

December 2024

## Youth Mental Well-Being Amid Climate Change and Land Loss in Santa Cruz, Bolivia

*Recommendations for NGOs, funders and government officials*

**In an exploratory qualitative transdisciplinary study conducted in collaboration with IUCN NL, Nativa Bolivia, UNE Bolivia and VU University Amsterdam, Yesica Chavez's master's thesis examined the impacts of land loss and climate change on the emotional well-being and identity of youth in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. The study also explored youth involvement in climate mitigation efforts, showing that while they experience negative emotions about these challenges, their nuanced understanding positions them not as passive victims, but as potential change-makers.**

### Background

Climate change and land loss are urgent global issues with far-reaching impacts, driven primarily by deforestation, agricultural expansion, and urbanisation (1). Bolivia, a significant contributor to global deforestation, exemplifies the severity of these challenges, particularly in the Santa Cruz region, which accounts for 80% of the country's land loss (2). This region is known for its rich bio-diversity, but agricultural and livestock expansion, particularly the soy industry (3), has fueled deforestation. Compounding this, climate change has led to more extreme conditions such as droughts, wildfires, and water scarcity, further intensifying land degradation (3)(4).

The practice of slash-and-burn agriculture has become increasingly problematic, contributing to a rise in wildfires. Policies promoting agribusiness under former President Evo Morales accelerated this, including Law 741, which authorized land clearing and inadvertently encouraged illegal deforestation practices (5). This has raised concerns among Bolivia's youth, the largest population group in the country, particularly in Santa Cruz, where 25% of the population is aged 16-28. Youth are increasingly aware of environmental issues, with 40% expressing that authorities should prioritize environmental care (6).

Mental health is also a growing concern in Santa Cruz, where conditions like anxiety, depression, and substance abuse are rising.

In 2022, anxiety cases surged to 8,332, a significant increase from 1,705 in 2019 (7). The connection between climate change and mental health is well-documented in the Global North, where climate events are linked to issues like PTSD and depression. However, in low- and middle-income countries like Bolivia, research on these impacts remains scarce, despite the likely severe consequences for vulnerable populations.

Overall, Bolivia's youth face significant mental and environmental challenges, but their growing awareness presents potential for positive change, especially as environmental conservation and mental health policy.

### Methods

This study used a transdisciplinary, participatory research design to engage youth in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. Its exploratory approach aimed to uncover new themes and address knowledge gaps by incorporating perspectives from diverse stakeholders. Climate change, mental well-being, and land loss are complex, interconnected issues that require this multidisciplinary approach. By actively involving youth through interviews and focus groups, the research identified community needs and fostered potential for social change. The study included ten in-depth interviews and four focus group discussions with a participatory action focus.



## Recommendations

The findings reveal that climate change and land loss deeply affect environmental health, human well-being, social systems, and identity. While these issues may not always directly impact urban youth, the compounded effects of climate change, such as rising temperatures and wildfires, intensify their mental and physical health challenges. Despite this, the youth's nuanced understanding positions them as potential change-makers, offering hope for future climate action.

### Awareness

- Develop educational programs that raise awareness about the importance and purpose of protected areas while encouraging youth to spend more time in nature, fostering a deeper connection to the environment that enhances mental health and promotes proactive participation in conservation efforts.

### Resilience

- There should be an investment in mental health programs addressing the psychological effects of rising temperatures and deteriorating air quality on youth. Collaborative efforts should focus on providing support services and raising awareness about the mental health impacts of wildfires and climate-related stressors.

### Adaptation

- Strengthen regional climate adaptation strategies by increasing green spaces, improving water access, and enhancing air quality monitoring systems. These efforts should focus on mitigating the effects of rising temperatures on human health and wildlife, while also establishing clear response protocols to address the health impacts of wildfire smoke exposure.
- Implement a socio-ecological framework in protected area management that combines top-down wildlife conservation with active community involvement, particularly engaging Indigenous communities like the Guarani, to ensure that cultural heritage and land use are incorporated into conservation strategies, addressing the complex interactions between humans and the environment.

### Policy

- Foster youth participation in formal climate processes by incorporating their perspectives and initiatives into policymaking, ensuring their voices are heard and creating a feedback loop between youth engagement and local and national climate policies to strengthen overall climate action efforts.
- Continue to support youth climate action retreats like RED SCZ that focuses on collaborative discussions among youth on critical topics such as forest management, resilience systems, and climate governance, enabling them to develop strategic plans for addressing climate challenges.

### Conclusion

This study underscores the interconnected impacts of climate change and land loss on youth, revealing that they are not just victims but potential agents of transformative change. Their nuanced understanding emphasizes the urgent need for increased awareness and engagement with environmental issues, particularly regarding mental health and identity. Participants advocated for enhanced education on climate change, calling for comprehensive curricula that address its realities and promote sustainability.

By involving youth in the management of protected areas through participatory frameworks, we can strengthen their connection to nature and sense of agency. Despite stereotypes portraying youth as self-centered, this study highlights their genuine concern for societal and environmental issues. Therefore, it is essential to equip them with the necessary tools and opportunities for meaningful engagement in climate action initiatives, while policymakers must prioritize their voices in decision-making processes to effectively address climate impacts.

**About the author** - Yesica Chavez, MSc in Global Health, is a researcher dedicated to storytelling, particularly in amplifying the narratives and perspectives of vulnerable populations most affected by climate change. This investigation would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of the youth from UNE Bolivia, Nativa, Department of Climate Change, and the Indigenous Charagua community.

## References

- (1)** United Nations. (2023). Five drivers of nature crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/five-drivers-nature-crisis>
- (2)** Cabezas, I. (2023). The hidden crisis of deforestation in Bolivia. Global Canopy. <https://globalcanopy.org/insights/insight/the-hidden-crisis-of-deforestation-in-bolivia/>
- (3)** Arismendi, M. O. R. (n.d.). Diagnostico del estado socioambiental de Bolivia.
- (4)** IPCC. (2021). Retrieved from [https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg1/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg1/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Full_Report.pdf)
- (5)** Colque, G. (2023). ¿Por qué eliminar la Ley 741? Fundación TIERRA. Retrieved from <https://ftierra.org/index.php/opinion-y-analisis/1189-por-que-eliminar-la-ley-741>
- (6)** Rodríguez, Y., Pedraza, G., & Mendoza, A. (2018). Millenials: Percepciones sobre el Estado y la democracia.
- (7)** Ministry of Health of Bolivia. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.minsalud.gob.bo>