

“Under the mask” reports:**VENEZUELA**

Educating community leaders to achieve local changes in rural communities

***Abstract:** The goal of this project was to give human rights tools to a community named Brisas del Chama located in Mérida, Venezuela. These tools were handed out through human rights workshops, educative booklets, and through the practical use of the right of access to information to achieve policy changes in urban transportation, which is fundamental to Brisas del Chama for everyday life during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Executive Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic the Venezuelan government tightened restrictions towards civic participation and everyday life, making regular things like transportation to other states almost impossible. In the midst of this reality, since 2020, Espacio Público has activated a group of social activists around the country to push forward the agenda of the NGO to promote and defend freedom of speech and access to information.

Brisas del Chama is a rural community located in Mérida, Venezuela. The current pandemic has worsened even further the capabilities of the community to execute everyday activities, but the most aggravating problem that has become more profound during the pandemic is the access to public transportation and gasoline to achieve mobility from the community to the main cities of the state. Inhabitants of Brisas del Chama depend on public transport to go to their jobs and do everyday chores in the city. The lack and further worsening of public transportation during the pandemic has affected the capability of its inhabitants to work and resume everyday life. This problem was first identified in the first meetings with the community and was the main issue addressed through the project.

To help the community address this problem, we focused on a fundamental tool: the use of the right to access information through a formal request. Public transportation was chosen as the topic to be addressed, because among many issues that arose during the meetings with the community, this was the most pressing one due to the fact that Brisas del Chama and its inhabitants mainly depend on this service for daily activities. Transportation has worsened even further after the quarantine months of 2020, the general lack of investment in the region, and the humanitarian crisis that has also worsened since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dayana Rangel is our ally in Mérida, and has been our executive arm in Brisas del Chama to educate the already present social leaders of the community in different aspects regarding human rights and the exercise of freedom of speech. Through workshops (formal activities and informal activities also called “cafes”) Dayana has involved herself in the dynamics and problems of the community, offering the community the fundamental tool used by Espacio Público when faced with a community problem: **the use of the right to access to information through a formal request.**

Different workshops were given to the community, specifically:

- Human Rights.
- Documentation of human rights violations.
- Access to public information and usage of social networks.

Aside from these formal workshops, several encounters with the community were made. Said encounters are referred to as “cafes,” which are safe spaces in which the community members can openly speak about their day to day life and troubles. These cafes serve the purpose for the regional coordinator to visualize which are the most important problems that affect the community that may be linked directly to—in this case, access to information and the COVID pandemic. These “cafes” were essential in discovering the importance and gravity of the issue of public transportation in Brisas del Chama.

Each workshop is specific to the mandate of Espacio Público, even if there is a general focus on human rights. The main objective is always to empower the community to use free speech and access to information as a tool for change. The attendees varied from workshop to workshop but, as we have seen in other communities, there were regular attendees who typically serve as social leaders of the community. Brisas del Chama has teachers from the local rural school as leaders for the social movement of the community; there are several young people of college age involved with social activism in the community.

Pamphlets were disseminated through our regional coordinator, Dayana Rangel, who obtained them on a visit to Espacio Público’s HQ in Caracas. She left to Mérida with an array of booklets, which were handed out to specific people in Brisas del Chama who were regular attendees of the workshops. Several booklets and pamphlets were also left in a school that was the regular meeting place for workshops.

Finally, all these resources and meetings were celebrated in order to motivate the community once again and reactivate their civic space activities which were present before the pandemic. The delivery of a legal request for public information to the mayor is also an instrument used to motivate the community to follow up on the request and make further demands of the Municipality for change in their community.

Challenges and objectives

The objective of the project was to impart education in human rights to Brisas del Chama through workshops, booklets, and other strategies furthered by the NGO with the purpose of empowering the community to demand change from their local authorities.

During the first approach with the inhabitants of Brisas del Chama, Dayana Rangel was able to understand the main issues that affect them, mainly the fact that public transportation has been unstable since before the pandemic, but with the start of the pandemic and the quarantine, local authorities have stopped funding public transport, and this has in turn made it almost impossible for the people from Brisas del Chama to go to work in the city or to generally move from the community to other parts of the state.

To attend to the issue of a neglected public transportation system during the COVID-19 pandemic, Dayana Rangel and the legal team of Espacio Público agreed on making use of a formal request of information to the mayor in order to demand answers regarding funding, projects, bus routes, and financing of public transport specially during the pandemic. Said letter was delivered in the mayor's office on the 11th of October and was due to be reviewed on the 11th of November; yet due to a change in administration, public employees of the Municipality have refused to acknowledge the receipt of the second letter, openly violating the Venezuelan Constitution.

Several challenges were encountered during the execution of the project:

- General discouragement in the community due to the humanitarian crisis which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though Brisas del Chama is a community with strong social leadership, part of the job of our local facilitator was to encourage community leaders and members to push forward an agenda to demand change regarding public transportation.
- Long distance between the main city and Brisas del Chama was also a challenge faced by our local facilitator, Dayana Rangel. This was because of the gasoline shortage that the country is experiencing at the moment.
- Internet connectivity was also a major issue regarding communication with our local facilitator. It is important to note in this regard that Dayana has always been an excellent ally of Espacio Público due to her organization and documentation skills. Said skills helped overcome communication issues, as she was always on time with reports and updates.
- Regional elections were held during the final stages of the project, which made it harder for our regional coordinator to push the mayor and other departments of the Municipality for an answer regarding the request of the community for public information.

A quote from from Dayana Rangel:

“The experience with Brisas del Chama has been quite rich because of the interest of its inhabitants to gain knowledge and face the issues related to public services in the community. We first faced a disinterested community, and now that we have done work within the community and introduced ourselves in their dynamics, even young leaders have surged. .”



Picture caption TBD

When working with any community, the main goal of Espacio Público is to provide tools to community leaders and to give accompaniment to the community during the exercise of their human rights. In no way is the intent to appropriate the process, because we believe that communities must organize in an organic way from within to achieve and push for the changes they want.

Brisas del Chama was already an organized community with a present leadership. Yet, the immersion of Dayana Rangel as a regional coordinator of Espacio Público in Brisas del Chama helped further cement the already present leadership. Workshops, booklets, and other encounters with the community served a double purpose: to provide them with support from an organization, making them know they are not alone, and to provide technical knowledge regarding human rights, especially access to information on freedom of speech and freedom of association.

The lack of public transportation to and from Brisas del Chama affects the daily life of community members, especially in regards to their right of mobility and their ability to meet with social leaders from other communities and civil society in the main city. This is shown by the fact that our local coordinator also had serious difficulties when going to the community of Brisas del Chama.

The use of a formal letter requesting public information to the mayor is part of the strategy Espacio Público uses when addressing community problems because in this way we achieve a double purpose:

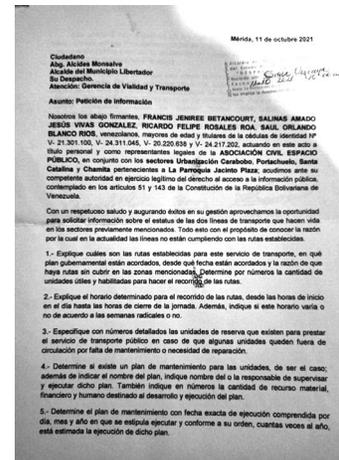
- Encouraging the community to push and protest for public information and change in their local realities.
- Introducing a legal document to give the opportunity to introduce legal actions against authorities and public servants who do not provide a technical answer or solution to the request of the community.

Results

The introduction of the legal request for public information has been the cornerstone of the work with Brisas del Chama. What was asked for in this request was the following:

1. Active bus routes to and from Brisas del Chama.
2. Schedule of bus routes and their availability during quarantine measures.
3. Total number of bus units available to give the service of public transportation.
4. Public policies related to maintenance and public employees in charge of these policies.
5. Funds and specific dates of maintenance of bus units that give service to and from Brisas del Chama.

Letter to the mayor asking for public information on public transportation



Summary of the letter in English:

The following is a translation of the questions asked to the Mayor of the Libertador Municipality in the state of Mérida, Venezuela. Questions:

1. Inform about the bus routes available to and from Brisas del Chama. Inform about government and public policies that establish said routes and motivate the reasons which some routes are unavailable.
2. Inform about the schedule of bus routes to and from Brisas del Chama. Inform if the schedule of bus routes is affected by the quarantine measures initiated by the state.
3. Inform about the total number of bus units available that provide the service of transportation to and from Brisas del Chama. Inform about failing bus units and number of backup units available.
4. Inform about the maintenance plan for bus units. Provide the following information: name of the bus maintenance policy, name of the person responsible for the execution of this maintenance policy, funds available for maintenance of bus units.
5. Inform about the specific dates of maintenance of bus units that provide transportation to and from Brisas del Chama.

These are the questions sent to the municipality, an additional request was sent on the 2nd of December. We will be able to introduce the lawsuit against the municipality on February 2nd.

Through this request in the following months we can further push for change regarding public transportation, since this is the most important means of mobility for the community that has been heavily struck by quarantine restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community leaders from Brisas del Chama have obtained human rights technical knowledge by the hand of our regional coordinator, Dayana Rangel. Even more so, the practical use of the right to access to information has also shown them that human rights can be used in a practical day to day basis and that respecting them also comes with obligations from public servants to guarantee them. They also have in their hands booklets regarding basic human rights, access to information, freedom of speech, and the right to association and protest.

A bond with Brisas del Chama has been made, and this will lead to further work with the community, aligned with their needs and requirements, since we strongly believe that rather than working with hundreds of communities, it is better to focus on a few to keep the accompaniment constant and useful for them. This has led to a more organized and motivated Brisas del Chama, and even more so now that there is a new mayor. The philosophy of Espacio Público is that change comes from within citizens themselves; the same applies to communities. That's why our focus is to hand out tools that inform and educate citizens no matter their background and socioeconomic status. Even if change will not come in the short or medium term, it is important to note that we work to build the basis of something that most probably we will not see completely realized.

Nevertheless, this may sound “tragic” in some sense. It is always gratifying to see small changes in the realities of communities that work alongside Espacio Público. Brisas del Chama is an example of this. When we first arrived, there was already a social leadership within the community, but it was fragmented due to the pandemic, the quarantine, economic depression, and other restrictions such as the fact that no other NGO works with them. Nowadays the community, even though no relevant change to their problem has been achieved, has technical tools and contact with a regional human rights defender. They also have a legal action underway that will most probably end in a lawsuit against the Municipality for their lack of transparency with public funds for public transportation.

Working in countries with a restricted civic space is always a challenge because of the many variables that come into play when trying to achieve social change and justice, but it is always possible to give citizens practical tools and educate them in regards to the obligations of countries to respect human rights. An informed citizen is a direct challenge to authoritarian governments.

Future plans

Since 2012 when Espacio Público started doing access to information workshops all around the country, our main goal has been to provide communities with the necessary tools to enact and make proper use of their human right to access to information. We strongly believe that this right is transversal to the exercise of almost all other basic rights, and due to this fact we encourage communities to exercise it along with other basic rights such as freedom of speech and protest.

Brisas del Chama has received a ‘cycle of formation’ that consists of several workshops and distribution of booklets, a typical NGO approach to communities in many contexts. The added value of our approach is that constant communication is maintained after the end of the cycle, and any other formation cycle needed by them will be attended by our local coordinator.

The main product of the ‘formation cycle’ imparted to Brisas del Chama has been the introduction of the legal demand for access to information regarding public transportation and its funding, projects, and bus routes. Said information request has not been answered by the Municipality and has been subjected to several blockades with the unconstitutional argument of a “change in management” and the electoral context. Nevertheless, if the request is not answered by January of 2022, Espacio Público and the community will be legally enabled to file a lawsuit against the mayor for the denial of the request of Brisas del Chama for public information.

Call to action

Human rights promotion and defence are processes subjected to organization, knowledge, and legal counsel. As such, the process for changing realities in countries with a context like the one in Venezuela is usually subject to mid-term and long-term continuous work. The link between organized civic society and communities is fundamental in the exigence of respect of human rights. Without this link, NGOs would be detached from the reality of their field of work and remain in a bureaucratic shadow.

Our call to action to other NGOs is simple: Work hand in hand with communities, impart education to them, and strengthen the bond with the common citizen in order to little by little change the reality of the country in which work is done.

We are open to exchanging experiences with NGOs from all parts of the world, especially those that work in arbitrary contexts such as the one in Venezuela.

We can be reached by our email todos@espaciopublico.org and our website www.espaciopublico.org