
Who owns the land?



Patterns of land usage in Bolivia have an ancient history, which remains current today. The people who make their living from the land belong to family-based groups, shaped by customs of land ownership which predate the Incas. For half a million such people, the land is not only the source of their livelihood, but the place where their ancestors are buried, where their gods are

△ Patterns of ayllu landholdings, Sección Vacas, Department of Cochabamba

present, and where society is reproduced in its customs and rituals.

The social unit used by the indigenous people of the *altiplano* and valleys for the defence of their rights, both legally and through armed uprisings, was the *ayllu*, a community consisting of a group of families sharing control of a territory. It is a Quechua word, today used also by Aymara speakers. The persistence of ancient customs makes clear the importance of the cultural and religious relationship between the community and the land. Western ideas of progress find *ayllus* a problem, their survival through time a sign of imputed backwardness, rather than a feat of adaptation. Yet in Andean thought, time is not linear, and it is possible for differing rhythms and communities to co-exist, adding to the wealth of collective experience. *Ayllus* in the twenty-first century are not static legacies of the past: they develop and change. In the mid-1990s they were given a new lease of life when they were legally recognised by the Law of Popular Participation.

Ayllu landholdings are not contiguous: unrelated *ayllus* own intercalated plots of land, each field separated by rocks or stone walls. These not only mark out boundaries but also keep animals out of the crops: the trampling of fields by llamas or goats is the main source of conflict between community members and between *ayllus*. Such problems are mostly dealt with by the *ayllu* authorities. The positions of responsibility are rotated among all the male members of the community, in accordance with the wider concept of reciprocity which informs social relations in the highlands. Even though migration from rural areas to the cities has become common, those who have left their original homes are still included in community affairs. In the lowlands, very different patterns of land tenure and social organisation existed.



LLAMA POWER

In most Bolivian markets, dried-out llama foetuses are for sale on the stall dedicated to spiritual things. They are ritually buried under buildings and form part of other ceremonies as offerings to the Mother Earth, *Pachamama*. Llamas have been used as beasts of burden in the Andes for more than 4000 years, and have constituted the main mode of transport in the region. They play a crucial role in rural livelihoods: the males are used as pack animals, while females are raised for their meat, which tastes somewhat like mutton, and for their milk. The long, coarse wool of both sexes is used in the weaving of textiles, and the skins are tanned for leather. Llama tallow is used for making candles. The long hair is braided and used for rope, and the dried excrement is used as fuel. Related animals include *alpacas* and *vicuñas*,

with their precious wool. All of them are perfectly suited to the harsh environment of the *altiplano*, down to small but important details: unlike goats, which pull pasture out by the roots and thereby speed up soil erosion, llamas nibble at the vegetation, leaving the roots intact.



Dignity and territory

The banner at the front of the march read 'For Territory and Dignity'. In 1990 a new social and political force emerged in Bolivia: the indigenous people of the eastern tropical lowlands, who walked to the distant *altiplano* in search of political solutions to the problems caused by centuries of isolation. For more than thirty days, the country's media followed the 800 women, men, and children who trekked some 500km to express their sense of the deep significance of land, a feeling shared by all indigenous people in Bolivia. To know about land in Bolivia means to engage with a much wider range of concerns than those implied by the Western concept of 'land as property'.

The indigenous lowland peoples living in the rainforests of eastern Bolivia lived in isolation from the rest of the country until scarcely fifty years ago. They resisted colonisation for longest, fighting off attempts by missionaries to 'civilise' them, and by speculators to seize their land. Over the centuries, indigenous people retreated as far as possible beyond the reach of the invaders, until they were left in the remote, often inaccessible regions that they call home

today. Although they were once assumed to be nomads, it now seems that some lowland peoples were settled and practised intensive agriculture before the Spanish invasion. The revision was prompted by the discoveries of archaeologists who are studying the remnants of raised islands once used for farming. The farmers' complex drainage systems had to be abandoned as they were pushed deeper into the forest. The myth of the primitive nomad has to be reassessed, because for some it was a lifestyle imposed by retreat.

Large numbers of indigenous people were forced into missionary communities, where they were evangelised, educated, and given work on the extensive lands occupied by the Church. These missions remain in active use, their spectacular churches a testament to the determination of the religious orders who went in search of souls to save. In the beautiful villages where the church dominates the central square, with its painted plaster and carved columns of precious hardwood, the institutional church is also dominant economically and socially: the clinic, the school, and the enterprises such as carpentry workshops and cattle ranches and local logging businesses are now owned by Franciscans (the original Jesuits having been expelled in 1767).

For lowland indigenous people, the first political battle was to be recognised as Bolivian citizens, because the Constitution referred to them as 'savages' requiring 'guardianship' – provided in the main by the Catholic church missions. The remaining nomadic groups were settled in the twentieth century, with the encouragement of foreign Protestant missions and local welfare organisations. Since they achieved their political emancipation in the 1980s, the source of their political activism has been the influx of new strangers into their territories: the advent of loggers, cattle ranchers, and oil companies has forced them to organise to defend their access to the land. These diverse peoples have formed the *Confederación Indígena del Oriente Boliviano* (Indigenous Confederation of Eastern Bolivia, CIDOB), a regional umbrella group representing local and ethnic groups. Their organisation has borne fruit, in that their pragmatic and particular demands have, in general, been met by the State.

Land reform

'Land reform' to Bolivians means the measures undertaken by the first MNR government in 1953 in response to the demands of *campesinos*, who adopted the slogan: *Land belongs to those who work it!* Yet the ownership of land has been contested, reformed, and counter-reformed since the days when the Spanish first took control of the territory. In a country where only 27 per cent of the terrain is considered to be arable, land is a precious resource. Forests account for another 50 per cent of Bolivian land, and the rest is either too high or otherwise unsuitable for cultivation.

Above and beyond the usurpation of land which took place after the Spanish conquest, there was a concerted 'counter-reformation' in the mid-nineteenth century, when oligarchic interests managed to wrest great expanses of community land from indigenous inhabitants of the *altiplano*. In 1866, the ruling *caudillo*, General Mariano Melgarejo, and his first minister Mariano Muñoz set a precedent for wholesale theft of land from indigenous communities. A law was passed, in a largely illiterate country, requiring indigenous lands to be registered as private property or revert to the State. The measure meant the transfer of title deeds to huge areas of land to the followers of the minister; it was to set the scene for conflict over land which continues today. *Ayllu* authorities still refer to these events when claiming jurisdiction over particular pieces of land.

At the time of the national revolution of 1952, Bolivia had one of the most unequal distributions of land in the Americas: 82 per cent of the country was owned by 4 per cent of the population. Thus the great need for the land reform of 1953, which was fought for by *campesino* rural militias, before the MNR made it law. It was the rural workers of the extensive *haciendas* in the lower valleys of the Department of Cochabamba who fought hardest and gained most from the land distribution which took place after 1953. In the *altiplano*, land was re-distributed to a lesser extent, although in total it is estimated that two-thirds of rural families were

Demésio Cejas harvesting barley in Sección Vacas, Department of Cochabamba





Juliana Flores grinding wheat in the community of Azangaro, 15km from the city of Potosí

affected by the reforms. Ironically, *campesinos* suffered from acquiring the land that they had traditionally worked, in accordance with their own demands: they received mostly tiny subsistence plots, rather than larger sustainable concessions. The successes of the reforms were not able to overturn the historic pattern of tenure. By the 1990s, 60 per cent of *campesinos* still lived in the highlands, where the plots of land are smallest, with the least fertile, over-cultivated soils. The all-pervading poverty of the rural communities proves the failures of reform. In the decade 1953–63, food production increased and helped to meet rural demand, showing the extent of the need; but the government did not provide any technical or financial assistance for development of the smallholder sector, which remains steeped in the practices of a subsistence economy to the present day.

The social impact of the reforms was great, in the first instance reducing conflict between the State and indigenous rural communities, and secondly, with the creation of *sindicatos*, bringing communities into the party political system, while providing a new internal social structure which in some cases

functions in parallel with traditional structures. But the reforms did not include measures to address inequality between *campesinos*: women, for example, were not eligible to own land under customary law, and the reform did not provide a State law to redress this injustice.

Colonisation

Landowners may have been pushed out of the highlands in the 1950s, but they were not left destitute. The MNR planned the land reform for *campesinos* and the ‘opening up’ of the eastern plains concurrently. Investment in the east was not part of the land reform: rather it was seen as a way of providing land for highland landowners who had lost their holdings during the reform, in the hope that they would embark on large-scale commercial exploitation of the land, thus diversifying the country’s economic activities. Great expanses of land were sold cheaply, creating vast landholdings, or they were given as political favours. Indirect financial incentives, such as tax exemptions, were given to investors to establish agribusinesses.

The main crop of the Santa Cruz plains is soya beans for export; together with cotton, they constitute the bulk of the 15 per cent of Bolivia's gross domestic product (GDP) that is accounted for by agriculture. The export of soya beans and associated derivatives grew by 43 per cent between 1995 and 1999, to become the main non-traditional export, overtaking sugar and cotton, which had previously been preponderant. In 1999 soya was Bolivia's largest export after minerals (including all mining output and oil). Soya is the most widely cultivated crop in the country, covering more than twice the area dedicated to rice and potatoes. Meanwhile, the production of staple crops is done by smallholders, even though they hardly register in the official economy. They grow potatoes, corn, sugar-cane, rice, wheat, coffee, and barley in the main. While the poorest *campesinos* are unable to meet their own needs for food, they still account for 70 per cent of the country's food production. *Campesinos* are crucial to the food supply, yet government support has tended to concentrate on the large landowners, who produce 80 per cent of their crops for export.

The mass exodus of migrants from the highlands to the plains took place decades after the MNR's failed attempts to encourage such movement. They were driven by land shortages and drought; they went east or headed towards the cities. The outflow from rural areas of the *altiplano* continues in the twenty-first century.

GO EAST

A brash and bustling city vies with the long-established cities of La Paz and Cochabamba to shift Bolivia's economic centre of gravity eastwards. The old heart of Santa Cruz de la Sierra is small, dwarfed by the developments of the last fifty years. The conurbation is organised in concentric circles, so that locals speak of which 'ring' they inhabit, while out-of-towners get hopelessly lost in the flat expanse of

roundabouts and identical streets.

The growth of the city has been so rapid that the outer rings are vast areas of self-made shanty housing, and finding transport into town is difficult.

Santa Cruz took off in the 1950s, as can be seen by the proportion of national wealth generated in the region: in 1952 it created nearly 3 per cent of the gross national product, compared with an estimate for 2000 of nearer 33 per cent. The economy is much more dynamic in Santa Cruz than in other regions, as can be witnessed from the brisk business which large petrol stations attract.



Reforming the reform

Although the 1953 land reform was one of the most comprehensive in Latin America, it did not solve the problem of rural poverty. Thus in 1996 a new land-reform law was passed, to address the failings of the 1953 attempt. Action was spurred by the extreme poverty concentrated in rural areas, and the knowledge that only around half of the country's arable land is cultivated; the land that lies idle is concentrated in the east, where large landowners keep extensive tracts, much larger than are needed as pasture for the head of cattle they own. Forty per cent of the population lives in the countryside in dispersed communities. Bolivia registers the world's highest proportion of rural people living below the poverty line: 95 per cent in the year 2000, according to the Jesuit economist Gregorio Iriate. Basic services are the privilege of a few, with only 26 per cent of households having access to clean water, and 18 per cent served by a decent sewerage system.

The new 1996 law was known by the acronym of the institution set up to deal with land issues, the *Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria*, INRA. The law created controversy before it was even passed. Indigenous *campesinos* marched and protested to ensure that they would get titles to their land and achieve workers' rights by inclusion in the General Labour Code. Large-scale commercial farmers protested that there were too many environmental constraints in the law, and that it did not guarantee property rights. The aims of the INRA law included the recognition of indigenous territory, including collectively owned land, in both the highlands and the lowlands. It also required the payment of taxes by medium and large landholders, and the abolition of tax for smallholders – measures which so far have not been enforced. Moreover, it recognised the social function of land, and enabled unused land to revert to the State to be redistributed. Crucially, INRA was charged with providing definitive titles to land.

Land ownership is seen as the cornerstone of development by agencies such as the World Bank and other aid donors. For that reason they have

provided much of the finance for the work of land registration. The support of the Bank has been questioned by critics who allege that it encourages the exploitation of non-renewable resources on the same get-rich-quick basis that determined Bolivian national development in the past. The same critics draw attention also to the Bank's support for US business interests which are intent on exploiting those resources. Although on paper the law is progressive and benefits the poorest indigenous rural sectors, in practice land titling has been subject to corruption, and large landowners have managed to consolidate dubious titles, while smallholders and indigenous people face delays and objections.

QUININE

Malaria is still a fatal disease and public-health hazard for 40 per cent of the world's population, mainly in the tropical areas of the world. The only known defence is provided by quinine, extracted from the bark of a tree which originates in Bolivia. It was introduced into Europe by the Jesuits, who learned of its many medicinal uses from the indigenous people whom they converted. The Dutch schemed to steal seeds and saplings, which they planted in Java; eventually they monopolised international trade in the drug. In the twenty-first century, quinine is again exported from Bolivia, after a gap of 100 years.

Human capital

Bolivia is known as the poorest country in South America. Development specialists calculate that between 1960 and 1990 social-welfare indicators improved more slowly in Bolivia than anywhere else on the continent, producing conditions closer to those of Africa than any in Latin America. Here is found the 'hidden violence' of which Bolivians often speak. It ranges from physical violence in the home to the destructive effects of official neglect. The factors which keep Bolivia at the bottom of the statistical tables are many and complex, and they deserve closer examination.

When questioned by researchers, Bolivians identify the following as their country's greatest problems: lack of development, inequality, poverty, exclusion, and corruption. Recently political and social spaces have been created to include those who were previously excluded from public debate: women, indigenous groups, and rural people; yet at the same time, the lack of economic development has meant a growth in unemployment and the continued economic exclusion of the majority. The most significant obstacles to development arise from Bolivia's weakness in relation to other countries in the international order, both economically and politically. Because Bolivia depends on its larger neighbours and far-away allies for markets and aid, it is always likely to be the victim of larger interests.

Education and reform

The poor coverage and quality of State education in Bolivia is perhaps its most important long-term social problem. Especially disturbing is the gap between the opportunities for boys and those for girls, which is most extreme among the poorest sector of society: the rural indigenous population. Although in the cities women and girls have an increasingly better chance of studying and working in professional jobs, in the countryside they often fail to reach secondary school.

Carlos Moreno hails from Andalucia in Spain, but could be found nowhere but Bolivia. A priest and a teacher, in the latter capacity he leads an education section in the rural highland valleys of Cochabamba which includes eight schools. Having worked in State education in various parts

➤ Trifonia Mamani taught without qualifications in rural Bolivia for five years before investing her savings in a course at a teacher-training college. She graduated in 2000 at the age of 33, one of the oldest in her class.



of Bolivia for more than a decade, he says that his overall impression is that educational standards are not improving: in some cases they are regressing, owing to the concentration of poverty. Parents cannot afford to buy school materials, and families can't survive without the labour of their young members. All rural children work, but in times of economic crisis the first to be taken out of school are girls. There is a prevailing belief that girls don't need schooling: it is of no use to them. Once they have achieved basic literacy, after a year or two of primary education, they are considered 'educated' enough. Father Moreno says sadly: 'In all the schools that I supervise, by the beginning of secondary school – for which the costs rise and for which travel to an urban centre is required – there are only two or three girls left in each class.' Nationally, 70 per cent of girls are registered at primary school, but actual attendance rates are much lower. It is hardly surprising that the national rate of female illiteracy is 28 per cent; in rural areas the official figure is 48 per cent, although 66 per cent is probably closer to the mark. As we shall see, illiteracy affects the health of rural women and their children. Moreover, it is estimated that as many as 800,000 women are not registered to vote and are thus denied political representation.

The decade of the 1990s saw a concerted effort on the part of education researchers and the Bolivian government to introduce reforms which would strengthen State provision of schooling. One of the most intensely debated changes was the creation of teaching materials in the Aymara, Quechua, and Guaraní languages, to enable children to learn in

their mother tongue in the first years of primary school. The reform is dealing with every aspect of education, from the training of teachers and the involvement of parents, through to a fundamentally different approach to teaching: a shift to a more child-centred focus from the hierarchical and authoritarian practices of the past.

The recognition of indigenous languages was potentially a major advance, in social as well as educational terms. But although children may now learn in Aymara, the cultural environment does not yet support or encourage their fluency: there are, for example, no newspapers in their language. The Constitution may recognise the multilingual reality of Bolivia, but Spanish remains the only official language *de facto*, and is therefore the language of power and the passport to social mobility. But there are signs of change: popular radios which transmit in Quechua and Aymara, and a growing number of indigenous intellectuals who seek to reaffirm the collective cultural heritage. In few other countries have indigenous intellectuals provided such solid research and advocacy for national changes, working on previously ignored historic, linguistic, and cultural issues.



CHILDREN AT WORK

A young girl sits poring over her English-language textbook. Her name is Ana Mamani, and she is minding her stall on the ragged edges of the largest market in the *altiplano*. She keeps half an eye out for her younger brother, who is running with other children in between the flapping canvas and the trestle tables. Their mother is a wholesaler, a trader who travels to the countryside to buy whatever the city needs, from vegetables to hides. Their father is an artisan who has his workshop in the back of the family house, an *adobe* construction made of sun-dried earth and straw.

Ana sets up her stall on Thursdays and Sundays in El Alto's market *Feria 16 Julio*. The market was named after the street where it began, but long ago spilled over far and wide. Researchers estimate that millions of dollars change hands here each Sunday. The number of traders is estimated to exceed 20,000, many organised in 200 guilds. With more than 70 per cent of the population of the city of El Alto working in the informal sector, the majority of *Alteños* make their

living on the streets. Ana is not unusual. In the countryside, two-thirds of children work alongside their elders. In the cities, half of all Bolivians under the age of 19 work; a few manage part-time education alongside their labour. Oscar and Edgar, pictured above, make a living by shining shoes in La Paz.

MUTUAL INTERESTS

Andean economic logic was traditionally based on the values of fair exchange, not profit. The notion of reciprocity – mutual support – is frequently used by anthropologists to describe the political and economic culture of the Andes. Take housing: more than half of all housing in Bolivia is 'self-built', which does not mean that each family constructs its own home in isolation, but that the members work to buy the materials and then invite their extended network of friends and relatives to help them to erect the house, or a new storey, over a couple of days.

Measuring the quality of life

In 2000 the World Health Organisation (WHO) devised a new way to calculate life expectancy: not measuring years of survival up to the moment of death, but discounting years of sickness or disability. Using the new method, researchers found that Bolivia came bottom of the list of all Latin American countries: the average Bolivian can expect only 53 years of life free from serious illness. This compares dramatically with the highest figures in Latin America (Chile 69, Cuba 68) and the highest in the world, Japan and Australia, at 73 years. The fertility rate is 4.4 children per woman of child-bearing age, but infant mortality rates,

with 66 deaths per thousand births, are the worst in Latin America.

Malnutrition affects a large proportion of the population, with as many as one-third of all children suffering a chronic lack of food; UNICEF estimates that more than half of under-fives fail to receive sufficient sustenance, a fact which contributes to the high levels of mortality. Insecure supplies of food are critical in the rural areas of the highlands and are another sign of the prevailing poverty, which follows migrants to urban areas. Even in the cities, where absolute malnutrition is less prevalent, it is calculated that poorer households spend up to half the family income on food; after housing costs have been paid, this level of expenditure leaves little or nothing for health care or education.

In the hope of improving food security, research has begun into the cultivation of native species which have been found to be superior to imported crops, both in their nutritional value and in their suitability for the difficult terrain. As in many poor countries, the value of something native is better appreciated if it is 'discovered' abroad: since *amaranto*, a Bolivian cereal, was reported to be the preferred breakfast of top athletes in the USA, agronomists have found it easier to re-introduce the grain, which was considered sacred by the Incas. Its religious importance led the Spanish to destroy it and forbid its cultivation. Another Andean staple is beginning to arrive in Europe with the fair-trade market: *quinoa* is one of nature's most complete nutrients, a grain upon which Bolivians have survived for centuries.

Women's health

The link between education and good health is well documented, and Bolivia is no exception. The more education a woman has received, the more likely it is that her children will be better fed and cared for in times of illness, and her own health is likely to be better too. In Bolivia, the

The chemist, Silvia Turari, and nurse, Juan Chuviru, at a community pharmacy in Concepción



maternal mortality rate is a tragic 390 per 100,000 live births, while more than half of all pregnant women suffer from anaemia. As in any country where abortion is illegal, a large number of deaths are caused by the terrible conditions in which terminations are performed. Fewer than half of all deliveries are attended by professional carers, as there are only three doctors per 10,000 people, and even fewer trained nurses.

In a town in the tropical plains, a little house on a dusty street has just opened its doors. The whitewash has hardly dried, but people are arriving at the new community pharmacy. The project was co-ordinated by the local indigenous assembly and funded by Oxfam. The chemist, a friendly young woman, shows us the contents of the shelves. Modern medicines are beyond the reach of most families, partly because they live so far from urban centres, and partly because the price is not subsidised by the State. On being asked to name the best-selling product, the pharmacist points to the oral rehydration salts, used to treat diarrhoea, then thinks again and says, 'Actually, I think we've sold more condoms than anything'.

BECOMING A PERSON

According to highland custom, only those who are married become 'people': responsible, full members of the community. The couple are required to contribute to community tasks only after they have held a celebration and been given land to work. It does not happen immediately that two people fall in love. In many communities, elopement is the accepted method for getting together; it gives the new couple some time to themselves and allows their kin time to organise where and how they will live. Living together for some time to see whether the relationship will succeed is the next step. If it does, it will lead to formal marriage. If it doesn't, the couple will be free to seek other partners.

An economy in crisis

Markets are one of the salient features of the Bolivian landscape: every settlement of any size has one, and people travel far afield to sell their goods. Most markets are still run, as they have been since before the times of the Spanish conquest, by indigenous traders, combining a sharp commercial sense with older traditions of exchange.

In Bolivia the formal economy, whose output can be measured by accountants, constitutes only a fraction of the nation's productive activity, most of which is 'informal': unregulated and usually untaxed. Around three million Bolivians (out of a population of eight million) depend upon it for a living. They include the traders who perch on wooden crates on city streets, plying their varied wares, the home-based artisans who make and mend things, and self-employed people who offer local services such as hairdressing and barbering. Only 35 per cent of the working population is 'employed' in any formal sense, and many of them do not enjoy the benefits normally associated with a salary: for example, for most women employment means domestic service — work which is notoriously exploitative and insecure.



➤ *If it can be repaired on an industrial sewing machine, Mario can fix it at his roadside stall in La Paz, making use of recycled materials.*

Although the informal economy operates by definition outside the law, most small traders, known in Bolivia as *gremialistas* (guild members), do in fact negotiate with authorities and are officially recognised. They pay for permits, although they usually do not pay taxes; a recent estimate put the number of tax-payers from the *gremios* (guilds) at 89,000, while the number of informal *gremialistas* is thought to be at least 800,000 people. Thus the formal and informal economies intermingle and have points of contact at various stages of trading. One reason why traders prefer to operate informally is to avoid the endless bureaucracy which is involved in setting up a legal business. Paperwork and red tape feature in every aspect of Bolivian life, requiring large measures of patience, a thick skin, good contacts, and some cash to speed matters along.

Cocaine rules

The single most profitable informal activity in the 1980s and 1990s was drug trafficking. Trade in narcotics has been estimated by investigative journalists to account for 80 per cent of the country's illegal earnings (with contraband representing another 15 per cent, and detected corruption the remaining 5 per cent). The recent war of eradication waged by President Banzer against the coca crops grown by peasant farmers has reduced, but not eliminated, the trade.

In the Chapare region in the centre of Bolivia, the government's success in destroying visible coca plantations has had tangible economic repercussions. In the government's own inflated estimation, between 1997 and 2000 income worth more than US\$700 million was 'lost' due to eradication; other researchers put the figure at US\$250 million. (All figures

relating to the illegal drug trade are by their nature hard to gauge and are only approximations.) The effects of the eradication campaign are painfully clear: the region of Cochabamba is at an economic standstill, the national economy is in crisis, and thousands of coca-growing *campesinos* are ready to take up arms against the State.

When production was at its peak, in the early 1990s, Bolivia was only ever the second or third biggest producer of the coca leaves used to make cocaine. Colombia and Peru each produce larger quantities, although their respective shares fluctuate. In 2001, more hectares of coca plantations were newly planted in Colombia than were eradicated by the governments of Bolivia and Peru. The traffic in precursors – the chemicals used to make the drug – and the drug itself has always been controlled by Colombians.

KING OF COCAINE

Roberto Suárez Gómez was Bolivia's best-known cocaine trafficker. He became prominent in political circles by suggesting early in the 1980s that the Bolivian State could live off the revenue generated by legal, medicinal uses of coca. He achieved international prominence when he offered to pay off the country's external debt, in return for his liberty. Making a stand for the rule of law and not yielding to corruption, the State declined his offer and imprisoned him. The proposal to research legal uses for coca leaf was taken up by President Paz Zamora (1989–93), but his initiative was tarnished by accusations of drug-related enrichment inside his party, MIR, and has since, unfortunately, been discredited.

CONTRABAND

Santa Cruz seems to have many more taxis than a city could possibly need – hundreds of white estate cars, snarled up in endless tailbacks. In a typical cab the speed gauge doesn't work, and there is a strange gap on the dashboard on the passenger side, explained by the fact that this is a Japanese left-hand-drive car which has been smuggled into the country. For 200 US dollars, the steering wheel is swapped round – and solid Japanese engineering is then worn down by the local potholes.

Contraband is a sector of the economy which shows Bolivians' ingenuity in the face of necessity. In 1997 it was estimated that merchandise worth US\$1.1 billion entered the country illegally; during the 1990s, contraband cost the State potential tax revenue worth millions of dollars.

It is hard to generate public opinion against black-market trading, when it results in a great deal of consumer choice

at a reduced price. A Customs Law passed in 1999 aimed to change the ease of entry for contraband, while also dealing with the notorious corruption within Customs institutions. Ironically, the success of the reform meant an increase in prices, hitting the poor and contributing to the slowdown of the economy in 2000. Yet the ubiquity of goods of dubious provenance has forced the government to grant amnesties to the smugglers, which has weakened the reform.



Bolivian involvement is greatest at the level of the poor *campesino* families who grow coca leaf. But there are signs that a few Bolivians are profiting from drug-running, and trails often lead to politicians and the military: there have been notorious cases, for instance during the brutal military dictatorship of General García Meza, of proven links to the narcotics trade.

Throughout the 1980s, coca and cocaine were Bolivia's single largest sources of income, serving to soften the impact of the government's harsh austerity programme, which brought stability to the national economy but hardship to the ordinary people. According to official figures, in the late 1980s around 8 per cent of gross domestic product was cocaine-related; by 2000 the share had been dramatically reduced.

The politics of economics

In the beginning, the Bolivian economy consisted of colonial exploitation for the benefit of the Old World. After independence from Spain, the local élite maintained the existing social structures, using bonded labour to enrich themselves. The oligarchy, in various forms, held sway until halfway through the twentieth century. The 1952 revolution aspired to develop the national economy through State intervention, which was the post-war option pioneered in the northern hemisphere. But the State-led model broke down in 1985, and since then Bolivia has been governed according to neo-liberal economic tenets.



· Cerro Rico, Potosí: the human faces of the economic austerity plan

The traditional close links between the political class and the economic élite in Bolivia have historically produced high levels of corruption, which have survived into the twenty-first century. Corruption at all levels of government, with officials lining their own pockets by abusing their positions, remains a problem. There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that Sánchez de Lozada assured voters during his presidential campaign, 'Trust me: I won't steal – I'm too rich.' He is an entrepreneur of undoubted flair, but it is sadly true that fortunes are more easily made in Bolivia by mixing business and power.

Decree 21,060

Sánchez de Lozada is linked in the public mind with the shock stabilisation measures of 1985. He was Planning Minister in 1987, inheriting the chaos caused by the economic collapse of the early 1980s, when Bolivia's external debt, unsustainable even before the international crisis of 1982, became even more burdensome. Political stalemate compounded the deterioration of the economy, which took place on a scale which is now scarcely imaginable.

Bolivia retains the sad distinction of recording the world's highest rates of hyperinflation, which reached a peak of 8000 per cent in 1985. Between 1980 and 1985, *per capita* consumption of basic necessities fell by 30 per cent, and family incomes by 38 per cent. External events, too, seemed to conspire against Bolivia: in 1983–84 the worst drought of the century afflicted the *altiplano*, causing hunger, mass migration to the cities, and the deaths of thousands of herd animals, which are vital to the *altiplano* economy. Hyperinflation caused desperation, and people's sense of helplessness was mitigated only by their efforts to look after their own kin. For society as a whole, the result was disintegration.

The new government's first action was to put together an orthodox austerity plan, which World Bank advisers, with hindsight, recognise as being intolerably harsh. It involved cutting State spending by sacking 23,000 miners (of the 30,000 employed) and other employees, reducing subsidies, generally reducing State expenditure, increasing the price of

'I always told the Bolivians, from the very beginning, that what you have here is a miserable, poor economy with hyperinflation; if you are brave, if you are gutsy, if you do everything right, you will end up with a miserable, poor economy with stable prices.'

petrol, relaxing employment laws (thus reducing job security), liberalising trade, imposing a single import tariff, and opening the country to foreign private investments. At the same time, the currency was changed from the *peso* to the current *boliviano*, and severely devalued. The response of the Bolivian Workers' Union (*Central Obrera Boliviana*, COB) was a general strike which lasted 15 days. The government reacted with a state of siege and the detention and internal exile of workers' leaders. It also ran a concerted campaign to blame the COB for the country's financial troubles, a final blow which destroyed the Union's credibility, already weakened by the wholesale sacking of State-employed miners.

The overall result brought stability, which was welcomed, but at a very high price: an increase in poverty and an ever-widening gap between rich and poor. Miners were 'relocated', to use the political euphemism of the time. In fact, many miners had to move, as there was nothing on the barren *altiplano* to induce them to stay. The most tangible sign of their abandonment by the government was the official decision to close down the *pulperías*, the general stores which provided miners' families with subsidised food and other necessities, thus effectively forcing them to move in search of sustenance. The era of State intervention in the economy was over, and the measures that were introduced were in accordance with the neo-liberal package of structural reforms promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Neo-liberal guru Jeffrey Sachs (quoted in *The Silent Revolution*, a book written by Duncan Green) was clear: 'I always told the Bolivians, from the very beginning, that what you have here is a miserable, poor economy with hyperinflation; if you are brave, if you are gutsy, if you do everything right, you will end up with a miserable, poor economy with stable prices.'

There was more misery to come: in October 1985, after decades of declining prices and the increasing power of the US cartel, the price of tin fell sharply. The great tin crash saw the fortunes of Bolivia, dependent on tin for almost 100 years, shatter on the polished floor of the London Metal Exchange. Prices halved overnight on a world market which had been suffering from over-supply for some time.

The next wave of economic reforms came when Sánchez de Lozada of the MNR became President in 1993. He pushed through a dizzying series of social, political, and economic reforms. The Law of Capitalisation (a Bolivian term for privatisation) was designed to allow foreign investment in nationalised companies, and to devote the profits of the State's remaining 49 per cent share to the creation of a basic State pension.

Gendered economics

All over Bolivia, bundles of cloth on poles stick out from houses on to the street. In some regions red is the colour of choice, in others only white will do. They advertise the fact that fresh *chicha* is available inside, made and



▲ A trader at a livestock market in Cochabamba. Women are active in all areas of the Bolivian economy.

sold mostly by women. This sour-sweet ferment of maize (or grain) has been the tippable of choice in the country for hundreds of years. *Chicheras*, the women who sold it on the streets, were an economic force to be reckoned with in colonial times, according to tax records. In the twentieth century, commercial breweries competed fiercely with the *chicha* trade, but small-scale production still outsells national beers by millions of bottles.

Women are economically active at all levels of society. For the poor majority, staying at home is not an option, as every effort is needed to support a family. For many girls, their best chance of employment is to join the ranks of women – more than 60,000 – who toil as domestic workers. By employing domestic help at cheap rates, women of the middle and upper classes are liberated to earn money outside the home. These differing interests are sometimes in conflict, as when a law to regulate domestic employment was opposed by some women in Parliament. The supply of domestic labour invariably outstrips demand, which pushes down wages. Young women, often from outside the city, enter an alien culture where racism prevails and their appearance, their accent (or language, if their Spanish is limited), and their sex are causes of exploitation and discrimination. Their average age is 17, and for most this is their first paid job. Many are obliged to work long hours, with no regular leave, and poor living conditions. In response, household workers have organised themselves into local unions, operating within a national structure and affiliated to a Latin American advocacy group which campaigns for their rights. In the 1990s it was led by a Bolivian indigenous woman, Basilia Catari.

By the end of the twentieth century, women constituted almost half of Bolivia's economically active population. Women earn less than men for the same type of work in every activity, even the 16 per cent of working

A MODERN GOLD RUSH

Hillary Rodham Clinton has a piece. Queen Sofia of Spain bought some. Bolivian jewellery keeps finding new markets, and exports grow and grow. At last, in a country with a long history of selling raw materials with no added value, a manufactured product requiring a high degree of skill has succeeded. Bolivian jewels have been exported to chain stores in the USA such as Walmart; in 1999, the export of gold and silver jewellery brought in US\$40 million. Ironically, even Bolivian gold is not sufficient to meet demand, and some has to be imported. The challenge to the government is to provide the necessary investment to train more people in the varied skills required.



^ Maria at the kiosk outside her home in La Paz, where she sells everything from shampoo to sweets to support her family of seven children

women in technical and professional jobs. Their involvement in visible employment does not release them from the invisible work of home and family care. At least 25 per cent of families are headed by a single woman. For many working women, only the worst-paid and most insecure jobs are open to them. Most often, they have to rely on informal activities, in the face of fierce competition; yet they are proving that they can make a virtue of necessity, as they have come to dominate several sectors of informal trading.

There is a growing gap between middle-class women, who by 1999 accounted for 43 per cent of professional and technical workers and 25 per cent of administrators and managers, and rural women, two-thirds of whom are functionally illiterate.

Free to trade with the USA

The legal export trade includes sales of natural gas, tin, zinc, coffee, silver, tungsten, wood, cotton, gold, jewellery, and soybeans, to a value of US\$1.2 billion.

Bolivia has become the main supplier of natural gas to its huge and industrialising neighbour, Brazil. Major export markets include the rest of Latin America, accounting for 40 per cent, the UK with 16 per cent, and the USA with 12 per cent. The country makes a loss by importing more than it exports, mostly machinery, consumer products, and construction and mining equipment. The USA is the main source of imports (32 per cent), followed by Japan (24 per cent).

Along with trade, investment has been liberalised, so that foreign investors are treated the same as nationals, and foreign ownership of companies operates virtually unrestricted in Bolivia. As a consequence of these measures, in 1996 private investment surged by 25 per cent to an estimated US\$225 million, in 1999 exceeding US\$1 billion. US companies, especially oil interests, were the largest single source of investment in the 1990s, followed by Chilean and Italian mining companies, with less than one-fifth of the US total each. They prospect not only for oil but also for gas, of which Bolivia has huge reserves. The USA remains Bolivia's largest trading partner, to the advantage of the richer nation, which exports goods worth US\$626 million into Bolivia, while importing goods and produce worth only US\$149 million from its partner.

Life or debt

Bolivia's economic reforms in 1985 made it the darling of multilateral agencies and other international creditors. It never defaulted on its external debts, and thus was lent more and more money – but repaying the debts has strangled Bolivian development and further impoverished its people. To earn concessions from its creditors, Bolivia has had to accept economic reforms which are primarily concerned with ensuring that the country can pay up in hard currency. Officially, the draconian structural adjustments were justified as an attempt to improve Bolivia's chances of reducing poverty. The underlying assumption was that stability and growth would benefit the poor; but the World Bank and IMF advisers candidly admit that the measures have failed – which is a meagre comfort for the impoverished majority. People are grateful for fifteen years of a stable economy,

∨ It is too soon to tell whether the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper will make any difference to those who survive by begging and grafting on the streets of La Paz.



Malnutrition among children under the age of five increased in Bolivia from 11 to 16 per cent between 1997 and 2000.

but unless wealth is distributed fairly, growth means very little. Bolivia remains the testing ground for new multilateral policy conditions, such as national consultations on how to use the money 'saved' for development by debt relief, if and when it is granted. Bolivia has now carried out not one but two National Dialogues.

The Dialogues of 1997 and 2000 included a significant proportion of organised society; they were funded by international donors keen to promote good practice and encourage democratic consultation. In addition, an independent National Forum was called for by the Catholic Church and the national Jubilee 2000 campaign. The aims of these initiatives were to define the main problems that need to be addressed in order to reduce poverty; and to contribute to the preparation of the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), the creditors' latest condition for debt relief. Some 3600 people participated, from all corners of the country, and helped to identify the kinds of development that could benefit from debt relief; but it is clear that the relief proposed will not be sufficient, given what has already been paid and the social needs that have been identified. It is not creating new money for development, but forcing the country to invest its own resources. Bolivians need less talk, more action, and fresh money.

Bolivia has acted as a pilot for a range of donor strategies. It was one of the first countries to fulfil the comprehensive conditions to be eligible for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, and then its successor, HIPC II. The relief on offer is US\$1300 million over 20 years, a small fraction of the debt owed in 2000. In spite of carrying out all the required reforms, Bolivia still pays US\$240 million in debt service annually. In 1999 this meant that it was paying an unsustainable 35 per cent of the value of its exports in debt servicing, while the ratio of total debt to exports stood at a staggering 388 per cent. At a time when flows of aid are being reduced across the board, and trade is seen as the answer to the problems of developing countries, the deficit on Bolivia's balance of trade increased throughout the 1990s, due to adverse international economic conditions. The loss made on trading was approximately US\$ 480 million per year, which is approximately seven times the amount of debt relief provided by HIPC.

A precarious economy

According to CEPAL, the UN Economic Commission for the region, the total number of poor people is growing in Bolivia and across Latin America, while wealth becomes more concentrated in the control of a minority. Malnutrition among children under the age of five increased in Bolivia from 11 to 16 per cent between 1997 and 2000. Meanwhile CEDLA, a Bolivian think-tank, calculates that the richest 10 per cent of the population own 53.73 per cent of the country's wealth, while the poorest 10 per cent possess only 1.35 per cent.

The government argues that the structural state of the economy is the major factor in determining the resources available for development. That is the starting point, but it is also true that its redistributive and social-investment measures are too weak to serve the needs of the majority. There are some crucial weaknesses in the country's economic profile, in particular its tiny tax base: revenue collection has been declining, rather than growing. Tax evasion is the norm, and changing the culture requires altering attitudes and imposing an effective rule of law. Public opposition to gross evasions is growing, however: for example, Johnny Fernandez, leader of a political party and a member of the ruling coalition (1997–2002), was taken to court for unpaid taxes and condemned from all sides when he tried to refuse a settlement. The law was changed in 2000 to ensure stiffer penalties for evasion, but time will tell how effectively it can be implemented.



DEBTS OF HONOUR

Bolivia was most seriously indebted by the Banzer dictatorship (1971-78), which took out credit worth US\$2 billion, at a time of low global interest rates. As rates rose in the 1980s, so did Bolivia's debt. In spite of having already paid US\$475 million, in 1996 it still owed US\$5.2 billion. In April 2000, the debt relief provided by the USA and other leading industrialised countries ('the G-8') led to a reduction of almost one-third of Bolivia's debt service, but this was far from adequate. In 1985 the total debt service accounted for 50 per cent of exports of goods and services; the fact that in 1998 it still accounted for 30 per cent does not represent sufficient progress: the poorest country in South America still spends a large part of its income on debt repayments, rather than social or productive investment.



▲ A common sight on the main road from Santa Cruz to Concepción.

Another impediment to growth is the poor state of the country's roads. The crucial main road from Cochabamba to Santa Cruz dramatically illustrates the problem: a 30km gap in the tarmac forces lorries to crawl through muddy potholes. Overall, only 5 per cent of roads in the country are paved. Transport in general in such a mountainous country is poor. Railways used to run between important points

in the country, but only a few lines are left, among them the historic *Ferrocarril de Antofagasta a Bolivia*, built by the British in 1888 and now run by a Chilean company.

There was considerable foreign investment throughout the 1990s, but other indicators were less healthy. Although the economy as a whole grew by around 4 per cent annually, by 1999 growth had been reduced by the sharp recession gripping the country. The major causes were the reduction in income from drugs trafficking (assumed to have cushioned the economy throughout its recent crises); the general contraction in Brazil and Argentina as they were hit by the after-effects of crises elsewhere (South-East Asia and Russia); the fall in the price of oil; and the inability of the government to manage investment.

Bases for prosperity?

Officially around 8 per cent of the adult population were unemployed in 2000, but underemployment is a much more serious phenomenon, as is shown by the fact that almost 70 per cent of the population work informally to some degree. Bolivia's economically active population includes large numbers of children who work – from the age of 7 onwards. In the cities, many are employed as *voceadores*, hanging out of the doors and windows of public transport and shouting out the destinations. There are more than 10,000 *voceadores* in La Paz alone, exposed to high levels of pollution during their long working days. Gladis, a 12-year-old girl from El Alto, describes her day: 'I get up at 5 am and help my mother to cook for my younger brothers. At 6.30 am I begin work on the minibus route and work until 2 pm, when my voice begins to fade – and then I go to night school.' More than half of all children contribute to family enterprises, whether businesses in the city or agricultural tasks in the countryside.

AID-DEPENDENT DEVELOPMENT

Bolivia relies heavily on foreign assistance to finance development projects. Between 1995 and 2000, it received an average total of US\$655 million per year, in both bilateral and multilateral aid. In 2000, donors collectively agreed to reduce their support to an average of US\$500 million per year. The dependency on aid donations and soft credit has been reduced somewhat (13 per cent of GDP in 1994, 8 per cent in 1998) but remains significant, amounting to around 80 per cent of the value of Bolivia's exports.

One area of growth is tourism. The numbers of visitors to Bolivia increased sharply in the 1990s, in line with the trend for tourism to become the world's largest industry. In 1999 nearly half a million visitors arrived in Bolivia. They were mostly adventure-seeking travellers looking for 'unspoilt' places; the wealthier tourist wanting comfort and good infrastructure is not well catered for. The popularity of southern Peru is providing an overflow of visitors, which benefits Bolivia – as evidenced by the status of Copacabana, a town on Lake Titicaca, as the most frequently

visited place in Bolivia. The tourist trail includes Potosí and historic Sucre, while many travellers also go east to see the beautiful churches of the Jesuit missions in the Chiquitania. Only the most adventurous manage to reach one of the wonders of Bolivia, the Uyuni salt field, a dried-out lake which shimmers in the sharp *altiplano* sun. Uyuni creates a fantastic landscape for tourists, while remaining a source of income for the local indigenous people who 'harvest' the salt, as they have done for centuries. Before the Spanish conquest, people would travel long distances to trade for the salt of Uyuni.

Bolivia's potential income from mineral wealth is enormous, with deposits rich in bromine, lithium, potassium, and magnesium. Prospectors predict some of the world's largest reserves of nickel and copper. The exploitation of natural wealth which can be quantified in physical terms has always been accorded high priority in Bolivia. Yet it has not provided for the development of the whole population. Perhaps if there were fewer natural riches to exploit, it might be apparent that the true wealth of a nation lies in its people, and their creative and productive potential.

. The Winay pottery co-operative in Cochabamba: Bolivia's true wealth lies in the creative and productive potential of its people.



The state of politics



△ 'A life without violence is our right', proclaims the poster on the wall.

In the Andean region, over the course of the last twenty years, Peru has suffered a bloody internal war and constitutional dictatorship, Ecuador has seen its economy and social fabric unravel, and Colombia has been living through the agony of one of the longest civil wars on the planet. But since 1982, Bolivia, which once held the world record for the number of political *coups*, has maintained a stable democracy: a major achievement. Yet within Bolivia there is considerable disenchantment with multi-party politics, and the idea of a 'crisis of representation' keeps cropping up in conversations. Despite the fact that it is the parties and their pacts that have enabled democratic stability, many social activists are disillusioned with the political system. They resent the fact that political parties are immensely effective at colonising the spaces of power – with the sanction of the law, which permits only registered

parties to present candidates for election. Reform of this law is one of the main demands of social organisations. The parties' power depends also on other factors, such as the networks of patronage and social advancement which they can provide.

The events which brought a left-wing government to power on the shoulders of popular protests in 1982 provided a rare occasion for popular sectors to exert a direct influence over the political process. After years of military dictatorship (1964–1978), and political chaos (1979–1982), a hard-won democracy was achieved. The process of wearing down the armed forces in power was achieved in great part by the people's mass organisations: the COB, the CSUTCB, and a range of civil-society movements. They provided the hope that power could be truly representative of the population, at a time when the military unleashed its worst violence, and some factions among the armed forces were funded by profits from drug trafficking. The confluence of these dark powers reached their maximum expression in 1980 with what was known as the 'narco-coup' of García Meza and

Arce Gómez, which denied the newly elected coalition of the left its rightful accession to power. In 1982, the parties which had been voted in in 1980 with tremendous popular support, the UDP (*Unión Democrática y Popular*), finally attained the presidency, with Hernán Siles Suazo at their head. Since the elections in 1985, however, popular organisations have wielded much less political power, as neo-liberal economic austerity began to bite. The economic crisis, becoming ever worse towards the end of the dictatorships, exploded in the early 1980s. In 1983 Bolivia's external debts amounted to US\$3 billion. The price of tin fell, and between 1983 and 1984 the *altiplano* suffered one of the worst droughts of the century. The net result was catastrophic. Hyperinflation took hold, generating panic and instability. The COB turned its considerable power to organising strikes in search of better economic conditions for workers, while deterioration continued apace. By 1985 Víctor Paz Estenssoro, the man who had led the first MNR government (1952–1956), was back in power, thanks to political deals. He took decisive – if unpopular – action, introducing tough structural adjustment measures, laying off thousands of miners, reducing social spending, and setting course for orthodox neo-liberal restructuring. The government gained tremendous political capital from the stabilisation that was achieved, with inflation under control and international credit once more available. The popular movement was left in disarray and without leverage.

From the age of 13, Ignacio Cita de la Vega has mended shoes on the streets of Santa Cruz. A fading slogan on the wall behind him reflects popular support for 'Goni' (Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada) of the MNR, President from 1993 to 1997.

Reforming the State

When the MNR regained power in the 1993 elections, it seemed safe to assume that politics would continue to be the business of a few, in a centralised and self-perpetuating system. Yet the new President, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, known as Goni, confounded expectation. He began by

making a boldly symbolic appointment to the position of Vice-President: Víctor Hugo Cárdenas of the Revolutionary Movement for Liberation Tupaj Katari (*Movimiento Revolucionario Tupaj Katari de Liberación, MRTKL*). The sweep of reforms made during this period was unprecedented, socially and politically. Socially, the Education Reform and the Law of Popular Participation aimed to change society from the roots. The Law of Popular



Participation, passed in 1994, recognises that indigenous communities are legal entities, and prescribes the transfer of control over resources from central government to local authorities. It was followed in 1995 by the less well known but also crucial Law of Decentralisation, which provides for administrative independence at the local and departmental levels, again including transfers of resources away from central government. The combination of these two laws constitutes the most ambitious attempt on the continent to bring power to the people, making local government a site of real authority and economic decision-making. The creation of the post of Ombudsman has offered the beginning of protection against State abuses of citizens' rights. These reforms have had far-reaching consequences, although progress on some has stalled under subsequent administrations. A few of the initiatives did not outlast Goni's term in office, among them a much-needed government Gender Unit, with a mandate to encourage affirmative action to strengthen women's rights.

The difference that power makes

To understand the force of the new laws, they have to be seen in action. In Concepción, an important administrative centre with 11,000 inhabitants in the Chiquitania (the lowland plains east of Santa Cruz), local power has always been wielded by the large landowners, who since 1979 have tended to support *Acción Democrática y Nacionalista* (ADN), the party established by General Banzer. When elections followed the creation of municipalities, the landowners won most seats by a mixture of bribery and intimidation. It seemed that local government was going to be a microcosm of national politics: controlled by the traditional parties and economic élites.

The *Central Indígena de Comunidades de Concepción* (Co-ordination of Indigenous Communities of Concepción, CICC) has been organising to defend indigenous people's rights for about ten years. The activists had some initial success when they managed to get their leader elected into Congress as a stand-in parliamentarian, but found to their dismay that the resources made available to him distanced him from the community. True to their democratic ideals, they changed the greater part of the organisation's leadership, ensuring that the interests of the community would be the priority. With renewed enthusiasm and vigour they stood in the municipal elections of 1999 and won two seats, including the presidency of the Council. More important for achieving the integration of indigenous people, they were able to place indigenous people within the technical administration of the Council, where the detailed implementation of policy is worked through.

Because elections can be fought only by established political parties, CICC had to 'adopt' the party set up by the coca growers of the Chapare, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), although they work independently of its national structures. A tough political initiation lay ahead of them, in the face of competition from the main parties, which had many years' experience of manipulation behind them: the ADN won the greatest number of votes

in the last election by trucking in voters from other villages. To reach power, therefore, the MAS had to make an alliance with the MNR and the MIR (*Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario*, the Revolutionary Left Movement) to run the Council together. In the words of Justo Seoane Parapaino, a young indigenous councillor, 'To do things is the only way to learn. We have learned to negotiate, to make proposals, and they have been taken up.' Some observers fear that the wheeling and dealing of real power will corrupt these enthusiastic ambassadors for their people, yet Seoane points out that they are not free agents: they have to report to the monthly assemblies which take place with the CICC, to consult the members and discuss what is happening inside the town hall.

The Law of Popular Participation includes a number of mechanisms designed to enable citizens at large to take part in local government. The most important body is the Vigilance Committee, which is charged with the oversight of municipal finances. It has the power to report on municipal management and to withhold State funding. Municipal Development Plans are another mechanism for democratic inclusion: their preparation relies on a process of wide consultation, and they allow a degree of transparency in local government which was previously undreamed of. The changes wrought by popular participation in local politics are remarkable, in that they have created a new culture of equality and collective exercise of power for previously disenfranchised sectors of society. The true social significance of CICC's victory is clear when the elected president of the municipal authority says: 'We're in the same Council as the bosses, the same who have exploited us and our fathers and generations back, and now we don't bow and scrape before them: we can look them in the eye.'

Women in politics

The first law in Bolivian history explicitly to promote gender equality was the first article of the Law of Popular Participation in 1994. Its stated aim was 'facilitating citizen participation and guaranteeing equality of opportunity for women and men at all levels of representation'. Yet this excellent aim was not the result of wide consultation and consensus: it was the work of one woman, who had clandestine access to the very restricted preparatory documents of the law. The extreme measures taken by Sonia Montaña (Subsecretary of Gender in the government of Sánchez de Lozada) illustrate both the determination of individual women to advance collective rights, and the difficulties that they face in trying to bring about change. It is not outright opposition that women in politics encounter, so much as inertia and an ingrained control of power structures on the part of men, which few of them are willing to acknowledge or give up.

In social matters Bolivian legislation has been ahead of most other Latin American (and Catholic) countries; for instance, divorce has been an option since 1932 (whereas in the UK it became fully legal only in 1969, and in Argentina in 1985). Considering that marriage and related

legislation have invariably favoured men, all over the world, it is important to note that civil marriage in Bolivia was legal from 1911, and common-law marriage recognised since 1944, with full rights granted to the children born of those unions.

In politics, women have been *de facto* leaders without institutional support, from the days of the colony all the way to the present. By contrast, women did not get the vote until 1938 (non-literate women in 1952), when they also gained the right to stand for office. It was only in 1966 that the first woman reached parliament. Examples abound of individual women who have made their mark politically, making brief star appearances on male-dominated stages. The first (and so far only) woman to serve as President was Lidia Gueiler, who ruled for a few months in 1979–80, before being deposed by a coup.

At the level of communities in rural areas, where traditional authorities predominate, women's role in decision making is built into communal decisions. Men and women meet separately to consider the matter at hand and give their verdict, although the power of final decision remains with the male authorities. A major step forward for all citizens, and for women's equality, came with the appointment in March 1998 of former newspaper editor Ana María Romero as the country's first Ombudsman, with a mandate to investigate alleged abuses of power by public officials.

A new law of 1999 constituted the most radical attempt yet to promote gender equity in politics. It required parties to put forward women as one-third of all candidates to municipal elections; and it stipulated that women's names must alternate with those of the male candidates on the lists of candidates presented for municipal elections, to avoid attempts to relegate women to the bottom of the list. Political parties tried desperately to find sufficient women to comply with the law, and many failed. To make up the numbers, in some cases they put forward men, altering their first names to make them appear as women.

Nevertheless, as a result of the reform, women constituted 42 per cent of the elected representatives in the new municipal governments which came to power in 2000. It was a huge rise in the participation of women, up from 9 per cent of posts in the previous municipal elections of 1995. Yet the figures are deceptive. The office of municipal councillor, which used to be an almost symbolic post before the Law of Popular Participation, was often filled by a woman, because men did not strive for community involvement without the prospect of pay or power; but since municipal councils have become sites of real power, the proportion of women who hold these posts has fallen. The system in Bolivia requires the election of substitutes to stand in for principal office holders when the



▲ A monument dedicated to the women of Santa Cruz

latter are not available. The result of the 1999 elections was that the proportion of women who are principal councillors amounts to only 15 per cent, while they account for 70 per cent of stand-ins.

Political alternatives?

The failure of the traditional political parties to deliver economic improvements and social inclusion, combined with the decline of the COB, has led most impoverished Bolivians to search for alternative means of representation. Since the 1980s, new political forces have emerged to harness popular restlessness and demands for reform.

In 1989 the opening of Congress was closely watched, for the first time, by indigenous people crowding around television sets: when *Comadre* Remedios Loza made her entrance in traditional dress, they cheered in disbelief. She was voted in for CONDEPA (*Conciencia de Patria*), a party which drew heavily on urban indigenous and *mestizo* support. The founder of the party was a self-made media man, *Compadre* Palenque. He became famous in the 1970s with a phone-in radio programme which was eventually transferred to TV. The programme, *The People's Tribune*, provided a space for ordinary people to air their problems and aspirations; his appeal lay in defending those who rang in with their experiences of injustice. His rise to fame illustrates the growing importance of the media in politics, and a more general flow of communications professionals into politics: spin is



WOMEN IN EL ALTO

Women's lives in El Alto reflect the rural realities that they are leaving behind: less schooling than the national average for women, more illiteracy, and the lowest incomes. Once they arrive in El Alto, however, they have the chance to organise and work together to achieve education, employment, and a voice in social and political decisions.

Eulogia Tapia, a community worker with a non-government organisation called *Gregoria Apaza* (named after the sister of Tupaj Katari), describes how women came to influence local government, as well as taking control of their own destinies: 'When the Law of Popular Participation was introduced, there were no means of including women and young people in the planning process. We went out to find local leaders and provided the training they asked for, and with an adviser from within the Council we achieved a great deal!' She speaks with the measured assurance of an educated middle-class woman, but she dresses in indigenous *pollera*, an elegant vision in black shawl and hat.

everywhere. Palenque's popularity and populism aroused great indignation among traditional parties, and the MNR finally closed down his channel after he allowed drug-runner Roberto Suárez to insult the President on live TV.

The scandal that shut down the TV programme triggered the creation of the political party CONDEPA. It was founded in the Aymara ruins at Tiawanaku in 1988, and went on to win important results in the elections. In 1997 it had 16 per cent of the national vote (compared with 22 per cent for the leading party, the ADN). CONDEPA also won the mayorships of La Paz and El Alto, where high hopes of a different kind of politics were soon dashed, as corruption and clientelism as usual took hold. As one woman activist said in El Alto: 'We believed they would be different – one of us – but nothing changed.' The untimely death of Carlos Palenque exposed the degree to which the party depended on his personal following. CONDEPA was briefly part of the governing coalition under Banzer, but seems to be in serious decline.

Another populist party, the Civic Solidarity Union (*Unión Cívica Solidaridad*, UCS), was created in 1989 by an entrepreneur named Max Fernández. From a small concession he had worked his way up to owning the largest brewery in the country, and he used his wealth to fund works in poor areas. It was never clear how his approach differed from that of other traditional parties, aside from his greater *largesse*. Fernández strove to represent the poorest sectors of society, without providing any alternative to the neo-liberal model, which he obviously supported. His political career was cut short by his sudden early death, and the appeal of the UCS has since diminished.

Neither CONDEPA nor the UCS provided a real alternative to conventional politics in Bolivia, although they gained massive support by appealing directly to the impoverished majority. They both opened up political spaces for new social sectors, CONDEPA for the recent migrants to the cities, and the UCS for the wealthier indigenous middle-class. Deeper structural changes seem to be occurring at the local rather than national level. The new administration in the town hall in La Paz is part of that trend. The mayor, Juan del Granado, is a lawyer with a long record in the defence of human rights; he led the case that put ex-dictator García Meza behind bars for thirty years. His reputation is built upon his mission to be the scourge of corruption, and on his impeccable personal integrity. During his campaign for a seat in Congress in the early 1990s, graffiti on city walls proclaimed him to be '*Juan Sin Miedo*', Juan the Fearless. When he later formed a new political party, he included others in a 'movement of the fearless', *Movimiento Sin Miedo* (MSM), based on his strong ethical code. His election in 1999 shows the popular support for a different kind of politics, where bribes and favours are not the rule. Only time will tell whether the attempts at citizen participation in local governments across the country will deliver a new political culture. Meanwhile, three of the city's previous mayors are facing trial for corruption, on charges brought by the current administration.

Leaf of contention



Filipa Mamani Martinez, a widow and leader of the coca-growers' union, was shot in the leg by the military during a demonstration against the government's coca-eradication campaign in the Chapare in 1995. Now she grows pineapples, for which she earns very little, to support her two children.

In the early 1990s, then-President Jaime Paz Zamora claimed that it was the US embassy, and not he, that ran Bolivia. It is a claim which would be shared by almost every Bolivian ruler, elected or otherwise. In the whole of Latin America, the largest US embassy is in Mexico, and the second largest is in Bolivia. Given the geopolitical and economic insignificance of this small country, this seems to make no sense; but it reflects the degree of influence which the USA is able to wield in an economically underdeveloped and politically weak nation. From economic reform to coca eradication, the USA seems set on making Bolivia the example of how it wants things to be done on the continent. The official website of the US State Department reports: 'The Bolivian Government continues to pay its debts, [and] relations between the United States and Bolivia are cordial and co-operative' – which translated means: 'We don't have any trouble getting what we want in Bolivia'.

The major issue in bilateral relations, in the words of the State Department again, is the 'control of illegal narcotics'. The US government glosses over the fact that Bolivia exports mainly the raw material for cocaine which is manufactured in Peru and Colombia; it ignores also the reality that eradication of coca-leaf plantations has done nothing to diminish the flow of drugs into the USA. Bolivia may have eliminated the bulk of coca plantations, but the area planted with the bush across the Andes has actually increased in the same period (notably in Colombia).

The leverage of the USA continues to be based on economic relations and aid. The bulk of military aid is earmarked to combat coca growing and drug trafficking. Bolivia was the country most visited by US Special Forces in 1998 in the region; more than Colombia, which is in the midst of a

civil war in which the USA is actively intervening, and on a par with Venezuela, the region's main oil producer. The USA's own reckoning of its economic and development assistance totalled US\$53 million in 1999 (a figure which includes credit for the payment of debts). In the same year, military aid worth at least \$36 million was given, including the training of 2000 officers, making Bolivia the third largest recipient of such assistance after Colombia (\$305 million) and Peru (\$65 million). On top of that, Bolivia bought US armaments worth around \$10 million in 1997, receiving in addition donations worth \$12 million from the USA's own arsenal for the 'emergency purposes' of combating drugs trafficking. The importance of US aid to local politics is compounded by the fact that the USA is Bolivia's main trading partner. Aid and trade, therefore, add up to enormous economic and political leverage, of which Washington makes full use in order to further its own interests – which do not necessarily coincide with Bolivia's development needs.

▼ Filiberto Moya chewing coca as he pauses from his work on a pineapple plantation near Villa Victoria, in the Chapare



The sacred leaf

The coca leaf has been used by the inhabitants of the Andes for medicinal and ritual purposes for some 4000 years. It is considered sacred, and it plays a central role in many religious ceremonies. Coca is offered to the *Tio*, the fierce deity of the mines, and the miners themselves chew it to keep hunger at bay during their long shifts. The sweet and sour smell of coca belongs with the people of the countryside: it is part of the daily diet of more than half of the inhabitants of the *altiplano*. After decades of vilification from Western science, it is now becoming clear that the nutritional and medicinal value of coca is significant in the hostile physical environment of the highlands. There is now solid evidence of a fact which has always been known in the Andes: coca alleviates tiredness and hunger. Gradually, researchers at centres such as the Bolivian Institute for Altitude Biology have been able to propose scientifically tested hypotheses about the effects of coca consumption. Altitude sickness, *sorojche*, as it is known, affects Bolivians as much as foreigners, and coca tea is the ubiquitous remedy. The national brew is also good for upset stomachs and a wide range of minor ailments.

WISE MAN

His name is Valentín Mejillones. He wears a colourful *ch'ullu* (a knitted hat with ear-flaps) half hidden under a cowboy hat, and he lets coca leaves fall between his fingers while he asks them silently to make their wisdom apparent to him. You have to provide your own coca, as fresh and undamaged as possible,



and find a *yatiri* (wise man) like Valentín, who can diagnose ills of the body and soul with the aid of the falling coca leaves. The services of *yatiris* are called upon for community or political occasions, as well as personal troubles.

Valentín Mejillones recalls how he was given the task of ritually investing the trust of the indigenous community in the newly elected President, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, and his Vice-President Victor Hugo Cárdenas, by bestowing the traditional Aymara *bastón* (staff) and *chalina* (cloak) upon them. The presentation of these symbols of power signified the

fact that, for the first time ever, the indigenous majority felt represented in national government. The *yatiri* was also called to take the symbols back when Cárdenas' term was over, and the *bastón* and *chalina* now lie in a vault in the Bolivian National Bank, awaiting the next indigenous leader.

Alternative development or forced eradication?

Great quantities of the aid which arrives in Bolivia, both from the USA and Europe, are devoted to the cause of 'alternative development', and are supposed to finance attempts to provide an alternative livelihood for the thousands of families who depend on growing coca, mostly in the Chapare, a sub-tropical region at the foot of the Andes near Cochabamba. In fact, however, the main policy being carried out in the Chapare is not alternative development, but forced eradication. The US-funded eradication campaigns began in 1986 with a doomed military sweep, employing US soldiers and Black Hawk helicopters, and provoking a huge social backlash. As a result, the next wave of eradication came with blandishments: a cash prize for every *campesino* who converted to 'alternative' crops. Many small farmers did attempt to grow what the agronomists advised: palm hearts, passion fruit, pineapples, citrus fruits; but it was never going to be easy, given that the income from one hectare of coca was estimated at US\$5000, with yields from the same area planted with citrus estimated at US\$500.

'The government says there are five "star" results of alternative development: pineapples, passion fruit, palm hearts, bananas, and chilies. But what we've really got are prisoners, wounded, dead people, bullets, and arms.'

The coca plant is a gift in many respects, as it can be harvested twice a year or more, requires hardly any care, and is extremely hardy. The change in crop was not matched by improved access to markets, so that many bitter *campesinos* watch the fruits of their labour rot by the roadsides.

The top priority of the government is to eradicate coca from the Chapare, but this creates enormous conflict in the region. The *Plan Dignidad*, passed in 1998, aimed to reach zero coca production by 2002. The plan relies on huge funding and pressure from the USA to carry it out, on pain of losing US aid. The Chapare has been heavily militarised, while the cash incentives previously offered to *campesinos* to switch to other crops have been stopped by the government. In spite of claims by the Bolivian government that 'zero coca' was achieved in 2001, anti-narcotics aid from the USA has been on the increase, directly and indirectly. 'Plan Colombia', a massive injection of cash to the Colombia military, includes US\$25 million for eradication and interdiction in the Chapare and the Yungas regions of Bolivia.

The disastrous results of the eradication campaign were eloquently summed up for this book by Leonida Zurita Vargas, President of the Women's Six Federations of the Chapare: 'The government says there are five "star" results of alternative development: pineapples, passion fruit, palm hearts, bananas, and chilies. But what we've really got are prisoners, wounded, dead people, bullets, and arms. That's what there is.'

The reality in Chapare

The luxury hotel in the middle of the Chapare looks incongruous, as we walk past *campesinos* whose livelihoods have been 'eradicated' and whose 'alternative development' – crops of pineapple, plantain, orange, and papaya – pile up unsold in roadside markets. The hotel stands empty, an apt metaphor for the misguided attempts to develop the Chapare away from coca and, in this case, into tourism, without providing real alternatives. Sadly, it has so far hosted only the international development specialists brought in to devise 'alternative development' projects. The *campesinos* live under constant surveillance by the police and the army, on account of a European invention which they do not control: cocaine, first produced by a German chemist in 1860. Cocaine is consumed primarily in the rich countries which banned it at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Chapare absorbed thousands of migrants from the highlands in the process of State-sponsored colonisation. The population was 24,000 in 1967 and 200,000 twenty years later, with nearly two-thirds of the new arrivals coming from Cochabamba department, and the rest from Potosí and Oruro. More than forty per cent arrived between 1980 and 1985, driven by the effects of highland drought and unemployment among miners, and lured by the prospect of earning money from growing coca. The Chapare has become notorious as the site for a huge expansion of coca-leaf production, prompted by the increase in the cocaine trade

and drug trafficking from the mid-1970s onwards. There were small coca plantations for two centuries, but the traditional area for coca-leaf cultivation was the Yungas of La Paz, the steep valleys north-east of the capital city.

Only the first steps in the process of making cocaine take place in Bolivia. More than 40 chemicals are required to turn coca leaf into cocaine, and many of them have to be imported from industrialised countries. The *campesinos* who grow coca, known as *cocaleros*, remain the weakest link in the chain of drug production, yet they have been subjected to the most severe repression – while those who make fortunes from exporting drugs to consumer countries such as the USA and Europe walk free. A draconian

law, *Ley 1008*, was passed in 1988 to proscribe drug-related activities. It has become a byword for human-rights abuses perpetrated against some of the most vulnerable people in society; more than half of those arrested under it are imprisoned on remand, awaiting trial.

The *cocaleros* are tightly organised in *sindicatos* and federations which unite them. They have a Member of Parliament, Evo Morales, and have created a political party to fight in local and national elections. The Movement to Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS) has majorities in all the Chapare municipal councils but one, showing the strength of support for resistance to government policy. The *campesinos* argue that the solution lies not in eradication, but in finding legal uses for coca leaf, and the development of alternative crops from which they can make a sustainable living. As the militarisation of eradication has grown, so has the scale of the conflict.

▽ *Alternative development?*
Filiberto Moya produces pineapples for which he will be lucky to find a market.



A nation on the move

Migration to the cities and to other countries has been the fate of nearly four million people, half of the population.

During the 1990s, there was a steady stream of people making their way gingerly into an imposing building in downtown La Paz. In 1999 the queue ran the length of the long façade. In 2000 it snaked around the block, a square dance around the massive white cube of the US Embassy. The people waiting patiently in line hoped for the chance of a new life: a visa to take them legally to the United States. The economic crisis, which seems almost constant in Bolivia, has deepened to the extent that it is driving people away. Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, the old favourite destinations, offer no prospects, because they are suffering their own economic contraction. A taxi driver in Cochabamba summed it up: 'I worked in Argentina and built my house. I went to Brazil, came back and started a business. But now I have to drive my car for money, because I can't even afford to go La Paz to get a visa to reach the USA.'

The Bolivia that anthropologists study and tourists gasp at, a nation of thousand-year-old customs and rooted to the land, is shrinking. Across the whole of Latin America, migration from the rural areas to the towns and cities means that the population of the continent is now mainly urban. In Bolivia, migration to the cities and to other countries has been the fate of nearly four million people: half of the population, an astonishing proportion. Conservative estimates put the population living abroad at 25 per cent of all Bolivians. In other words, some two and half million have left their country; more than one million live in Argentina, some 800,000 in the USA, and the rest mostly in Brazil and Chile. More than half of all Bolivians have at least one family member living outside the country. Another million (at least) are estimated by social scientists to have migrated internally to other areas of the country in the latter half of the 1990s. Almost 40 per cent of Bolivians between the ages of 5 and 19 have experienced migration – a mass testimony of dissatisfaction: people voting with their feet in search of a better life.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the economic and cultural predominance of the highlands, including the lower valleys, was undisputed: nine out of ten Bolivians lived there, and of them some 20 per cent lived in the cities. By the end of the century the population of the lowlands had grown spectacularly, with Santa Cruz in particular affected by the influx of

> Rene and Gregoria, originally from the altiplano, live with their children in one room in Santa Cruz, trying to save money to build their own home on the outskirts of the city, where the price of land is lower.



rural people. Whereas in other countries the capital city is the magnet for migrants, in Bolivia the move has been spread across La Paz (and El Alto) and Santa Cruz. To a lesser degree, migration has also affected the smaller cities such as Sucre – in relation to their size, rather than in absolute numbers. The areas that are losing population include all the highland departments: Potosí, Oruro, and Chuquisaca; the rural areas of La Paz are emptying, while its cities fill up. Regions gaining the largest numbers of migrants are Santa Cruz and La Paz, with Tarija, Beni, and Pando also absorbing smaller, but significant, numbers of arrivals.

Bolivians abroad

In 1990 a national census was conducted. When the results were compiled in 1992, demographers were surprised to find fewer people than expected: only 6.5 million Bolivians were in evidence, and the shortfall seemed to be due to migration.

Argentina has the largest community of Bolivians abroad. They are divided between the rural north-west, near the border between the two countries, and Buenos Aires province. The most enterprising and adventurous manage to reach the big city, where conditions are tough, and xenophobia runs high. In the wake of several well-publicised attacks on Bolivians, the Argentinian government promised to punish those responsible and prevent further violence. The media coverage brought some unexpected facts to public attention: most of the fruit and vegetables consumed in the capital city are grown and marketed by Bolivians, many of whom have lived in the country for decades. Argentinians were forced to confront their prejudiced assumptions about the imputed marginality and criminality of the not-so-new immigrants.

The provinces of what are now southern Bolivia, northern Argentina, and Chile were one territory for three hundred years of colonial rule; even after Independence, borders were easily permeable (and changeable, as Bolivia knew to its loss). Before Independence, the privileged classes from all three countries studied at the University of Charcas (in what is now Sucre); since then, the flow has tended to be in the opposite direction. In the 1920s it was estimated that some 30,000 Bolivians crossed into Argentina to find work in sugar-cane cutting, many of them staying on to labour on tobacco plantations or to find other work.

If anything, Bolivians tend to be invisible in their lands of adoption. Whether their presence is legal or not, they keep a low profile and work hard. In the United States, their presence is a well-kept secret – or it was, until the community was partially ‘outed’ in Arlington, Virginia, when the Chief of Police gave them a prize for being the most law-abiding section of the community. Wherever they are, Bolivians abroad contribute significantly to their national economy with their remittances: the money they send to relatives left behind. The total amount remains unquantified, but economists agree that it is increasingly important.

▼ Isidora Humacata, a shepherd, who divides her time between her village and her daughter's home in the city of Cochabamba.



Internal migration

A large number of Bolivian citizens have one foot in the city and another in the countryside. Segundina Choque, for example, migrated with her husband from the mining town of Cami, near Oruro, to Cochabamba. She works in Wiñay, a community ceramics enterprise. The decorative mobiles and picture-frames which she produces sell internationally; the business operates high social-welfare standards, which have ensured it an overseas market, via Oxfam on fair-trade terms. Segundina's mother, Isidora Humacata, divides her time between her village and living with her children in the city. When she visits, she brings her small herd of sheep with her and puts them out to pasture behind the building where she lends a hand in trimming ceramic pieces. When Segundina proudly showed us her house, built thanks to her wage, she offered us delicious sweet potatoes which her father had sent from his fields. Such is the daily reality of Bolivians who make the most of their connections with rural and urban environments.

Although the process of urbanisation speeded up dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s, many migrants retain a connection to their land, via relatives, seasonal visits for cultivation, and festivities. In common with most migrants to the cities, it is the young and the most able and educated who first make the move; the least qualified and the oldest are left on the land, a fact which partly helps to explain why the countryside suffers the worst poverty.

There have been some population movements from one rural area to another, especially after the 'relocation' law which made thousands of miners redundant in the State mines: miners and their *campesino* families moved to areas of new colonisation, such as the lowland plains east of Santa Cruz. They also moved to El Alto, where entire neighbourhoods are made up of ex-miners.

BOY BAND AND GIRL DREAMS IN EL ALTO

The neighbourhood centre is packed. We pick our way upstairs on half-built steps, the basic concrete structure which is sufficient to take us to the second floor (that symbol of upward mobility desired by all inhabitants of El Alto). Waiting for us are the leaders of the neighbourhood committees, mostly older men, together with a lot of young people of secondary-school age. We are warmly welcomed by the local boy band, who keep alive a tradition brought from the *altiplano* villages. They seem at home here, just as they are (they tell us) in the discos which blare out rock, salsa, or techno music. For us, they play wind pipes and *charango* and sing 'traditional' songs. But tradition does not stand still, and their offering is *La Picara* (literally 'the tease'): a *cueca*, a song from the south of Bolivia, near Tarija. Their band has no name, they say, but one shyly adds that they are thinking about 'Andean Wind'.

Girls and boys are eager to speak, to tell us about their lives, to share their hopes. They are all in secondary school, hoping to go to university. Their parents are mostly poor *campesinos* who have come to El Alto/La Paz in search of better opportunities – and clearly their daily efforts are paying off. Mónica wants to be a doctor, and supports the campaign for El Alto to have its own university, because, as she says, 'We have a right to an education too'.



DE POLLERA

La Paz, with its skyscrapers and traffic jams, and El Alto, with its two-storey brick and adobe houses, look familiar to visitors from urbanised and industrialised countries. It is the colour provided by the people on the streets that draws attention to the indigenous extraction of the majority of the population. The most noticeable example is the women who dress in traditional skirts and bowler hats as they go about their business.

Lisette Canavesi, an indigenous Bolivian anthropologist, has compiled a history of the distinctive dress of indigenous women, developed predominantly in the cities, where they tend to have more money to spend on clothes and jewellery than their sisters in the countryside. The voluminous *polleras* (skirts)

with the many underlying petticoats, the famous bowler hats made of felt, and the woollen shawls pinned with intricate golden brooches are the visible expressions of their wearers' pride in their heritage. As a mark of their identity, the women actively choose to dress *de pollera*, as they describe the traditional style, when it would be much easier to wear Western clothes.

The principal market streets of La Paz are vibrant with the colours of *polleras* hung up for sale. At stalls on the pavements, women traders sit behind intricate towers of



the flat court shoes they wear, similar to those worn by bullfighters in Spain. Today's typical dress was imposed by Spanish king Charles III in the eighteenth century, copied from the peasant dress of women of Extremadura (south-west Spain): living proof of the way in which cultures intermingle and enrich each other.