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## State intervention, South-South cooperation and structural transformation: the (ignored) case of Brazil-Venezuela cooperation for equity of access to university education, 2003-2016

**Política de Estado, cooperação Sul-Sul e transformação estrutural: o caso (ignorado) da cooperação Brasil-Venezuela para a promoção da equidade na educação superior (2003-2016)**

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### Abstract

This article re-visits Brazil-Venezuela official cooperation in the period 2003-2016, during which state interventionist policies improved social and educational justice. By drawing from an education governance approach, a pluriscalar analysis of equity of access to university education is conducted, which integrates an account of distributional justice in access to university education in Brazil and Venezuela with a structural approach related to South-South cooperation (SSC) among the two nations as well as within the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). Two interrelated arguments are developed: first, despite persistent inequities in access to university education in both territories, state-interventionist policies enhanced equity of access directly with respect to availability and accessibility. Second, the case of the Brazil/Venezuela Régimen Especial Fronterizo illustrates that SSC can transform the background conditions for educational justice by producing an alternative structure to the neoliberal global governance of education. Empirically, the discussion draws from contents and discourse analysis of 81 cooperation documents signed among Brazilian and Venezuelan state and non-state actors, complemented by municipal, national and regional development plans and commission reports, and 1 month of field research in the Régimen Especial Fronterizo in 2012. Participant observation and 13 semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with officials at different levels of the policymaking processes, academics, as well as local scale actors in distinct cooperation and integration initiatives on both sides of the Brazil/Venezuela border.

### Resumo

Este artigo revisita a cooperação oficial Brasil-Venezuela no período 2003-2016, durante o qual as políticas intervencionistas estaduais aprimoraram a justiça social e educacional. Partindo de uma abordagem de governança educacional, é realizada uma análise pluriescalar da equidade de acesso ao ensino universitário, que integra um relato de justiça distributiva no acesso ao ensino universitário no Brasil e na Venezuela com uma abordagem estrutural relacionada à cooperação Sul-Sul (CSS) entre as duas nações e também dentro do Mercado Comum do Sul (MERCOSUL). Dois argumentos inter-relacionados são

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desenvolvidos: primeiro, apesar das persistentes desigualdades no acesso à educação universitária em ambos os territórios, as políticas estatais intervencionistas aumentaram a igualdade de acesso diretamente em relação à disponibilidade e acessibilidade. Em segundo lugar, o caso do Régimen Especial Fronterizo Brasil / Venezuela ilustra que a CSS pode transformar as condições de fundo para a justiça educacional, produzindo uma estrutura alternativa à governança global neoliberal da educação. Empiricamente, a discussão recorre à análise de conteúdo e discurso de 81 documentos de cooperação assinados entre atores estatais e não-estatais brasileiros e venezuelanos, complementados por planos de desenvolvimento e relatórios de comissões municipais, nacionais e regionais, e 1 mês de pesquisa de campo no Régimen Especial Fronterizo em 2012. A observação participante e 13 entrevistas semi-estruturadas e abertas foram conduzidas com funcionários em diferentes níveis dos processos de formulação de políticas, acadêmicos, bem como atores de escala local em diferentes iniciativas de cooperação e integração em ambos os lados da fronteira Brasil / Venezuela.

**Keywords:** Brazil/Venezuela international cooperation, Education governance, Education policy, Equity in higher education.

**Palavras-chave:** Brasil/Venezuela cooperação internacional, Governança da educação, Política educacional, Equidade na educação superior.

## Introduction

As world-leading promoters of South-South cooperation (SSC) in the 2000s and early 2010s, a comprehensive development cooperation agenda was also established between the República Bolivariana da Venezuela (RBV) and República Federativa do Brasil (RFB). Between 2003 and 2016, about 200 cooperation agreements were signed between the national governments and state institutions as well as sub-national state and non-state actors, as regular summits and meetings were convened and bilateral commissions established. The reinforcement of state leadership in national, regional and global development was domestically accompanied by state interventionist re-distributive policies, which improved social justice in both territories: inequality, as measured by the Gini index (family income distribution), was reduced in Brazil from 54.0 (2004) to 49.0 (2014), and in Venezuela from 49.5 (1998) to 39.0 (2011) (CIA, 2019). In these contexts, university education<sup>2</sup> was reclaimed as a fundamental human social and individual right and public good, and justice-driven policies improved equity of access to university education in and across both countries. With the institution of neoliberal authoritarianism in Brazil since 2016, and its agenda of privatisation, commodification and elitism, however, public university education has come under attack and the democratisation of access is sought to being reversed (GOLDSTEIN, 2019; LEAL, 2019; TELESUR, 2019). Unlike Brazil, Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution maintains its constitutional commitment to free state-provided university education despite intensified US-driven economic (and paramilitary) warfare and its socially detrimental impact (WEISBROT; SACHS, 2019). By 2019, as “[m]ás de 75% de la educación nacional es pública y gratuita” (RBV, 2019, p. 13), university enrolment had tripled in comparison to 1998, and expansion continues, as is mirrored in the creation of the Universidad Martín

<sup>2</sup> In accordance with the Venezuelan government discourse I use *university* rather than *higher education*, as the latter suggests a hierarchisation that is incompatible with an integral approach to education that views all levels and modalities of education as complementary and equally important to individual and collective (social) development.

Luther King in 2018 and Universidad Bolivariana de las Comunas in 2019 (APORREA, 2018, 2019).

Vastly ignored in the global (Anglophone) academic literature on educational justice, this article re-visits these projects in an effort of underscoring their significance for future policy-making not only in Brazil, but the Global South generally. Within an education governance approach, McCOWAN's (2016) theoretical framework of three dimensions of equity in university education – availability, accessibility, horizontality – are integrated with a structural approach related to SSC between Brazil and Venezuela as well as within the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). On this basis, two interrelated arguments are developed: first, despite persistent inequities in access to university education in both territories, state-interventionist policies enhanced equity of access directly with respect to availability and accessibility. Second, SSC can transform the background conditions for educational justice by producing an alternative structure to the neoliberal global governance of education.

Methodologically, an education governance approach permits analysis at and across different scales of policy-making processes, while recognising that political economic projects may not be organised and constructed by state actors alone (DALE, 1997, 2005; ROBERTSON; DALE, 2013). For the purpose of this analysis of equity of access to university education, however, the benefit of the education governance approach principally consists in its heuristic value of a pluri-scalar analysis rather than in examining the roles of non-state actors in governance activities. The human geography concept of *scale* has been theorised as scale being socially produced through institutionalised sets of material practices and discourses, inter alia: the body, household and other local and sub-national (e.g. community; municipal government), national (e.g. nation-state governments), inter- and transnational (e.g. cross-border regionalisms; transnational communities), regional (supranational regionalisms) and global (e.g. finance flows) scales (LARSEN; BEECH, 2014; MANSFIELD 2005; MARSTON; SMITH, 2001; MARTIN, 2017). In contrast to *level* and its association with fixed hierarchical arrangements (as in *levels of government*), scalar configurations are perpetually (re)constituted and redefined through social praxis, “in terms of their extent, content, relative importance, and interrelations” (SWYNGEDOUW, 1997, p. 141). With respect to this pluriscalar approach to educational justice, two distinct scales of university education governance were produced through SSC, besides the inter-national (i.e., between the Brazilian and Venezuelan governments): a regional scale, through SSC within MERCOSUR, of which both Brazil and Venezuela were full members at the time<sup>3</sup>; and a Northern Brazilian/Southern Venezuelan inter-municipal, transnational cross-border scale termed Régimen Especial Fronterizo.

Thus, the analysis unfolds at the following interrelated scales of governance: at the national scales, the Brazilian and Venezuelan governments' policies of expanding university education between the late 1990s and 2016 are examined through the lens of availability, accessibility and horizontality. This concentrates on the access-related quantitative dimension as expressed in enrolment figures, thus ignoring qualitative aspects as well as politico-philosophical/ideological and political economic motives for expanding access. At the regional MERCOSUR scale structural “background conditions” for educational justice (ROBERTSON; DALE, 2013, p. 428) are sketched out. At the inter-municipal cross-border scale, increased

<sup>3</sup> Venezuela's full membership was suspended on 5 August 2017 (MERCOSUR, 2017).

access to university education in the Régimen Especial Fronterizo is explored. Empirically, the discussion draws from contents and discourse analysis of 81 cooperation documents signed among Brazilian and Venezuelan state and non-state actors, complemented by municipal, national and regional development plans and commission reports, and 1 month of field research in the Régimen Especial Fronterizo in 2012. Participant observation and 13 semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with officials at different levels of the policymaking processes, academics at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV) Ciudad Bolívar, as well as local scale actors in distinct cooperation and integration initiatives on both sides of the Brazil/Venezuela border.

### **Education governance, SSC, and equity of access to university education**

Following DALE (1997, 2005), education governance can be broken down into four specific “sets of activities” or “mechanisms” that are not necessarily all performed by the state but also by non-state actors (market; community; household), together with or independent of the state: funding; regulation (control); provision (delivery); and ownership. Thus, combinations of funding and regulation provide the “framework” for “educational policy, provision, and practice” (DALE, 1997, p. 277). These activities are not necessarily located at the national scale, but may also occur at sub- and supranational scales. In contrast to a comparative study – “learning from” and “explaining through” comparing based on the assumption of isolated, autonomous and heterogeneous national education sectors and systems (DALE, 2005) – a relational, pluriscalar approach permits to structure an analysis of equity policies at various, interrelated scales of governance. Therefore, regarding the promotion of educational justice through the creation of an alternative South–South (counter-)structure, the governance approach here serves as a heuristic device for analysing equity-enhancing state policies at and across different scales, rather than examining the inter-scalar sectoral and functional “division of the labour of educational governance” (DALE, 2005, p. 132) (the roles of such actors as households, communities and private (market) providers therein). That is, while the existence of private university education sectors in both territories as part of the neoliberal global education governance regime is recognised, they (and their internal dynamics) are not part of this analysis of an equity-enhancing state-interventionist SSC counter-governance regime.

The argument for a pluri-scalar approach to educational justice is that the respective policies and practices – their “form, pattern and scope” – are shaped by the “structures, processes and practices of education governance frameworks” (ROBERTSON; DALE, 2013, pp. 426-427). That is, as essential as distributional accounts of educational (in)justices are, these are incomplete without a “relational account of justice” (ROBERTSON; DALE, 2013, p. 427), in order to also consider the structural conditions that underlie or produce distributional injustice. It is hereby important to recognise that education governance frameworks are “mediated” by political projects whose underlying ideologies (e.g., neoliberal privatisation) have to be made explicit when discussing educational justice; after all, policy outcomes are the product of power struggles between competing projects (ROBERTSON; DALE, 2013, pp. 431-433).

The remainder of the paper integrates a discussion of the three principles of equity of access to university education (availability, accessibility, horizontality) at the national scales with a structuralist approach to social transformation through SSC at

the international, regional and inter-municipal cross-border scales of governance. These policies, processes and practices are inseparable from the state-interventionist development strategies implemented in Venezuela since 1999 (with the first Chávez presidency) and in Brazil from 2003 on (with the first Lula da Silva presidency). Conceptualised as neostructuralist endogenous development, this pursued, *inter alia*, the repayment of the “social debt”, including the “educational debt” (RFB, 2007b, p. 9; RFB, 2007a; MINCI 2004). While the Venezuelan university education policies confront neoliberalism within the national project of constructing socialism (DUFFY, 2014; GRIFFITHS, 2013; LANGTHALER, forthcoming; MUHR, 2010, 2011), the Brazilian policies emphasised “equity”, “solidarity” and “the need to structurally challenge the inequalities of educational opportunity” (RFB, 2007b, p. 6). These neostructuralist policies were upscaled from the national to inter-, trans- and supranational scales through SSC, whereby the SSC core principles of solidarity, complementation and cooperation were (in Latin America-Caribbean) in the 2000s also promoted by MERCOSUR members Argentina and Uruguay, alongside such states as the Republic of Ecuador and, over the past 50 years, the Republic of Cuba (e.g., MUHR, 2017, 2019; MUHR; AZEVEDO, 2019). Thus, as will further be discussed below, these SSC principles became integrated in MERCOSUR during the 2000s. Concomitantly, from 2003 on, Brazil-Venezuela SSC was initiated, became consolidated as “strategic alliance” in 2005 (RBV/RFB, 2005), and by 2008 the principles of solidarity, complementarity and cooperation had been internalised in the bilateral cooperation discourse and practices (MUHR, 2016). With respect to education, this cooperation agenda envisioned the “universalisation of higher education”, whereby “solidarity cooperation and complementarity” among the university education systems specified academic mobility, joint study centres and programmes, under- and postgraduate courses, doctoral studies and research programmes in the mutual interest, as well as the creation of academic, publishing and dissemination networks, the recognition of academic credits and titles, and the mutual exemption from any charges raised by state institutions (RBV/RFB, 2008a, b, c, d, e). Joint equity aspirations were mirrored in the pursuit of “strengthening public [i.e., state] education accessible for all sectors of the population” (RBV/RFB, 2008d, Point 19).

### **The national scales: availability, accessibility, horizontality**

MCCOWAN (2015) characterizes the three principles of equity of access to university education as follows: *availability* refers to the overall capacity (places and “adequate” infrastructure and teaching staff) to accommodate all of those who both want to study and fulfil the minimum academic requirements. Subsequently, fairness in *accessibility* depends upon the removal of possible barriers to access, especially fees (including different levels of fees within in a system) and entry examinations (which discriminate against those with low quality pre-university education), as well as geographical location of institutions, opportunity costs (foregone earnings), and other constraints related to class, race and ethnicity (culture, language, identity). Finally, *horizontality* means “even prestige and quality across the system”, especially concerning the value (recognition) of degrees within society and the associated “positional advantages” through stratification (lower classes generally being confined to less prestigious universities). Regarding availability in Brazil and Venezuela, this increased in both contexts during the period of interest here: in Brazil, gross enrolment rose from 14 % in 1999 (UIS 2010) to 17 % in 2003 and 29 % in 2013

(INEP 2013); in Venezuela, from 28 % in 2000 to 79 % in 2008 (UIS 2010) and 83 % in 2015 (RBV, 2017, p. 14).

In both nations, public (i.e. state financed) universities are free of charge, and neither (has) outlawed (for profit/not-for-profit) private provision and/or the university education market. However, significant differences in the adopted expansionist strategies can be identified. In Venezuela, based on the constitutional right to free state-provided university education introduced in 1999, measures to reduce barriers to access have from 2003 on included the launch of a system of non-formal education *misiones* that operate at different levels of the formal and non-formal educational process.<sup>4</sup> At the university level, by the mid-2010s, Misión Alma Mater involved the transformation of 29 state-financed university institutes and colleges into national experimental universities alongside the creation of over 30 new universities across the territory, while Misión Sucre and Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela (UBV) epitomise the “municipalisation” of university education via a satellite structure composed of eight regional UBV headquarters and associated *aldeas universitarias* (henceforth *aldeas*). In contrast to “university city” or “campus”, which usually are geographically isolated and associated with a single university or perhaps different universities that offer individually administered programmes, *aldea* as originally conceptualised by the Oficina de Planificación del Sector Universitario (OPSU) embodies the pooling of the teaching and research capacities of different universities for the development of joint academic programmes. While OPSU’s Proyecto Alma Mater para el Mejoramiento de la Calidad y Equidad de la Educación Universitaria en Venezuela, initiated in 2001, originally conceived the participating universities as users (rather than owners) of the facilities provided by the state-administered *aldea* (e.g. classrooms, library, laboratory, offices; TORO, 2004), in the course of municipalisation *aldea* came to mean simply a municipal branch of Misión Sucre/UBV.

By 2015, over 1.300 *aldeas* (MPPEU, 2016, p. 374) were operating in educational institutions, prisons, military garrisons and libraries in all 335 municipalities. Thus, as the subsection on the Régimen Especial Fronterizo will underscore, university education is taken to “where the people live”, while “epistemic access” (“meaningful access to the curriculum”, MCCOWAN, 2015, p. 7) is improved through linguistic and cultural adaptation to local contexts and a free-of-charge preparatory Misión Sucre programme called Semestre or Trayecto Inicial. Moreover, “criterion-based” affirmative action, which “challenges the supposedly meritocratic basis of admissions procedures” (especially those of elite institutions) (MCCOWAN, 2015, p. 6, 16), has involved: first, entry examinations, which in Venezuela had been found as structurally discriminating, were outlawed in 2008 and replaced by a “multivariable” quota system that considers, inter alia, academic grade, socio-economic conditions and territoriality (MPPEU, 2015, p. 14; OPSU 2015). Quota systems also ensure access for people with a disability, as well as the allocation of Misión Sucre students in the more prestigious established state-funded universities (GONZÁLEZ SILVA, 2009; MUHR, 2011, p. 157). Second, such measures as free public student transport for UBV students and a targeted grant system have been introduced (216,965 grant recipients in 2014 out of a total student population of 2,620,013, MPPEU, 2015), which has further involved converting previously awarded loans into grants in 2003 (GONZÁLEZ SILVA, 2009, p. 169). Finally, based on the

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to conventional assistentialist or compensatory welfare schemes, the *misiones* combine immediate poverty alleviation with long-term structural transformation across strategic socio-economic, sociocultural and sociopolitical sectors.

recognition that the determination of educational life chances starts at birth, efforts of universalising pre-primary education has included a state-driven increase in infant education gross enrolment from 45 % in 1999 (UIS 2015) to 75 % in 2015, diminished, however, to 67 % in 2017 (UIS, 2019).

In contrast, expansion of availability of university education in Brazil has strongly been associated with marketisation and increased private sector involvement, initiated by the neoliberal Cardoso government in 1996 (AZEVEDO, 2015a; also SOBRINHO; BRITO, 2009). From 2003 on, however, the state sector was strengthened through recomposing and increasing the public sector budget, the creation of 14 new state universities and over 50 campuses linked to existing federal universities, as well as 78 new federal professional and technical colleges via the Programa de Apoio a Planos de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais (REUNI) (RFB, 2007b, pp. 27–28; GOMES et al. 2014, pp. 175–77). Expansion of availability was accompanied by affirmative action through state regulation in support of equity in accessibility: first, the introduction of a quota system to reduce the historical class/race discrimination in access to the more prestigious public universities (MCCOWAN, 2007, 2015; SANTOS, 2014). As in Venezuela, such segregation was largely perceived as being rooted in entry examinations that privilege higher-income sectors that can afford private secondary schooling and preparatory courses (MCCOWAN, 2015). Accordingly, as of 2012, Law 12.711 obliged federal (public) universities (as well as medium technical institutes) to allocate 50 % of places to low-income public secondary school leavers, of which students of black, indigenous and mixed descent had to constitute a proportion no less than their relative population within the federal state in which the institution is located (PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, 2012, Art. 1).<sup>5</sup> Second, the Programa Universidade para Todos (ProUni) provided targeted household income-dependent scholarships for undergraduate study at private universities, for which students coming from public secondary schools were eligible as well as those low-income students who had already received a full scholarship for study in private secondary schools (PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, 2005, Art. 1, 2). This means that self-funded private secondary school graduates were excluded from receiving such university scholarships. Third, the Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio (ENEM) sought to achieve a fairer distribution of university places and scholarships (RFB, 2007b, p. 29; MCCOWAN, 2015, p. 17; PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, 2005, Art. 3). Finally, as in Venezuela, the Law of the Plano Nacional de Educação recognised the importance of pre-primary education, with the ambitious aim of universalising infant education for the 4- to 5-year-olds by 2016 (PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, 2014, Annex).

Regarding horizontality, high stratification prevailed in both systems, albeit in slightly different forms. In Venezuela, deprivatisation reduced private sector enrolment from 43.6 % (2000) to 28.8 % (2010) (UIS 2015) and 23 % in 2012 (as compared to 65 % public and 12 % autonomous) (MPPEU, 2012). In 2014, 1.965.449 out of 2.620.013 students were enrolled in public institutions (MPPEU, 2015, p. 12), equating a public enrolment ratio of 75 %. While this may suggest that the state-funded sector has been gaining in prestige, however, this itself is characterised by “inclusion with segregation” (MUHR; VERGER, 2006, p. 180), or

<sup>5</sup> “Federal” refers to “national”, in contradistinction to (federal) state and municipal institutions. During the first four years of having come into effect, the law demanded a minimum quota of 25 % only (rather than 50 %) (PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, 2012 Art. 8).

stratified inclusion, as the historically excluded popular classes overwhelmingly participate in the newly created state university education circuits (UBV and the missions), which in society are often viewed as less prestigious. However, the extent to which and/or in what respects this may generate positional disadvantages in the current context of revolutionary transformation would require specific research that does not appear to be available at this moment. With respect to Brazil, there is general agreement that “the high correlation between studying at a public university and achieving positions of prestige, power, and authority” in Brazilian society (SANTOS, 2014, p. 153) is the product of “highly differentiated public and private sectors...with access to institutions of quality or prestige for the most part restricted to the upper-income groups” (MCCOWAN, 2015, p. 11, 13). There, private enrolment incremented from 63.1 % in 1999 to 74 % in 2013 (INEP 2013).

Therefore, in both Brazil and Venezuela, albeit to significantly differing degrees, (re)regulation through law-based affirmative action and direct state funding of public institutions deprivatised and demarketised university education. Further examples of such practices included curbing (in the Brazilian government’s words) the “chaotic expansion” of the private sector, such as through the regulation (but not abolishment) of tax exemptions granted by preceding neoliberal administrations (RFB, 2007b, pp. 27–29; PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, 2005, Art. 8), and the aim of increasing university education gross enrolment to 50 % by 2024, with a share of 40 % of new enrolments in the public sector (PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, 2014, Annex). The following subsection extends the analysis to the regional scale to explore structural “background conditions for social justice” (ROBERTSON; DALE, 2013, p. 428), before turning to the inter-municipal cross-border scale as a manifestation of the intertwinedness, or interrelatedness, of “the national” and “the regional”.

### **The regional scale: MERCOSUR as an education governance regime**

MERCOSUR was founded in 1991 by the neoliberal governments of the Argentine Republic, Federative Republic of Brazil, Eastern Republic of Uruguay and the Republic of Paraguay. Venezuela joined as full member in 2006, and although the full membership was ratified in 2012 only, from 2006 on Venezuela transcended the status of associate member and contributed to shaping MERCOSUR policy-making, for instance through participation in such meetings as the 32nd Meeting of the Education Ministers (MERCOSUR, 2007). From 2003 on, driven by inter alia the Brazilian and Venezuelan governments, MERCOSUR entered a process of “overcoming neoliberalism” (MERCOSUR, 2006, Point 3), which manifested itself in the adoption of the SSC principles of solidarity, complementarity (related to the creation of productive synergies) and cooperation (with respect to production, technology and knowledge transfer (MERCOSUR, 2012a, b, c). Importantly, public policies, including education, were identified as central to reducing the “severe social, economic, productive and commercial asymmetries, contain the rural exodus (of especially young people), [and] restrain contraband and labour exploitation” in the historically marginalised border zones (INSTITUTO SOCIAL DEL MERCOSUR, 2015; also see: RFB, 2007a, p. 15, b, p. 37; FERRARO, 2013; MERCOSUR, 2012a, pp. 45–68; PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, 2003, pp. 7–8, 2007; RBV, 2001, p. 93, 2007).

Consecutive Plans of the Sector Educativo del MERCOSUR (SEM) echoed and reinforced these shifts. While the fundamental strategic objectives laid out in the

different plans did not essentially change over time, the principle of “solidarity cooperation” (MERCOSUR 2000: 4) became specified and consolidated (MERCOSUR 2005, p. 13, 2011, p. 11) as “profound structural change” was called for (MERCOSUR 2005, p. 5). The purpose of education for “competitiveness” (MERCOSUR 2000, p. 2) was removed from the 2005 and 2011 Plans, and neoliberal “human resources” formation (MERCOSUR 2000, p. 4) became superseded by “human development” (MERCOSUR 2005, p. 10, 2011, p. 13). In this course, education became reclaimed as a “human right and public and social good” (MERCOSUR 2011, p. 4). Importantly, while the 2000 Plan follows the hegemonic “education for all” agenda by narrowly focusing on formal education and restricting the right to education to “basic education” (primary and secondary or ‘medium’; MERCOSUR 2000, p. 4), the subsequent Plans also considered modalities such as adult and non-formal education (MERCOSUR 2005, p. 11). As in the Brazilian and Venezuelan national policies, a “democratisation” of university education at the undergraduate level was pursued (MERCOSUR 2011, p. 46), however, also through private sector involvement (MERCOSUR 2011, p. 67).

While MERCOSUR appeared to avoid directly addressing educational (in)justice, the outlined political shift, while principally originating at the national (member state) scales, in return changed the context for education policy at the national and sub-national scales. By context I mean not simply background or “detail”, but “those things that environ and thereby define a thing of interest” (Abbott 1997, n. 10). In other words, if MERCOSUR is understood as an education governance regime, a transformation of the structural conditions that underlie or produce distributional injustice could be ongoing even though—as in the Brazilian and Venezuelan national contexts—private participation (funding, provision) continues. The following exploration of increased access to university education through cross-border cooperation in the Régimen Especial Fronterizo illustrates some of the equity outcomes produced through state intervention at and across the different scales.

### **The inter-municipal scale: increasing equity of access in the Régimen Especial Fronterizo**

Historically, Northern Brazil and Southern Venezuela are underdeveloped areas, socioeconomically characterised by illegal mining and associated problems, especially contraband, drug trafficking, environmental contamination, (child) prostitution and violation of indigenous rights (MARTINEZ, 2009). The objective of providing a development alternative while (re)claiming state sovereignty over that area entered the official Brazil-Venezuela cooperation agenda in 2004, which led to the establishment of the Régimen Especial Fronterizo between the border towns Pacaraima (Municipality of Pacaraima, Roraima, Brazil) and Santa Elena de Uairén (Municipality of Gran Sabana, Bolívar, Venezuela) in 2010 (RBV/RFB, 2010a, b; RBV/RFB, 2014). Spatially, however, the sub-region extends to Ciudad Bolívar and Puerto Ordaz in the Venezuelan state of Bolívar, and to Boa Vista and Manaus in the Brazilian states of Roraima and Amazonas. This was manifest in a range of development cooperation dimensions: infrastructure projects (a fibre optic connection provided by the Venezuelan state company CANTV and Venezuelan electricity supply to Northern Brazil; road, rail, river and air connections); trade, financial (mutual opening of state banks on both sides of the border), military, industrial (exchange of knowledge, experience and technology in support of small

entrepreneurship and biodiversity), security (training of members of Bolívar state police forces in Roraima), and education cooperation. Although many of especially the socio-productive development projects were only at the planning stage and/or under construction in the early 2010s, existing initiatives included a binationally managed agricultural research centre; an International Centre for the Attention of Migrant Women operating in both Pacaraima and Santa Elena de Uairén; efforts to legalise dual nationality; a Cédula Vecinal Fronteriza that permits the tax-free cross-border flow of subsistence goods purchased for personal consumption in either of the border towns; a cross-border public transport system; and free-of-charge health and education services mutually accessible on either side of the border. In 2012, school children were crossing the border on a daily basis within the MERCOSUR Escolas Interculturais de Fronteira (FTEIF) programme, through which schools became transnationally twinned in the various MERCOSUR cross-border zones (in the Brazil/Venezuela border zone from 2009 on). The original mission of providing bilingual and intercultural education was extended with the MERCOSUR (2011) Education Plan, aiming for these twin schools to become organically embedded within the wider processes of cross-border economic/productive, social and infrastructural integration (RBV/RFB, 2009; MERCOSUR 2005, 2011, pp. 16, 31–32).

In this context, after just over one year of planning and in response to demands by the population and the mayoralty of Gran Sabana, the Aldea Universitaria Gran Sabana Fuerte Roraima was established in October 2004 inside the barracks of the Bolivarian Armed Forces near Santa Elena de Uairén (TORO, 2004). This unusual location inside the garrison is due to the territorial delimitation of Santa Elena de Uairén and Pacaraima by national parks and indigenous lands, which legally restricts geographical expansion and, therefore, border zone development. Today, this aldea is the largest of several in the municipality of Gran Sabana (Venezuela) (CABRERA, 2009). Moreover, it was the first ever instituted aldea and embodies the original idea of a place in which synergies are generated through the pooling of the teaching and research capacities of six Venezuelan universities in the process of municipalisation. These are Misión Sucre, through which UBV programmes are delivered, and Universidad Nacional Experimental Politécnica de la Fuerza Armada Nacional (UNEFA), Universidad Nacional Experimental de Guayana (UNEG), Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador (UPEL), Universidad Nacional Abierta (UNA), and Universidad Nacional Experimental Simón Rodríguez (UNESR). While overlappings with respect to courses offered exist (e.g. courses related to tourism), these institutions mostly complement each other via their distinct areas of expertise. For example, UNEFA has offered Agronomy, Nursing, and Tourism; UNEG has provided undergraduate courses in Public Accountancy, Business Administration, Fiscal Sciences, and Tourism; and UBV's expertise includes Environmental Management. In all cases, programmes offered may change over time in accordance with the changing developmental needs of the surrounding communities. In 2012, the aldea had about 800 students attending morning, afternoon, evening and weekend classes and, located close to the local airport, university education is also provided by air to isolated indigenous communities.

Within the frameworks of bilateral (Brazil-Venezuela) and MERCOSUR cooperation and integration, formal and informal relations were established between the Venezuelan universities and their public counterparts in Brazil: within an interstate cooperation framework (i.e. the federal states of Bolívar in Venezuela and Amazonas and Roraima in Brazil), agreements were signed, first, between UNEG and the Universidade Federal do Amazonas (UFAM), the Universidade Federal de

Roraima (UFFR) and Universidade Estadual de Roraima (UERR); and, second, between UBV Bolívar State and UFAM. Mutual student exchange and academic mobility (visiting professors) took place in accordance with the principle of complementarity: Brazilian students from as far away as Manaus and Boa Vista were attracted by courses that were either not offered in their immediate environments or were subject to access restrictions, such as medicine. According to one interviewee, most of the students of the UBV/Misión Sucre National Programme of Integral Community Medicine were Brazilian, came to live in Santa Elena de Uairén and Pacaraima, and some stayed on after graduation. Venezuelan students could study Tourism in the Pacaraima branch of Roraima State University, supported by placements/internships facilitated by the Boa Vista Tourism Department. Academic mobility included UNEG staff working in the Pacaraima branch of Roraima State University, joint workshops (knowledge and experience exchange on an annual basis), and language courses.

This cooperation, as limited as it may appear, meant a significant improvement of opportunities of access to university education in the border zone. Prior to the facilitation of education migration through the creation of the Régimen Especial Fronterizo and Venezuela's full membership of MERCOSUR, the geographical asymmetries regarding availability of university education, which historically characterise both the Brazilian and Venezuelan territories, expressed themselves in various ways. For instance, on the Brazilian side, the socio-economically marginalised North Region of Brazil, to which the states of Amazonas and Roraima belong, has been considered the most disadvantaged nationwide, with only a total of 122 universities (106 private/16 public), as compared to 1051 (953 private/98 public) in the privileged South-East Region of Brazil (SOBRINHO; BRITO, 2009, p. 243). On the Venezuelan side, prior to the establishment of Aldea Universitaria Gran Sabana Fuerte Roraima, the closest universities were a (minimum) 5-hour bus journey from Santa Elena de Uairén (TORO, 2004).

### **Conclusion: state intervention, SSC, and equity-driven structural transformation**

The pluri-scalar analysis conducted in this article focused on state-interventionist policies designed to increase equity of access to university education at and across three scales of education governance: the national, regional (MERCOSUR) and transnational inter-municipal cross-border scales. In this, the heuristic value of the education governance approach has consisted in introducing the concept of scale as socially produced through institutionalised sets of discourses and material practices, in this case through bilateral and regional SSC. The example of the Régimen Especial Fronterizo demonstrates how synergies can be generated through SSC and how equity of access to university education is enhanced by improved availability and accessibility. The study also shows how efforts of deprivatisation and demarketisation are intertwined with state policies and strategies of territorial deconcentration and the evening out of uneven development, from the urban centres (where also the private and profitmaking providers tend to be concentrated) to structurally disadvantaged zones and historically marginalised populations. Without doubt, as highlighted, inequities of access persist in both Brazil and Venezuela, most glaringly with respect to horizontality, which is not directly addressed by the policies discussed. Whether these policies have any indirect

bearing on stratification would have to be subject of further and more specific research that to date does not appear to have been conducted.

The Régimen Especial Fronterizo, however, also illustrates the structural interrelatedness of educational justice with scales of governance other than the national. That is, while the cross-border sub-region emerged as a distinct scale of a South–South educational governance regime – a manifestation of the intertwinedness of the national and the regional – the pluri-scalar approach permits to extend the analysis to the structural background conditions that underlie, produce and/or reproduce distributional (in)justice in access to university education. In this regard, once the political nature of governance frameworks is taken into account, the equity-driven pluri-scalar structural transformation as discussed in this article inevitably conflicted with the neoliberal education governance project. Put differently, the co-existence of ‘commodification and solidarity’ (AZEVEDO, 2015b, p. 26) in Latin America-Caribbean is a manifestation of two conflicting political projects related to distinct ideologies and class interests. Although, at this moment, the outlined pluri-scalar strategy has been successfully countered by the authoritarian transnational neoliberal class, the value of this study consists in illustrating that, and how, state-interventionist SSC *can* build an alternative structure to the neoliberal global governance of education, and – considering the multidimensionality of SSC as displayed in the Régimen Especial Fronterizo – beyond education.

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