

Bolivia

Home to the highest capital city in the world and once part of the Incan empire, Bolivia is a land of stunning beauty, rich history and extreme poverty.

Invaded by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, the region provided silver and other natural resources to bolster the Spanish Empire.

Now, however, Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Traditionally, city elites have dominated the economic and political life, whereas the majority of the population rely on subsistence farming.



background

Bolivia is a landlocked country, much of which lies at a high altitude. The political capital – La Paz – is the highest capital city in the world.

The country is a land of geographic contrasts. To the west is the Altiplano, an area of high plains between two ranges of the Andes. The east, however, consists of tropical forest and lowland plains.

Bolivia is home to the highest proportion of indigenous peoples in Latin America. The Aymara and Quechua Indians together make up two-thirds of the population. They live mainly in the Altiplano, but also around Lake Titicaca, the world's highest lake, and many have migrated to the cities. Both groups have retained their distinct cultures, identity and languages. The Aymaras live now much as they did when conquered by the Incas in the fifteenth century.

There is a sharp division in Bolivian society between the indigenous people and the elite descended from the Spanish. The indigenous groups have suffered a long

history of poverty and isolation and are still the poorest sector of Bolivian society.

Roman Catholics make up approximately 95 per cent of the population. The majority of the remaining five per cent are Protestant, although there are small minorities of traditional religions.

a brief political history

The area that is now Bolivia was invaded by the Spanish in 1525. In 1825, following decades of struggle against the Spanish, Bolivia gained independence.

Political instability has been a persistent feature of their history – between 1825 and 1982 the country suffered no fewer than 188 coup d'états.

Bolivia has had a democratic governing system since 1982. But recent years have again seen increased instability. There have been five presidents since 2001. And there have also been large public protests about the nationalisation of gas reserves and unrest about unemployment, water and education.

the economy

Although a fifth of Bolivians live in extreme poverty, Bolivia does have significant reserves of natural resources, particularly tin, natural gas and minerals.

The Spanish found huge quantities of silver at Potosi which they extracted and exported to Spain.

Natural reserves have caused problems in recent years, as they have been the focus point for public demonstrations – many Bolivians do not think natural gas should be exported.

The country is the world's largest producer of tin: making up 45 per cent of their export earnings.

In the mid 1980s the tin market collapsed, a blow that came after severe inflation and a major debt crisis. The government responded to these disasters by drastically cutting state expenditure. This brought economic stability, but at the cost of increasing poverty and a widening gap between rich and poor.

Bolivia is also one of the world's largest producers of coca, which is used to make cocaine. Traditionally, the crop is used as a medicine. But now, coca produced for cocaine is often the only source of income for farmers. The government has waged a US-backed war against coca production. As well as causing great tension in rural areas, it has exacerbated poverty because coca cultivation is the basis of so many people's livelihoods.

Bolivia has high inequality of income – the poorest 20 per cent of the population share a meagre 5.6 per cent of the national income.

Tearfund's work

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we are working in partnership with a number of Bolivian Christian organisations.

Our partners target specific problems of poverty to bring life in all its fullness to Bolivia's poorest communities.

Instituto Biblico San Juanillo (IBSJ) Yanapanakuna program

Eighty-five per cent of Bolivians in rural areas live below the poverty line.

The causes of death of children under five are directly associated with poverty. More than 50 per cent of children under five are malnourished. Food supply in remote rural areas is extremely tenuous. Lack of education also means that communities have few opportunities to improve their lives and reduce their vulnerability.

Working in partnership with Tearfund, IBSJ runs the Yanapanakuna program in rural and suburban communities of the department of Chuquisaca, one of the poorest areas of Bolivia. The aim of the program is to improve nutrition and health of communities.

The program helps communities build and maintain greenhouses so they can grow more fruit and vegetables. They also provide practical training to men, women and children on health and agriculture to support their efforts to improve nutrition.

Quechua leadership training

The IBSJ also runs a Quechua Leadership Training Program. The aim of the project is to help Christian men and women take up roles of leadership in their communities. They are promoting issues such as children's rights, women's literacy skills, and encouraging women's participation in the church and community.

Mosoj Yan

With a high illiteracy rate and almost 40 per cent drop-out rate from schools, there are a large number of children and young people living and working on the streets of Bolivian cities.

Mosoj Yan, meaning 'New Life', helps girls who work and live on the streets in the city of Cochabamba.

They run three projects: the first assisting young girls who work, the second is a drop in centre for street girls where they learn about hygiene and how to look after

their babies. And the third is a residential half-way home called Albergue de Restauracion (Restoration Shelter).

Working girls' centre

The centre provides psychological, educational and family support for girls working on the streets. The project helps the girls organise themselves in to small union groups which help protect themselves and defend their rights.

The centre offers job training and has its own bakery and snack shop to provide income.

Last year, the project reached 450 girls, helping them to recognise their potential, return to school and give them the same opportunities that others have to improve their quality of life.

Albergue de Restauracion (Restoration Shelter)

This is a half-way house which provides shelter and help for girls (aged 6-18) who have lived on the street.

The purpose of this project is to help girls improve relationships with their families and settle back into their community.

More than 25 girls can stay at this house at any one time, where they are provided with psychological support and skills training.

Organizacion para la educacion y servicio a la comunidad (OESER)

Strengthening the role of the church is key to Tearfund's international work. Training church leadership is crucial to achieving this.

We have recently joined in partnership with OESER, who are working with church leaders and churches. They are encouraging churches to engage more effectively with the communities that they are part of, to combine both spiritual and practical help.

how you can help

To make a credit card donation, please visit our website or call our Supporters Enquiries Team. Cheques should be made payable to Tearfund, earmarked for Bolivia.

please pray

- For the girls working with Mosoj Yan, that they would feel encouraged to return to their families and to school.
- For the children of the Chuquisca region, that the Yanapanakuna program would be able to reach and support those in need of urgent nutritional or medical help.

Main sources: www.alertnet.org, www.bbc.co.uk, www.irinnews.org, www.undp.org, www.fco.gov.uk.

We are Christians passionate about the local church bringing justice and transforming lives – overcoming global poverty.

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