Latin America, however is ploughing its own furrow and huge gains have been made, in poverty reduction, health, education, and social and political confidence and voice amongst the previously disenfranchised. There is more that we could learn from what I have touched on here. These are ‘good examples’ on which we can draw in the current crisis and the search for an alternative way ahead. Massey, 2012, p. 139
This unit addresses SDG 3 (health) and GCE topic 7, (actions that can be taken individually and collectively), in the context of Venezuela’s Bolivarian revolution. It introduces students to Left populism; the impact of the revolution on health care; contrasting explanations of the revolution’s failure; and the continuing social and health crisis in the country.

**Curriculum Plan**

**Key idea**

21st Century socialism in Venezuela claimed to be an alternative to neoliberalism that sought to improve people’s lives. It offered welfare gains for a time but eventually failed. Commentators disagree on the reasons for this failure.

**Inquiry question**

Why did 21st century socialism in Venezuela fail to offer a long term alternative to neoliberalism?

**Key understandings**

Venezuela was colonised by Spain and achieved independence in 1821 under the leadership of Simon Bolivar. It has a post-colonial society made up of immigrants who have diverse origins.

Oil was discovered in large quantities in 1922 and the subsequent history of Venezuela is much shaped by the price of oil on world markets.

In the 1980s Venezuela suffered a debt crisis as the price of oil fell and it was unable to pay its debts to foreign banks. Under pressure from the IMF it was forced to take a neoliberal turn. A structural adjustment programme meant liberalising the economy, privatising state assets, and cutting welfare benefits. GNP fell by 40%. There were riots in Caracas in 1989 when the military killed 3000.

In 1992 populist leader Hugo Chavez, a military officer, led a coup by the revolutionary Bolivarian movement on behalf of poor Venezuelans. After a spell in prison and reforms that allowed more parties to run for office, he became president in 1998. He bypassed parliament with a new constitution in 1999 that established a national assembly with candidates from government approved lists. He attacked the power of Venezuela’s rich who were supported
by the USA. A coup in 2002 briefly removed him but he was re-instated when citizens mobilized to defend him.

Chavez was a charismatic but divisive figure, revered by most of the poor but hated by almost all the urban middle classes, social elites, and traditional political parties.

In 2005 Chavez announced that Venezuela would follow a new form of development that he called 21st century socialism. Socialism had to be built slowly from below by developing pockets of power in communities based on solidarity, workers’ self-management, and cooperation. Community councils were established with the claim that these would gradually take over the functions of the existing capitalist state. Social missions were set up to bring healthcare services and education to the poorest communities. Cheap oil was sold to Cuba in return for Cuban doctors who delivered health care missions in Venezuela.

After 2010 when oil prices and government revenues fell, corruption spread and state-run enterprises and services, including health care, were mismanaged. Growth slowed and it had became clear that the United Socialist Party that Chavez established had become a ‘top down’ party that had failed to devolve power in the ways that 21st century socialism advocated. Chavez died of cancer in 2013 and his place was taken by his foreign minister Nicolas Maduro.

Maduro failed to increase oil production to fund the social welfare and to reform the economy. Oil prices collapsed in 2014, living standards began to fall, and the Chavismo movement lost its political dominance. By 2018 Venezuela was facing an economic and humanitarian crisis with many millions fleeing his country. Maduro dealt with discontent by packing the supreme court with loyalists who overturned laws passed by the national assembly that he opposed. In 2018 he called an election to consolidate his power but the UN, EU and Organisation of American States rejected the polls as rigged. Opposition parties refused to take part but despite the social crisis, Chavismo continued to have millions of supporters amongst the poor and be firmly embedded in the military.

In January 2019 Juan Guaido was made chairman of the national assembly as it was the turn of his party to take the chair. He had led student protests against Chavez’s socialism in 2007 and his party had launched a movement in 2014 designed to force Maduro out of office. He declared himself interim president using a clause in the constitution that states that the chair is allowed to assume
interim power and declare new elections in 30 days if the legislature deems to
president to be failing to fulfil basic duties or to have vacated his post. He was
immediately recognised by the US, Canada, and a group of Latin American
governments and later by several European governments including Britain. The
US imposed new sanctions; seized Venezuelan oil-related assets on US soil, and
started making threats of military intervention. National and international
dialogue was urgently needed to avoid possible US intervention and/or civil
war.

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 revealed the extent of Venezuela’s health
care crisis.

Reasons for the failure of 21st century socialism in Venezuela include:

- the failure of leaders to deliver on their promise of radical / grassroots
democracy and their disrespect for parliamentary democracy;
- failure to diversify the economy, over reliance on oil revenues and the fall
in oil prices;
- corruption within state run enterprises and services;
- the US and its allies who imposed sanctions on Venezuela, treated
Chavismo as a criminal rather than political organisation, and limited the
country’s access to capital markets thereby accelerating the decline of the
oil industry.

**Key concepts** socialism, populism, participatory socialism, neoliberalism, 21st
century socialism, structural adjustment, imperialism, community economy,
health, well being.

**Key values** democracy, social justice, solidarity, social welfare.

**Key skills** Forming a provisional judgment when faced with conflicting media
accounts of events.

**Learning outcomes**

Knowledge of Venezuela’s economic geography, recent political history, and
the impacts of neoliberalism and 21st century socialism on healthcare in
Venezuela.
The ability to recognize that different media sources provide different accounts of Venezuela’s experiment with 21st century socialism and that they reflect the politics of their journalists, editors, and publishers.

The ability to relate knowledge of 21st century socialism in Latin America to efforts to establish ‘bottom up’ socialism and participatory democracy in the UK and elsewhere.

**Learning activities**

Media analysis, debate, decision-making, presentation skills.

**Assessment task**

Prepare a three minute newscast on the Venezuelan Bolivarian Revolution and its impact on healthcare.

**Links to Unesco guidance on ESDGC**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SDG 3 Good health and well-being</th>
<th>Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive learning objectives</td>
<td>The learner understands the socio-political-economic dimensions of health and wellbeing and knows about the effects of advertising and about strategies to promote health and well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-emotional learning objectives</td>
<td>The learner is able to encourage others to decide and act in favour of promoting health and well-being for all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural learning objectives</td>
<td>The learner is able to publicly demand and support the development of policies promoting health and well-being. The learner is able to propose ways to address possible conflicts between the public interest in offering medicine at affordable prices and private interests within the pharmaceutical industry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GCE Topic 7**

**Actions that can be taken individually and collectively**

**Learning objective (12-15 year olds)**

**Key themes:**
Examine how individuals and groups have taken action on issues of local, national and global importance, and get engaged in response to local, national and global issues

| Defining the roles and obligations of individuals and groups (public institutions, civil society, voluntary groups) in taking action |
| Anticipating and analysing the consequences of actions |
| Identifying actions taken to improve the community (political processes, use of the media and technology, pressure and interest groups, social movements, non-violent activism, advocacy) |
| Identifying benefits, opportunities and impact of civic engagement |
| Factors contributing to success and factors limiting success of individual and collective action. |

**Preparation**

Familiarise yourself with SDG 3, good health and well being; its [aims, some basic facts and figures](#) and [progress](#) in realising it.

Familiarise yourself with [ALBA](#), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America. Note that this alliance of states was founded to oppose neoliberalism and US imperialism and resulted in a ‘pink-tide of new left and centre left governments, and a revival of militant social movements’.

Read Activity Sheet 1.1 pages 46 and 47. This provides an overview of change in Venezuela in recent decades and how it shaped healthcare.

This unit is based on the following publications that you should read:

- [Eva Maria](#)

- How today’s crisis in Venezuela was created by Hugo Chavez’s revolutionary plan, Pedro Carrillo, *The Conversation*, July 2016

- [Pedro Carrillo](#)


- [Julian Yates & Karen Bakker](#)
Socialized health care system collapses in Venezuela, no more hospital beds no matter how sick you are, Lance Johnson, *Natural News*, 8.11.17.

**Human Rights Watch on Venezuela**


Available to download for a small charge from the *Soundings* website

It also makes use of three websites:

https://venezuelanalysis.com/search?keyword=health


http://www.venezuelasolidarity.co.uk/ The UK Venezuelan solidarity campaign.

Relevant videos include:

The TES has a short video on socialism;

[Explainity](https://www.explainity.com/) and [One Minute Economics](https://www.oneminuteeconomics.com/) have short videos explaining populism

[Paul Mason](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exxP2H0ZGfE) on what is driving the rise of populism worldwide


[Chavez advocating revolution](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5IcoqGdHg4)


Graphic on title page is from https://www.telesurtv.net/english/multimedia/Health-Care-in-Venezuela-20170420-0022.html
A Possible Procedure

Begin by recalling people clapping for the NHS during the coronavirus pandemic. What do students know about the NHS, its origins, its funding, its services, its embodiment of socialist principles (socialised healthcare), The NHS is sometimes spoken of as ‘the envy of the world’. Why is this? How is health care organised and funded elsewhere in the world? Introduce SDG 3, aims, facts and figures, progress. Introduce the unit, Venezuela and 21st century socialism, with reference to GCE topic 7 – how can individuals, groups, movements, political parties work to improve health care?

Ask students to suggest reasons for the appeal of Nigel Farage, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Corbyn and Hugo Chavez?. What do they know and understand about these politicians? Are they all populists? What is populism? Draw on the chapter and Paul Mason’s video to explain the rise of populism around the world. Make reference to the UK, Europe and Latin America, and explain that populism and nationalism are often found together. While populism is constructed through a down/up antagonism (people vs elite), nationalism is constructed through an in/out distinction (insiders vs outsiders).

Now show one or both of the short videos on populism. Distinguish between right and left wing populism and allow students to discuss the appeal of populists and the disadvantages of populism explained in the videos.

Introduce Venezuela its geography and people. Refer to basic facts about the country and compare it to the UK.

Outline Venezuela’s economic and political history making clear that it was colonised by Spain; achieved independence in 1821; and has been much shaped by the changing price of oil. Explain neoliberalism, structural adjustment and the Bolivarian revolution led by Hugo Chavez. Explain that he claimed to be following a programme of 21st century socialism that offered an alternative to neoliberalism. Outline the main features of this type to socialism and the associated programme. Help students to distinguish between a political theory as theory and a political theory as practice (the reality). What can explain why a political theory when applied does not deliver the benefits it is claimed it will deliver? Allow students opportunities to discuss their views on Venezuela’s revolution in groups and report back with reactions and questions.
Give out copies of Activity Sheet 1.1. Healthcare in Venezuela. Read it through to aid comprehension. Explain that commentators and journalists disagree on several issues relating to the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela: the extent to which it improved people’s lives, whether or not it failed, the reasons why it failed or had limited success. The Bolivarian Revolution continues to have its supporters and critics in the UK and elsewhere.

Show the Al Jazeera video and discuss it with students. Was socialism the reason why Venezuela’s revolution failed? Were their other reasons? Do attempts to implement 21st Century socialism elsewhere in Latin America suggest it can avoid the problems encountered in Venezuela? Do other sources support Al Jazeera’ claims about Bolivia? See article in Independent.

Divide the class into groups and explain that each group is to prepare a 3 minute newscast on the health crisis in Venezuela and its causes. They can research their content and argument from the sources listed above and other sources on the internet. The newscast can be for radio, television or the internet and may contain relevant images.

Each group presents its newscast and there is discussion and evaluation of each. How should we view 21st Century Socialism as practiced in Latin America? A failure of theory or a failure of practice, or a combination of the two?

In concluding the unit return to the NHS. What actions should citizens take, individually and collectively to sustain and improve it? What are the current issues concerning health and social care in Britain and how should they be resolved?
Activity Sheet 1.1  Healthcare in Venezuela

1998: In the large urban barrios (poor neighbourhoods) and countryside, the population has little access to healthcare. Apart from some deficient public hospitals, healthcare is provided by private clinics and the booming pharmaceutical and medical insurance sectors. Healthcare requires credit cards and insurance. Medical care for the poor is almost non-existent.

2000: The Bolivarian revolution led by Hugo Chavez starts the Bolivar Project to provide urgent medical assistance to those most in need. It includes military surgical units that move around the country to attend to thousands who for years waited for the inaccessible operations that they needed. Simply, it’s a civic – military program for the health of the people. Between 1998 and 2000 healthcare spending increased from 4 to 6% of GDP.

2003: The Bolivarian government with the help of the Cuban Republic launches the operation Barrio Adentro (primary care clinics). In exchange for cheap oil Cuba sends 20,000 doctors who offer primary medical attention to the people in their communities. The program is totally free, even the medication.

2005: The Barrio Adentro programme is extended together with Comprehensive Diagnostic Centres, which are clinics equipped with the latest technology and Comprehensive Rehabilitation Clinics. The third phase of Barrio Adentro improves hospitals.

2012: The first two groups of community doctors graduate: the first in August with 8,000 and the second with 6,000 more, which adds up to 14,000 young doctors. Other advances include Mission Miracle to operate on people’s cataracts and prevent blindness and the building of a children’s cardiology hospital. All of the projects mentioned offer free services to users.

Throughout Hugo Chávez’s presidency (1998 -2014), the Health Ministry changed ministers many times. According to a high-ranking official, the ministers were treated as scapegoats whenever issues with public health arose in Venezuela. The official also explained that some Health Ministry officials were corrupt, enriching themselves by selling goods designated to public healthcare to others.
2015 Venezuela’s economy is performing poorly. The price of oil has fallen by 60% since 1998, the currency has collapsed and the country has the world’s highest inflation rate. Healthcare spending has fallen to 3% of GDP and only 35% of hospital beds are being used. One third of patients attending hospital die and 15,000 doctors have left the public healthcare service due to poor pay and shortages of medicines.

2018 Venezuela’s health care system is on the verge of collapse. Doctors continue to leave and 85% of medicines are in short supply. Infant mortality increased by 16% in 2016. There have been rapid increases in the incidence of such diseases as malaria and measles. Inflation is running at 13,000%; and the local currency is virtually worthless. Nicolas Maduro, Chavez’s successor, refuses humanitarian aid, blames Venezuela’s problems on foreign economic sanctions that seek regime change. He won a second term in the May elections but these were boycotted by his rivals who claimed widespread voting irregularities. 2.5 million people have left the country since 2015 and these include many health care workers.

2019 Juan Guaido declared himself Venezuela’s interim leader in January and was recognised by dozens of foreign governments including Britain and the US. His backers believed Maduro would fall with days but this did not happen. Representatives of Guaido and Maduro are engaged in talks which optimists hope will lead to free elections in 2020. Russia and China continue to back Maduro. Polls suggest that 57% support Guaido and just 10% Maduro. 18,400 Venezuelans applied for asylum in Europe between January and May.

2020 Venezuela’s health care system is in crisis and ill prepared for the Covid-19 pandemic. A third of hospitals have no water supply and two-thirds only an intermittent supply; 60% of hospitals report shortages of gloves and fact masks and 90% shortages of sanitising gel. The government is accused of not revealing the true number of cases and deaths and blames the health crisis on continuing US sanctions. The UN has launched a humanitarian response plan for Venezuela and the central bank of Venezuela has appealed to the Bank of England to release $1bn of gold reserves. This it is not prepared to do as the British government does not regard Venezuela’s government as legitimate.