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VOICES FOR JUST CLIMATE ACTION

# BOLIVIA AND PARAGUAY

Factsheet

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# VCA CONTEXT, IMPLEMENTATION AND GOALS

VCA interventions are carried out in the **Bolivian and Paraguayan** sections of the **Chaco-Pantanal region** as part of the collaborative efforts by the VCA Alliance members, Fundación AVINA and WWF, together with their local partners.



## CHACO-PANTANAL

The Gran Chaco is a biogeographical region of 1,000,000 km<sup>2</sup> located in the center of South America. Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay share this ecosystem, a region with great biological diversity, which is the second largest forest area on the continent, after the Amazon.

The Pantanal is a cross-border ecoregion that covers sections of Brazil (60%), Bolivia (22%) and Paraguay (18%). It is the world's largest continuous and best-preserved freshwater wetland, inhabited by Indigenous communities, rural communities and large cattle ranchers. It is a mosaic of 158,000 km<sup>2</sup> of lagoons, flood prone grasslands and gallery forests. Its importance lies in its great flora and wildlife diversity, and crucial role in flood regulation and water quality provision for millions of people living in lower parts of the river basin.



## POPULATION

The population of the Chaco Pantanal of Bolivia and Paraguay is approximately 216,919 inhabitants, including indigenous peoples (33%) and the last indigenous group living in voluntary isolation outside of the Amazon basin, creole people, and people of foreign origin (Mennonite settlers, Europeans, Asians, among the main ones). Historically, the state has been absent of this remote region: lack of governance and low enforcement, insufficient policies, lack of infrastructure, and limited investments in the public sector. A large extent of local

inhabitants are vulnerable because of: (1) low incomes (children, youth, women and indigenous population); (2) no property rights, limited land tenure or guaranteed access to drinking water and natural resources (indigenous, women, youth, peasants); (3) live in voluntary isolation (some groups of Ayoreos people); (4) have reduced access to public health and education services; and, (5) low access to infrastructure (transport, Internet and others). This limited access to public services is exacerbated by the fact that this region has poverty rates higher than the national averages which is more severe for indigenous people in rural areas, especially young indigenous people.

In Paraguay there are 19 indigenous groups with a total population of 122,461 – 1.8% of the total population – and over 40% of them live in the Chaco Pantanal. In Bolivia, there are 36 recognized indigenous groups, representing 48% of the population. Most of the Ayoreos, Guaranis and Chiquitanos indigenous group lives in the Bolivian lowlands.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE

The Plurinational State of Bolivia is a low-middle-income country, with 11.6 million inhabitants<sup>1</sup>. There are 38 indigenous groups, representing 41% of the population, with a large sector of the rest of the population also of indigenous extraction. The largest indigenous groups are the Quechuas and Aymaras in the highlands and the Guaranis and Chiquitanos (who live in the Pantanal – Chaco landscape) in the lowlands. Indigenous land rights have been recognized through the titling of what are called Indigenous Community territories (TIOC), which cover 21% (23 million ha) of the country. The main economic activities are natural resources extraction (gas and mining) and large-scale agricultural production (mainly beef and soy). Poverty is mainly concentrated in rural areas; extreme poverty is 34.6% and moderate poverty affects 53.9%.

Paraguay is an upper-middle-income country, however 18.6 % of its 7.1 million people live in poverty (with less than USD 5.5 a day) and high inequality (46.2 Gini index)<sup>2</sup>. There are 19 indigenous groups with a total population of 122,461 – 1.8% of the total population – and slightly more than half of them (57.6%) live in the Chaco Region. Paraguay's economy is characterized by the predominance of agroindustry and large-scale livestock breeding, as well as growing commerce and service sectors. The country has persistent disparities between rural and urban populations and serious deprivation, especially in remote communities inhabited by indigenous peoples.

Indigenous communities livelihoods in the region are diverse with activities such as fishing, small agricultural production, cattle ranching, hunting, handicrafts, beekeeping and day labour.

## CLIMATE CRISIS

As climate change intensifies, communities in the Chaco–Pantanal face rising temperatures, shifting seasons, and increasing variable rainfall, leading to challenges in relation to water access, food and livelihood security.

The Gran Chaco still has 69.8% natural cover yet this is diminishing through biodiversity loss and a growing rate of deforestation (reaching peaks of 1,500 – 1,800 hectares per day) due to the expansion of the agricultural frontier. In the last 25 years, the average deforestation in this region was 336,000 hectares per year, which leads to soil degradation. In a drought-prone area as the Chaco, this leads to low retention of moisture in the soil which leads to droughts, which increases the human vulnerability to climate change. In addition, increased pollution, and upstream development are causing water quality and quantity to decline, with some streams and tributaries drying up completely. Moreover, the indigenous communities, whose livelihoods are more dependent on forest, are more vulnerable to deforestation and degradation

of ecosystems, making it more difficult for them to access natural resources for their traditional use and subsistence. Anomalous weather has generated heavy losses in agriculture, livestock and infrastructure, which also affects urban people. The Pantanal – Chaco target landscape is experiencing warmer days and nights than in the past, including temperatures that have never been registered. In 2020, the normal floods in the Pantanal wetland never came. Larger than normal wildfires – combined with a critical drought – affect its inhabitants, their livelihoods and ecosystems. Overall, agricultural productivity per hectare is decreasing due to water and thermal stress, indigenous and rural people migrate to urban centers, there are more water shortages but also floods (streams with sediment dragging); damage to roads and infrastructure is increasing; there is higher soil erosion and more pests. These impacts are projected to intensify.

## SCOPE OF THE VCA PROGRAM

In both Paraguay and Bolivia, civil society and particularly marginalized groups of the Chaco–Pantanal region are not (sufficiently) represented, nor their perspectives considered the decision-making processes related to local climate agendas. The work of the VCA alliance members, WWF and Fundación AVINA, is focused on diverse issues ranging from the shrinking civic space to land grabbing and the lack of effective implementation of environmental regulation. Some initial progress has been made influencing policies, norms, laws and practices, such as the review of National Determined Contributions (NDCs) and the updating of the National Adaptation Plan with participation of partners, the inclusion of Nature Based Solutions (NBS) within the NDCs, and the participation of Indigenous peoples at decision making levels concerning climate change. Lobbying activities have also focused on promoting inclusiveness at governmental level.

## **THE CHACO-PANTANAL IN 2026: WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE THROUGH THE VCA PROGRAMME**

Through VCA, WWF Bolivia and Paraguay envision an expanded civic space in the Chaco-Pantanal region where civil society voices are present and heard on climate action. By building coalitions that bring together rural and urban civil society with a focus on indigenous people, marginalized groups, women and youth in order to amplify their voices and influence key policy issues related to climate change. Regional linkages with other movements will be identified, especially those created by partners of the VCA alliance initiative in Brazil. Together with other alliance members and local partners, the VCA programme will have helped to find local solutions to adapt to climate change stresses, shocks and variability. The collection of innovative climate solutions will serve as evidence to prove that maintaining and conserving large areas of forest and wetlands can act as a climate buffer and improve local livelihoods.