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**Between social harmony and political dissonance: the institutional and
policy-based intricacies of the Venezuelan System of
Children and Youth Orchestras**

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policy-based intricacies of the Venezuelan System of
Children and Youth Orchestras**

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For Silvia, my cornerstone and guide

For Gladys and Gustavo, two bright stars

For Teresa, a beacon of hope

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This study explores the narratives of day-to-day practices of the Venezuelan System of Children and Youth Orchestras, one of the oldest social development strategies in Venezuela, and one of the most successful social inclusion and cultural participation programs in the world. Its main objective is to identify some of the policy-based and organizational factors contributing to the success, autonomy, and longevity of this initiative since its creation in 1975. In order to assess the relative importance of these factors, the study reviews the sociopolitical circumstances surrounding the evolution of the program and examines the perceptions of its main actors and clients about key internal processes and organizational dynamics. More generally, this case is offered as a way of better understanding the insularity of bureaucratic efficiency in Latin America.

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Introduction

*Yo insisto tremendamente en esto:
la pobreza material será profundamente vencida por
la riqueza espiritual que genera la música.
Ese combate entre la pobreza material y la pobreza espiritual,
la está ganando la riqueza espiritual; la está ganando el arte.*

José Antonio Abreu

In 1975, Venezuelan musician and economist José Antonio Abreu dared to imagine that social progress and a more virtuous society could be attained through the collective practice music. He did not base this belief on expedient political or technical calculations, but on the firm conviction that art has the intrinsic ability to encourage the integral development of human beings. Despite the skepticism generated at first by such a vague proposition, these principles became the foundation of an internationally renowned music education methodology that has dramatically changed the landscape of social and artistic development in Venezuela and several other countries around the world. The Venezuelan System of Children and Youth Orchestras—known simply as *El Sistema*—has not only given place to a new and very successful paradigm of music education, but has also advanced innovative ways of achieving sustained social change and redefining cultural participation.

From a programmatic standpoint, *El Sistema* constitutes one of the few governmental initiatives in Venezuela that has effectively connected the social and cultural dimensions of development in one consistent and sustainable strategy. This line of work makes *El Sistema* a very unconventional program that is capable of generating results once associated with the independent action of regular artistic and social institutions. Thus, over the last thirty-six years, *El Sistema* has provided a stable platform for both social progress and artistic excellence that has served close to two million people, and currently benefits a community of approximately 290 thousand beneficiaries nationwide. Given its longevity and exceptional outcomes, especially within vulnerable

communities, *El Sistema* has been referred to as one of the most successful social inclusion projects in Venezuela and the world, and has received international praise as a unique model for cultural development (Borzacchini, 2004; IADB, 2007; UNDP, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010).

Meanwhile, organizationally speaking, the day-to-day operations of *El Sistema* are managed by a governmental agency whose bureaucratic routines respond to a complex and ever-changing institutional environment. After less than one year as a private venture, *El Sistema* became a vast state organization whose activities have been continuously overseen and funded by different social affairs-related ministries. This arrangement has allowed the institutional face of *El Sistema*—the *Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela* (State Foundation of the National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras of Venezuela or FESNOJIV)—to maintain a fairly stable operational and financial platform for the program, while remaining programmatically independent. At the same time, however, this arrangement has exposed *El Sistema* to the political and administrative complexities of a transitioning democratic system, where political scenarios, institutional structures, and development policy orientations have undergone severe changes over the last few decades. The fact that *El Sistema* could be easily considered the oldest social program in the country, which has survived seven quite different consecutive presidential administrations, also makes it a fascinating object for further attention and analysis.

That said, some questions that immediately come to mind are, how has *El Sistema* achieved continued success under these particular and sometimes adverse circumstances? What facets of its organizational culture have enabled it to pursue and attain its very ambitious goals? How unique is the organizational structure supporting *El Sistema*? To what extent can the accomplishments of the program be attributed to the social policy innovations it has introduced? Bearing these inquiries in mind, this research project intends to analyze the key policy-based and organizational factors behind the success of

El Sistema, and presents some speculative notes on the future and sustainability of the program.

In order to achieve these objectives, the different argumentative strands of this thesis are developed in three main chapters. The first one presents a brief historical overview of *El Sistema*, analyzes the context where it takes place, and examines the international expansion of the program. It also describes the relations of *El Sistema* with the Venezuelan state and other implementation partners, focusing on the role of international development agencies.

The second chapter describes some of the features that make *El Sistema* unique, emphasizing different policy factors that could explain the success of the program. In particular, it analyzes some of the policy orientations and ideas that have supported the work of *El Sistema* over the last thirty-six years, and its connection with both social and cultural policies in the country. This is followed by a description of the music education methodology employed by the program, and a review of its multi-level social and community impacts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the overarching factors that characterize *El Sistema*'s distinctiveness as a development strategy.

The third chapter builds on the previous two to suggest that FESNOJIV is a pocket of efficiency that has remained relatively isolated from the intricacies of Venezuelan bureaucracy. It then visits the internal features that have played a pivotal role in its success, and some of the mechanisms it has used to protect itself from external disturbances. Finally, the chapter examines these internal features and dynamics, which are classified according to the following categories: (1) commitment to organizational mission; (2) adaptation mechanisms; (3) leadership and management; and (4) planning and internal processes.

The scarce existing literature grappling with *El Sistema* has usually paid a fair amount of attention to the history, pedagogical methods, and emotional appeal of *El Sistema*. This work takes a slightly different perspective, looking at the program through the lens of development policy and organizational culture—two areas that have only been briefly explored by the reports and strategic planning documents of a few international development agencies (see IADB, 2007; and UNDP, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010). The analysis of these policy trends and institutional behaviors is based primarily on the information and experiences recounted by executive officials and key employees of *El Sistema*, and well as representatives from multilateral and donor organizations involved with the program. This data was collected through fifteen in-depth interviews during three field trips to Caracas, Venezuela, in May and November of 2010, and March of 2011. Interviewees were asked questions dealing the work of the FESNOJIV, based on issues such as organizational success; strategic management and leadership; program sustainability; adaptation mechanisms and practices; political and administrative bottlenecks; and relationships with external clients (especially the government, donors from the private sector, and international cooperation agencies). The identity of the interviewees is kept confidential during the entire study.

The open-ended responses during these interviews also revealed additional information on other complementary topics to the central focus of this research. This data was very useful to better understand the pivotal role of *El Sistema* in community and cultural participation, social capital, human development, and avant-garde music education methodologies. Therefore, what began as a highly structured study, focused on a restricted set of variables, evolved into a richer and more fascinating journey through the winding roads of *El Sistema*.

Ultimately, this study explores the narratives of day-to-day practices of *El Sistema* from the perspective of its very own actors and clients, pinpointing the main principles that nurture its organizational culture and advance its programmatic goals. Instead of

utilizing typical methods of institutional diagnosis, such as structured surveys designed to disaggregate data, this study focuses on a more integrated look at how multiple stakeholders understand the key processes associated with the mission of *El Sistema*. In doing so, this research seeks to highlight the tensions between formal structures, a challenging social and political context, and the philosophy of a complex organization whose growth is said to be guided by a notion of chaos. In the end, this research aims to contribute to the burgeoning debate on state efficiency in Latin America and the public purpose of the arts.

Chapter 1: A long-lasting and ever growing organization

Overview

The Venezuelan System of Youth and Children Orchestras is a revolutionary music education program founded in 1976 by the Venezuelan musician and economist José Antonio Abreu, targeted primarily at low-income and disadvantaged youth.¹ Its mission is to promote the collective practice of music through symphony orchestras and choruses, in order to help children and young people to achieve their full potential (FESNOJIV, 2011). Over the last few years, this model has earned international praise for its role in human development, given its ability to provide access to knowledge, cultivate ethical and aesthetical values, and connect individuals with their communities.

This program, popularly known as *El Sistema*, was first conceived as a tool for transforming the traditional model of music education and democratizing the access to the arts, which would subsequently open new windows of opportunity for young musicians interested in a career in Venezuelan professional symphonic ensembles. However, beyond rendering outstanding and world-class artistic results, this new approach also proved to be a very powerful catalyst for social advancement. What started in 1975 as a private initiative with less than a dozen students, has become a vast network of orchestras and choruses currently serving over 290 thousand children and youth, ages 3 to 19, in 237 academic centers nationwide (IADB, 2007; Govias, 2010; FESNOJIV, 2010; FESNOJIV, 2011).

The program emerged when its founder and eight students of the José Ángel Lamas Music School in Caracas realized that more innovative and inclusive teaching

¹ 63% of its beneficiaries come from the country's two poorest social strata; or 81% if the medium-low stratum is included (IADB, 2007).

methodologies were needed in the field of music education. At the time *El Sistema* took its first steps, the main symphony orchestras that existed in Venezuela—both in Caracas and Maracaibo, two of the most important cities of the country—were essentially comprised of aging foreign musicians (Borzachini, 2004). Instead, Abreu and his followers sought to develop a form of pedagogy that would allow young musicians to quickly achieve a high level of proficiency in the execution of their instruments, not only to occupy positions in long-established national orchestras, but also in those being formed within the emerging movement (Borzacchini, 2004).

Although initially this program did not gather the number of participants it expected, Abreu nevertheless managed to recruit musicians from all over the country, rapidly forming a full-fledged and highly successful symphony orchestra by mid-1975 (Borzacchini, 2004). The Juan José Landaeta National Youth Orchestra made its debut in April of 1975 at the headquarters of Venezuela's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and in August of 1976, after its first tour around several countries in Latin America, the ensemble inaugurated the International Festival of Orchestras in Aberdeen, Scotland, under the auspices of Queen Elizabeth II. Before the year was over, given the highly successful trajectory of this initiative, the United Nations had already established an agreement for the creation of the Center for Higher Musical Studies, with Venezuela as its headquarters (Borzacchini, 2004).

The visibility of José Antonio Abreu's work also rapidly gained the immediate attention of the Venezuelan government, which provided the resources for the training, performances, and international appearances of the National Youth Orchestra. Once it became state-funded entity, the program grew from 15 to 300 beneficiaries between 1975 and 1976, and by early 1979 it had established academic centers—commonly referred to as *núcleos*—in half of the country. In response to its sustained growth and social results, the program evolved into a larger public institution, the *Fundación del Estado para la Orquesta Nacional Juvenil de Venezuela* (the State Foundation for the National Youth

Orchestra of Venezuela or FEONJV), which provided a more solid institutional platform for its operational and budgetary expansion (Borzacchini, 2004; FESNOJIV, 2011). In 1996, the organization changed its name to *Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela* (State Foundation of the National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras of Venezuela or FESNOJIV), and then in 2011 to *Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar* (Simón Bolívar Music Foundation or FMSB)—a complex educational, artistic, and administrative structure coordinating the activities of 790 orchestras and choirs, and close to 3,500 teachers and employees (Borzacchini, 2004; IADB, 2007; FESNOJIV, 2009). In the last two decades, the professional regional ensembles stemming from *El Sistema* have also become independent institutions, supported financially by state-level foundations and coordinated by the Federation of Regional Symphony Orchestras of Venezuela (FESNOJIV, 2011).

Relationship with the state

Since *El Sistema* is rarely singled-out as a music education program, but rather as one aimed at social inclusion and human development, it has always fallen under the administrative oversight of governmental bodies charged with social development—the ministries for Family and Youth Affairs, Health and Social Development, Participation and Social Development, and the Communes.² In 2009, the oversight of *El Sistema* was transferred to more political instances, such as the Office of Vice President, and more recently, in March of 2011, to the Office of the President (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 2009 and 2011). This last change caused the abovementioned renaming of *El Sistema* to *Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar* (or Simón Bolívar Music Foundation)

² In Venezuela, state foundations are understood as organizations with general artistic, scientific, literary, or charity-oriented purposes that are created and funded by the central, regional, or local governments. Therefore, these entities are subject to the laws and other principles regulating the Venezuelan public administration (see the *Ley Orgánica de la Administración Central*, 1976 and 1995; and the *Ley Orgánica de la Administración Pública*, 2001).

(Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 2011), a change whose political and administrative consequences are still unknown.

Unlike similar programs in other countries, *El Sistema* is almost entirely funded by the state. Governmental contributions represent 91% of the organization's annual budget, which is currently calculated to be around US\$129 million³ (FESNOJIV, 2010). Meanwhile, private donations and external sources—such as loans by international financial institutions—cover a mere 9% of *El Sistema*'s operational costs. As a result of organizational growth and other factors impacting the Venezuelan economy, *El Sistema*'s budget has expanded by approximately 24% annually since 2000 (IADB, 2007; UNDP-Venezuela, 2010).

From an institutional standpoint, *El Sistema* is a very complex and flexible entity, represented in every state of the country through hundreds of local offices, which are basically regulated by Venezuelan public administration procedures. Despite being an organ of the central government, the National System of Children and Youth Orchestras has consistently acted with a high degree of programmatic autonomy, adapting to the planning processes of six consecutive presidential administrations without altering its essential mission. As will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapters, the institutional structure of *El Sistema* has remained flexible and dynamic, in a constant state of flux, enabling it to adjust to the changing circumstances of a very complex and ever-transitioning democratic system (Abreu in Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008; Abreu in TED, 2009).

³ These amounts cover the expenses of two projects—the expansion of the network of orchestras and choirs, and the support to the *Centro de Acción Social por la Música*—whose total cost exceeds \$228 million (FESNOJIV, 2010).

Advancing social change in the midst of crisis

The program's steady process of expansion, as alluded above, has not taken place in an ordinary political environment. While *El Sistema* emerged at a time of economic prosperity and political stability in Venezuela, most of its institutional evolution has occurred during difficult periods of crisis. Not long after its creation in 1976, *El Sistema* faced the bitter consequences of structural adjustment policies and the gradual demise of representative democracy in Venezuela. Then, after establishing itself in the midst of such difficult circumstances, the program had to adapt to another set of complex institutional changes, triggered in 1998 by a political transition toward a new model of democracy.

The signing of the *Pacto de Punto Fijo* (or the Pact of Punto Fijo) in 1958 after ten years of military dictatorship, gave rise to a populist system of elite conciliation that served until 1993 as the articulating principle of Venezuelan democracy (Rey, 1991; Kornblith, 1998). This pact represented an agreement between the most important parties of the time—namely, *Acción Democrática* (AD), *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI) and the *Unión Republicana Democrática* (URD)⁴—around the distribution of political positions in the executive and legislative branches, as well as in local and regional governments. Together with a boom in oil revenues, this new political arrangement generated a certain level of social and political consensus in the country, and spurred the development of a highly cohesive democratic system. It was the key feature confirming, at the time, the “exceptionality” of Venezuelan democracy (Rey, 1991; Urbaneja, 1992; Kornblith, 1998).

Nonetheless, the debt crisis of 1983 and the implementation of several structural reforms since 1989 triggered profound changes in the sociopolitical milieu, bringing

⁴ URD withdrew from the pact in 1962 as a sign of disagreement with President Rómulo Betancourt's foreign policy (1959-1964). This move turned the Venezuelan political system into a bipartisan one, where AD and COPEI consistently controlled national politics until 1993.

critical social dilemmas, formerly hidden behind a situation of apparent prosperity, to the surface. Unlike other countries, where neoliberal adjustment policies were applied without extreme reactions, Venezuela experienced harsh episodes of civil unrest that anticipated the collapse of the Punto Fijo-based democracy and the breakdown of the social contract it had once promoted⁵ (Kornblith, 1998; López-Maya, 2006). This backlash responded to the exclusive focus of these reforms on achieving macroeconomic stabilization through a drastic reduction in social spending and primary assistance to those in need. Political decentralization in 1986 and 1987 had temporarily resolved the participation deficits in public decision-making, but social demands proved higher and deeper (López-Maya, 2006).

The collective discontent that emerged in these critical junctures, while essentially centered on socioeconomic claims, carried the flag of social change and announced the emergence of new popular social movements. These circumstances, along with the increasing attractiveness of left-wing parties and the definitive fracturing of bipartisan politics in 1993, set the stage for the rise of anti-system and populist political alternatives. After a controversial and difficult campaign, Hugo Chávez, a former military officer and head of the *Movimiento Quinta República* (or Fifth Republic Movement), became president after defeating traditional parties in the elections of 1998 (López-Maya, 2006).

Hugo Chávez had appeared in the public arena six years earlier as the leader of two failed coups against Carlos Andrés Pérez, but was allowed to run for office after being released from jail in 1994.⁶ Chávez's electoral success in 1999—and in the decade that

⁵ The announcement of a neoliberal package known as *El Gran Viraje* (or the “Great Turnaround”) in 1989 by the recently elected government of Carlos Andrés Pérez, caused violent protest, massive riots, and looting in Caracas and the main cities of the country (López-Maya, 1999). This event, often referred to as *El Caracazo*, was just one in a series of violent episodes of protest registered since 1987, but certainly the most important one.

⁶ The climate of political agitation was later exacerbated by two military coup attempts in February and November of 1992. Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez, along with other colleagues from the *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200* (Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200 or MBR-200), led these failed insurrections against President Carlos Andrés Pérez as a means to oust what the movement considered an

followed—responded primarily to the great support this figure and his movement received from the most vulnerable sectors of the population, who no longer trusted the democratic institutions established in 1958⁷ (López-Maya, 2006; Kornblith, 2009). The enactment of a new constitution in 1999 echoed this public sentiment, giving rise to a more progressive political and economic system, and inaugurating a different, albeit complex, era in contemporary Venezuelan politics. Traditional representative democracy was gradually dismantled in favor of a participatory governance model, based on popular sovereignty and the empowerment of grassroots movements.

In spite of its arguably clear ideological orientation, Chávez’s political program can be seen as a very long, authoritarian, incremental, and crisis-led transitional process toward a so-called “Socialism of the Twenty-first Century,” which has implied deep and highly controversial changes in traditional democratic practices, the structure of the state, and national development strategies.⁸ The societal polarization and economic difficulties stemming from these adjustments, on the other hand, have today aggravated class-based conflicts, increased crime and interpersonal violence, and fractured national cohesion, thereby creating powerful challenges for democratic governance and the implementation of long-term development strategies.⁹

anti-popular government. Even though both coups were strictly military actions, they raised collective concern over the situation and future of democracy in Venezuela.

⁷ In mid-1994, as reported by López-Maya (2006), and shortly after his liberation, a national conducted by poll by *Consultores 21* reflected that Hugo Chávez had a popular approval rating of 55% (López-Maya, 2006: 171).

⁸ Chávez’s election implied the social, economic and political reconfiguration of the Venezuela state, in what Escobar (2010) denominates a post-liberal, post-state and post-capitalist order—where economy is not essentially capitalist, society that is not naturally liberal, and the state is not the only way of instituting social power. These changes were materialized from both legal and institutional perspectives: new development philosophies (or *desarrollo endógeno*), innovative and solidarity-based forms of economic interaction (or *economías mixtas*), and unconventional democratic procedures (or *democracia directa y protagónica*).

⁹ In the last presidential elections, and even more in the constitutional referendum of 2007, the country seems divided into two large political blocs—the larger being in favor of the government. Chávez won the presidency in 1998 with 56.2% of the votes in 1998, 59.76% in 2000, and 62.84% in 2006 (López-Maya, 2006). While in 2000, 1.263 protests were registered in the country, in the 2008-2009 period this number reached a peak of 2.882 (Provea, 2000 and 2009).

In very general terms, this brief historical account of Venezuela's contemporary democracy illustrates the complex national scenarios in which *El Sistema* has operated over the last thirty-six years. From a period of affluence and political stability, the program weathered severe economic cycles, an exhaustive process of decentralization, seven presidential transitions, long cycles of social turbulence, and comprehensive redefinitions of the Venezuelan state. Regardless of eventual—and rather short—periods of economic expansion or political conciliation, *El Sistema* has been constantly dealing with an ever-transitioning sociopolitical context. Paradoxically, such a situation of chaos, as it will be explained in the third chapter, seems to be one its main sources of institutional survival.

Going beyond national borders

The pedagogical and policy innovations introduced by *El Sistema* have captured the attention of international development agencies, multilateral organizations, world-renowned cultural institutions, and several foreign governments over the last three decades (Borzacchini, 2004; FESNOJIV, 2006; IADB, 2007). Even though these instances emphasize different aspects of the program, they all seem to agree that *El Sistema* represents both an alternative mechanism for increasing cultural participation, democratizing the arts, and injecting vitality into classical music; and an effective and highly replicable tool for stimulating long-term social change.

Most of the advocacy *El Sistema* conducted in the past—and continues conducting today—was channeled through the international tours of its many musicians, orchestras, and chamber ensembles (FESNOJIV, 2006). From the early days of the Juan José Landaeta National Youth Orchestra or those of its bright successor, the Simón Bolívar National Youth Orchestra,¹⁰ *El Sistema* has been continuously performing challenging

¹⁰ The Juan José Landaeta National Youth Orchestra, founded in 1975, then became the Simón Bolívar National Youth Orchestra in 1978. This ensemble remains the crown jewel of *El Sistema* and is divided into two full-size orchestras: the one that congregates the founders of the program (or the Simón Bolívar

repertoires for demanding audiences all over the world. This international exposure dramatically increased the prestige of the program, which has received numerous acknowledgments (see table 1), and enabled the formation of similar initiatives in approximately twenty-five countries (FESNOJIV, 2011).

Year	Award	Institution
2010	Nonino Risit d' Aur Award	The Nonino Family
	Erasmus Prize	<i>Praemium Erasmianum</i> Foundation
2009	Latin Recording Academy's Trustees Award	The Latin Recording Academy
	Polar Music Prize	Polar Music Prize
	Frederick Stock Award	The Chicago Symphony Orchestra
	Bridge Builders Award	Partners for Livable Communities
	Frankfurt Music Prize	Frankfurt Music Prize Foundation
	TED Prize	TED Foundations
	International Citation of Merit	International Society for the Performing Arts
	Distinguished Service Award	Conductors Guild
2008	Q Prize	Harvard School of Public Health
	Blue Planet Award	Ethecon Foundation
	Yehudi Menuhin Award	Albéniz Foundation
	The Prince of Asturias Award for the Arts	The Prince of Asturias Foundation
	Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun	Emperor of Japan
	Glenn Gould Prize	Glenn Gould Foundation
2007	WQXR Gramophone Special Recognition Award	WQXR-FM and Gramophone Magazine
	Golden Medal of the Italian Senate	Italian Senate
	Don Juan de Borbón Award for Music	Don Juan de Borbón Foundation
2006	GlobalArt Award	GlobalArt
	UNICEF Prize "Della parte dei Bambini"	UNICEF-Italy
	<i>Praemium Imperiale</i> Grant for Young Artists	Japan Arts Association
2005	Order of Merit	Federal Republic of Germany
2004	UNICEF National Goodwill Ambassador	UNICEF
	United Nations International Arts Prize	United Nations
	World Culture Open Peace Prize	World Culture Open
2002	The Schwab Foundation Award	The Schwab Foundation
2001	Right Livelihood Award	Swedish Parliament
	UNESCO Simón Bolívar Medal	UNESCO
1998	UNESCO Artists for Peace	UNESCO
	UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador	UNESCO
	Successful Experience in Poverty Reduction Award	UNDP
1996	The Gabriela Mistral Inter-American Prize	OAS
1993	UNESCO International Music Prize	UNESCO

Table 1. International awards received by the FEONJV and FESNOJIV (1993-2010) [This list does not include honorary memberships or academic degrees].

Source: IADB, 2007; FESNOJIV, 2011

National Youth Orchestra "A"), and the one comprised by the former members of the *Orquesta Sinfónica Infantil de Venezuela* (or the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra "B"). Maestro Gustavo Dudamel is the music director of the latter, and conducts it during national and international tours during particular concert seasons every year (FESNOJIV, 2011).

In addition to the aforementioned recognitions *El Sistema* has received, the program's outstanding trajectory is also evidenced by the implementation of regional and global models for community-based music education, such as the one established by the Organization of American States in 1982, and the international network of orchestras and choirs initiated by UNESCO in 1995.¹¹ Similarly, joint efforts between several Latin American countries and Venezuela facilitated the creation of the *Orquesta Sinfónica Juvenil del MERCOSUR* and the *Orquesta Sinfónica Juvenil Iberoamericana* in 1997, and then the *Orquesta Juvenil de las Américas* in 2000 (FESNOJIV, 2006). These ensembles, as well as other activities, were the preliminary results of a development program led by the Andean Development Corporation, which today continues to provide funds and technical assistance for the replication of *El Sistema* in the Andean region (FESNOJIV, 2006; CAF, 2011).¹²

Aside from the bilateral cooperation schemes established with Asian, European, and North and Latin American countries, the assistance of international agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has played a fundamental role in the recent operational expansion of *El Sistema*. Both organizations have provided financial and administrative support for the consolidation of FESNOJIV—and now of FMSB—through activities that include the construction of new facilities and academic centers, the acquisition of instruments and supplies, and the strengthening of institutional capacities.

Since 1997, for example, the IADB has lent FESNOJIV US\$ 150 million¹³ for developing new infrastructure in the eight regions covered by the program (FESNOJIV,

¹¹ In November of 2005, UNESCO designated José Antonio Abreu, the founder of *El Sistema*, as a special delegate for the development of an international system of youth and children orchestras and choirs, with the purpose of promoting and disseminating the Venezuelan model around the world (FESNOJIV, 2011).

¹² This program includes four components: (1) the *Conservatorio Andino Itinerante* (or Traveling Andean Conservatory); (2) the *Voces Andinas a Coro* (or the Choir of Andean Voices); (3) the *Taller Itinerante de Luthería* (or the Traveling Lutherie Workshop); and the *Formación de Formadores* (or Training of Trainers) (CAF, 2011).

¹³ The Venezuelan government is responsible for the loans received by FESNOJIV, which can be paid in 25 years, with a credit fee of 0.25% (more details of the program VE-L107 in IADB, 2007). Even though less

2006; Regnault and Casanova, 2006; IADB, 2007). These interventions were mainly focused on building the *Centro de Acción Social por la Música*, a world-class music education center in Caracas; conducting evaluation and institutional reform exercises; and broadening the international networks of *El Sistema*. Along the same lines, UNDP has focused its cooperation since 2003 in facilitating transparent and efficient procurement processes; managing payments in foreign currency for visiting artists; supporting the operational and financial needs of international tours; systematizing the successful experiences of the program; and assisting the production and dissemination of informative materials about *El Sistema* (UNDP-Venezuela 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2010).¹⁴ By managing governmental and IADB funds via pass-through modalities, UNDP has been disbursed approximately US\$ 70 million in the last decade, which have served to broaden the services and number of beneficiaries attended by the program¹⁵ (UNDP-Venezuela, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2010).

In addition to operational support, these organizations are also responsible for giving *El Sistema* a high degree of international legitimacy, which has allowed FESNOJIV to establish multiple connections abroad and even become the goodwill ambassador of at least three United Nations agencies. In this sense, *El Sistema* has been continuously acknowledged for its contributions to music education and human development, and its ability to provide alternative paths toward poverty reduction (IADB, 2007; Pitrelli, Vidal, and Balbi, 2008).

visibly, the IADB has also provided US\$8 million in donations to FESNOJIV in order to assist the construction of the *Centro de Acción Social por la Música*, cover the costs of visiting artists and other expenses associated with international tours (IADB, 2007).

¹⁴ UNDP in Venezuela assists the purchase of instruments, supplies and other equipment required by the FMSB, through tax-exempt import procedures. Given the rigid exchange control policies implemented by the Venezuelan government since 2003, it is easier for the FMSB to carry out operations in foreign currency—i.e., payment to artists and other acquisitions—through the international financial platforms of multilateral organizations.

¹⁵ As a matter of fact, during the first intervention of the IADB, program enrollment rose from 100,000 beneficiaries to 245,343 in 2007. The work of UNDP was fundamental for this expansion process on an administrative level. On the other hand, UNDP has provided approximately US\$ 287,603.82 in donations through TRAC funds (or resources used for institutional capacity-building) since 2006 (UNDP-Venezuela, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2010).

While the approval of international organizations remains crucial for *El Sistema* as a development strategy, the endorsement of well-regarded figures of classical music has given the program an even more privileged status in the artistic arena. This support is evidenced in the regular visits of these musicians to the country and their international appearances with some of *El Sistema*'s most prestigious ensembles. During their trips to Venezuela, many of these artists have participated extensively in concerts, master classes, and field visits, experiencing the pedagogical process of the program and offering advanced training to its beneficiaries.

Of all the artists accompanying *El Sistema* over the last few years, the role of renowned conductors Claudio Abbado and Simon Rattle could be easily deemed the most pivotal for the global projection of the Venezuelan orchestral movement. Not only have these artists spent extensive periods of time participating in performances and training activities in the country, they have also promoted the benefits of *El Sistema* in different places around the world. Observers of the process insist that *El Sistema* reached a new level of international notoriety after Rattle—music director of the Berlin Philharmonic and arguably the most important classical conductor in the world—stated in a press conference in 2004 that Venezuela represented a new horizon for the future of classical music (Borzacchini, 2004). In a brief account of this event, presented in the documentary *Tocar y Luchar* by Alberto Arvelo (2006), Rattle affirmed, “If anybody asked me where is there something really important going on for the future of classical music, I would simply have to say, ‘here in Venezuela’” (Arvelo, 2006). In the same documentary, maestro Claudio Abbado, one of the living legends of classical music, explains that, “[w]hen we came [to Venezuela], we found a new world, a different way of approaching music, of approaching culture. People rarely know about what is happening in Venezuela; and for me, this is best example that countries should follow.”

Steps into the future

El Sistema continues to grow at a fast pace. The IADB (2007) foresees this program reaching 500 thousand beneficiaries in 2015 through a vast network of *núcleos* and regional centers. José Antonio Abreu himself, echoing the figures of the IADB, indicates that by 2020 this number will likely increase to 1 million¹⁶ (Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008). This growth, however, does not necessarily respond to a top-down strategy for institutional expansion, but rather to the countless external demands the FMSB receives from communities around the country. The results shown by the program, along with the current liveliness of grassroots organizations in Venezuela, have targeted *El Sistema* as an effective community-building initiative demanded by the citizenry and other local organizational actors (FESNOJIV, 2010). Therefore, as it will be explained in the third chapter, the creation of *núcleos* and local orchestras ceased to be a process guided exclusively by *El Sistema*, becoming a necessity emanating from the communities themselves.

The international notoriety of *El Sistema* has also resulted in countless replications of the model in several countries around Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin and North America, confirming the capabilities of the program to encourage social change and artistic excellence in radically different contexts. Even renowned cultural institutions such as the New England Conservatory, in Boston, Massachusetts, have created programs to train specialists in music education who are willing to implement the Venezuelan model in their own communities.¹⁷ Thus, an emerging and highly educated contingent of professionals is contributing today to adapt *El Sistema* to contrasting national realities.

¹⁶ The lack of systematized information on *El Sistema* makes it difficult to track the historical growth in the number of beneficiaries. However, according to some official records (FESNOJIV, 2006 and FESNOJIV, 2010), *El Sistema* provided services to a population of 83,734 children and youth in 1998; 109,729 in 1999, 2000 and 2001; 165,000 in 2002; 185,845 in 2004; 245,354 in 2005; and around 295,000 in 2009 and 2010. FESNOJIV (2006) argues that the rapid increase of beneficiaries between 2004 and 2006 responds to the expansion of its national network through IADB loans.

¹⁷ This program is known as the Abreu Fellowship and was founded by the former dean of the New England Conservatory, Mark Churchill, in 2009. This initiative is also supported by a national platform, *El*

On the other hand, the artistic brilliance of *El Sistema* graduates such as Gustavo Dudamel, Edicson Ruiz, Christian Vásquez, and Diego Matheuz, has also placed the program on the radar of numerous, demanding and quite diverse audiences around the world. These young talents, among many other gifted musicians, have become conspicuous representatives of a movement that today has reached global proportions (Arvelo, 2010).

It is worth adding that, as it will be explained in the last section of this study, the results of this program in the field of citizenship-building may ultimately clash with the centralist and authoritarian practices of the current Venezuelan government. Even though in theory *El Sistema* may be compatible with Venezuela's overall social policy orientation, in practice there may be some conflicts over the values both actors impart to their followers. In other words, while the Venezuelan government supports its popularity and clout in a deep and long-standing class struggle, the ways in which *El Sistema* promotes cooperation, tolerance, independence, and mutual understanding pose potential challenges for a regime with demonstrably authoritarian tendencies (Kornblith, 2006 and 2009; Levitsky, 2010). These nascent and thorny political issues, along with other institutional conundrums, will be visited in the third chapter of this study.

Sistema-USA, which serves as an observatory of the *El Sistema*-inspired initiatives developed in the United States. At the moment, according to *El Sistema*-USA, over forty cities in the country have replicated the Venezuelan model of music education.

Chapter 2: Human development in practice: understanding social action through music

It is often argued that *El Sistema* represents a one-of-a-kind initiative that connects social and cultural policy, thereby representing a consistent and sustainable development strategy. However, the scarce literature examining the evolution of the program rarely scrutinizes this claim in detail, nor connects it with the various ideological trends that have influenced development policy in Venezuela. This chapter seeks to address this gap in the existing literature on *El Sistema* as a development strategy, and identify some key issues for related future research endeavors.

The first section of this chapter describes some of the features that make *El Sistema* unique, emphasizing the different policy factors that could explain the success of the program. In particular, it analyzes some of the policy orientations and ideas that have supported the work of *El Sistema* over the last thirty-six years, and its relationship with both social and cultural policies in the country. This is followed by a description of the music education methodology employed by the program, and a review of its multi-level social and community impacts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the overarching factors that characterize *El Sistema*'s distinctiveness as a development strategy. As anticipated in the introduction, some of these elements are directly related to the perception of key actors involved with *El Sistema*, which will be contrasted with relevant theoretical references.

The different faces of development policy

The role of culture as a precondition for political and economic modernization was not a foreign concept in Venezuela during the consolidation of its democratic system. Since the early 1940s, as pointed out by Bermúdez and Sánchez (2008), politicians and intellectuals from different and even opposing ideological traditions coincided in the

view that education and the fine arts constituted essential channels for advancing development in the country. Both processes—seen, nevertheless, as two separate fields—were considered indispensable for transforming the cultural landscape of Venezuela and inculcating civic values in the citizenry, especially during the first half of the 20th century. The strand dealing with the fine arts, on the other hand, also promoted the advancement of national folkloric expressions and the invigoration of national identity (Bermúdez and Sánchez, 2008).

These early efforts to build a consistent cultural policy were temporarily interrupted by a military dictatorship between 1948 and 1958. Since previous policy trends were oriented toward the democratization of education and culture, the establishment of an authoritarian regime was a major setback in this process (Bermúdez and Sánchez, 2008). Meanwhile, the Venezuelan government promoted a development strategy primarily focused on sustained economic growth, which was successfully achieved through the strengthening of the industrial sector and the construction of large-scale public infrastructure (Urbaneja, 1992). During this period, an extensive network of national public schools and universities was constructed, but political censorship restricted the freedom of thought and limited the development of a critical model of education and culture (Urbaneja, 1992).

With the end of this regime in 1958, democracy began to blossom, reflected in part in the provisions of the Constitution of 1961. This foundational document gathered the aspirations of countless cultural actors from both liberal and conservative parties, and served as a preamble for the democratic cultural policy that would prevail until the emergence of the Bolivarian Revolution in 1998 (Massiani, 1977; Bermúdez and Sánchez, 2008). New legal frameworks were introduced to improve the system of public education, and promote a more inclusive and innovative cultural policy. However, this consensus was later fractured when left-leaning parties started emphasizing national identity issues, and opposed the elitist approach that democratic governments were taking toward culture

and the arts. Later debates on cultural policy confirmed these exclusionary trends by highlighting the ancillary position popular culture was taking and the gradual disconnection between social development and culture (Barreto, 2003; Bermúdez and Sánchez, 2008; for similar cases in Latin America, see Mulcahy, 2008; for discussions on the impact of national identity on cultural policy, see Massiani, 1977).

Even as it was acknowledged that the affluent Venezuelan democracy was indeed providing the infrastructure for a vibrant cultural community, these efforts were not necessarily reinforcing popular participation or strengthening cultural citizenship—defined in this case as the right of every individual to engage in public life, based on principles of equity and absolute access to community matters (Rosaldo, 1994). As Barreto (2003) insists, policy-makers in Venezuela were unable to combine social and cultural dimensions of development in a well-rounded strategy, continuing to conceive both factors as separate strands that rarely intersected. In the years that followed, cultural policy debates would analyze this structural problem and target state institutions as the main obstacles for the achievement of a cultural democracy¹⁸ (Bermúdez and Sánchez, 2008).

The role of *El Sistema* in cultural policy, on the other hand, was always ignored in these aforementioned discussions. Such an omission seems intriguing when one considers that this particular program was achieving sensitive development goals established by national planning entities, and had managed to bridge the gap between social and cultural policies in Venezuela. This remarkable level of inattention could arguably be explained by a number of factors—at least until the late 1990s, when the reputation of the *El Sistema* model reached international notoriety. First, *El Sistema* was not understood as a comprehensive development strategy, but rather as a small program whose survival depended on the mandates of various social governmental agencies. Second, given the

¹⁸ Cultural democracy refers to the active participation of citizens in community cultural life and the policy decisions that affect the quality of culture. It also refers to the fair and equitable access of the community to cultural resources and support (Graves, 2005).

inability of policy-makers to bridge the cultural and social dimensions of public policy, the hybrid model *El Sistema* embodies could have been somewhat difficult to categorize—at least in terms of conventional social or cultural institutions. Moreover, if culture was not understood as a key factor of development, the contributions of *El Sistema* could have been unintentionally overlooked. Finally, the program was not a creation of the Venezuelan state, but the idea of an individual who had started it before obtaining governmental endorsement. Therefore, because the program was not purposely conceived under the vision and purview of the state itself, it may have seemed less relevant for particular policy actors. After all, *El Sistema* was one of the multiple mechanisms the *puntofijista* development model created through the abundance of oil revenues to bolster social consensus.

In any case, the first observation to be made regarding these circumstances is that *El Sistema* was generating outcomes unlike any other social or cultural institution at the time, despite the formal and institutionalized demand for such results (see articles 30, 66 and 80 in the Venezuelan Constitution of 1961 and the priorities of the national development plans between 1976 and 1998 in Massiani, 1977). Even more importantly, the program was already operating along the lines of a human development paradigm, well before this concept was even brought to the fore by its creators in the early 1990s (see UNDP, 1990; Haq, 1995). Thus, *El Sistema* represented a unique and unconventional strategy that pursued sociocultural objectives within a wider development policy environment that largely pursued national growth via import-substitution industrialization (Urbaneja, 1992; Franco, 1996; Weyland, 1998 and 2002; Gerstenfeld, 2002; Gutiérrez, 2008).

By contrast, *El Sistema* was built around broader notions of human development, which entail the enlargement of human choices and capacities through means that are not necessarily economic (see Sen 1998; UNDP, 1990; and Haq, 1995). By using the arts as a vehicle to provide opportunities to vulnerable children and youth, *El Sistema* increased

the likelihood that its beneficiaries would live a long and healthier life; have access to knowledge and a decent standard of living; and fully participate in their communities (see Martinussen, 1996). Therefore, as it will be explained in the last section of this chapter, this program cannot only be seen as only a conventional tool for alleviating poverty, but rather as a broad platform for social inclusion that simultaneously renders social, psychological, and artistic results through a singular intervention.

In spite of its multi-faceted nature, *El Sistema* withstood the rise of the targeted social policy model implemented in conjunction with the structural adjustment reforms of the 1990s.¹⁹ Clearly, the program was not exempt from the budget cuts that most social programs experienced at the time, but such setbacks did not appear to fundamentally threaten its institutional existence and performance. Considering these circumstances, it is clear that *El Sistema* was an exceptional social endeavor that promoted a holistic approach to development in the midst of dominant market-oriented policies; and probably the only sustained effort to promote social change in a context of rising poverty and inequality.²⁰

This comprehensive approach seemed to dovetail nicely some of the post-liberal development priorities defined by the Chávez administration; especially those dealing

¹⁹ The neoliberal package devised by Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989-1993) and his advisors, known as *El Gran Viraje* (or the Great Turnaround), primarily sought macroeconomic stabilization, the increase of fiscal discipline, a more limited intervention of the state, the promotion of free trade, and the deregulation of markets. Pérez's successor, Rafael Caldera (1993-1998), tried to contain the negative effects of neoliberal reform through the application of a populist social program, usually referred to as the *Plan de Solidaridad Social* (or Social Solidarity Plan). However, the complicated economic situation reached the point of requiring the implementation of a second phase of macroeconomic adjustment reforms, which are known as *Agenda Venezuela* (or Venezuela's Agenda) (Gutiérrez, 2008).

²⁰ Target-based policy platforms were implemented as part of both phases of structural adjustment in Venezuela. These policies were very unsuccessful, aggravating existing social inequalities. In this period, from 1989 to 1998, social policy was conceived as a pragmatic tool to mollify the consequences of adjustment for the poorest sectors of society, resulting in focalized and targeted strategies, instead of long-term and comprehensive approaches toward poverty. The Gini coefficient in Venezuela reached a peak in 1997, when it was estimated to be around 0.4878 (versus 0.4068 in 2009) (INE, 2011). On the other hand, 55.56% of the population was considered to be poor toward the end of the 1990s (vis-à-vis 23.80% in 2009) (INE, 2011).

with the empowerment of traditionally excluded groups, the exercise of participatory democracy, and the creation of new socioproductive modalities (Gutiérrez, 2008; FESNOJIV, 2009 and 2010). The program had followed these guidelines over the last decade, invigorating community life, forming more conscious citizens, and providing alternative sources of livelihood to an ever-growing population of beneficiaries. This particular period also favored the substantial growth of *El Sistema*, showing similar expansion tendencies to those achieved by the program during the mid-1970s. Fueled by high oil prices, record government spending helped to boost the gross domestic product of the country by about 10% in 2006, 8% in 2007, and nearly 5% in 2008 (INE, 2011). During this time of sudden affluence, which was halted by a severe contraction in 2009, *El Sistema's* budget increased by over 60% and its population of beneficiaries by approximately 15% (FESNOJIV, 2006; IADB, 2007). In general terms, this economic boom enabled the broadening of social services provided by the Venezuelan government, mainly represented in the implementation of the so-called *misiones sociales* (or social missions), a broad set of governmental programs providing primary assistance in areas such as food security, health, education, culture, environmental sustainability, housing, economic development, and energy (D'Elia, 2006).

The leftist ideological orientations of the Venezuelan government, on the other hand, revived the Marxist criticism that dominated cultural policy between the 1960s and 1970s, although with more radical overtones. Within *chavismo*, culture is clearly intertwined with social and economic development, cultural animation, and the broadening of citizen rights, but it reemphasizes the role of national identity from an anti-globalization and anti-imperialistic perspective (Bermúdez and Sánchez, 2008). This viewpoint has not necessarily affected the work of *El Sistema*, although some of its supporters sustain that the program actually encourages a separation between popular culture and other academic genres (Aporrea, 2011). This Marxist critique sustains that *El Sistema* is not paying enough attention to local repertoires that highlight national identity, values and aesthetics, but rather focusing its programs on the music of mostly European

composers (Aporrea, 2011). This assessment, nevertheless, is quite inaccurate, since it ignores the study and constant interpretation of both national and Latin American compositions by *El Sistema*'s ensembles, as well as the identity-related effects of the program throughout the entire Venezuelan geography (Borzacchini, 2004; FESNOJIV, 2010 and 2011). In this respect, a founding member and high-ranking executive of *El Sistema*, indicates that the program “undoubtedly represents the country, and this is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the orchestras have turned the Venezuelan flag into their own identification icon” (interview, May 2010).

Finally, despite of this criticism or its absence in fundamental policy debates, *El Sistema* continues to offer a customizable and highly replicable model of cultural participation that goes beyond simply increasing attendance at traditional arts venues or providing high-quality artistic training to individuals. This program has shown over the last three decades that the value of the arts goes far beyond passive spectatorship and that it actually involves the inculcation of fundamental citizenship values such as equity, tolerance, diversity and cooperation. In order to cultivate such values, *El Sistema* has promoted the democratization of the arts; the enrichment of cultural experiences; and the promotion of community engagement through the collective practice of music, through an agenda that is changing the landscape of development worldwide (FESNOJIV, 2010).

The collective practice of music: rationale and effects

El Sistema is commonly known for inverting the traditional model of music education: it replaces the solitary training of a future soloist or member of an orchestra—a route typically taken by conservatories—with the collective practice of music in ensembles and choirs. Even though the program's beneficiaries take courses on music theory and other required topics, most of their time at the *núcleo* is used for performing in an orchestra, practicing an instrument, or singing with their peers.

The collective practice of music seems to be at the heart of *El Sistema*'s success, and the real factor boosting social development and cultural participation in Venezuela. It serves as a common platform for two different, albeit intimately connected processes. First, it rapidly increases the proficiency level of students by exposing them to real orchestra settings and challenging repertoires. The traditional system advocated for the preparation of students in music theory over the course of several years, only after which they could receive training in a particular instrument. Within *El Sistema*, by contrast, from day one, students have the opportunity to acquire and develop advanced technical skills as they play in an orchestra. This methodology also allows more experienced children to teach others with less knowledge, and stay within the system as long as possible (Borzacchini, 2004; Govias, 2010). As a founding member and manager explains,

[m]ost of the people who studied music thirty years ago, aspired to become soloists, since there were no opportunities to join an orchestra. The main orchestra that we had, the *Orquesta Sinfónica Venezuela*, was a high-level ensemble—with great musicians, mostly foreign—and it was really hard to get in. I think the orchestra [*El Sistema*] has opened the possibility to massify culture in Venezuela. Secondly, children learn to play by playing. Every child receives an instrument and immediately becomes a member of a community. And that, for sure, takes music training to a whole different dimension.

On the same issue, a unit coordinator of FESNOJIV indicates that,

[t]he traditional system is too slow. Way too slow. Many children abandon conservatories because they get tired. They see no progress, they do not see themselves playing an instrument, or living the wonderful experience of playing in an orchestra (...) For a child playing the violin, the flute, the oboe, or any other instrument, orchestral practice is fundamental. That also creates a sense of camaraderie and teamwork that is very important (interview, May 2010).

In addition to these pedagogical factors, the emotional involvement of students with music is another important part of the equation. Henry Crespo, the director of a *núcleo* in Maracay, the capital of the state of Aragua, affirms that,

We bring children together and get them all playing, even when they know nothing about music. Our system puts a lot of emphasis on the idea that the children really feel the music, that they live the music when they play. It is not about perfect playing [at first]—if they get

the bowing wrong, it is fine, no problem. We say, ‘feel the music, look at what you are doing. Your technique will improve with time, but let the music live and breathe’ (Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008).

The second process associated with the collective practice of music is the formation of peer support groups among students, and the construction of networks between *El Sistema* and the host communities. Orchestras and choirs are considered to be “much more than artistic structures,” as they enable “the establishment of social groupings (...) where children can learn about social interaction, solidarity, and teamwork” (Abreu in Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008; Abreu in TED, 2009). These ensembles not only allow beneficiaries to play music together, but they also integrate individuals with different socioeconomic backgrounds, creating a space for collaboration and mutual understanding.

Commenting on this particular factor, a founding member and leader of a *núcleo* in Caracas points out that, “children learn how to live in a community, to share in a space that is different to that of their family or school. They become members of a different family—one that is even closer—where they find human and musical harmony, which creates a permanent atmosphere of friendship” (interview, November 2010). At the same time, a mid-ranking manager explains that “*El Sistema* also provides the opportunity for children to understand, live, and get closer to the reality of their peers (...), realizing we are all the same, regardless of our different backgrounds or socioeconomic status” (interview, June 2010). Finally, as a beneficiary (in TED, 2009) adds, “there is no difference here between classes, nor white or black, if you have money or not. Simply, if you are talented, if you have the vocation and the will to be here, you get in, you share with us and make music.”

Thus, the *núcleo* and its internal groupings may serve as a refuge where beneficiaries feel safe, confident, and appreciated; and a place where they feel protected from the spiraling violence and political polarization that characterizes Venezuelan

society today.²¹ In such an environment, children feel better about themselves and motivated to succeed in both music and school-related activities. Josbel Puche, a teacher at the *núcleo* of La Rinconada, in Caracas, indicates that “all the kids are part of a system that keeps them busy. They feel valued, they love the music. In fact, when they have problems, they ask to come [to the *núcleo*]. They want to be here. They would rather be here than at home” (Puche in Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008). A student from the same *núcleo* (in Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008) affirm he likes the orchestra “because you feel part of things and get to know better people (...) You join and start learning, and when you are part of an orchestra you have fun playing (...) I like the orchestra because it teaches you discipline and the right way to grow up.”

This last process is well connected to the first when considering that nurturing socialization experiences have a very powerful impact on the beneficiaries’ self-esteem and, therefore, on their academic and musical achievements. Unlike traditional methodologies, where students were subject to the scolding of their teachers during private and excruciating rehearsals, *El Sistema* focuses on a learning process where beneficiaries empower one another and create meaning collectively. This practice results in a very successful system of peer instruction that facilitates learning between students with uneven levels of proficiency (Borzacchini, 2004). Students learn from the virtuosity and mistakes of others in a nurturing and safe environment.

José Antonio Abreu (in TED, 2009) describes these ideas with unparalleled clarity, when affirming that,

[i]n their essence, orchestras and choirs (...) are examples and schools of social life. To sing and to play together means to intimately coexist toward perfection and excellence, following a strict discipline of organization and coordination, in order to seek the harmonic interdependence between voices and instruments. That is how they build a spirit of solidarity

²¹ Venezuela has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. In 2010 alone, approximately 17,000 were killed in Venezuela (INCOSEC, 2011). In addition, the country is highly polarized between supporters and opponents of the current socialist administration of Hugo Chávez, creating high levels of tension and distrust among Venezuelans (Briceño-León, 2009).

and fraternity among them, develop their self-esteem, and foster the ethical and aesthetical values related to the music in all its sense. This is why music is immensely important in the awakening of sensibility, in the forging of values, and in the training of youngsters to teach other kids (Abreu in TED, 2009).

A mid-ranking official of FESNOJIV supports these ideas by underlying that,

[i]n group education, reading music, playing an instrument, and even auditions are done collectively. If children do not understand something, they do not feel dumb. If a child thinks something is hard and realizes that is also hard for her or his peers, then a connection is established. And if, for any reason, you understand what you are doing, you assist the one who does not get it. This reaction strengthens a system of community accountability, where everyone is responsible for everyone else (interview, June 2010).

Overall, in addition to building social capital and interpersonal trust, *El Sistema* functions as a very useful instrument for boosting community empowerment and involvement in culture. According to a founding member and high-ranking executive (interview, May 2010), the activities of the orchestras and choirs impact different levels of community life: families, neighborhoods, parishes, municipalities, states, and even the nation as a whole. However, the effects are stronger and more direct at the local level, where interactions with the work of *El Sistema* are more intimate. Families, on one hand, witness the progress and discipline of their children in the execution of a particular instrument, and become involved in the activities promoted by the program. In this context, the support provided by the students' parents continue to be of one of key factors ensuring the success of *El Sistema*. As Wilfrido Galarraga, a member of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, explains: “the first factor [involved in the student's success] is your family. In any education process, the fact that your parents believe in you, bring you to school, and pick you up later, is very important” (Galarraga in Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008). If parents are not particularly engaged with this process, they are eventually captured by the intellectual and emotional transformation experienced by their children. Ricardo Blanco, a graduate from *El Sistema*, explains that “[m]usic surrounds the children and youngsters, and instills in them a whole series of standards that lend order to their lives, and that inexorably and fortunately is passed on to their families” (Borzacchini, 2004: 91).

On this particular issue Abreu adds that,

[t]he idea is that the families join with pride and joy in the activities of the orchestras and choirs their children belong to. The huge spiritual world that music produces in itself (...) ends up overcoming material poverty. From the very minute a child is taught how to play an instrument, he is no longer poor; he becomes a child in progress heading for a professional level, who will later become a full citizen (Abreu in TED, 2009).

Similarly, the community—including families and other groups surrounding the *núcleos*—is another key actor in this process. Communities attend *El Sistema*'s events in their towns and observe the changes that this program generates in their children and youth. At the same time, parents whose children are not involved with *El Sistema* seek information about how to enroll them in one of its multiple activities. Those who simply attend as spectators, have access to different forms of art from which they had been traditionally excluded. In the same vein, José Antonio Abreu (in TED, 2009) asserts that “in the circle of the community, the orchestras prove to be creative spaces of culture, and sources of exchange of new meanings.” He also adds that “[t]he spontaneity music contains, excludes it as a luxury item and makes it a patrimony of society” (Abreu in TED, 2009).

This methodology has proven to have very positive effects in the academic development of children and youth, and also in the improvement of the quality of life of their families. So far, 63% of the program's beneficiaries have reported good or excellent achievements in school, drastically reducing dropout rates and increasing performance in areas such as punctuality (95%), responsibility (95%), and discipline (86%) (IADB, 2007). Even if children do not become professional musicians at the end of the process, participation in *El Sistema* renders favorable academic results—as shown in the data presented previously—and helps students to continue on a steady path toward personal development. Thanks to the program, children begin to seek new ways of improving themselves, their families, and communities, giving place to a constructive and ascending social dynamic (Abreu in TED, 2009). Abreu underlines that “[t]he large majority of our children belong (...) to the most vulnerable strata of the Venezuelan population. That

encourages them to embrace new dreams, new goals, and progress in the various opportunities that music has to offer” (Abreu in TED, 2009).

Cultural participation as a vehicle for human development?

As a function of human development, cultural participation could be understood as the involvement of large and diverse audiences in the co-authoring of meaning and the community-based creation of a stronger civic culture (Wyzsomiński, 2000; Atlas, 2002; Conner, 2008; Tepper and Gao, 2008). This definition sustains itself on the fact that the arts are simultaneously capable of rendering intrinsic and instrumental gains; or, in other words, generating aesthetical and spiritual value, as well as promoting social engagement and democratic participation (Wyzsomiński, 2000; Atlas, 2002; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks, 2005; Tepper and Gao, 2008; Jackson, 2008). Put in different terms, enhancing cultural participation requires more than simply enlarging audiences or promoting great forms of art (Peterson and Rossman, 2008), but rather utilizing the arts as a catalyst for societal progress. As Atlas (2002) puts it, “cultural policy and participation is connected to all the major issues of our society” and “needs to be understood in a broader framework of social change and action that involves grassroots civic participation and not just government legislation” (p. 1-2). Thus, *El Sistema* represents a very complex and diversified approach to development that is not merely sustained by the promotion of highbrow music. It is, first and foremost, a major inclusion effort that intends to create social development through the collective practice of music (Abreu in Arvelo, 2006; Abreu in TED, 2009).

Thus, *El Sistema* can be considered a successful model of cultural engagement and an innovative human development strategy for three main reasons. First, it is a comprehensive opportunity-based model; second, it provides universal access to the arts; and, third, it can be replicated and adapted to the situation and needs of specific

communities in radically different contexts. Each of these factors is described in turn in the sub-sections that follow.

Opportunities for all

There is a natural compatibility between the work of *El Sistema* and the concept of human development, given the effects that cultural opportunities can have on the adjustment of certain social conditions. According to this view, *El Sistema* is not an initiative devoted to the solution of pre-defined social issues, but a channel to empower vulnerable groups in their struggle to have better and more prosperous lives. If anything, *El Sistema* is ultimately the provider of a form of psychological and spiritual encouragement that helps individuals to better cope with complex, day-to-day societal challenges. While many interviewees in this study accepted the proposition that similar results could be attained through different means—sports, for example—they still claimed that music makes social inclusion that much more successful. In this vein, Abreu points out that music has “the mysterious and unique capacity to express what other art forms cannot, [which] gives it both endless potential and an intense sensitivity. Music, perhaps, has a more profound impact on human beings than does any other form of art” (Abreu in Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008).

Casting this last detail aside, what seems to be essential in this process is the potential *El Sistema* develops in its thousands of beneficiaries simply by giving them access to a rewarding and aesthetically pleasing activity. On this particular matter, a founding member and director of FESNOJIV indicates that,

[*El Sistema*] is not a social program that intends to satisfy the basic needs of an individual—food, shelter, and the satisfaction of these needs concludes it all—but rather something that goes beyond: this programs gives you tools to confront life, to help you succeed and grow, for the construction of a society without exclusion, where people do not feel like less for not having access to the goods and services others do (interview, May 2010).

A manager of *El Sistema* concurs, and adds other important factors to the mix:

In our everyday work, we face a countless number of problems. It does not mean that these problems will be resolved, because we cannot, for instance, eradicate poverty on our own. So, what is it that we are looking for? What we want to achieve is for our beneficiaries to transcend their miseries, to redefine the ways in which they understand life, to start different personal projects, to recognize that beyond poverty—which may be a constant—there are opportunities to build a new things, a different future (interview, June 2010).

This way of conceptualizing the action of *El Sistema* also inverts traditional planning processes, since its development interventions are not necessarily focused on the resolution of clearly targeted problems,²² but as a general platform for overcoming social vulnerability.²³ Policy initiatives focusing on this last dimension, as Moser (1996) would explain, provide mechanisms that individuals and communities can employ to face external challenges, improve their relative position in society, and even change the subjective perceptions of poverty held by these actors. In this regard, referring to the psychological impact of deprivation, Abreu mentions that “the most miserable and tragic thing about poverty is not the lack of bread or roof, but the feeling of being no-one, the lack of identification, the lack of public esteem” (Abreu in TED, 2009). *El Sistema*, he insists, dramatically changes these perceptions and gives its beneficiaries—at least to those who are in a more socially vulnerable position—the opportunity to redefine their potential as human beings and the role as citizens in a particular social setting.

Democratic access to culture

El Sistema also transforms the idea that culture and access to the arts are reserved for those with more exclusive tastes or more favorable social positions. The fact that participation is “strongly tied to social context” (Tepper and Gao, 2008: 29) or that access to the arts is as unequal as society itself, reflect not only the current state of this subject in

²² See Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002) and Sabatier (2007) for more on policy design and strategic planning processes in developing countries.

²³ If *El Sistema* is seen as an artistic program, however, this conceptual approach changes entirely, since there are other and more precise objectives to be accomplished in the case of those students who wish to pursue a professional career in music.

the developed world, but also describes the limitations of cultural policy of Venezuela at a certain point in time (Bermúdez and Sánchez, 2008). As explained in the first section of this chapter, high-culture manifestations in most democratic governments were only approached by illustrated minorities with a vast cultural capital, which resulted in a very extended form of cultural exclusion. Even though bringing people closer to the arts was a policy priority between the 1970s and the 1990s, it overlooked the importance of participation—or the involvement of the audiences in the production of cultural meaning (Bermúdez and Sánchez, 2008). *El Sistema* has been gradually achieving this goal, as it allows everyone to become involved with arts, especially the most vulnerable—and youngest—sectors of society.²⁴ Referencing this idea, Abreu affirms that, “[t]he arts used to be an endeavor of minorities for minorities, then of minorities for majorities, and (...) [now] (...) an endeavor of majorities for majorities” (Abreu in Arvelo, 2006). He also asserts that the replication of this model in other countries, especially in Latin America, will signal a profound transformation of social policy history (Abreu in Arvelo, 2006).

Similarly, the collective practice of music inverts the typical pattern of participation according to which communities, on any scale, are passive receptors of the arts. Communities, instead, experience the beauty of the arts and its benefits in society, and then embrace it as a fundamental need—even, in some cases, as a fundamental human right (Abreu in TED, 2009). Thus, the community loves music not because it is obligated to do so, following some particular social convention, but because it recognizes the added value it brings to the life of its members. Therefore, this model is a very powerful tool for building both bonding and bridging social capital; that is, creating trust and reciprocity between people within a community or set of communities (see Durston, 2000, for other debates on community social capital; see the impact of these concepts in the context of immigrants arts participation in Lena and Cornfield, 2008; and the relational strand of

²⁴ While the target population from *El Sistema* is rather young, this may also respond to the fact that Venezuela is also a very young country currently going through a demographic transition process: 64.5% of the population is between 15 and 64 years old, and 30% of the population is under 15 (El Troudi, Rivas, and Ríos, 2008).

participation in Grams, 2008). On this subject, a mid-ranking official of *El Sistema* indicates that,

“(…) [Y]ou need to let the community actively participate in the arts, so that they acknowledge their value. Then, the community cannot disconnect itself from its need for the arts, because such need is not merely an aesthetic need, it is a social need, a representation of values, a tangible path toward development they can see and apply. And if it was not for that, they would not ask for it (…) [Communities see the arts] as something valuable, because they have had a more direct contact with them” (interview, June 2010).

Community understanding of the arts and its value intersects with the emergence of new instances of local power in Venezuela, where communities gather to identify their most salient problems and decide how to use governmental funds to solve them. Over the last few years, these instances—whose smallest and most nuclear expression are the known as communal councils—are now channeling public resources toward the creation of children and youth orchestras, a demand that is exponentially multiplying the number of *núcleos* around the country.²⁵

Community ownership has consistently guaranteed the program’s sustainability over the last thirty-six years. Rodrigo The same official also states that,

Over the last three decades, orchestras have multiplied, existing and coexisting with different communities in a very open way, (…) trying to have the community as the creator of the art. It is not about having someone outside the community coming to teach you how to do things, but rather about making people identify themselves with the program through concerts, public recognition, and the artistic and academic success it fosters²⁶ (interview, May 2010).

On the increasing community ownership of the program, a unit coordination of FESNOJIV, comments that, “we are surprised with the eagerness of communities around the country to have an orchestra (…) It is not about us [FESNOJIV] going to a

²⁵ This process started recently, for which systematized data is not yet available.

²⁶ On the same note, although looking at the case of the United States, Tepper and Gao (2008) assert that “policy interventions might be more effective if they focus on teaching people to do art, rather than simply exposing people to the arts” (Tepper and Gao, 2008: 37).

community and begging for it to have an orchestra. They are the ones who call us” (interview, May 2010).

Another executive adds that,

Communities themselves are the ones that will demand the continuity of the program. This is the role of our next generation of managers, who come from the communities, and to whom communities will demand that continuity. I do not see this structure collapsing, because there are so many people involved, such great results, that if this were to disappear, communities, parents and children would be very upset.

However, the most interesting accomplishments of *El Sistema* are not restricted to community-building. Since quite recently, the program has also provided access or extended its services to traditionally excluded populations, such as indigenous peoples in secluded areas of the country; inmates in penitentiary centers; and handicapped children and youth. By considering these new target groups, *El Sistema* has expanded its reach to segments of the population that were never considered audiences or authors of the arts. Indigenous populations—521 children to date—are primarily attended in the rural state of Delta Amacuro through *núcleos* that, in many cases, can only be accessed by boat (RTVE, 2010). The project of penitentiary orchestras is currently being implemented in five prisons in Venezuela as a mechanism for social reintegration, and has shown thus far that music can effectively reduce recidivism among beneficiaries (RTVE, 2010). Lastly, the use of music as an instrument of rehabilitation for intellectually-challenged, and visually- and hearing-impaired individuals is currently occurring in fifteen out of the twenty-four states of Venezuela (Smaczny and Stodtmeier, 2008; RTVE, 2010). These projects within *El Sistema* have focused on developing the potential and fostering progress of individuals facing excruciating circumstances—geographical isolation, imprisonment, and physical disabilities—in groups whose ages sometimes exceed the ceiling of 19 or 20 years.

A highly replicable strategy

Notwithstanding the fact that there is no one precise recipe for emulating *El Sistema*, its basic teaching principles can easily be adapted to different national contexts.

Programs such as the one initiated by the Andean Development Corporation, as explained in the first chapter, have provided funds and technical assistance for the replication of *El Sistema* in most countries of the Andean region (CAF, 2011). In addition to these programs, more than twenty-five countries have managed to repeat the model resorting to either governmental support or private funding, and adjusting the teaching methodology of *El Sistema* to the specific conditions of their communities. In the United States alone, it is calculated that *El Sistema*-inspired initiatives are taking place in no less than forty cities in twenty-five states (*El Sistema-USA*, 2011). Beyond its identity as a music and social inclusion program, *El Sistema* has become a global movement that even the most developed countries are using as a model to improve cultural participation and the social impact of the arts in their own communities.

What the existing evidence suggests is that the successful replication of *El Sistema* depends on its adaptation to the various needs of communities. *Núcleos* in Venezuela may follow similar pedagogical and administrative guidelines, but they are not exact copies of one another. As Govias (2010) puts it,

El Sistema (...) defies reduction to bullet points or pedagogical sound bites. Its founder, José Antonio Abreu, once described the organization's development and growth in terms of chaos theory—"chaos" not in the normal sense of anarchy or entropy, but the mathematical concept that a constrained set of variables can at different times express significantly different outcomes, all of which remain intrinsically linked, if not unique, to the starting data. A good metaphor for this phenomenon is an apple seed. When it is planted, one particular outcome is certain. How high the tree, how many and branches it has, how big the apples, all of these can and will change based on local growing conditions. Yet as different as all these features will be, no matter how extreme, cannot change the fact that the resulting organism will be an apple tree.

Thus, the replication of the model must be adjusted to the needs of each community, resulting in a unique organism that follows a general and very flexible course of action. Community adaptation, then, remains at the forefront of this process. A manager of the program clarifies that,

Each town, community, state or municipality has its own identity. The Foundation [FESNOJIV] does not impose an educational system within these communities. On the

contrary, it seeks to adapt to the needs of that community, identifies them, and then uses them in its own favor to implement the program. If the program will be implemented in a small community that is oriented toward the development of folkloric expressions, the Foundation ties itself to those genres at first to then bring the orchestral format to the fore, but always keeping in mind that community needs are a priority (...) There is not an imposition of criteria for any of this. What we have is a format that is totally and completely adaptable. This allows you to have several groups under *El Sistema*, in spite of their differences. While you will find a format that is somehow repeated in several *núcleos*, there are many things that are defined by the idiosyncrasies of the communities that host them.

The same manager made an additional comment that is fundamental for the replication of *El Sistema* in both Venezuela and abroad:

[In many *núcleos*, especially abroad] [t]here is usually a tremendous anxiety to have a finished product so that it can be sold. But, again, this is not about selling communities or donors a program, but rather about identifying people's needs. Any foundation that wants to implement the program should first study those needs in a particular community, and only then would it be possible to implement the program. More than creating a result, the main priority is showing that community, after studying it, that you understand it, and that your program takes its needs into consideration. The focus is transforming those needs into sources of endless potential. This process is not one of marketing, but one of study.

These wise reflections touch on the very essence of the rights approach to social policy and especially on the need to build strong interfaces with communities and other groups of beneficiaries. According to Roberts (2001) the interactions that precede the design of social policy are extremely important for the success of any development program. And this is so as “the nature of relationship between policy implementers and their targeted populations is as important to the success of social policy as is the content of the policy” (Roberts, 2001: 2). According to Roberts, “it is in the nature of these relationships rather than in the formal content of policies that the most dramatic changes have taken place in the last two decades” (Roberts, 2001: 2). This assertion is based on the fact that highly consulted and disseminated policies tend to be more legitimate, and have better and more socially accepted outcomes. This is the case of *El Sistema*, where this approach has proven to be highly successful.

Following these ideas, popular participation in public decision-making is often identified as a crucial component of democracy, and has an important role as one of the

grounds for the construction of more responsive social policies (Jelin, 1996; Roberts, 2001; Powell, 2007). This concept gains more importance within the framework of participatory democracy, which is based on the interplay between human subjectivities and the state, and the inclusion of those traditionally excluded from public decisions (Dean, 2007; Powell, 2007). Therefore, *El Sistema*, along with the surfacing of participatory democracy, constitutes a pathway to reinvent citizenship, reinvigorate political pluralism, and improve social policy design.

Final considerations

The preceding sections illustrates how *El Sistema* has been successfully advancing human development and enlarging cultural participation using the collective practice of music as its main tool. Overall, the model represents an alternative avenue to advance human development in difficult, contradictory, and unequal societies, functioning as a general, opportunity-oriented, and comprehensive platform for reducing different forms of human vulnerability.

Yet, these transformations have not occurred spontaneously. Over the last thirty-six years, *El Sistema* has moved forward an ambitious social and artistic agenda using a large and particularly complex institutional machinery. While it still represents a governmental instance, shaped by the changing dynamics of the Venezuelan public administration, FESNOJIV has remained faithful to its mission and programmatic goals, and fairly adaptable to a myriad of dramatic environmental challenges. But, how does it do it? What are the key organizational factors behind the relevance and survival of FESNOJIV? These questions are answered in turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: The organizational machinery behind *El Sistema*

Thus far, this study has explored the contextual and policy-related factors explaining the distinctiveness of *El Sistema*. This last chapter examines the organizational factors that have enabled the success of the program, using observations gathered from key institutional actors and organizational counterparts as primary evidence. The first section of the chapter offers a general characterization of the institutional environment in which FESNOJIV has operated, visiting some of the central concepts and ideas that have led to bureaucratic reforms in Venezuela and Latin America. The second section analyzes some of the data collected for this study and presents a more comprehensive summary of FESNOJIV's organizational culture.

The tensions of institutional reform

One of the most salient concerns within development policy in Latin America is the need for more solid national institutions that observe principles of democratic governance, transparency, and efficiency (Bresser-Pereira, 1998, 1999, and 2004; Cunill, 2004; Scartascini, Stein, and Tomassi, 2010). Policy reforms pushed forward in the late 1980s sought to create these patterns of behavior, streamlining the role of the state in social development, and reducing its size to its minimum expression (Bresser-Pereira, 2004; Echebarría y Cortázar, 2007). Accompanying these economic reforms was the reemergence of democracy—in a continent plagued by authoritarian regimes until the late 1990s—and the subsequent redefinition of national bureaucracies into supposedly more rational and cost-effective administrative instances.

The implementation of post-adjustment policies—or first-generation reforms—between the early 1980s and the late 1990s was intended to reduced the size of the state, which was considered an obstacle for the full effectiveness of market forces. Since the 1930s, the modernization model had propelled the growth of an increasingly large and

complex interventionist public apparatus, aimed at allocating resources for trade and industrial development; stimulating economic growth and investment; supporting production through public companies; controlling the prices of goods and services, and setting interest and exchange rates; regulating the labor market; and providing basic social services (Kirby, 2002: 3). The state, ruled by the national industrial bourgeoisie and an emergent professional bureaucracy, managed every possible aspect of the political, economic and social spheres of society, becoming an expensive, inefficient and overly centralized institutional structure. Moreover, this rational-bureaucratic state tended to favor the interests of the ruling classes, who obtained benefits from what Bresser-Pereira calls the privatization of the public patrimony (Bresser-Pereira, 1999).

In general, first-generation reforms consisted of measures to reduce public spending in accordance with new fiscal constraints, casting aside their potential effects on the regulatory capabilities of the state. Neoliberal programs achieved economic stability and growth through the attainment of clear fiscal objectives in certain countries, but also intensified previously existing dilemmas related to income distribution and social inequality (Filgueira and Filgueira, 2002; Gerstenfeld, 2002; Kirby, 2002; Kliksberg, 2005). This shrunken state subsequently dealt with increasingly complex social demands through “safety nets” or targeting policies, losing its ability to regulate the market when failing to provide inclusive public goods.

By the end of the 1990s, international financial organizations realized that the first generation of economic reforms had not delivered on expected outcomes, and recognized the importance of public institutions as a means for accomplishing market efficiency and social development. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, the reform of the state had become a major issue on the dominant development agenda (Kirby, 2002).

The renewed interest in the role of the state led to a series of second-generation reforms in which the state would complement rather than replace the market, boosting the

competitiveness of the economy, financing the social goods and services that the market was unable to offer, and making public decisions more transparent (Bresser-Pereira, 1998: 108). State reengineering would encompass the creation of a “quality-oriented administrative culture in the public service, a profound redesign of public institutions, and an opening to civil society” (Tomessini cited by Kirby, 2002: 11), as well as political decentralization, economic regulation, and the professionalization of public employment (Kirby, 2002). As stated by Bresser-Pereira (1999), managerial public administration materialized during the second half of the twentieth century and was meant to substitute the previous governance model, which was deeply rooted in a rational and formalistic bureaucratic tradition.

However, the transition between these two models was neither linear nor exempt from serious difficulties. While several Latin American countries managed to decentralize their public administrations, those dominated by populist and hyper-presidentialist regimes kept the discretion and independence of their national bureaucracies at bay (Echebarría and Cortázar, 2007). Other countries, in turn, would find that most state reforms pursued in the 1990s were being distorted by centralizing and statist governments, which sought to maintain control of public institutions in a rather patronizing fashion. This process has become even more common as emerging leftist governments in Latin America have substituted the institutional practices and models conceived by the Washington Consensus with others presumably more responsive to the popular will (Escobar, 2010).

Venezuela serves as a paradigmatic case to explain these tendencies, since a highly centralized government halted state modernization in the late 1990s, and focused its efforts on the establishment of a massive and highly politicized public bureaucracy. In addition to the almost thirty ministries dependent on the central government, the expansion of social services via the *misiones sociales* since 2004 and other public institutions has virtually tripled the number of civil servants in Venezuela and

significantly increased the public debt (Penfold, 2005 and 2007). Moreover, the Venezuelan bureaucracy during this period has served as the operational platform for a massive clientelistic network, which has restricted the provision of social services to certain groups (Penfold, 2005 and 2007). Although this behavior is not exclusive to the Chávez administration, it seems to be even more salient today, given the extremely close—and sometimes forced—relationship connecting the ruling elite with the different layers of bureaucracy (Penfold, 2005 and 2007; Panzarelli, 2009).

In the midst of these dynamics, *El Sistema* then appears as a truly rare entity. More recently, as explained in the previous chapter, the program and the Venezuelan administration have expanded considerably, and even more so since the period of economic prosperity that followed a financial crisis in 2004. However, *El Sistema* has remained an independent, successful, and flexible public entity, in spite of the environmental pressures it has undergone. It begs the question, how does it do it? What are the main internal factors that keep this organization afloat in a sea of contradictions and political conflict?

Connecting the dots: organizational factors behind success

Before addressing these queries, it is important to present some clear assumptions that will guide the last section of this study. First, as found by other research in the field, is that a strong correlation exists between bureaucratic independence and the capacity of the state to carry out successful development policies (Geddes, 1990; Willis, 1995). Second, public organizations can achieve high levels of insulation and autonomy under very specific circumstances, in spite of their exposure to external pressures, multi-level decision-making processes, and different policy arenas (Arellano, 2004). Case studies in Latin America confirm that bureaucracies can be prevented from reflecting the interests of particular groups in society as a result of, for example, presidential protection, more strict staff recruitment policies, commitment to organizational objectives, or the

development of innovative institutional practices²⁷ (Lafer, 1970; Geddes, 1990; Willis, 1995). The combination of these factors has enabled the creation of what is usually understood as “pockets of efficiency” within the Latin American state (Lafer, 1970).

These ideas do not suggest, however, that FESNOJIV—the institutional face of *El Sistema*—is a perfect or monolithic instance, but rather that its success can be attributed in part to its ability to remain relatively isolated from political processes within the broader political and administrative system. That said, this study examines the specific internal features that have played a pivotal role in the long-term success of FESNOJIV, and some of the mechanisms it has used to protect itself from external disturbances. This section will then look at these internal features and dynamics, which can be classified as follows: (1) commitment to organizational mission; (2) adaptation mechanisms; (3) leadership and management; and (4) planning and internal processes. As anticipated in the introduction, these units of analysis represent the main subjects covered by fieldwork interviews, and gather the perceptions of FESNOJIV’s officials and counterparts.

Commitment to organizational mission

Most interviewees attributed the success of FESNOJIV to several factors, particularly the dedication and passion of its employees; and the unique approach of the program to music and social development.

When it comes to the dedication and work ethics, and the connection with the community of beneficiaries, a founding member and director of FESNOJIV asserts,

If we want to talk about the keys to success, I believe that this first factor is the continuity of our work, our passion and commitment, the desire to continue doing what we are doing, to give away our lives to music and the arts, to pass our knowledge to children and youth, and to build something that goes beyond an artistic program (...) We are not detached from the product of our work, of what we do. After working so hard, so intensely, for hours and

²⁷ The creation of the *Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico* in Brazil presents an interesting case study to understand these assumptions (Willis, 1995).

hours, you go to a concert and there you find the reason for everything. If I did not have the ability of being emotional or crying when I see a new orchestra playing—as if I had never heard an orchestra before—none of this would make any sense, because our work would be nothing more than signing papers or following all kinds of administrative procedures. When you see all of these children and youth playing, giving themselves away for music, then you say to yourself, “this is it, this justifies it all” (interview, May 2010).

Finally, referring to the overall atmosphere of FESNOJIV, a founding member and high-ranking executive concludes that,

The scope of action of FESNOJIV is artistic. It is an activity that nurtures itself on the profound spiritual satisfaction that education generates. This is an institution of teachers. This is an institution of conductors and instructors that work with children and youth. Therefore, the main issue of this organization has to do with teaching—only a small part of it pertains to bureaucratic or administrative tasks. It then means that the essence of our work is forming human resources, developing human resources, and that guarantees the staff a pleasant life. Their job is to witness the accomplishments of children and youth (interview, June 2010).

At the same time, one of the most interesting factors mentioned in the interviews was the flexibility of the organizational structure. In this regard, a mid-ranking official of FESNOJIV states that,

The values of this organization are so obvious that they create a form of reciprocity, they make you feel engaged, and they become a part of your calling. (...) The philosophy of this organization affects you. And that philosophy tells you how the organization will evolve. That is why structures are only created if and only if they do not affect the flexibility of the program, so that it can accomplish its main tasks. (...) If a structure happens to obstruct any community initiative, then such a structure is broken and a new one emerges. And that is like working within a chaotic structure, where things are replaced, changed or adjusted in view of a central idea. And, of course, the main idea must be that of the social action through music.

In spite of these references to organizational structures and processes, most interviewees acknowledged that one of the most important reasons for the success of *El Sistema* was the very nature of the program—the massification of the arts and its focus on vulnerable populations—and the education model it proposed—the collective practice of music. Many respondents were unable to analytically separate the program from the organization. An example of this can be seen in the following comments:

I think that the first key to success is the change or breaking of the traditional education paradigm. When FESNOJIV decides to teach music to the masses, instead of focusing on individuals, success is guaranteed. It appeals to the attractiveness of the orchestra since the very beginning (...) I think this could be it, basically giving access to something that was not known to be massive. I think that it is the key to success.

These responses highlight the importance of the staff's emotional connection with the results of *El Sistema*. The relationship between these two factors creates a system of non-monetary incentives that improves performance, facilitates change, and increases organizational commitment. These particular findings are also reflected in the diagnosis of Regnault and Casanova (2006), which underlines FESNOJIV's open and adaptable organizational culture. At the same time, this emphasis on results and proximity to programmatic outcomes seem to diminish the relevance of organizational structures or bureaucratic practices. As seen in some of the previous comments, such structures are not ends in themselves, but rather means to carry out organizational mission and goals.

Unlike non-governmental organizations or the nonprofit sector, which sometimes modify their goals to meet donor demands, FESNOJIV's heavy reliance on resources from the Venezuelan government has contributed to its faithfulness to its essential mission. Therefore, and even though external fund availability may vary in response to particular economic cycles, FESNOJIV has not altered its organizational objectives to fit other potential fundraising requirements. This factor is essential to understand its commitment to mission, and could even be used as a confounding variable in future methodological models to debate this point.

Adaptation mechanisms

Thus far, FESNOJIV is usually described as a very malleable organization that adapts itself to the ever-changing Venezuelan context. Interviewees were asked about this issue, paying particular attention to presidential transitions and other changes in the national public administration. In this sense, respondents indicated that the main factors enabling adaptation to change were—practically repeating the reasons for overall

success—a strong commitment to the mission, the flexibility of the organizational structure, and the guiding role of José Antonio Abreu.

A founding member and manager of FESNOJIV believes that the program has continued as a result of its very strong mandate and the commitment it has generated in the community. She asserts,

I do not believe that there is such thing as clearly identifiable adaptation mechanism. We cannot stop doing what we do! We cannot stop, we are not allowed to do so, considering what the children give back. We receive so much from them, so much passion, and commitment, so much love for what they do. It is the same thing with the parents. They are with us everyday, taking their children to rehearsals, participating in every activity. If there were a mechanism, I would see it in terms of how we can actually convince the new government on the benefits of the program. But what usually happens is that it is immediately accepted due to its social nature. It is well received, supported, and endorsed, because it is tangible, because it is there, because it cannot be ignored. You cannot do otherwise. The children are there (interview, June 2010).

In the same vein, a director of FESNOJIV supports this idea by indicating that,

[t]he roots of this program are deep. And nobody really wants to mess with a program that is helping children to improve their lives; children who are leaving behind the bad things in order to do good things, right? I think every government gets that. Many governments, including the current administration, do not understand what we do at first. “So, you are musicians, which means that this is all about culture.” And we reply, “no, we are not a cultural program, but a social one.” And they say, “a social program, but how can you do that with music?” So, it is hard at the beginning. There is a lot of confusion. At the end of the day, they end up understanding what we do (interview, May 2010).

This opinion is echoed by a mid-level manager of FESNOJIV who argues that presidential transitions or institutional jurisdiction changes do not necessary create unmanageable tensions for FESNOJIV. As she states,

[t]here are no major changes, because *El Sistema* has always kept its line of work based on social development, and the rescue of vulnerable children and youth. When a different ministry takes control of FESNOJIV, the one thing that changes is the people we deal with, our counterparts, but our line of work never changes (interview, June 2010).

Interviewees were also asked about the pervasive effects of political polarization in Venezuela, and the influence of this factor on organizational performance. Internal

mechanisms to appease political conflict—if any—were not discussed during these interviews, since FESNOJIV staff considers itself to be strongly apolitical. When raising this issue as an adaptation concern, a founding member asserted that “[t]his program is patrimony of the country, it belongs to all Venezuelans, and has lasted thirty-five years. If tomorrow we have another president, we would have to work with her or him” (interview, May 2010). Although leaving behind major organizational dynamics, another founding member indicated that,

[w]e have integrated everyone into our orchestras. We have children and youth that come from different political orientations, because we are open to all of them. And our job is to show the country and the world that we are a system where everybody can work together toward a common goal. When you listen to an orchestra, a symphony, or any piece of music, it is hard to differentiate people—it does not matter if you are a Catholic, or a Jewish, black or white, left- or right-wing. In music, you cannot separate voices. Music touches you as integrality, and has no separations.

In addition to political tolerance, the flexibility of the organizational structure is brought again to the fore, using the idea of chaos as a main element regulating adaptation (see Govias, 2010). A director of FESNOJIV explains this feature in the following statement:

Something José Antonio Abreu loves to say—and I totally agree with him—is that FESNOJIV is in a constant process of “being and not being.” Put in different terms, there is a chaotic element in the organization, which makes it flexible and adaptable to particular needs. I believe that, in spite of the weaknesses that a system like this could have, because not everything is written down in a manual, there may be positive things. (...) I believe in the strengths of these weaknesses, of this sense of adaptation that creates structures to attend to specific issues (interview, May 2010).

However, a former high-ranking executive of FESNOJIV affirms that adaptation is a direct function of José Antonio Abreu, whose leadership has been fundamental for the expansion and survival of *El Sistema*. She sustains that,

[t]he one reason—and probably the strongest—is that there is a man in front of this institutional machinery named José Antonio Abreu. Other institutions have suffered a lot, not only today but also with previous administrations (...) José Antonio Abreu is very level-headed and knows how to walk the tight rope, which is truly admirable. He knows how to move the pieces in this game (interview, November 2010).

But adaptation, nonetheless, is something that should not only pertain to the central corporate structure of FESNOJIV. Flexibility transversally crosses the entire structure of the program, ranging from the functioning of major organizational units in Caracas to the operations of every single *núcleo* around the country. As explained by a FESNOJIV official in chapter 2, transferring *El Sistema* to any community should be preceded by a careful process of study, which must assess its needs and interests. Similarly, teaching methods are also adjusted to each community or its pedagogical requirements. A founding member and high-ranking executive explains that,

FESNOJIV is an organization that functions through a very flexible methodology. It is a system built on freedom and flexibility. Each teacher brings its own style and ‘technical personality’ to the class. We do not have rigid, militarist, and totalitarian guidelines for the teachers to follow. Our pedagogical guidelines are very open-minded. The curriculum is also elaborated under the same principles, and then adapted to each state, levels of development, and different school levels. Then, such freedom enables the system to receive many contributions. Those contributions are not subject to rigid controls, but should, however, generate results. Therefore, results become the patrimony of each state; for which *El Sistema* creates its own dynamics, and its own forms of pedagogical and social capital (interview, June 2010).

These statements reflect, above all, the importance of the organizational mandates as guiding principles for adaptation. At first, this idea may be somewhat paradoxical, given that the strict observance of these principles may sometime result in rather rigid or weak organizations (see Oster, 1995). However, overall success in these circumstances—where very changing environment and a strong mission are combined—can only occur when organizations have flexible structures and a committed staff. At the same, such outcomes can only be achieved when the staff itself understands that flexibility implies tolerance to chaos. Internal processes in FESNOJIV may be sometimes unclear and particular tasks may require the immediate action of different staff members without prior notice. In most cases, employees must take care of activities that are not included in their job descriptions. This mid-ranking manager of FESNOJIV asserts that,

I have been working here for the last ten years and you can ask me, “what were your responsibilities when you first started working for FESNOJIV? I have done some many things, and that is exactly what makes FESNOJIV attractive. It is very entertaining, and you

never get bored. There is no chance to get bored, because one day you can be on stage setting everything up for a concert, or running to the hospital with one of our students because something happened to her or him. Or maybe you have to be dressed up because you have a meeting with a minister or an ambassador. It is very dynamic and we need to be quite versatile. You can find me doing anything, dragging furniture around my office or getting on a motorcycle because I have to be in a meeting really soon [in Caracas, people take “moto-taxis” to move around the city faster, given the level of traffic] (interview, June 2010).

According to the interviewees, tolerance of change is a product of the strong connection that exists between employees and the mission of FESNOJIV. Put in different terms, proximity to programmatic outcomes gives rise to a form of commitment and motivation that gradually increases the acceptance of uncertainty. As a director of FESNOJIV previously pointed out, the entire staff is used to “making the impossible happen,” and that is a philosophy that clearly permeates the entire organizational structure (interview, May 2010). Another mid-ranking manager affirms that,

Beyond the love and commitment for what we do, you get to see results very fast. Results are a permanent and constant thing (...) You see them everyday. You can be amazed immediately. You can see a baby grabbing an instrument and shortly thereafter say, “look what she or he can do already!” It also being connected with the kids and their families, trying to give them a hand with whatever it is they need, because this is first and foremost a social program. We relate to everybody beyond music (interview, June 2010).

Following the same idea, a director of FESNOJIV explains the internal dynamics of the organization:

Our work is like living an impossible adventure everyday. That makes *El Sistema* quite unique, on top of other reasons—both significant and unimportant. It does not matter if the problem is big or small. If anyone comes to use with a trivial request, we are always ready to help. José Antonio Abreu himself may be talking to a minister in the morning, and then walk out of his office and help a child whose violin is missing a string. Taking care of things that may seem trivial is one of the things that makes us great (interview, May 2010).

For other members of the staff, being a musician or a graduate of *El Sistema* is a fundamental prerequisite for grasping FESNOJIV’s organizational culture. A mid-ranking official would argue, “if you are not a musician or ever studied in a *núcleo*, how can you understand all this?” (interview, May 2010). Nonetheless, there is no clear

consensus on this point. Many musicians and graduates from *El Sistema* rule out this hypothesis, although recognizing that FESNOJIV is encouraging its oldest students to pursue college degrees to eventually provide assistance to the organization in various fields. A mid-ranking official who belonged to one of the most important orchestras of *El Sistema* indicates that,

[a]t first, the emphasis was on music, “you have to study music, you have to study music,” because they [FESNOJIV] needed musicians. But in the last five years there has been a boom of musicians and they started telling you this: “it is important for you to be a musician, but you also have to develop yourself in other areas of knowledge that may be functional for FESNOJIV in the future” (...) So, the Foundation is encouraging its own virtuosos to engage in other academic endeavors that may benefit our organization in the mid- and long-term (interview, June 2010).

In spite of these factors, when it comes to the general adjustment of the Foundation as a whole to the external conditions of the country, the role of José Antonio Abreu has been considered fundamental. Traditional managers tend to focus on the technical and internally focused needs of policy and its administrative arrangements, sometimes neglecting the fact that most barriers to organizational success are externally derived (Brinkerhoff and Crosby, 2002). In contrast, José Antonio Abreu is perceived by his staff as a multi-faceted and integral visionary who wisely connects both worlds through a very special managerial style—and even acknowledged for putting into practice a unique paradigm of social management. In light of the importance leadership plays in FESNOJIV, the next sub-section delves into this particular variable in more detail.

Leadership and management

For most observers, leadership in FESNOJIV equals José Antonio Abreu. In spite of the emergence of a new generation of managers, mostly educated within *El Sistema*, it is often argued that the survival of FESNOJIV has mainly responded to the visionary and wise guidance of Abreu. For some interviewees, his diplomatic skills, political astuteness, charisma, and compassion are features that cannot be found in anybody else, turning Abreu into a virtually irreplaceable figure. For others, the founder of *El Sistema* is the

main proponent of a managerial model that is forming a new generation of leaders and the origin of powerful inter-institutional synergies.

Those in the first group explain that Abreu continues to be the intellectual powerhouse behind the most sensitive organizational processes, including, first and foremost, political negotiations with different national governments since 1975:

He is the only person who has been able to work on such a high political level. All we do is basically paddle in this very large ship. And he is the only one who tells us: “be careful, there is a seaquake or a tsunami coming this way.” He is the one who has been able to maneuver within Venezuelan politics, building bridges with presidents, governors, everybody. The political face of this organization is his (interview, May 2010).

A high-ranking executive of FESNOJIV adds that, after his physical disappearance, it would be very hard to find a replacement for Abreu:

[p]ersonally, I think José Antonio Abreu is a gifted individual, with a great sense of balance (...) He knows how to move the pieces of the game very accurately and is always clear about his goals. Now, this is a delicate matter, because we all die; and I do not see the same balance and wisdom in anybody else. Maybe somebody appears on the scene, just as José Antonio did in the past, who knows? But the presence and role of José Antonio is very strong, and I do not see this agility in anybody else (...) He is unique: an economist, musician, manager, a man with a broad sociocultural and sociopolitical background. He is a man with a lot of perseverance. (...) After every presidential transition, he had to start everything from zero again and again. Ministers, for example, do not stay in office for an entire constitutional period, which means that he had to lobby many times to protect the Foundation, especially when it had its name changed. We have had so many names! (...) He spent hours waiting to be received by ministers, so that he could tell them about the project and get their endorsement. But, being a man with so many personal skills, he always remained calm and levelheaded. He never lost control, and endured lightning and thunder until the organization was consolidated (interview, November 2010).

However, most of the interviewees agreed that, even though the personal skills of José Antonio Abreu are hard to find in one single person, the organization is currently being run by a diverse group of leaders who possess—albeit separately—some of Abreu’s essential skills. A mid-ranking manager goes deeper into this issue by indicating that,

Abreu is a genius, a unique man. I think he has created a managerial team that possesses most of the skills he brings to the table by himself. You have those with the patience of talking to people, attending external demands, getting phone calls. You have others who are much more into the financial side of things. But, indeed, there is a team of people that can complement themselves in doing something close to what Abreu would do by himself. In these teams we recognize and value the strengths of each member, so that we can all together become the head of a solid managerial structure. When we ask ourselves, who would replace Abreu? The answer is “no one.” There is not a single person. What we have is a team learning from him everyday, and that is what will maintain the organization afloat in the future (...) At the moment, we have three generations working together in FESNOJIV. You have the founders, a vast source of experience; then, an intermediary generation of technicians, who started working with the founders since day one; and now you have the emerging generation, which was trained by *El Sistema* itself (interview, June 2010).

Beyond the synergies and collaboration schemes that Abreu has enabled between these generational groups, the core issue continues to be the approach these teams are taking toward the work of FESNOJIV. What interviews show is that Abreu built the foundations of a different managerial style, based essentially on a highly ethical idea of social service. Paraphrasing Abreu, a founder member explains that “public management is a service and we are here to serve others (...) It does not matter how high you are in the hierarchy (...) we must always have contact with our beneficiaries and their needs” (interview, May 2010). A mid-ranking manager adds that, for Abreu “what really counts is the human dimension of things. This is rare in a person with so many occupations” (interview, June 2010). Finally, another manager concludes that the managerial tradition advanced by Abreu “includes something as important as meeting with people, listening to their concerns, calling them back, and giving them timely answers” (interview, June 2010).

Despite these highly positive comments, Abreu has also been criticized for his dominant role in the functioning of FESNOJIV. Most of the criticism underlines that several organizational processes have heavily relied upon his decisions, or that, in many cases, internal procedures and structures have been relegated to a secondary position. Nonetheless, a mid-ranking official sees this rather intensive control and focus on organizational flexibility—at least at the beginning—as a key component for the

consolidation of FESNOJIV and a determinant factor for the success of *El Sistema*. He points out that,

[i]n the development of artistic endeavors worldwide, you will see that most organizations started under the guidance of terribly charismatic leaders, which were followed by people enticed by such an idea. At the beginning, it was all about developing an idea, putting aside the managerial and structural side of things, and only trying to produce results. The breaking point for any institution created under these criteria is the emergence of a third generation, which has to somehow control such charisma and impulsiveness, and push the organization toward long-term sustainability.

The same manager emphasizes that centralization of power in FESNOJIV is a fallacy, since part of the managerial style of José Antonio Abreu is delegating functions in those who want to tackle particular challenges. On this issue, he continues by asserting that,

[o]ne of the most interesting things about *El Sistema* is how people assumes a responsibility, just because they want to do something that changes a particular state of things—not because of an economic incentive, because that is not the case here. The possibility of growing personally and professionally within an orchestra sometimes drives people to assume positions of leadership. (...) This institution has always promoted an idea of co-responsibility, making everyone responsible for the attainment of goals (interview, June 2010).

Yet, the influence and clout of Abreu does not necessarily diminish in light of these factors. It is clear that FESNOJIV is also recruiting a great number of employees from its own ranks, giving the program a sense of continuity and familiarity that cannot be easily contested, but the question that remains is, what will happen when Abreu is no longer able to lead FESNOJIV? Answers to this question were divided into two opposing trends: those who foresee conflict, and those who do not foresee a threat in Abreu's disappearance.

A manager takes a very pessimistic stance of this issue asserts that “[i]f José Antonio Abreu were to die tomorrow, terrible times would lie ahead. I am not saying everything would collapse, but we would go through a very dark and difficult period” (interview, June 2010). This official affirms that FESNOJIV has been preparing a select

group of professionals to occupy its highest managerial positions, but also believes that more training is necessary and that more capacities must be built in these individuals. A founding member and leader of a *núcleo* thinks, on the other hand, that “[t]his program is functioning on its own, following some specific directives (...) If these guidelines are followed, in the absence of Abreu, I do not see a reason for this to fail. This is our *país posible* [the country that is possible], a very palpable fact. Why would it fail?” (interview, June 2010).

Meanwhile, international cooperation agencies believe that *El Sistema* has made important inroads when it comes to the decentralization of decision-making and institutional strengthening over the last decade. Yet, some of their representatives dealing with FESNOJIV believe that much is still to be done. On the preponderant role of Abreu in FESNOJIV, this representative from a multilateral organization explains:

The continuity of FESNOJIV must rely on a strong institution, and not on the desires of a reduced group of people. This has to do with its organic structures—the regional centers and their *núcleos*—and that would give *El Sistema* a more decentralized structure. And the same thing is equally valid when keeping in mind the dimensions of the program. It is not the same having a small program depending on one person, than having a huge system where Abreu even decides which violins children will play (interview, March 2011).

In summary, most of the employees of FESNOJIV interviewed for this study believe that leadership represents a gradually decentralizing function that supports itself on a widespread notion of co-responsibility. On the other hand, and even though a more democratic structure of leadership is being developed, external observers believe that institutional strengthening still has a long way to go.

Planning and internal processes

By examining the previous categories, it is somewhat simple to conclude that flexibility is a feature that characterizes planning and other internal processes at FESNOJIV. As most interviews reflect, chaos reappears as an explanatory variable that

justifies the ad hoc nature of internal routines and the responses to external demands. Even though some studies assert that strategic and results-based planning is becoming a common practice in FESNOJIV (see Regnault and Casanova, 2006), it is clear that informality remains a strong component of several internal processes; especially when it comes to the implementation of particular activities in the field. FESNOJIV officials tend to assess this behavior quite positively, although, in the long run, it seems to create severe difficulties for counterparts and other implementation partners.

In general terms, FESNOJIV follows the mandatory planning methodologies and formats established by the Venezuelan public administration. A mid-ranking manager accepts that these guidelines are observed during general planning exercises that include yearly organizational goals and financial needs. She explains that,

Venezuelan public administration demands for us to present a list of projects every year. The budget is defined through these projects, and we are basically a major project—one that encompasses many activities. You have a network of orchestras, of choirs, but it all goes along the same lines of work, which is social action through music. You have activities for children with cognitive or physical disabilities, for abandoned children. You have a lot of punctual activities, but they all follow the same objective, the same work scheme, the same methodology. For us, *El Sistema* is one large project (interview, June 2010).

This very generic statement, however, fails to describe the planning processes behind everyday activities. The perception of a high-ranking director of FESNOJIV sheds light on this very sensitive issue:

A parent, who is a scientist and has devoted his entire life to that, told me something very interesting: “you do not follow any form of planning at *El Sistema*.” And, you know something? I was in shock for a while because we do have, indeed, a planning process and clear objectives to follow. Granted, we have objectives to accomplish. But planning can be a very relative thing. Sometimes it does not exist, because we depend on each of the needs that appear on the scene. And this is quite valuable. We take care of the needs of our children and their communities as they appear. This, of course, creates the feeling that there is no planning (interview, May 2010).

This account then shows that, even though FESNOJIV has clear organizational objectives, everyday planning responds to the incremental and ad hoc needs of its

beneficiaries. This lack of predetermined agendas or organizational routines gives a sense of instability that may be hard to understand at first, but it ultimately represents an arrangement that fits the mindset of the staff. It is, in short, a fundamental part of the organizational culture that is widely accepted and embraced, especially because it usually renders positive results. This apparent instability and chaos is a factor that strikes many international institutions who wish to replicate *El Sistema* or simply establish contacts with FESNOJIV. A high-ranking director explains that,

[a]t the end of the end, everything comes out as expected. Germans and American go a bit crazy when trying to work with us. They usually want immediate answers, and even with several months in advance. They want details. They go crazy with us, because we never give them those details when they want them or how the want them. At the end, however, they are happy, because things come out pretty well (interview, May 2010).

Another director thinks that flexibility is also a factor that some foreign cultural institutional wish to have, confirming that the organizational and programmatic informality of FESNOJIV is not a weakness but a true asset:

I remember that in London and some cities of the United States, some people would say to me, especially musicians: “everything is so formal and so structured that there is no possibility to do anything that is truly special.” And they were so right! If people and organizations are so square-headed, you cannot observe the uniqueness of each human being, then, what kind of world is this? (interview, May 2010).

On the other hand, as another official asserts, this apparent situation of chaos has eventually resulted in more stable and systematic practices, based on the experience of the staff. Instability, the same official adds, may also be the result of the rapid expansion of FESNOJIV over the last ten years:

Today, the managers of each unit, the managers of each orchestra understand how things are done. It all becomes more systematic. For instance, when we have to go on tours, we have a particular group of people who take care of the logistical details. They know what to do, what equipment to take, who to call (...) And the same thing happens with our *nucleos*. We have learned what to do to so that children can be in class on time, attend their concerts on time. We are a large team that sometimes you do not see. These are the people who make these events possible without a single problem (...) And, of course, things can get messy. There are many other things we want to work better, but remember that this

organization has grown extremely over the last decade. It has grown tremendously (interview, May 2010)

This process of institutional capacity building, intensely supported by multilateral organizations over the last decade, has made responses to internal and external challenges more efficient and organized (Regnault and Casanova, 2006). While it is widely accepted that flexibility is important and desirable, organizations cannot be permanently subject to instability or ad hoc planning. A representative from an international development agency, concludes the following:

This is always a matter of balance, because you cannot undermine the spontaneity of any organization through manuals and rigid institutional guidelines. Organizations are tools to develop something, not ends in themselves (...) Then, this balance is about not letting the rigor of internal procedures to assassinate a much needed charisma; but also about not letting charisma to limit institutional development, the success of *El Sistema*, and the efficient and efficacious use of resources (interview, March 2011).

These thoughts seem to locate FESNOJIV in the middle of strong tensions: on one hand, it is obligated to follow formal planning processes, in order to comply with governmental regulations and international loan requirements; and, on the other, it struggles to survive as a spontaneous and malleable public entity.

Final remarks

As the aforementioned analysis indicates, FESNOJIV can be defined as a flexible, highly adaptable, and independent public organization. Its ability to circumvent the difficult context of Venezuela has responded, among other things, to a clear observance of its mission, its disconnection with partisan politics, and the skillful guidance of its founder. From an institutional standpoint, its flexible structure and procedures, the motivation and commitment of its employees, and its line of work, seem to have prevented the organization from reproducing the traditional and clientelistic practices of Venezuelan bureaucracy. As some of the interviewees emphasized, the focus of FESNOJIV on culture and social development makes it a virtually harmless public

instance, although the growing radicalization of the Chávez regime—as it will be explained in the conclusions—may bring to the fore new constraints to institutional survival. However, in spite of these current challenges, FESNOJIV has been supported by every single presidential administration, even receiving financial resources in times of severe economic contraction and target-based social policies. This form of protection also kept it as a secluded island of efficiency in the midst of a chaotic institutional environment.

Excessive flexibility and a remaining form of centralized leadership, on the other hand, continue to represent risks for the continuity and efficiency of the program. Some of the interviews explained that informal planning strategies could also be considered major weaknesses, since constantly changing agendas cause serious delays in the processing of external demands. Ad hoc responses to internal and external challenges may result, as shown in some of the past statements, in moderately stable procedures; but that does not rule out potentially negative consequences. For counterparts and implementation partners the informality of internal processes within FESNOJIV—usually sold as a key feature of its organizational culture—can be indeed daunting and difficult to understand. This criticism is usually counterbalanced by the fact that most employees come or have been somewhat involved with *El Sistema*, and are accustomed to dealing with uncertainty and chaos. Nevertheless, this particular feature turns FESNOJIV into a closed and inhospitable system for outsiders. The deeply entrenched idea that only *El Sistema*-trained musicians can run the organization may be a problem, as much as a comparative advantage.

The other major issue identified during the interviews is that FESNOJIV has not been pursuing rigorous evaluations of its program, relying almost exclusively on the idea that its results are “good by definition.” The representative of a multilateral organization asserts that,

[a] stronger institution was needed; as well as more rigorous self-evaluation capacities, because when we started working with FESNOJIV, its assessments were mainly sustained on affirmations and anecdotes (...) Our intention was to turn FESNOJIV into an organization able to learn; because it is only through organizations that learn that it is possible to improve and formalize procedures (...) I am sure the effects of this program will be proven in a very rigorous way. I have no doubts. Still, a lot needs to be done, in terms of turning all this into a more rational thing. People want to evaluate the impact of this model with scientific procedures, so that many doubts can be clarified. It is hard to just demonstrate the effects of the program by only recurring to affirmations. In other countries, given the ferocious competition for resource, that is not valid (interview, March 2011).

A great number of interviewees also anticipated that the preponderant role of José Antonio Abreu could have negative effects in the future, since a considerable number of sensitive decisions are still centralized in this authority figure. In spite of the inroads made to correct this pattern, some processes and institutional responses continue to be sluggish, and this is clearly aggravated by the rapid expansion of the program. A mid-ranking manager affirms that “[e]xternal demands are huge and (...) maybe 20% of them are taken care of annually by each directorate” (interview, June 2010). Another one assures that priorities to these demands are given by Abreu himself and his board, and that such proceedings slow down response time. This manager also asserts that in addition to quantity, these requests are extremely diverse, and range from the establishment of a *núcleo*, to the organization of an international tour. “You have to separate those demands that involve Abreu; those that involve Gustavo [Dudamel] or the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra; and those that involve *El Sistema* itself. Many times you go to a place where people want it all” (interview, June 2010). Therefore, unless better prioritization mechanisms are devised, FESNOJIV runs the risk of appearing unresponsive and inefficient.

In conclusion, setting aside some of these potential threats, FESNOJIV can be considered a highly successful organization that has managed to deliver positive results while weathering the constraints of an unstable political system. It remains a pocket of efficiency in the Venezuelan public administration and a model that seems very unique, given the nature of its work. At the same time, the main practices behind its success could be easily replicable in other public organizations, although any attempt to do so ought to

take into consideration additional variables not analyzed in this study—i.e., recruitment policies or financial transparency. Still, in sum and conforming to previous studies, it seems that bureaucratic innovation and flexibility, apoliticism, commitment to mission, and presidential protection, are the main factors enabling the consolidation of this pocket of efficiency.

Conclusions

This study has succinctly examined the political and organizational factors explaining the success, autonomy, and longevity of the Venezuelan System of Orchestras. The second chapter revealed that the development strategy of *El Sistema* is focused on the expansion of cultural opportunities through the collective practice of music, which permits the cultivation of civic and aesthetic values, and the overall strengthening of community life. The comparative advantage of the program does not lie solely in its capacity to reduce material poverty, but rather in its ability to provide tools that drastically alter beneficiaries' perceptions of vulnerability and raise their motivation to overcome difficulties. In this way, as Abreu himself has proposed, *El Sistema* defeats material poverty through the spiritual riches of the arts, particularly music (Abreu in RTVE, 2010). By virtue of these characteristics, this focus appears to naturally align with the theoretical principles of human development, suggesting that the solutions to inequality cannot be found solely in the improvement of macroeconomic variables but also in facilitating access to those non-material goods that expand individual and community capacities. Based on interviews of functionaries and counterparts of FESNOJIV, the chapter narrated the distinctive ways in which *El Sistema* strengthens cultural participation, builds social capital, and intervenes in other pertinent ways to improve scholastic achievement and attendance, for example.

After clarifying these factors, the study reviewed the unique organizational factors that justify the programmatic independence and survival of FESNOJIV, the institutional face of *El Sistema*. This distinction between the programmatic and organizational dimensions was made in order to demonstrate that the pedagogy and the bureaucratic apparatus of *El Sistema* can be understood separately. In the Venezuelan case, there is a clear correlation between the two realms, but this does not necessarily mean that the success of the program necessarily depends on its organizational structure. As reflected in the remarks presented in this study, the organization is merely a vehicle for the

implementation of the program, not an end in itself. It is for this reason that the philosophy of *El Sistema* can be transferred to different contexts, both nationally and internationally, without replication of one particular bureaucratic platform. This essential characteristic places the focus of attention on the pedagogical components of the program, from which emanate its most important results.

The conceptual relevance of the program, however, does not detract importance from the work of FESNOJIV, especially its role as the coordinator of orchestral networks in Venezuela. Despite the flexible criteria for the implementation of the program in different communities, the integral role of FESNOJIV as a central unit cannot be omitted from this equation, and even less so when the survival of the entire network has depended on it for almost four decades. Thus, this study places special emphasis on the analysis of organizational practices that occur in the governance structures of *El Sistema*, and only touching briefly and tangentially upon different regional and local satellites.

From this analysis, interesting conclusions can be drawn that deserve to be studied in greater depth in the future, in order to contribute to the study of “pockets of efficiency” in Latin America. In accordance with previous studies, FESNOJIV appears to confirm that presidential protection, the high level of commitment of employees with the internal order, and the implementation of creative solutions to organizational challenges, are capable of shielding the program from the influence of clientelistic networks within the State. To all of this must be added the particular organizational culture within FESNOJIV, which can be best understood by those who have been formed within its traditions. This results in a kind of secrecy that coexists with mechanisms of adaptation and very flexible internal structures. These tensions are also clearly reflected in the processes of decision-making, in which highly centralized practices overlap with the emergence of a more democratic leadership that shares responsibility. Another distinctive factor in the success of FESNOJIV is the enormous motivation of its employees, which differs greatly with the typical behavior of public officials in the region (Blake, 2008).

The combination of the aforementioned characteristics affirms that FESNOJIV is a successful organization, although not free of various problems. Internally, FESNOJIV experiences all kinds of tensions in its highly informal planning processes, centralized decision-making mechanisms, and doubts about the future. Even so, in the face of these difficulties, it is able to generate tangible outcomes in its day-to-day life. Although some counterparts criticize this informality, especially when it comes to the measuring of results, they also recognize that the value of *El Sistema*—and the organization that serves as its base—is more than evident. The personal experience, the direct contact with the orchestras and choirs, and the outstanding motivation of employees and beneficiaries, clearly demonstrate that something positive is occurring in terms of social and cultural development in the country. On the other hand, the artistic talent and positive attitude of many students has been documented in dozens of publications, concerts, and documentaries, becoming objects of critical international acclaim and admiration. Beyond what occurs in the intimacy of the domestic realm, *El Sistema* represents, as has been repeated countless times, the cradle of a global movement that is changing the horizons of cultural participation, musical education, and community development around the globe.

The insularity of FESNOJIV, however, could decrease in the near future due to the growing radicalization of the current political regime in Venezuela. Although there is a clear complementarity between the work of FESNOJIV and the national development plans (FESNOJIV, 2009 and 2010), the values advocated by *El Sistema* appear to contradict some government actions in practice. While *El Sistema* is an inexhaustible fountain of civic values, oriented towards the promotion of cooperation and understanding, the discourse of the current government has polarized Venezuelan society through appeals to class struggle. These sociopolitical conflicts, though not originating with the Chávez administration, have acquired greater intentionality during its time in power. As a result, these divisions have not only encouraged a sharp confrontation between distinct sectors of the country, but have even managed to territorialize the

conflict and construct high walls between the dominant sociopolitical factions (García-Guadilla, 2003a and 2003b), what O'Donnell (1996) has termed dual societies.

Despite these conjectures, there is insufficient evidence to affirm that the state of this sociopolitical issue is directly affecting FESNOJIV. At this point, one can only speculate that the recent name change of the organization—from FESNOJIV to FMSB—could imply more aggressive control by the government, normally characterized by highly centralized and absolute control of public administration. It could also be speculated that this act represents an attempt by the government to assert its ownership over the program, as it has done by changing the name of almost all the state institutions and even the country itself.²⁸ It remains to be seen if there will be changes in the directive of the now FMSB and if the new authorities will violate the personnel recruitment mechanisms implemented in previous years. This topic could not be addressed in the interviews conducted in March 2011 due to its highly politically charged nature, and functionaries' unwillingness to comment, but it is a topic that merits more in-depth and systematized studies in the future. For the moment, common sense suggests that while participatory democracy may normatively connect FESNOJIV with the government of Hugo Chávez, in practice this is not the case. In other words, the concept of participatory democracy that both entities employ is almost diametrically opposed: while the government uses this term to shore up its political hegemony, *El Sistema* understands it as a mechanism capable of enhancing human potential, promoting peace, and fostering tolerance.

As has been demonstrated in the annals of history, the arts have always been a source of comfort in authoritarian regimes and a powerful channel—although paradoxically silent—for disseminating meta-messages of political dissent. The cases are many, extending from the Mahlerian tradition of criticizing the status quo, to the anti-

²⁸ With the approval of the Constitution of 1999, the country's name was changed from the Republic of Venezuela to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Since then, the government has changed patriotic symbols as well, adding another star to the flag and changing certain elements of the national coat of arms.

communist resistance of Shostakovich or Sibelius, to the more contemporary religious claims of Penderecki (Botstein, 2002; Goss, 2009). Music, independent of its form or tradition, brings with it a message of liberty and justice, because it constitutes, according to the judgment of Abreu and other musicians, one of the most direct routes into the human soul. For this same reason, music has also been utilized for opposite ends, as a symbol for oppressive and totalitarian causes; Wagner in the tradition of Nazi Germany is a clear example of these tendencies.

The criticisms of the political silence that *El Sistema* has maintained over the last several years are unaware of these lessons and simplify the role of the arts as a catalyst for citizenship-building. In response to these questions, the Venezuelan journalist Milagros Socorro (2010) affirms with formidable clarity that:

Abreu has built a social masterpiece that is the opposite of militarism, a true civil monument. It is the opposite of corruption and waste of our resources abroad, because every cent is invested in Venezuelan children whose families have been transformed by the wonders of creation (...) It is the opposite of authoritarianism, because a tempered spirit, nurtured by knowledge, discipline, and desires of personal progress (...) will never support *caudillos* or the irrational mandates of those in power. The opposite of this is inefficiency and mediocrity, which we all can see [in the current administration] (Socorro, 2011).

Today, FESNOJIV—or FMSB as it is now called—faces one the greatest challenges in its institutional history: to maintain its programmatic independence, growth, and pedagogical quality in the midst of critical political circumstances and an increasingly complex economic climate. This study, then, leaves a bookmark in this moment in the story and calls for the elaboration of comparative works that examine the relationship between *El Sistema* and the Venezuelan government in the near future.

Appendix: Interview questions

Following standard practice for semi-structured interviews, questions varied slightly from interview to interview depending on responses received.

Interview sample questions:

1. What is FESNOJIV's key to success and why?
2. According to your experience, what is the main feature that differentiates FESNOJIV from other social organizations in Venezuela?
3. What are the comparative advantages and weaknesses of the organization?
4. How has FESNOJIV grappled with government successions since 1975? Has FESNOJIV devised some sort of standard procedure to guarantee successful transitions and administrative continuity under these critical political changes?
5. What are the advantages and shortcomings of FESNOJIV's current institutional structure? How are ordinary and major decisional bottlenecks sorted out?
6. How autonomous is FESNOJIV when relating to national and international donors? Does its legal condition as a "state foundation" represent an advantage?
7. How are the relationships with donors and foreign governments established and articulated? Is there any intervention from the Venezuelan government in this process?
8. In terms of leadership, what has been the role of national public powers and FESNOJIV's management in the sustainability of the project?
9. In financial terms, where do FESNOJIV get its resources from and in which proportion? How does FESNOJIV capture additional resources and how could the financial evolution of the organization be generally described?
10. The growing international prestige of FESNOJIV seems to be creating enormous demands in several fronts. Is FESNOJIV working in any institutional reengineering process to tackle these external requirements in a more efficient way? What are the mechanisms regularly used by the organization to adjust to the outside world?

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Vita

A native of Caracas, Venezuela, Daniel Mora-Brito's professional trajectory includes extensive experience in the areas of institutional development, cultural policy, democratic governance, public relations, and project management. He has held executive positions with the United Nations and the Pan American Development Foundation, in which his responsibilities included strategic planning, community outreach, social policy formation, fundraising, public finances, and communications. During his undergraduate career, he also worked as a research assistant for the *Instituto de Estudios Políticos* of *Universidad Central de Venezuela* (2001-2004) and at the *Centro de Políticas Públicas* of the *Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración* (2003-2004), both in Caracas. At the University of Texas at Austin, he served as a close collaborator of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas and the *ArtesAméricas* program at the Texas Performing Arts. Daniel earned his Bachelor of Arts in Political Sciences and International Relations, *Summa Cum Laude*, from the *Universidad Central de Venezuela* (2004); and an Honor Graduate Degree in Public Management from Venezuela's *Universidad Metropolitana* (2009). He received the Lozano Long, Tinker and Graduate School fellowships during his studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

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