



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BOLIVIA

CLIMATE CHANGE,
INEQUALITY AND
RESILIENCE



PRESENTATION

In 2009, Oxfam in Bolivia published a report highlighting the challenges that Bolivia would face due to the impacts of climate variability and change, including: food security; glacial retreat and its effect on the availability of drinking water; the frequency and intensity of disasters resulting from human activity; and an increase in infectious diseases and the effects of droughts and forest fires.

A decade later, we have prepared a follow-up report "***Bolivia – Climate Change, Inequality and Resilience***" delving deeper into some points that were not covered in the 2009 report that, given the present climate, other actors and sectors in the country might use, especially when considering the need for an effective national policy to deal with the current challenges.

Present-day events reveal the magnitude of the crisis and the devastating effects it is having. More intense and frequent climate-related disasters are on the rise, and are difficult to predict or prevent; they are stretching the country's capacity to respond to the limit and exacerbate inequality and poverty in different areas of the country.

What comes up time and time again is that state actors have never concentrated on developing alternatives for resilience and capacities to adapt to and mitigate the climate crisis and its impact on communities, especially Indigenous and small-scale farming communities where the ramping up of the deforestation and the extraction model is putting their relationship with the land and one another at risk.

The implications of different climate events affect women, children and young people disproportionately as they are more vulnerable during the disasters and displacement that are on the rise because of global warming. All too frequently, older and disabled people do not have basic means of protection and their rights are violated when a crisis arises.

Likewise, Indigenous peoples are victims of this context, added to a long history of discrimination, deprivation and the arrival of policies that bolster the structures of domination dating back to when the region was colonised. The impacts reach far beyond the loss of security and livelihoods, and strike the very heart of the communities' cultural and ancestral connection with their territory and ways of life.

We here at Oxfam consider that climate change and the rapid increase in inequality are some of

the main risk factors facing the world today. As an institution, we stand by our position that we need to roll out a new development paradigm based on different relationships with the environment.

A better distribution of resources is a necessary condition for achieving indispensable agreements at the national and international levels, which will enable a shift towards a resilient development style that make social development and caring for the environment feasible and compatible, underpinning a process that contributes to creating territorial governance in a framework of fairer, more egalitarian societies.

Finally, Oxfam has worked on this report as a way of providing evidence and suggestions to feed into debates on public policy mechanisms and tackling the structural inequalities that are the main challenge facing Bolivia today.

Carlos Aguilar

Bolivia Country Director



INTRODUCTION

In 2009, a small team of Oxfam researchers travelled around Bolivia and published a report that stressed that the country was particularly vulnerable to climate change due to widespread poverty, its variety of ecosystems, frequent weather extremes, melting glaciers and high deforestation rates.

A little over ten years later, a similar team of researchers again travelled to different regions of Bolivia, interviewing a wide variety of small-scale farmers, Indigenous groups, NGOs, researchers and government officials at national and local levels. We revisited the small village of Khapi in the municipality of Palca, tucked under Mount Illimani in the department of La Paz, where villagers were feeling the effects of water insecurity partly because of receding glaciers.

We also spent time examining the aftermath of the forest fires, the worst in Bolivia's recent history, which affected the Chiquitania region in the east of the country in the second half of 2019. Finally, the researchers visited the department of Pando in the Northern Amazon, where several communities are pursuing a variety of environmentally friendly practices to avoid burning down or clearing forests.

The political context was very different in early 2020. In 2009, Evo Morales, the country's first Indigenous president, had only been in power for three years. In November 2019, after a period of political turmoil, he was replaced by the interim right-wing government of Jeanine Añez.



MAIN FINDINGS

The fundamental point remains as true in 2020 as in 2009, that in Bolivia – a country with very little historical and current responsibility for the causes of climate change – a changing climate is a threat multiplier. It adds an additional, potentially devastating, layer of vulnerability and risk to hundreds of thousands of poor women and men, and Indigenous communities in particular, already exposed to poverty and environmental problems other than climate change.

Many of the testimonies collected on the 2020 visit were similar to those heard during the first visit in 2009. In particular, the repeated experiences of hotter temperatures, unpredictable or shorter periods of rainfall, sudden downpours, and more droughts were a common refrain in all three regions we visited.

In some cases, local people said these weather patterns were getting worse.

Although there have been examples of improvements since 2009, climate change continues to have a much greater impact on women, particularly due to their being in charge of agricultural production.

Extreme weather events have continued, most notably extensive flooding in La Paz, Beni and Pando in early 2014, the drought in over half the country in 2016, and the widespread forest fires in Chiquitania in 2019 that were exacerbated by a changing climate.

Three issues new to this report are the growing phenomenon of ‘heat islands’ in urban areas

(where 70% of Bolivians now live) such as Cochabamba, the outbreak of dengue in early 2020 (which was probably exacerbated by climate change) and the complex links between climate change and other environmental problems such as water/air pollution and poor soil quality, which affect women and Indigenous groups disproportionately.

The current emphasis on the agro-extraction industries, the expansion of cleared lands, and other elements such as mining and oil and gas exploration is generating huge pressure on Indigenous lands and protected areas in the Amazon and Chaco regions. In addition, this negatively affects internationally recognised Indigenous rights, and the principle of self-determination.

Bolivia remains one of Latin America's hotspots of water stress, because of its semi-arid climate and marked seasonality. The contribution of glacial melt to human water use, particularly in the dry season, is particularly important to La Paz and El Alto, neighbouring cities with a combined population of over 2 million.

There are many pressures on water supplies, but climate change adds urgency to the need for effective adaptation strategies to address the water stress and scarcity threatening thousands of poor Bolivians living in rural communities dependent on glacial run-off for part of their water supplies, and for poor Bolivians living in El Alto and La Paz.

Oxfam's 2009 report warned that forest fires could become more extensive, and since 2009, the situation has worsened. Bolivia has

experienced its two worst years of forest fires ever - in 2010 it lost 2.9 million hectares, and from August to September 2019 over 5 million hectares of forested areas were burnt - 10% of Bolivia's total forested areas were destroyed in just two months.

There were many causes of the mega-fires in 2019, including recent legislation to promote agro-exports and incentives to clear larger areas of forested land in lowland areas; however, climate change played a role as a 'stress multiplier', creating local weather conditions (less water availability, higher temperatures and longer dry seasons) that made the fires worse. The fires undoubtedly made the lives of lowland Indigenous communities even more difficult as some of the worst fires affected Indigenous territories.

In Pando, several Indigenous and small-scale farming communities are successfully following alternatives to the dominant agricultural system of clearing forests for food production and cattle rearing. They share the common aims of generating economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits by employing a variety of alternatives, such as harvesting and processing forest products without chopping down trees.

These alternative agricultural systems have had some success encouraging women and young people to participate in decision-making processes and benefit from income-generating opportunities. Testimonies from families benefitting from these alternatives are an inspiring antidote to the general 'doom and gloom' narratives around climate change and deforestation.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- ▬ Around the world, the climate emergency, food insecurity, rapid urbanisation and rising levels of contamination are harming human ecosystems and health. The ecological transformation must be a just one, and the fight against inequality must be included in the implementation of environmental and climate policies.
- ▬ Commitments made so far by countries to reduce global emissions will not keep global temperatures from rising above 1.5°C. If the world is to have any chance of avoiding catastrophic climate impacts, it is critical that all countries – led by the largest emitters – commit to much deeper emissions cuts in 2020.
- ▬ Wealthy countries are not providing the funds that are needed to help poorer nations adapt to the climate crisis, which they did little to cause, and to help them transition to zero-carbon economies. Rich polluting countries pledged almost US\$90 million in new funding for adaptation at the COP25 in Madrid and made additional pledges to the Green Climate Fund. However, Oxfam's analysis shows that right now the target of reaching US\$100 billion per year in climate finance by 2020 remains a distant dream.

- The Gender Action Plan approved at the Madrid summit sets out a plan for increasing the participation and leadership of women in international climate talks, and designing and implementing climate policies at the national and local level. It is encouraging to see this blueprint for change given that poor women are often the hardest hit by the climate crisis, but the plan needs to be translated into concrete measures.
- The debt of especially vulnerable countries should be forgiven and the money reallocated to mitigation and adaptation projects in these countries.

FOR THE BOLIVIAN AUTHORITIES:

- More action needs to be taken at the municipal level across the country to strengthen the capacity of vulnerable groups to be able to respond to the impacts of climate change at the local level by emphasising disaster preparedness, crop diversification and water catchment. For example, the Territorial Plans for Integrated Development (PTDIs),¹ which have to be implemented at the departmental, regional and municipal level and include climate change and disaster risk management, are an important initiative to promote good practice but need more time for proper consultation with local communities, experts and relevant research.
- As appropriate, priority should be given to poverty and inequality reduction in small-scale farming and Indigenous communities, particularly in Amazonian regions, by promoting community-led adaptive and integrated territorial development models, such as SAFs, that build climate change resilience, improve food security and income, strengthen ecosystems and protect forests. These should be seen as an alternative to the dominant agro-export and extraction model of development.
- The laws passed since 2013 (particularly Law 741 and Supreme Decree 3973) that give incentives to burn down forests to bolster land ownership and promote agro-exports should be repealed. The national and subnational governments should stop encouraging the expansion of the agricultural frontier, protect remaining forests and ecosystems, and promote sustainable agricultural production in areas already converted for agriculture. All action should be rooted in the integrated management of forests, a concept present in the Constitution and other laws derived from it.
- Water storage, conservation and management should be made a major priority, particularly in urban areas where increased demand is generating water shortage problems at times of drought. At the rural community level, existing rainfall must be captured, stored and used to the maximum capacity. Glacial retreat adds another layer of water stress, so constant risk assessments are needed, informed by natural and social sciences and based on a participatory approach that includes local values, traditions and perceptions.
- In large cities, new green areas should be developed with shrubs and leafy trees to absorb radiation; urban expansion and buildings should be controlled and rationalised in favour of more green protected areas.

1 <http://www.planificacion.gob.bo/uploads/PTDI.pdf>

FOR BOLIVIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS:

- Civil Society should be encouraged to exercise social control over the Plan of Land Use (Plan de Uso de Suelo - PLUS) currently taking place in the Amazon region, and collegiate bodies, authorities and producers as established by the Constitution must participate in monitoring public policies in this area.
- The number of organizations run and/or led by women in small-scale farming and Indigenous communities may have increased in the last ten years, and the presence of women in leadership and decision-making roles, and their control of family resources have probably improved; however, these advances are patchy, and need to be strengthened and expanded.
- There are also signs that young people are taking a more active role in development and environmental issues, both in rural and urban areas. In particular, various platforms of young people concerned about climate change and other environmental problems have emerged. Their participation in practical policy formulation and execution needs to be strongly encouraged, for example in sustainable and resilient development.
- Indigenous group organizations at the national, regional and local level need to be (re-) strengthened in their leadership capacity and their ability to put forward influential policies that protect their interests, territories and visions of development that are more harmonious with the sustainable development of natural resources. In particular, support should be given for the efforts by lowland Indigenous groups to secure collective administration of their territories.
- At the South American regional level, efforts should continue to increase policy coordination and integration within and between countries in areas of climate change policy, deforestation and income generation initiatives in the Amazon, and the development and implementation of adaptation actions.

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