*, is mainly concerned with organisational practices and principles (in accordance with the 'autonomist' or 'new social movement' model). The first section of the article probes these areas of difference within the recognition that both FACUR and the Escuela embrace an anti-party discourse which attributes the backwardness of neighbourhood associations to party intrusions that damage their autonomous status. The relative importance of this factor in explaining the weakness of the neighbourhood movement is of major interest.

The second section seeks additional causes for the movement's shortcomings in the tenuous relationship between nation-wide and local organisations. Specifically, it examines the disparity between the vision and policies embraced by the movement's national interlocutors, on the one hand, and the reality of the day to day actions of neighbourhood associations, on the other.

The article also deals with two other aspects of the movement's lack of cohesion, namely the resistance to unification at the national level and the

<sup>5</sup> David Slater, 'Introduction', *Latin American Perspectives* ['Social Movements and Political Change in Latin America, Part 2'] Vol. 21, no. 3 (Summer 1994), p. 3.

cleavages and differences in criteria at all levels. Needless to say, internal diversity and conflict characterise all organisations which have political objectives, including organised labour and other traditional social movements. A case study of this nature, then, needs to ascertain the profundity of these differences – whether they are limited to abstract formulations and specific policies of a narrow scope, or whether, to the contrary, they cut across a spectrum of important issues which reflect different material interests. Furthermore, distinct positions within the same movement can be complementary (or consist of different priorities), in which case they are not necessarily divisive, or – at the opposite extreme – they can be diametrically opposed and antagonistic. The article will survey these problem areas in order to explain why the Venezuelan movement has disappointed those who formerly stressed its promising potential.

*The national level: the formulation of two distinct neighbourhood strategies*

The early growth of the neighbourhood movement was a response to the uncontrolled and haphazard urban settlement in Caracas following the opening of the modern, democratic period in 1958. Such rampant urbanisation, while characteristic of most third world nations, was particularly pronounced in those that exported oil, and affected Venezuela particularly. The first neighbourhood associations emerged in the wealthy areas of eastern Caracas and relied heavily on the courts to halt construction projects which violated city ordinances. These organisations were generally free of political party interference, unlike the Juntas Pro-Mejora of the barrios which administered social programmes and were precursors of the neighbourhood associations in those areas.<sup>6</sup>

In 1971, fourteen neighbourhood associations in the affluent areas of the southeast of Caracas founded FACUR to serve as an interlocutor for the entire nation. Many of the middle class leaders who led these early struggles had travelled to developed nations where they were inspired by the example of public participation at the neighbourhood and municipal levels. The Ley Orgánica del Regimen Municipal (LORM) of 1978 granted neighbourhood associations certain rights, including legal recognition as the exclusive representatives of their respective communities. The LORM's Article 170 called on municipalities to encourage the formation of new associations; in subsequent years the central government's Fundación para el Desarrollo de la Comunidad

<sup>6</sup> María Luisa Ramos Rollón, *De las protestas a las propuestas: identidad, acción y relevancia política del movimiento vecinal en Venezuela* (Caracas, 1995), p. 91.

(Fundacomún) disseminated basic procedural information regarding these organisations in the nation's barrios. As a result, new associations spread to poorer areas of Caracas and the nation's interior.

The nation-wide influence of the neighbourhood movement since the early 1980s, specifically that of FACUR and the Escuela de Vecinos, stems from various sources. Both organisations have made skillful use of the media (the Escuela has a regular TV programme called 'Buenas Noticias' dedicated to community news) and have organised and participated in conferences, campaigns to collect signatures, and (in the case of FACUR) street protests. In addition, they formally represent the neighbourhood movement in various public agencies and commissions.

FACUR and the Escuela played an important role in the enactment of far-reaching political reforms in the late 1980s: the election of governors and mayors, the reduction of state and municipal electoral periods from five to three years, and particularly the issuance of the LORM's Executive Order Number 1 of 1990 (known as the *Reglamento Parcial*) which replaced that of 1979. FACUR and Escuela leaders had objected to the government's failure to consult civil society prior to decreeing the 1979 Executive Order: the 1990 Executive Order was designed to achieve the objective of affirming the neighbourhood movement's autonomous status *vis-à-vis* political parties and the state. Of primary importance, the decree stipulated that the elections of neighbourhood associations would be *uninominal*, whereby the voter selects candidates individually for specific positions, thus impeding the efforts of political parties to impose an entire slate on the organisation.

The neighbourhood input in the enactment of political reforms in the late 1980s was not matched by equivalent successes for the movement's established leadership in the 1990s, in spite of the heightening of social tension throughout the nation. The spontaneous national disturbances of the week of February 27, 1989 signalled the beginning of what one sociologist called a 'cycle of protests', which continued into the late 1990s and included mobilisations of neighbourhood residents against deficient public services.<sup>7</sup> Short-lived, and at times informally constituted, neighbourhood groups organised many of these protests without the participation of the respective neighbourhood associations.

Escuela de Vecinos leaders, who were more active in slum areas than the generally middle-class FACUR, attributed the stagnation of neighbourhood associations in the barrios to their excessive politicisation. At the same time, they expressed concern over the social animosity set off by the February disturbances which broke what they called the 'social fabric'

<sup>7</sup> Margarita López Maya, 'El repertorio de la protesta popular venezolana entre 1989 y 1993', *Cuadernos de Cendes*, no. 36 (1997) pp. 118–23.

linking diverse classes and guaranteeing relative social harmony.<sup>8</sup> One manifestation of this apprehension was the perception in middle class communities during and after the 27 February disturbances that slum dwellers were about to overrun their communities. In spite of the Escuela's concern, proposals to form a nation-wide organisation as a corrective to lower-middle class tensions failed to materialise.

*The Escuela de Vecinos*

In 1989 the President of FACUR, Elías Santana, founded the Coordinadora Nacional de Federaciones de Asociaciones de Vecinos (Confevecinos) to represent the neighbourhood movement at the national level and to promote the creation of new associations in the nation's interior. In doing so, Santana discarded FACUR's pretensions of being national in scope and, in fact, refused to accept associations outside of the capital as new members. He pointed out that while neighbourhood associations in the nation's interior had proliferated and began to group in federations at the state and municipal levels, FACUR remained essentially Caracas-based. He argued that FACUR's claim to represent the movement throughout the country only reinforced the long-standing tradition of centralism and the primacy of Caracas. Santana also warned that the party loyalty of many FACUR leaders would facilitate the penetration of the neighbourhood movement and manipulation from outside.

Santana's actions were opposed by other FACUR leaders who resented the failure to announce and debate openly within FACUR the plans to create Confevecinos. They viewed Santana's anti-party discourse as a cover for drawing close to business interests, which he hoped would displace the parties as props of the neighbourhood movement. One FACUR leader who accused Santana of catering to business interests claimed that 'the national bourgeoisie was intent on using the neighbourhood movement as a Trojan Horse in order to wrest political power from the political parties'.<sup>9</sup> Until then, various presidents of FACUR had been members or sympathisers of the nation's largest party, Acción Democrática (AD), which had also heavily subsidised the organisation. Santana's successor, Carmelo Moreno, was a member of the left-leaning Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) but sided with neigh-

<sup>8</sup> Santiago Martínez (general coordinator of Centro al Servicio de la Acción Popular), interview, 26 June 1998, Caracas. (Thirty extensive recorded interviews with important neighbourhood leaders were conducted as part of a larger study entitled 'Decentralisation and State Reform' financed by the Consejo de Investigación of the Universidad de Oriente. Upon completion, copies of these interviews will be donated to the Biblioteca Nacional of Venezuela and Columbia University's Butler Library).

<sup>9</sup> Carmelo Moreno (former FACUR president), interview, 1 Sept. 1995, Caracas.

bourhood leaders who were affiliated with other parties as well, including AD. Moreno pulled FACUR out of Confevecinos at the same time as he discontinued other initiatives supported by Santana, allegedly in order to discredit him. Santana and his followers who belonged to the FACUR-affiliated Escuela de Vecinos (the Neighbourhood School, founded in 1980) reacted by severing relations with the parent organisation.

The split-off of Santana's group went beyond personality clashes and conflicting notions of the territorial scope of FACUR. Disagreements regarding the relationship between the neighbourhood movement and party politics, the radius of legitimate concern of neighbourhood leaders, and the structure of neighbourhood organisations lay at the centre of the schism. The differences between the two organisations in many ways coincided with the above-mentioned dichotomy between, on the one hand, the 'autonomist' (or 'new social movement') approach, which privileges the defence of basic principles including participatory democracy, and, on the other, the political interaction perspective which favours direct participation in politics. Both organisations had a common anti-party discourse, but whereas the Escuela de Vecinos called on neighbourhood leaders to avoid all forms of political partisanship, FACUR's leadership was dominated by those who, to varying degrees, were concerned with electoral politics.

The Escuela is a non-governmental organisation which provides services to a specific sector of the population. Most important, it organises training sessions and offers advice to individual associations. Escuela members, who are carefully chosen on the basis of experience, participate in an annual general assembly where they designate a director and his administrative team, which in turn names the school's paid staff of instructors. FACUR leaders, who are all voluntary activists, criticise the Escuela's vertical structure as well as Santana's endless consecutive appointments as director. They also point to the close ties that Santana has cultivated with the private sector, which sponsors Escuela courses and its television and radio programmes.

The Escuela leaders conceptualise neighbourhood associations along the lines of 'interest groups' which refrain from participating in electoral politics or assuming functions which correspond to the state. For this reason they adamantly criticise neighbourhood association leaders who run for public office. This issue was aired within 'Decisión Ciudadana', an electoral group founded by FACUR leaders, when several of its members who belonged to neighbourhood *juntas* were elected to city council. One Escuela instructor pointed out that the role of civil society is to oversee state activity and thus 'it can not be an umpire and ball player in the same game'. He added that all Escuela instructors are independents, even



though ‘nothing prohibits us from belonging to a political party since it is a constitutional right’.<sup>10</sup>

AD, more than any other party, played an interventionist role in the neighbourhood movement in keeping with its policy in organised labour, the peasant movement and professional associations which it has traditionally dominated. Generally, the networks developed by neighbourhood associations which AD dominated played an important role during electoral campaigns in their respective communities. According to Santana, AD attempted to compensate for the loss of influence and prestige of the labour movement in the 1980s by gaining control of neighbourhood organisations. With this goal in mind, AD modified its statutes by providing the party’s community activists a special vote in internal party elections. In addition, all AD members on the executive board of neighbourhood associations automatically became delegates (*delegados natos*) to the party’s municipal conventions. Santana maintained that these rules encouraged party militants to get involved in neighbourhood activity not out of a community vocation, but as part of a commitment to their party and in order to further their standing within it.

Santana also denounced the government of AD’s Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989–93) for designating certain neighbourhood associations in the barrios to take charge of the distribution of subsidised powdered milk for the poor (*leche popular*). Santana maintained that the programme facilitated AD’s take-over of the neighbourhood movement by favouring those associations which were headed by party militants, particularly those identified with the faction led by President Pérez. Santana claimed that as many as four hundred associations (known pejoratively as ‘*Asolecheras*’) were created specially for this purpose. In some cases, they gained legal recognition as representing fragmented zones where no association existed, but they ended up using their privileges to displace other associations in adjacent areas. In addition to clientelism, the programme lent itself to corruption as some associations sold the milk to those unqualified to receive it, including firms that produced dairy products.

Escuela leaders believed that the national representatives of the neighbourhood movement should confine themselves to lobbying around political reforms. They attributed FACUR’s failure to retain its leadership role and prestige in the early 1990s to the narrow scope of its concerns. Luis Perrone, the director of the Escuela de Vecinos de Caracas, stressed FACUR’s lack of sustained interest in proposals for political reform, which had previously earned the federation national prominence:

<sup>10</sup> José Gregorio Delgado (Escuela de Vecinos instructor and former legal director of Confevecinos), interview, 10 Dec. 1991, Puerto La Cruz.



It was our hope that FACUR be present in the great struggles of the neighbourhood movement for electoral [and] municipal reform. A national federation should direct its efforts toward the political aspects of the movement .... Neighbourhood associations, on the other hand, should solve the problem of the holes in the street and the lighting. It [the federation] should concern itself with the municipalisation of Caracas, that Caracas should elect its own governor, that the *uninomiladidad* reforms be deepened. FACUR practically disappeared from this area and instead, for example, when Melchor López Pérez was president of FACUR (1993–95) he accompanied representatives of the consumer protection [commission] in closing down grocery stores.... That really is not the role of the president of a federation of neighbourhood associations. The strategic conception, whereby the neighbourhood movement formulates a political project, was lost as was its social visibility in the communications media.<sup>11</sup>

The Escuela's long-term vision resembles US-style democracy in which political parties are confined to electoral politics and government, and civil society is largely divorced from political society. Indeed, US official circles have long attempted to impose this model on Latin America, particularly in the labour movement. Like many of the 'new social movement' theorists who look toward a utopian, post-industrial society and write off party politics, Escuela leaders refuse to participate in the seemingly unprincipled struggle to gain political influence or change the power structure. Since dissolving Confevecinos which they feared was about to be taken over by AD, they have deliberately put off the task of creating a centralised, efficacious movement with coherent positions to an unspecified future date. Their purist perspective leads them to limit their work largely to orienting the activists of individual associations, activity which is designed to raise levels of civic consciousness and achieve a long-term cultural transformation.

### *FACUR*

What most distinguishes FACUR leaders from the Escuela de Vecinos is their membership in political parties and electoral groups and activism which encompasses both political and socio-economic concerns. For one former FACUR president the Escuela's policy of prohibiting its members from engaging in all forms of partisan electoral activity, and its insistence that candidates for public office not publicly identify themselves with the neighbourhood movement in any way, reflects an 'aseptic view of the neighbourhood movement'.<sup>12</sup> Another ex-president of the organisation, Angel Enrique Zambrano, ran for mayor of the newly-created municipality of Baruta in Caracas on three occasions and was elected once, in 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Luis Perrone (executive coordinator of Escuela de Vecinos de Caracas), interview, 31 Aug. 1995, Caracas. <sup>12</sup> Carmelo Moreno, interview, 1 Sept. 1995, Caracas.

Zambrano recognised that the neighbourhood associations should refrain from endorsing candidates. At the same time, however, he claimed that the experience of neighbourhood leaders made them ideal to serve in municipal government and on the *juntas parroquiales* (which represent city hall at the community level) in an elective capacity. Zambrano, as mayor of Baruta, proposed the creation of electoral groups at the local- and state-levels to support prestigious neighbourhood leaders who were candidates in municipal elections. In order to coordinate these efforts, his organisation *Decisión Ciudadana* sent representatives throughout the country. Indeed, a large number of independents ran for local office following the electoral reform of 1988 that scrapped the system of closed slates (which favoured political parties and their centralised leadership). In calling for a loosely structured national electoral movement which would refrain from dictating policies at the local level, Zambrano in effect assigned greater importance to the neighbourhood credentials of candidates than to the enactment of a particular political programme.

During his three-year term as mayor of Baruta and in his three mayoral campaigns, Zambrano embraced a model of local government based on community participation. In 1993, Zambrano helped to organise a convention of mayors where he spoke out against the decentralisation process for failing to reach the municipal level. At the same time, he took the governors to task for not providing the mayors with sufficient resources to enable them to assume the powers conferred upon them by recent legislation. In addition, Zambrano called for referendums to decide important local issues.<sup>13</sup> As mayor, he complained of being denied ready access to the gubernatorial-run *Policía Metropolitana*, whose military status and vertical structure impeded community input.

FACUR and the *Escuela* concurred in their efforts to lobby for the establishment of single-member electoral districts along with the elimination of proportional representation (PR). Those who opposed such a measure pointed out that PR encouraged plurality in city government. FACUR president Melchor López recognised the danger of single-party rule but insisted that such a tendency ‘may, in the worst of cases, prevail for three or four electoral periods but people are increasingly casting ‘votes of conscience’ [for the candidate rather than the party] thanks to *uninominal* districts, while councilmen are doing the same by bucking their party’s machine since they are now more responsive to their

<sup>13</sup> In a much criticised omission, the Constitution – and legislation in general – makes no provision for holding nation – or state-wide referendums, except to ratify constitutional reforms. In contrast, the LORM (Article 175) requires municipalities to hold a referendum when ten per cent of the voters petition for it.

constituency.’ Thus, plurality will eventually be achieved, not because elected offices are apportioned on the basis of PR, but rather because no one party has a franchise on the best candidates. López went on to note that FACUR encouraged this voting pattern in Caracas, particularly in Baruta where it organised debates in which the candidates interacted directly with the public.<sup>14</sup>

FACUR’s opposition to PR formed part of its strategy of achieving neighbourhood penetration of local government. In the first place, PR favours parties over neighbourhood-based electoral groups, which were usually not in a position to form municipal-wide slates. In the second, the elimination of that system placed individual candidates rather than political organisations in the limelight, and thus enhanced the chances of those who lacked party backing.

FACUR leaders supported other electoral measures to strengthen the linkage between elected officials and the communities and facilitate neighbourhood displacement of political parties in local government. FACUR approached the independents on the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE, the state electoral commission) in order to pressure for neighbourhood representation on the CSE.<sup>15</sup> At one point, FACUR withdrew from the CSE to protest the naming of party sympathisers rather than genuine independents to serve on electoral commissions, as stipulated in the Suffrage Law, and at the widespread violation of residence requirements for candidates in the 1995 municipal elections.

FACUR has also called for electoral districts which preserve traditional boundaries. According to one FACUR board member,

the CSE has drawn imaginary lines which lump together [middle class] *urbanizaciones*, slums, and even rural areas. In Caracas and elsewhere, the *parroquias* [traditional neighbourhoods] have not been taken into account. FACUR has presented a harsh critique of the CSE’s practice since it prevents the electorate from developing a close bond with its representatives, but the CSE’s response was that there is simply no other way to do it.

Nevertheless, the proposal to create electoral districts around established territorial entities, namely *parroquias* and municipalities, was implemented for the 1998–1999 general elections.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of FACUR’s fervent anti-party rhetoric, political parties were well represented on the federation’s governing board. At the time of Melchor López’s presidency, members of AD, the social Christian Copei, MAS and Decisión Ciudadana occupied four of the board’s seven positions. López defended the party composition of his board: ‘In this

<sup>14</sup> Melchor López Pérez, interview, 14 Aug. 1993, Caracas.

<sup>15</sup> Miguel Tovar (FACUR board member), interview, 21 Aug. 1995, Caracas.

<sup>16</sup> Esperanza de Cuevas (FACUR treasurer), interview, 16 Oct. 1992.

way we receive constructive party input at the same time that we prevent any one party from dominating the organisation'. He went on to indicate that it was a 'point of honour' for the federation that the previous practice of accepting donations from parties had been completely eliminated.<sup>17</sup> Escuela members, however, viewed FACUR as a 'federation of political parties'.<sup>18</sup> One Escuela instructor stated that, 'even though FACUR elections are *uninominal* (and not by slate), many of those who attend its annual assembly are given a *chuleta* (voting instruction) which is tantamount to a slate and this goes against the idea of the *uninominal* system, which means voting for the most qualified candidate'.<sup>19</sup> FACUR's efforts to discourage individual ambition by ruling out internal campaigns prior to its annual assembly may be conducive to this type of manipulation since alternative candidacies do not readily emerge.

At the time Santana created Confevecinos, most FACUR leaders criticised it for being too loosely organised. Under Confevecinos's federative structure, each one of its 34 affiliated federations had equal weight on the organisation's governing board. A more tightly knit structure would have provided FACUR, which was by far the most influential federation in the nation, with a dominant position. Indeed, Escuela members accused FACUR of attempting to place itself at the helm of the national neighbourhood movement.

After 1990, however, both FACUR and the Escuela de Vecinos lost nearly all interest in forming a permanent neighbourhood organisation at the national level. Indeed, most Escuela members concurred that the creation of Confevecinos in 1989 had been an error since 'we were doing the work of the parties by establishing a structure that they could easily take over'.<sup>20</sup> FACUR leaders had similar experiences with party penetration. FACUR Treasurer Esperanza de Cuevas argued that AD leaders promoted centralisation since their superior influence would have entitled them to the presidency: 'They [AD] tried to utilise two people, namely Carmelo Moreno, ex-president [of FACUR] and member of MAS, and myself, a social Christian (Copei member), by placing us in the leadership in order to mask their intentions of controlling the entire movement, but I frankly do not believe in these super-federations'.<sup>21</sup>

Subsequently, FACUR leaders agreed to participate in national meetings that brought the neighbourhood movement together, but under the proviso that no permanent organisation would be forthcoming. They

<sup>17</sup> López Pérez, interview, 28 Nov. 1994, Caracas.

<sup>18</sup> Israel Jaspe (Escuela de Vecinos), interview, 2 June 1998, Caracas.

<sup>19</sup> Elías Santana, interview, 14 Aug. 1991, Caracas.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin Cisneros (Escuela de Vecinos), interview, 25 Aug. 1994, Caracas.

<sup>21</sup> Cuevas, interview, 10 Aug. 1994, Caracas.

preferred 'national congresses', with their previously agreed agenda, to the more spontaneous 'encounters' (*encuentros*), which were sponsored by Confevecinos under the leadership of the Escuela. They argued that the informality of the 'encounters' made it easier for a coterie to manipulate the event in favour of partisan interests. In contrast, ex-FACUR president Carmelo Moreno, among others, called for the establishment of an organically integrated national structure for the neighbourhood movement.<sup>22</sup>

Having all but abandoned organisational plans at the national level, FACUR and Escuela leaders viewed with great interest the system of local 'coordinators', even though these lacked a legal status (*personalidad jurídica*). They pointed to the greater democratic potential of the coordinators, which grouped neighbourhood associations in different municipal areas on the basis of specific issues and struggles, over the 'bureaucratic' state- and municipal-wide federations. The coordinators had responsibilities over a smaller geographical area, which facilitated direct input from below, and a rudimentary internal structure based on rotation in leadership positions.<sup>23</sup>

#### *The hiatus between national and local levels*

The disunity and atomisation which characterise the Venezuelan neighbourhood movement is in large part a product of the gap between the policies embraced by its national leaders and the positions and daily practices of individual associations. These fissures are aggravated by differences in the interests of the associations which represent the *urbanizaciones*, on the one hand, and those of the *barrios*, on the other. Furthermore, many of the pressing problems confronting the neighbourhoods due to the economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s demanded immediate solutions and some of those proposed are of dubious legality, thus producing controversy and ambivalent responses. Unlike most of the important demands of the labour movement which are monetary and quantitative in nature, these issues are complex and have been analysed from distinct perspectives. Many national leaders (such as those of the Escuela de Vecinos) found refuge from this complexity by embracing a purist model, or evaded the issues completely by evoking the principle of the autonomous status of each association. In short, coherent positions which reflect the daily activities of individual associations have not been forthcoming at the national level. Four issues which are basic to the

<sup>22</sup> In recent years, loose national bodies have emerged which group sectors such as women activists, micro-companies, and NGOs (whose organisation is called 'Sinergia').

<sup>23</sup> Miguel Tovar, interview, 21 Aug. 1995, Caracas.

concerns of the neighbourhood associations will now be discussed from this perspective.

*Land tenure and squatter settlements*

During the period of armed struggle after the initiation of the democratic regime in 1958, leftists often organised popular takeovers of *cerros* (known as *cerros ajuro* – hills taken by force) in Caracas and elsewhere. They usually proceeded on the basis of a rudimentary plan which included the location of roads and houses, but were unconcerned with ecological considerations. According to city zoning, the *cerros* were off-limits to construction of any type due to the importance of the vegetation, the fragility of the soil, and the vulnerability of buildings to landslides set off by torrential rain. President Rómulo Betancourt (AD, 1959–64) eventually clamped down on these actions out of fear that they would discourage private investment.<sup>24</sup>

Following the defeat of the leftist guerrilla movement in the 1960s, land invasions and the legalisation of squatter settlements assumed different political implications. Both leftists and Copei members generally expressed concern that the land takeovers were ecologically harmful and created chaos since the new communities were completely lacking in public services and infrastructure. At the same time, they attributed the actions to ‘populist’ and opportunistic politicians, specifically those of AD. During electoral campaigns, politicians procured building material, such as asphalt, cement blocks and corrugated iron for roofs, and used their influence in city government to grant land titles on an individual basis. Those opposed to land occupation also pointed out that, unlike in the early 1960s, ‘professionals’ often organised them as a way of making money. An area that was greater than needed was often staked out, and the excess land sold, albeit without legal documents.<sup>25</sup>

Neighbourhood associations in the barrios frequently issued property certificates which, along with construction contracts and receipts of *ejido* rent payment, facilitated the legalisation of tenancy and, in turn, eligibility for public assistance for home improvement. Naturally, *urbanización* residents disapproved of the illegally created barrios, particularly because the squatters did not pay property tax nor were they charged for public services.

Neighbourhood movement leaders formulated two diametrically opposed positions regarding illegal settlements, as did local politicians. One called for the legalisation, zoning and consolidation of squatter settlements, in order to provide their inhabitants with public services and

<sup>24</sup> Talton F. Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios of Venezuela* (Berkeley, 1969), p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Ray, p. 40.

the opportunity to purchase land. Although these leaders recognised the necessity of razing some houses because of their extreme precariousness or in order to make way for roads which the *cerros* lacked, they argued that community members should be in charge of such decision-making. The other point of view called for nothing less than the wholesale evacuation of the *cerros*. These leaders pointed to the social and economic costs produced by landslides in areas not suitable to construction. This position was articulated by FACUR treasurer Esperanza de Cuevas, who blamed neighbourhood leaders along with ‘populist politicians’ for failing to come up with viable solutions:

There is no strategy. Venezuela has a vast extension of land especially toward the frontier and even in the central region where these people could be located.... Physically stable barrios exist, but what percentage? They say that the stable barrios in the metropolitan area of Caracas do not reach 30 per cent.... A dictatorial power such as Pérez Jiménez could put 30 or 50 families on a bus and leave them off someplace because nobody could say anything. But now with liberty of information liberty of press, this would create a scandal. The politicians see this problem as too difficult, too complicated. It is easier to asphalt the holes in the streets (of the barrios). No one is thinking of Venezuela 50 years from now.<sup>26</sup>

Cuevas went on to claim that government retardation in consolidating the barrios and legalizing land tenancy was a stop-gap device designed to slow down land invasions but not eliminate them, nor confront the problem. Although the government has never implemented plans for massive relocation, it has cleared unsafe and illegal communities on an individual basis. The forced evacuations are often a response to pressure from residents of wealthy communities who resent adjacent squatter settlements, or public figures who warn of possible calamities resulting from precarious construction.

#### *The formation of new municipalities*

The process of decentralisation which was initiated in 1978 with the Ley Orgánica del Régimen Municipal (LORM) was an attractive corrective to the nation’s extreme centralism, but at the same time it threatened to aggravate inequality along geographical lines and cater to extreme localism. These negative tendencies were stimulated by Chapter Two of the LORM which provided for the creation of new municipalities with the approval of two thirds of the deputies of the state legislature. From 1990 to 1998, when decentralisation was in full swing, 63 areas split off from existing municipalities under the terms of the LORM.

The creation of new municipalities was inspired by the neighbourhood

<sup>26</sup> Cuevas, interview, 10 Aug. 1994, Caracas.



movement's support for smaller units of decision-making, which was considered conducive to direct participation by the general populace. Along these lines, neighbourhood leaders championed such developments as the creation of the *juntas parroquiales* (mini-city governments established by the LORM, which were originally to be divided into five electoral subdistricts), the establishment of single-member voting districts, and the reduction in the size of the neighbourhood associations (made possible by the rescinding of the LORM's Executive Order of 1979, which required a minimum of two hundred families in a community to be able to constitute a neighbourhood association).

The three new municipalities that emerged in Caracas after 1989 consisted of affluent sectors and thus their separation added to the capital's socio-economic polarisation. FACUR leaders particularly criticised the creation of one of them, Chacao, which was the wealthiest municipality in the country. FACUR's Esperanza de Cuevas claimed that powerful economic interests including financial institutions promoted the split-off in order to modify zoning ordinances and overcome official resistance to urban development plans: 'Before it was common to buy off the municipal engineers in order to get around city ordinances but now they are more intelligent they simply change the ordinance'.<sup>27</sup> Santana also questioned most municipal split-offs as the work of 'demagogic politicians' who play on localistic sentiment, but added that 'we have to examine each case individually since not all new municipalities are the product of opportunism, since some of them are based on historical resentments that are fully justified'.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Measures to control delinquency*

Many neighbourhood leaders justified anti-crime measures which lacked a legal basis on the grounds that personal insecurity had reached epidemic proportions and required bold solutions. Armed community brigades, speed bumps, and the 'privatisation' of neighbourhoods in order to monitor or restrict incoming traffic generated controversy because of complications that arose. In slum areas, for example, the brigades often escaped the control of the Metropolitan Police which was supposed to oversee them, at the same time that their arms fell into the hands of criminal elements. In addition, private guards in wealthy communities sometimes impeded traffic bound for other locations, or discriminated against those residents who failed to pay community dues. National neighbourhood leaders were opposed to these practices, but pointed out that, like the creation of new municipalities and the invasion of *cerros* by

<sup>27</sup> Cuevas, interview, 16 Oct. 1992, Caracas.

<sup>28</sup> Santana, interview, 18 Aug. 1994, Caracas.

poor people, they were *faits accomplis*. Recognising that ‘any mayor who attempts to undo these measures will be very unpopular’,<sup>29</sup> national neighbourhood leaders applauded the passage of ordinances which checked their more glaring abuses. These city laws limited traffic inspection stations to streets which serve as entrances to closed communities, and restricted the use of arms by neighbourhood brigades to situations of self defense.

Controversy along class lines was also generated by the agreements between neighbourhood associations in barrios and gangs whereby the latter refrained from selling drugs to minors who lived in the area and from committing crimes on certain days of the year. FACUR secretary Alida Freites pointed out that ‘in my barrio we remind gang members that we are the ones that drive you to the hospitals when anything happens, and so please do not rob our very own cars’.<sup>30</sup> FACUR president Melchor López played a major role in the best known programme of this type in the barrio of Los Erasos in Caracas in the early 1990s. Six police cadets, who because of their age were considered idealistic and receptive to novel ideas, were selected to approach criminals with a record of two arrests and to offer them job opportunities for training at the same time that they threatened them with draconian measures and persecution if arrested a third time. The programme proved to be a resounding success as seventy delinquents signed up. López pointed out that ‘We (FACUR) did not impose the idea on the community nor do we even advocate it. Each community has to choose its own solutions. This may work, as in Los Erasos, where the delinquents operated in the same barrios where they resided. Furthermore, it is the community that knows who the delinquents are and can distinguish between those who are beyond remedy and those who are curable’.<sup>31</sup> In short, this programme, like the privatisation of the *urbanizaciones* and the creation of armed brigades, was the initiative of individual neighbourhood associations; such programmes could clearly not easily be put forward by the national neighbourhood movement as all-encompassing solutions. In contrast to the case of the armed brigades, no national politician or prominent government official dared endorse the programme of Los Erasos and indeed some vocally opposed it.

*Neighbourhood associations and their interaction with the state*

Neo-corporatist legislation which recognises the legally constituted neighbourhood associations as the exclusive representatives of their respective communities and obliges municipal government to consult

<sup>29</sup> Perrone, interview, 11 Aug. 1994, Caracas.

<sup>30</sup> Alida Freites (FACUR secretary), interview, 21 Aug. 1995, Caracas.

<sup>31</sup> López Pérez, interview, 28 Nov. 1994, Caracas.

them before undertaking public works has served to obscure the distinction between civil society and the state. Local neighbourhood leaders interpreted these laws as investing their organisations with official responsibilities. Associations sometimes inspected public works in their neighbourhoods and halted them for technical reasons, issued their members good conduct certificates (a faculty which corresponds to the prefecture), assigned much coveted telephone numbers to individual families, and issued building permits and commercial licenses. Some of these functions theoretically correspond to the *Juntas Parroquiales* created by the 1989 Reform of the LORM to represent municipal government in the communities. Most of those bodies, however, never got off the ground, and the majority of municipalities outside Caracas even failed to pass ordinances defining their responsibilities in detail. National neighbourhood leaders, who viewed with apprehension the blurring of the distinction between the state and civil society, had lobbied for the establishment of the *juntas* which were designed to serve as a liaison between the neighbourhood associations and city hall.

Luis Perrone of the Escuela de Vecinos defended neighbourhood associations which use force, or the threat of it, to halt public work projects in their communities on grounds that they are not acting in the name of the state, but rather are exercising the legitimate right to commit ‘civil disobedience’.<sup>32</sup> In spite of this interpretation, Perrone’s overall assessment of the daily practices of the neighbourhood associations and the positions they assume was extremely pessimistic: ‘The feudal concept in which no one wants a school or gasoline station in their neighbourhoods, even though these services have to be located somewhere, has largely prevailed’. Perrone noted that associations sometimes take on state functions in order to execute plans which in no way solve – and indeed sometimes aggravate – the problems of society as a whole. Examples of this phenomenon include middle class *urbanizaciones* which close themselves off to outside traffic and barrio residents who reach agreements with street gangs, in effect encouraging them to operate elsewhere. Perrone concluded that the majority of the associations go beyond their legal functions and at the same time are highly politicised and inwardly directed.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, Perrone and other Escuela leaders have opposed centralisation as premature, and instead concentrated their efforts on

<sup>32</sup> Perrone, interview, 11 Aug. 1995, Caracas.

<sup>33</sup> Perrone, interview, 11 Aug. 1994, Caracas. Indeed, this evaluation was at odds with the optimism and emphasis on constructive deeds which the Escuela de Vecinos has always tried to project. The Escuela’s weekly TV programme ‘Buenos Días’ was explicitly designed to underscore the positive side of community experiences in order to counter the negative images projected by the communications media about Venezuelan politics and society.

educating members of individual associations in order to transform the movement from the bottom up.

The potential of the neighbourhood movement to play a major role in the political system in Venezuela is enhanced by its increasing membership, which is probably superior to that of organised labour, the size of which has been shrinking in line with world-wide trends.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the neighbourhood movement has gained a reputation of credibility far above that of the workers' movement; according to a public opinion survey conducted in 1996, three times more respondents indicated they had confidence in neighbourhood associations than those who responded positively about labour unions.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the neighbourhood movement has also fallen short of the favourable prospects of earlier years. The split of the Escuela de Vecinos from FACUR in 1990 and the dissolution of Confevecinos signalled an organisational dispersion at the same time that the movement's national representatives failed to develop systematic links with the rank and file. Furthermore, individual neighbourhood associations failed to spearhead the mobilisations against deficient public services, which formed part of the 'cycle of protests' set off by the February 1989 disturbances.

This article has examined two basic explanations of the failure of the Venezuelan neighbourhood movement to live up to the high expectations it generated during the last decade. The first section discussed political party interference, to which both the Escuela de Vecinos and FACUR (particularly in recent years) consistently objected. The Escuela with its 'autonomist' approach naturally stressed the problem of outside interference which it considered to be at odds with the virtually sacred principle of social movement autonomy. FACUR leaders, for their part, followed a 'political interaction' approach. The vehicle many of them chose to achieve this objective was electoral groups, which competed with political parties for votes. Both Escuela and FACUR leaders embraced an

<sup>34</sup> According to political scientist Luis Salamanca, 'neighbourhood associations are quantitatively the most important social force in Venezuela, edging out the unions'. The 1991 census placed the number of neighbourhood associations in the country at 10,000. Prior to 1990 each association was required by law to represent at least 200 families, and so it could be inferred that at the beginning of the decade the neighbourhood movement took in a minimum of 2,000,000 families. Interviewees conducted for this study concurred that the number of associations has increased in recent years. This information confirms Salamanca's affirmation considering that estimates generally place the number of organised workers at 2,000,000. Official statistics on membership in neighbourhood association are lacking. Salamanca, 'The Venezuelan Political System: A View from Civil Society', in Jennifer McCoy, Andrés Serbín, William C. Smith, Andrés Stambouli, *Venezuelan Democracy under Stress* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995), p. 210.

<sup>35</sup> Fundación Pensamiento y Acción, *Cultura democrática en Venezuela: informe analítico de resultados* (Caracas, 1996), pp. 47–49.

anti-party discourse in keeping with their respective outlooks and objectives. The major thesis of the article is that the determination of national neighbourhood leaders to avoid political party control blinded them to the movement's basic liability, which was its fragmentation and disarticulation, and detracted from their ability to find viable solutions to overcome it.

The second set of problems analysed in the second section of this article was the movement's internal contrasts and incohesion. Most important was the differences between the associations of the *barrios* and *urbanizaciones*. The preference of neighbourhood leaders in Caracas for the "coordinators," which grouped associations of similar social backgrounds, over city-wide federations with their multi-class constituency demonstrated the extent to which this cleavage divided the neighbourhood movement. Neighbourhood agreements with street gangs, for instance, received considerable support in those *barrios* where the delinquents were not outsiders, in contrast to the sentiment prevailing in middle class neighbourhoods, which adamantly opposed such pacts. Differences over plans to legalise the status of squatters, either individually through the sale of ejidos or through zoning changes taking in the entire *barrio*, also reflected distinct social perspectives. Many middle class leaders, including several FACUR and Escuela spokesmen interviewed for this study, called for the wholesale evacuation of those *cerros* which were precarious, both for those who lived there as well as for the entire city from an ecological viewpoint. Class background also shaped opinions toward land takeovers. The neighbourhood associations of the *urbanizaciones* viewed with great alarm squatter settlements in the vicinity and often pressured the city government to clear them out. This attitude contrasted with that of slum inhabitants, most of whom lacked land ownership and who, because of overcrowded conditions, sometimes participated in land invasions in their own communities. Finally, middle class associations benefited from the professional expertise, resources and sense of efficacy of their members and were thus less dependent on parties than those of the *barrios*, whose problems demanded immediate solutions.

### *Conclusions*

Over the last several decades, the literature on social movements – particularly that of European scholars who have influenced writing on Latin America more than their North American counterparts – has displayed a strong normative bent. Many writers on social movements celebrate salient features of their subject matter that at first glance would appear to be liabilities and disadvantages. They stress the diversity of the

movements, in terms of slogans and actors, and the multiplicity of ideological positions embracing similar objectives (for instance, conservatives and leftists who participate in the struggle against racism or sexism).<sup>36</sup> Some writers on Latin America have pointed to the advantage of this dispersion in that actors occupying a variety of spaces reinforce similar objectives.<sup>37</sup> In the second place, these social scientists place a premium on the decentralised thrust and structure of the movements and the local targets they select to protest against (a factory that pollutes or an urban construction project). Indeed, the anti-centralism of social movements in Latin America represents a reaction to the continent's well established centralist tradition.<sup>38</sup> Finally, they exalt the newness of the movements and contrast them with the centralistic and corporatist structures of organised labour. The relative novelty also stems from the autonomy of the new social movements *vis-à-vis* political society and particularly political parties.

National spokesmen for the Venezuelan neighbourhood movement (both the Escuela de Vecinos and FACUR) shared this perspective. Here we have identified the profound nature of the neighbourhood movement's fear of centralised structures, its localistic focus and its exaltation of diversity (which impeded it from prioritising demands and issues). The extreme dependence of organised labour on political parties in Venezuela served as a warning signal for the neighbourhood movement, such as the Escuela de Vecinos leaders who boasted that all of their instructors were politically unaffiliated.

In recent years, political observers and academic writers have pointed to the failure of social movements in Latin America to achieve their full potential, and attribute this shortcoming to the distance they maintain from political structures. In contrast to some European writers who viewed social movements as engaged in defensive politics designed to check the encroachment of the state (as well as the market) on the personal sphere,<sup>39</sup> they call for an offensive strategy which includes alliances with political actors.

Nevertheless, these writers do not belittle the importance of maintaining the independence of civil society, a primary concern of European

<sup>36</sup> One of the outstanding books on social movements which stresses the advantages of diversity is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, 1985).

<sup>37</sup> 'Conclusion: Horizons of Change in Contemporary Latin American Social Movements', in Escobar and Alvarez (eds.), *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder, 1992), p. 324.

<sup>38</sup> David Slater, 'New Social Movements and Old Political Questions: Rethinking State-Society Relations in Latin American Development', in *International Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 21, no. 1, Spring, 1991.

<sup>39</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (London, 1973).

social movement writers. Joe Foweraker, for instance, claims that linkages with political institutions, far from sacrificing the autonomy of social movements, can fortify their individual identity especially in struggles resulting in victories.<sup>40</sup> Foweraker and others deny that political parties have sapped the strength of social movements throughout Latin America. They take issue with the thesis that social movements were forced to play a subservient role to political parties in order to ensure the transition to democracy, albeit in restricted form.<sup>41</sup> According to Foweraker, democratic consolidation, rather than representing a fatal blow for social movements, created a propitious atmosphere for them, while their relations with political society remained ‘ambiguous’.<sup>42</sup>

Foweraker and others who attach importance to the structural links of social movements generally refrain from pointing to the liability of organisational fragmentation. Both political analysts and actors view the ephemeral character and fragility of social movement structures (such as umbrella organisations) as a given, since they define the movements as ‘non-hierarchical’. In a similar vein, Sidney Tarrow in his much acclaimed *Power in Movement* minimises formal organisation and economic factors and attributes the expansion of social movements to political opportunities (such as intra-elite conflict).<sup>43</sup>

Writers on social movements belonging to the European School overstate their case against well structured, nation-wide organisations. Social scientists who highlight the importance of political linkages fail adequately to address the issue. Just as cooperation with political structures may represent a middle ground between dependence on political parties and the state, at one extreme, and aseptic apoliticism, at the other, nation-wide organisations may stop short of the extreme centralism of the ‘old’ social movements. Indeed, the student and civil

<sup>40</sup> Joe Foweraker, *Theorizing Social Movements* (London, 1995), pp. 63. In recent years, social movement scholars writing on Latin America have displayed considerable interest in achieving a synthesis of the European and US approaches. Sonia E. Alvarez and Arturo Escobar also analyse the two approaches and call for a ‘careful blending’ both on theoretical and methodological levels. See Alvarez and Escobar, ‘Conclusion’, p. 319. See also Gerardo L. Munck, ‘Algunos problemas conceptuales en el estudio de los movimientos sociales’, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, vol. 57, number 3, 1995, p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> One of the first works to systematically defend this thesis was Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter (eds.), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, 1986).

<sup>42</sup> Foweraker, ‘Movimientos sociales y derechos del ciudadano en América Latina’, in Menno Villinga (Coordinator), *El cambio del papel del estado en América Latina* (Mexico, 1997), pp. 385, 388; Foweraker, *Theorizing Social Movements*, p. 108. For the opposing viewpoint, see Philip Oxhorn, *Organizing Civil Society: Popular Organisations and the Struggle for Democracy in Chile* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1995).

<sup>43</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge, 1994), Chapter 8.



rights movements of the 1960s, which served as a take off point for 'new' social movements, were nationally structured. When the Escuela de Vecinos leaders abolished the nation-wide confederation Confevecinos in order to avert party takeover of the organisation, they failed to recognise that a fragmented movement may well be more vulnerable to party domination than a nationally organised one. Furthermore, structural cohesion is necessary in order to make the movement's influence felt even at the local and state levels, whose importance has been enhanced by the decentralisation policies of recent years. One of the stumbling blocks to the unification of the Venezuelan neighbourhood movement is the notion, adhered to by activists and scholars alike, that centralist structures of any type are tantamount to the old way of doing politics.