

Radical changes in environmental protection can be achieved through education

Joaquin Chila Frontanilla is from Bolivia, South America. He is currently working as an environmental technician at the local [Gaia Pacha foundation](#), as a leader of the Bolivian branch of the NGO [IDEAS For Us](#) and as a volunteer at the [Bolivian Platform Action Against Climate Change](#).



Source: Joaquin Chila

Joaquin, you are an environmental engineer and educator on the topic of sustainability in Bolivia. Could you tell us more about your work?

In recent years, I have focused on working towards reaching the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN through environmental education and the development of eco-action projects, with an emphasis on the climate crisis. I work with NGOs, volunteer groups, and local authorities in order to identify the main environmental problems suffered by the different regions of Bolivia, consulting the community members themselves, to then manage the development of resilience, adaptation, or mitigation projects that arise through proposals prepared jointly with those affected. For these processes to be successful, environmental education and climate education should be both increased, so that the local communities have appropriate knowledge and tools related to the dynamics of climate change and actions to combat it.

You are closely engaged in addressing environmental challenges in Bolivia. Can you share what these challenges are with us?

Bolivia is one of the [fifteen most biodiverse countries](#) in the world, but it ranked third in 2021 in the ranking of countries with the highest loss of forest cover according to Global Forest Watch. This deforestation is related to other problems, such as the fact that Bolivia also occupies the 10th position among the countries that suffer the most from extreme climate changes, according to the [Global Climate Risk Index](#).

This vulnerability to the climate crisis causes severe impacts due to floods, droughts and frosts. Each year approximately, thousands of families and crops are affected by these weather changes, causing an increase in [food insecurity](#). This also has an effect on the country's [rural access to basic water](#) services, which is 78% and the rural access to basic sanitation services, which is 36%. The existing relationship between the different impacts of the climate crisis have repercussions in the social and economic spheres as well.

Added to this, there are alarming levels of pollution that affect ecosystems. Around 5% of the municipalities have sanitary landfills, the average annual rate of pollution by PM2.5 is twice the WHO recommended maximum, and Bolivia is responsible for the 7% of world average [mercury emissions](#).

Tell us more about why and how you became passionate about environmental protection. Is it true in your opinion that everyone can contribute to safeguarding the environment or does its future depend more on national policies and corporations?

Since I grew up in a small town surrounded by beautiful Bolivian nature, I was able to establish deep connections with it. Upon moving to a larger town, I noticed a drastic change in terms of pollution and deforestation. This motivated me to become a forest firefighter at a young age. However, the number of fires didn't decrease no matter how much effort we put in. What caused intrigue to investigate the socio-economic causes of these events, which later translated into my passion for environmental education.

In my experience, it is through education that radical changes in the environment can be achieved. Since it is the people who build the policies, develop projects, and decide on the type of development of the country. This is why it is necessary for all of us to contribute from wherever we are, be it in the private, state or non-governmental sphere, to improve our environment. People have the power to change themselves and their environment.



Source: Joaquin Chila

Many people think that environmental policies are in conflict with economic logic and that they may cause economic loss. Is that true having in mind your own experience?

I think this is true if we are referring to an economic model whose objective is only the increase in GDP or monetary growth. But if the chosen development model seeks sustainability and the well-being of society, then the policies are adjusted to the economy. For example, in Bolivia, there are already B companies that incorporate environmental and social spheres into their development indicators, such as in the areas of rubber recycling for the installation of safe parks, garbage recycling for diesel production, or green investment initiatives. These types of situations could be driven by policies, since they not only generate income for the State through taxes, but also boost the economy, employ young people, and reduce environmental impacts.

Can you tell us a positive story related to your work - please share an achievement.

We were able to reach 20 schools in the Bolivian Chaco region, in remote communities where little was understood about climate change. Students and professors identified how floods and droughts affect them, and proposed ideas for viable projects that they will work on in the following years. Likewise, thanks to the recent IREX CSP fellowship I won to carry out a professional practice in the United States, I was able to establish contact with the NGO IDEAS For Us, which has already supported us in obtaining financing to reforest 500 fruit trees in an indigenous Quechua community, and an orchard of medicinal plants, which is already being used to train in the use of natural medicine for sick people in the city of La Paz.

Can you share some best practices in terms of advocacy in the field of environmental issues that you have used?

To improve environmental actions, the use of alliances has been incredibly useful, alliances between different institutions or generations. It is when there is a sincere rapprochement between different groups of people that significant changes in society are really achieved. This, however, requires conflict resolution, leadership, and other soft skills, so that communication and ties are true and strong.

And at the end of this conversation, I would like to mention that Bolivia is a country not only diverse in terms of biodiversity, but also in terms of culture. I want all of the readers of this interview to know that they are welcome to my country. I appreciate your time, and I hope to meet you in Europe soon, to exchange experiences and knowledge, so that together we can improve our work for sustainable development. You can reach me at: joaquin.ch.fr@gmail.com or joaquin.chila@ideasforus.org.