

## **Law of Internacional Cooperation places limits to Civil Society.**

### **Carl Meachan, North American Advisor, Rejects Creation of a Register for NGOs.**

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza El Universal

The Foreign Affairs Committee of the US Senate is analyzing civil society in Latin America using a sample of three countries: Chile representing the highest level of development in this field; Peru for being in the middle position, combining advances and difficulties, and third Venezuela.

Carl Meachan, an expert in Latin American Affairs, and main advisor to legislator Richard Lugar, chairman of the above-mentioned committee, visited Venezuela to evaluate in the field the local NGO reality and to state his position on the International Cooperation Law.

#### **What is your opinion of the proposed law?**

There are some points in it which make me a bit uncomfortable, one of them being the obligation NGOs to register with the government. In addition NGOs must have parallel objectives with government. In the United States and other free countries, the governments' relationship with NGOs is not always an easy one because they represent an independent voice. This proposed law would limit the potential of civil society.

#### **Its promoters justify the creation of a register "to make transparent" NGOs' finances and to avoid illegal funding of organizations.**

The tool to be used to find out the funds' origin or to ensure financial transparency is the tax system. Maintaining the independence of organizations is of paramount importance.

#### **Deputies in the National Assembly have publicly stated that their intention is to control NGOs. In the past, they have denounced them as puppets of the "empire", who are intent on destabilizing Venezuela, as is the case with Sumate and the funding they received from the National Endowment for Democracy –NED.**

NED is an independent organization. Lately it has been accused of foreign interference and of being part of the CIA. My boss Senator Lugar is one its founders. The last thing they have in their minds is to subvert governments in other countries. NED' job is to assist independent voices to become stronger. It is harmful to limit people's potential. People have different priorities and ought to be able to do their job, to express themselves in an independent manner, without fear of having the government use their activities to prosecute them.

#### **But the deputies suspect that NGOs are not independent, but obedient to imperialism.**

Neither is true, nor have they seen local NGOs trying to overthrow the government. We have seen the NGOs worrying about improving the country's general condition, increasing participation, and defending the Constitution. If Chavismo- the name given

to groups supporting the government - is strong, open, transparent, and democratic, then people's civil and independent participation should not be a threat.

**Chavismo states that the civil society brought together in the Missions – state-funded welfare programs - and other similar official groups alike are the foundation for a "one-party system".**

It is important to preserve the freedom to choose. As long as Chavismo remains democratic, what is the problem? Democracy does not mean that everyone has to be absorbed in the search for a uniform reality.

**Do these ideas correspond with the Bolivarian Revolution?**

In the US we have never seen a definition of what the revolutionary process is, or what it means. What we do know is that, they are against the ideas we try to promote which are democracy and transparency.