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An Unequal Shift: Urbanization's Impact on Inequality in Brazil and Bolivia

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Abstract

This article examines the urbanization of two developing South American countries, Bolivia and Brazil, and how that urbanization impacts the quality of living in both nations. Both countries are experiencing an increase in their urban populations, but this does not mean the quality of life of both nations' populations is necessarily improving. In Bolivia, data suggests that there is a massive gap between the country's poor and rich populations when it comes to reliable access to sanitation services and water. In Brazil, a large portion of the urban population lives in inadequate housing, while Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are both in the top twenty most economically vulnerable cities in the world. This article examines both nations' populations' shift to cities and how this has potentially exacerbated the issues of inequality faced by their citizenry.

I. Introduction

Urbanization is a term that refers to an increase in the share of the urban population, largely driven by the movement of a population from rural areas of a country into urban, city-like areas. Because the population of a country moves closer together, this process causes the overall population density of that country to increase. In other words, more of a country's population can be found in one area as urbanization increases. This, however, is not always a good thing; many people migrating to the cities are often unable to afford adequate housing. This forces massive concentrations of economically at-risk families to live in inadequate housing arrangements that lack access to safe water and sanitation. It is in this way that urbanization can sometimes exacerbate issues of inequality.

Brazil and Bolivia are two South American developing countries that have experienced rapid urbanization in the past few decades. Both countries, although experiencing an overall standard of life improvement across the board, are experiencing negative side effects of this urbanization on equality. For example, nearly half of Bolivia's urban population lives in slums.[1] In Brazil, only about 15 percent of the urban population lives in slums, but inequality is overall much higher in Brazil than in Bolivia. [2]

[1] World Bank (2024).
[2] World Bank (2024).

Proceeding from this introduction (section I), there will be a brief literature review (section II) of some influential publications on urbanization and inequality in Bolivia and Brazil. Section III will then briefly summarize the socio-economic background of Brazil and Bolivia. Section IV will analyze some key facts pertaining to urbanization and its potential impact on inequality in Brazil and Bolivia, which is followed by an ethical analysis of both nations' plans to combat inequality (section V). Finally, section VI will provide a brief conclusion of the thoughts found within this paper.

II. Brief Literature Review

There have been many publications analyzing the urbanization and urban life of Bolivia and Brazil. Many studies also examine how urban life in both nations can be very different depending on where you are and who you are. Huggins (2000) and Pacheco (2008) analyze how racial discrimination and urban crime have impacted the lives of Brazilians, while Campolina Diniz and Vieira (2016) examine the worsening of four social indicators associated with urbanization. Anderson (2002) discusses how urbanization might be the key to solving some social issues despite the negative side effects it has caused in Bolivia. Lara and Soloaga (2007) simulate the impact of a successful implementation of the Doha Development Agenda on Bolivia, which have different impacts on agriculture and industry, and hence on rural and urban populations. Each of these publications provides a thorough examination of income distribution to understand where potential sources of inequality may be.

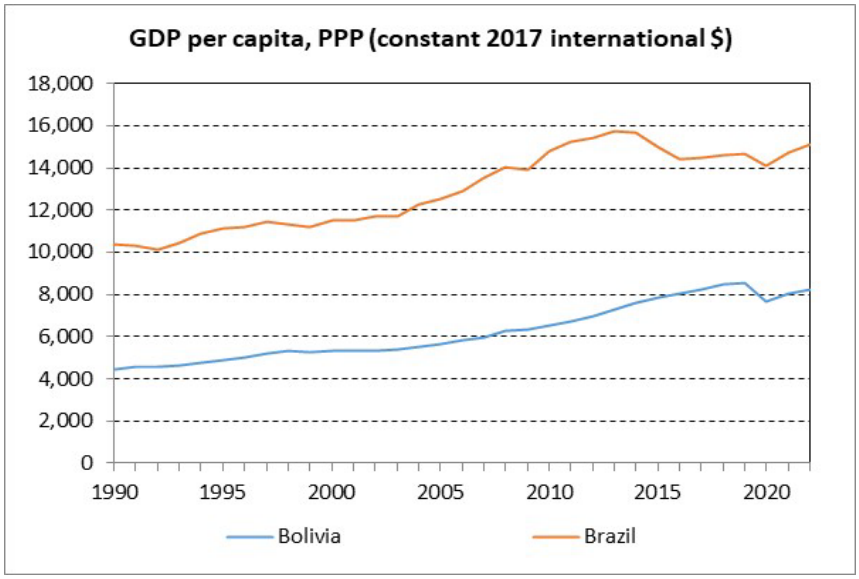
- Huggins (2000) discusses how urban violence throughout Brazil has resulted in astoundingly high homicide rates. Specifically, how different factors impact homicide patterns such as race, age, and whether or not an individual resides in an urban setting. A proposed solution to violent crime throughout Brazil's cities is to integrate privatized police forces into law enforcement and criminal justice systems. However, this solution may present a substantial issue, potentially destabilizing the very system it means to serve.
- Pacheco (2008) analyzes the inequality found within Brazilian society across either racial or geographical lines. The author has found that Brazil's poor, at-risk, and unhealthy populations are primarily comprised of people of color. This is a clear indication of systemic inequality within Brazil's borders, which is worsened by the increasing emphasis placed on industrialization and the lack of care given to those working for this purpose.
- Campolina Diniz and Vieira (2016) show how migration and rapid demographic growth in large metropolitan areas in Brazil are associated with high levels of territorial and social inequality. The focus specifically on a.) inequality in housing conditions, per capita income and years of schooling; b.) a poor (or lack of a) public transport system leading to urban congestion and traffic accidents; c.) high levels of violence and murder, and d.) the rapid diffusion of diseases linked to the lack of sanitary facilities. They suggest that territorial guidelines for a more balanced polycentric urban network and a more active urban policy are required to address these issues.
- Anderson (2002) discusses how the single greatest issue plaguing the people of Bolivia is poverty and how the solution to this problem may be an increase in urbanization. A lack of population density in the country has caused the vast distribution of services (such as roads, healthcare, education, etc.) to be too expensive. As proposed by the author, a very easy way to increase population density is simply for people to move closer to each other.

- Lara and Soloaga (2007) give an overview of the economic state of Bolivia. In addition to identifying how much of the country, especially those living in rural areas, are facing poverty, their main focus is to simulate the impact of a successful implementation of the Doha Development Agenda on Bolivia. They concluded that significant gains can be expected if an increase in exports were to raise the demand for labor. While the increase in labor demand in the industrial sector would lead to an average gain in household real income of 2 percent, an expansion in the agricultural sector could yield an average gain of 7 percent in household real income. However, In the most likely scenario, which is business as usual, changes in prices and quantities per se are expected to have only minor effects on Bolivian household welfare.

III. Socio-Economic Background of Bolivia and Brazil

While Bolivia and Brazil are both developing countries in South America, Bolivia is a much smaller country than Brazil in terms of population and gross domestic product (GDP). As of 2022, Bolivia had a population of 12.2 million people and a total GDP of $38.3 billion, while Brazil had a population of 215.3 million people (about 20 times that of Bolivia's population) and a total GDP of $1.9 trillion (about 50 times that of Bolivia's GDP).[3]

Figure 1: PPP-adjusted GDP per capita, 1990–2022



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

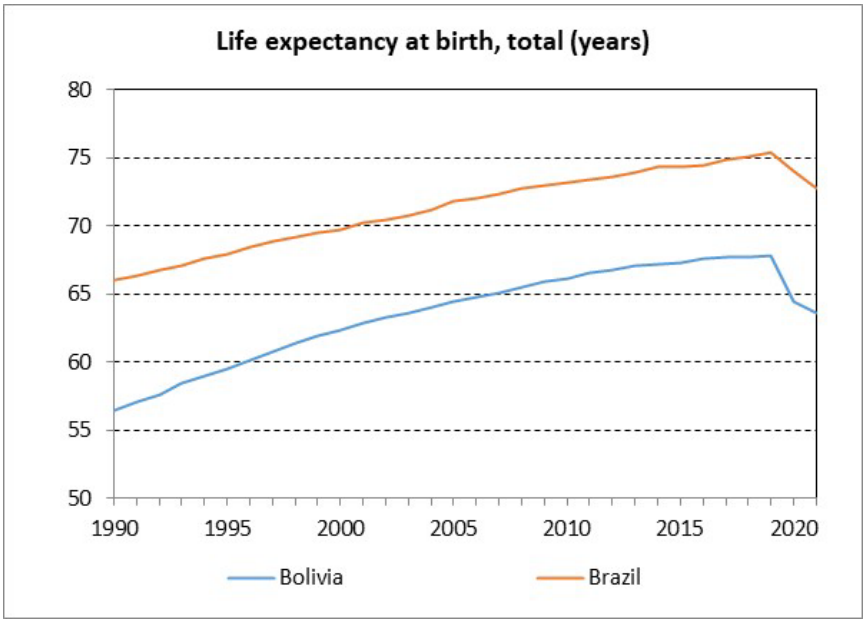
As shown in Figure 1, Brazil's purchasing power parity (PPP) adjusted GDP per capita increased from $10,402 in 1990 to $15,093 in 2022, while Bolivia's increased from $4,438 in 1990 to $8,244 in 2022. That is, Bolivia's GDP per capita increased by a cumulative 86 percent over 32 years, while Brazil's GDP per capita increased by a cumulative 45 percent over the same period. Figure 1 also shows that Brazil's GDP per capita has been more volatile than Bolivia's GDP per capita. Bolivia experienced a decline in its GDP per capita only twice, in 1999 and in 2020, while Brazil experienced a decline in its GDP per capita ten times during the same time period. It is also worth

[3] World Bank (2024).

noting that both nations' PPP-adjusted GDP per capita took a noticeable decline in 2020, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2 compares the life expectancy at birth for people living in Brazil and Bolivia. Based on the figure, it is evident that both nations' life expectancies were climbing from 1990 up to 2019. Brazil's life expectancy has been consistently higher than that of Bolivia, at least since 1990 (the beginning of our comparison). Both countries reached their highest life expectancy in 2019, with 67.8 years in Bolivia and 75.3 years in Brazil. Life expectancy then dropped in both countries in 2020 and declined further in 2021; this was also likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, life expectancy increased from 1990 to 2021 by 7.2 years in Bolivia and by 6.8 years in Brazil.

Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (years), 1990–2021



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

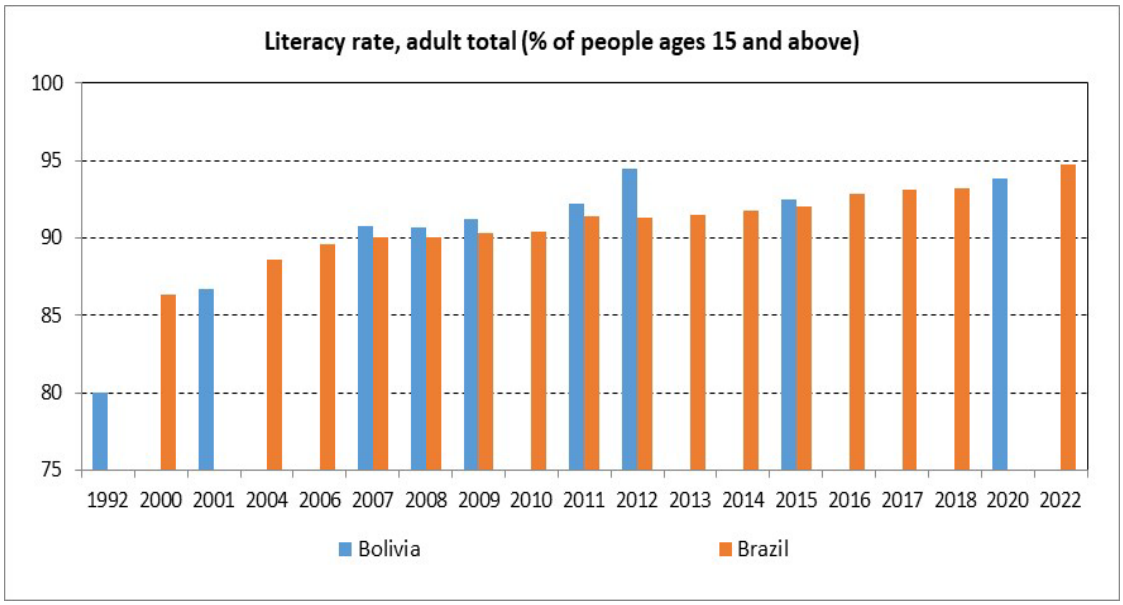
Figure 3 compares the adult literacy rate in both Brazil and Bolivia for all years available in World Bank (2024).[4] Though the comparison is complicated by the fact that data is not always available for the same year, Figure 3 indicates that Bolivia's literacy rate is consistently higher than that of Brazil's. This is an interesting fact given that a.) Brazil's PPP-adjusted GDP per capita has been about twice that of Bolivia's and b.) Brazil's life expectancy has been at least 6.8 years higher for every year during the period between 1990 and 2021.

Bolivia's literacy increased from 80.0 percent in 1992 to an all-time high of 92.2 percent in 2012, after which it declined slightly to 92.5 percent in 2015, and then increased again to 93.9 percent in 2020 (the last year such data is available for Bolivia). Brazil's literacy rate has been slightly less volatile than that of Bolivia. With the exception of 2012 (when Brazil's literacy rate declined by 0.07 percentage points), Brazil's literacy rate grew for all other years such data is available, even though marginally (less than by 0.1 percentage points) from 2007 to 2008 and again from 2009 to

[4] Adult literacy refers to the literacy of all individuals in a country who are 15 years of age or older.

2010. Overall, Bolivia's literacy rate grew by 13.9 percentage points from 1992 to 2020, while Brazil's literacy rate increased by 8.3 percentage points from 2000 to 2022.

Figure 3: Adult Literacy Rates (percent of people ages 15 and older), all available years



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

IV. Analysis of Facts

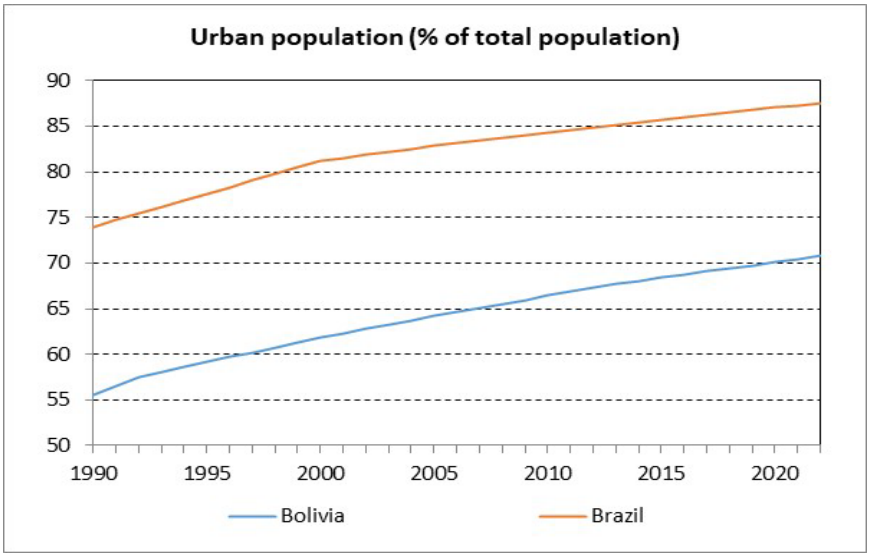
This section is separated into two subsections. The first subsection will examine and compare the urbanization within Brazil and Bolivia by examining the evolution of three indicators: a) the percentage share of urban in the total population, b.) the population in urban agglomerations of more than 1 million (as a percent of the total population), and c.) the population in the largest city (as a percent of the urban population). The second subsection will then examine the quality of life within each country's urban population by reviewing the evolution of four indicators: the percentage of the urban population a.) living in slums, b.) having access to electricity, c.) having access to water and d.) having access to sanitation.

IV.1. Urbanization in Brazil and Bolivia

While Brazil's urban population as well as its overall population is in absolute terms much larger than that of Bolivia, both nations have seen a considerable increase in the percentage of people living in urban areas, as shown in Figure 4. In 1990, Bolivia's urban population made up 55.6 percent of the country's entire population, which increased to 70.8 percent in 2022. In other words, Bolivia experienced rapid urbanization during the last three decades, with the share of the urban population increasing by 15.2 percentage points. While Brazil's level of urbanization has always been much higher than in Bolivia, Brazil experienced a slightly slower rate of urbanization than Bolivia. The share of Brazil's urban population increased by 13.6 percentage points, from 73.9 percent in 1990 to 87.6 percent in 2022.

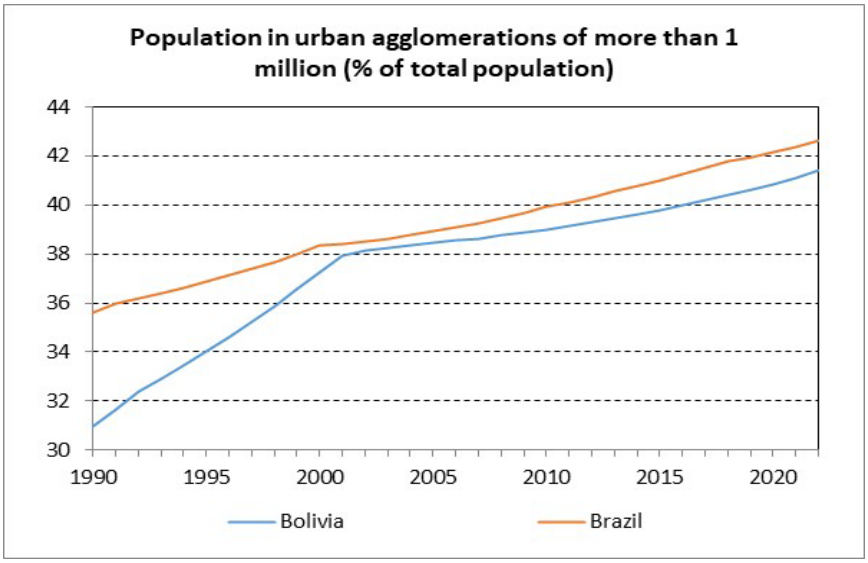
Figure 5 shows the evolution of the population in urban agglomerations of more than 1 million as a percentage of the total population from 1990 to 2022. It is important to note that Brazil has a much higher population with much larger cities than Bolivia,[5] but Figure 5 still shows the rapid increase in the share of the population in urban agglomerations in Bolivia from 1990 to 2001, nearly catching up with Brazil.

Figure 4: Share of Urban Population (percent), 1990–2022



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 5: Share of Population in Urban Agglomerations of More than 1 million (% of total population), 1990–2022

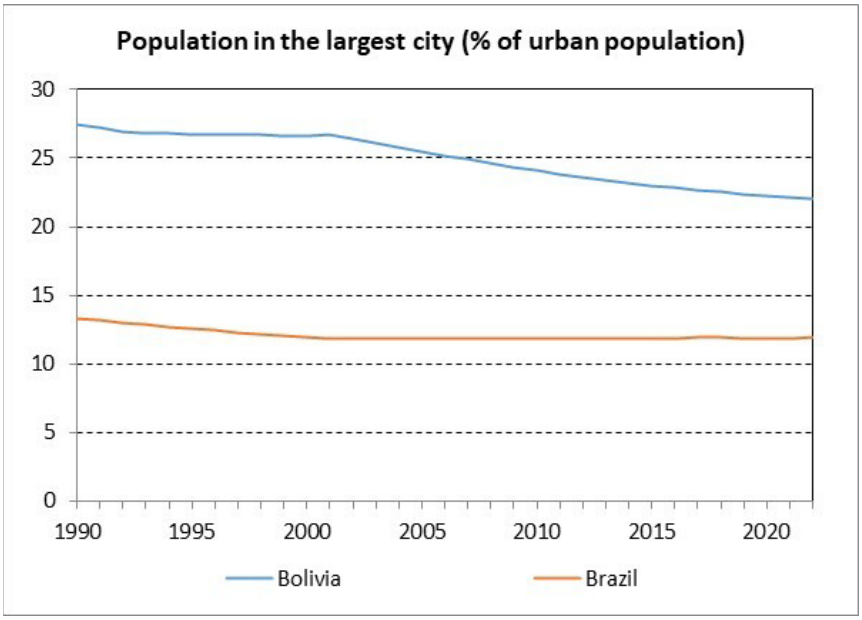


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

[5] For example, based on World Bank (2024), while 1.9 million people lived in Bolivia's largest city (Santa Cruz de la Sierra) in 2022, some 22.4 million people lived in São Paulo (Brazil's largest city) in the same year.

Figure 6 shows the evolution of the share of the population in the largest city as a percentage of the urban population (not as a percentage of the total population). The overall decline in both countries indicates that the largest city in each country has become slightly less important over time. In other words, other urban agglomerations increase their relevance. Still, as of 2022, more than 20 percent of Bolivia's urban population lived in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, while slightly more than 10 percent of Brazil's urban population lived in São Paulo.

Figure 6: Share of Population in the Largest City (percent of urban population), 1990–2022



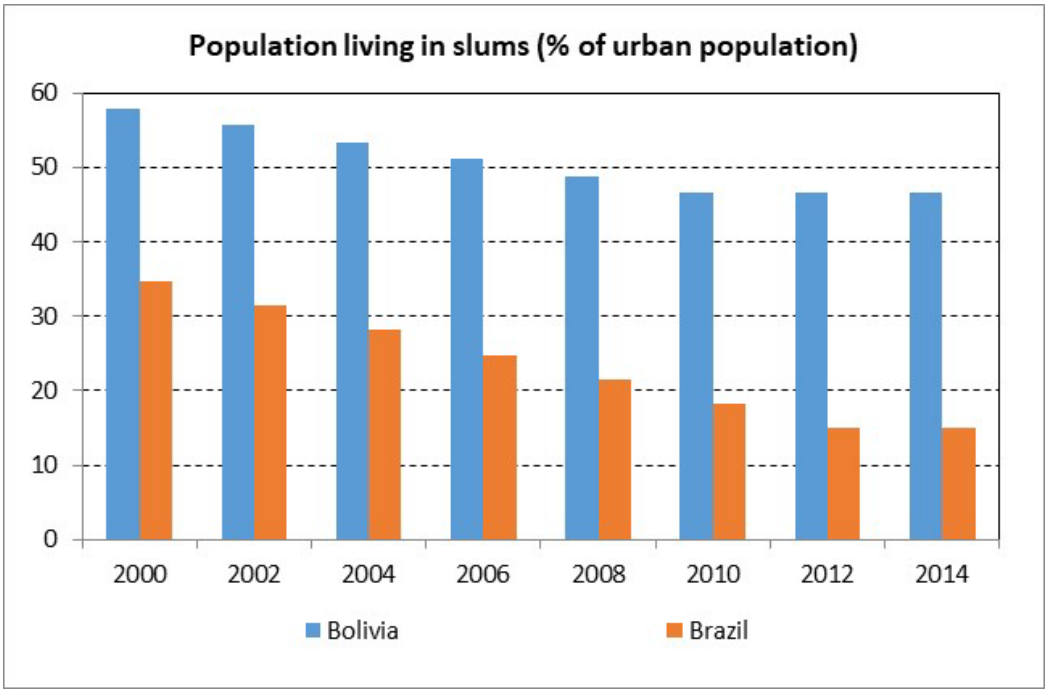
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

IV.2. The Quality of Life within Brazil's and Bolivia's Cities

Figure 7 represents the percentages of the urban population in both countries that reside in slums. In 2000, 57.9 percent of Bolivia's urban population lived in slums, and in 2014 it was reported that 46.6 percent of Bolivia's urban population lived in slums. In this respect, the quality of life in Bolivian cities seems to be rather poor, especially if compared to Brazil, where 34.7 percent of the urban population lived in slums in 2000, decreasing to 14.9 percent by 2014. In addition to Brazil having consistently lower percentages of its urban population living in slums than Bolivia, Brazil has also made more progress than Bolivia in reducing the percentage of the urban population living in slums: Bolivia's decreased by 11.3 percentage points from 2000 to 2014, while Brazil's decreased by 19.8 percentage points in the same period.

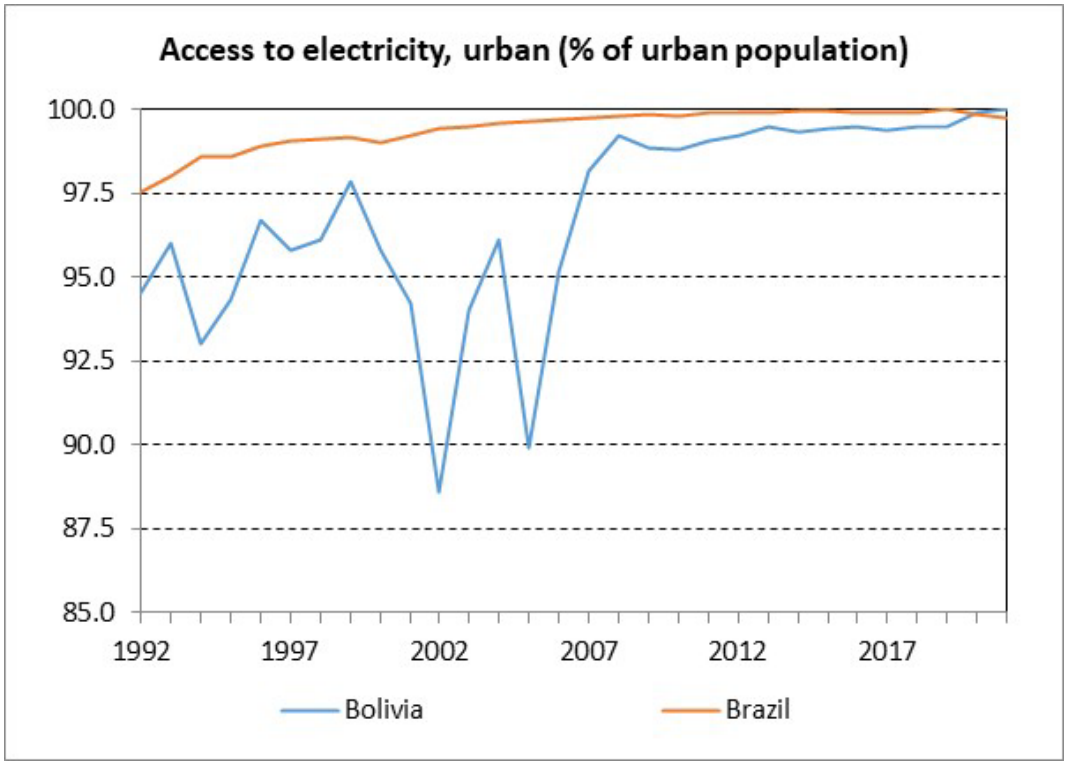
Figure 8 represents the access that the urban population of each country has to electricity. In 1992, 94.5 percent of Bolivia's urban population had access to electricity, and in 2021, it was reported that 100 percent of Bolivia's urban population had access to electricity. In Brazil, 97.5 percent of the urban population had access to electricity in 1992, which increased to 99.7 percent of the urban population in 2021. Hence, looking at this indicator specifically, the quality of life in both the Bolivian and Brazilian cities seems to be quite good.

Figure 7: Percentage of Urban Population living in Slums, 200–2014



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

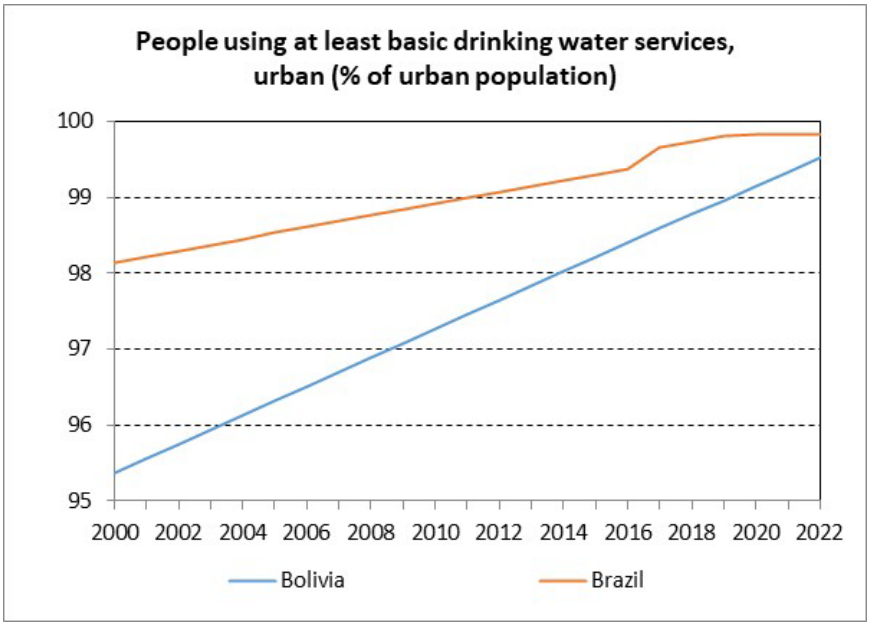
Figure 8: Percentage of Urban Population with Access to Electricity, 1992–2021



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 9 represents the percentage of the urban population in both countries that uses at least basic drinking water services. In 2000, over 95 percent of Bolivia's urban population used at least basic drinking water services, which increased to 99.5 percent in 2022. In Brazil, where the percentage of the urban population using at least basic drinking water services was always higher than in Bolivia (within our examination period of 2000 to 2022), the numbers increased from 98.1 percent in 2000 to 99.8 percent by 2022. Overall, it is clear that both countries currently do not have an issue when it comes to their urban populations having access to at least basic drinking water services. The picture is slightly less good if looking at the percentage of the urban population using safely managed drinking water services. While such data is not available for Bolivia, in Brazil, the percentage of the urban population using safely managed drinking water services is some 11 to 15 percentage points below that of having access to at least basic drinking water services over the same time period.[6]

Figure 9: Percentage of Urban Population Using at Least Basic Drinking Water Services, 2000–2022



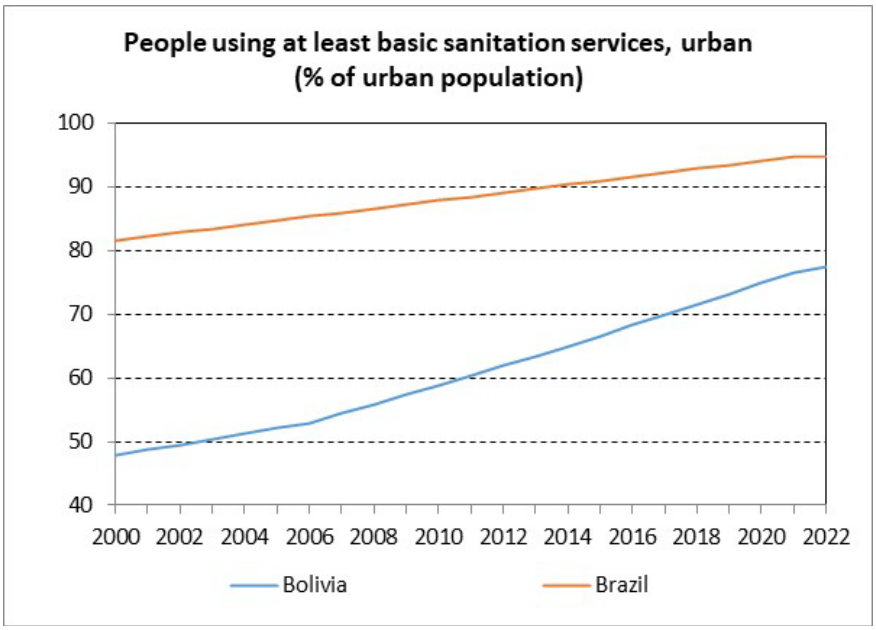
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Adequate sanitation services are also critical to the health integrity of any city. As Figure 10 shows, in 2000, 47.8 percent of Bolivia's urban population used at least basic sanitation services, which increased to 77.4 percent in 2022. Brazil's numbers are even better than Bolivia's. In Brazil, 81.6 percent of the urban population used at least basic sanitation services, which increased to 94.7 percent in 2022. Instead of looking at the percentage of the urban population using at least basic sanitation services, Figure 11 represents the percentage of the urban population that regularly practices open defecation as opposed to using sanitary facilities. In 2000, 14.8 percent of Bolivia's urban population practiced open defecation. By 2010, this figure had been more than halved, and by 2021, zero percent of Bolivia's urban population practiced open defecation. In Brazil, the situation has been even better than in Bolivia, where just under 3 percent of Brazil's urban

[6] World Bank (2024).

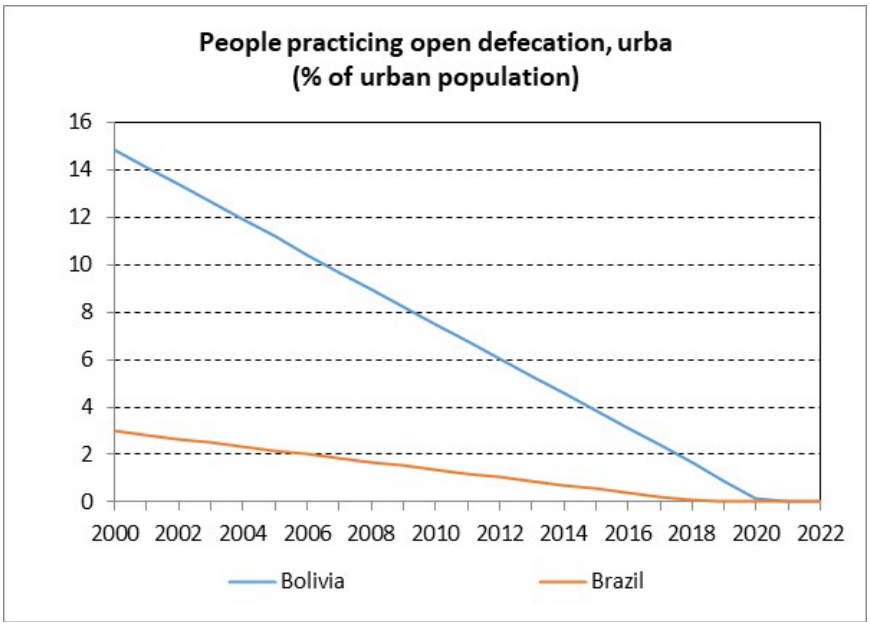
population practiced open defecation in 2000, which dropped to 1.0 percent in 2012, and reached zero percent by 2019.

Figure 10: Percentage of Urban Population Using at Least Basic Sanitation, 2000–2022



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 11: Percentage of Urban Population Practicing Open Defecation, 2000–2022



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

V. Ethical Analysis

This section is structured into two subsections. The first subsection discusses the plans Brazil and Bolivia have for mitigating urban inequality. The second subsection analyzes how these programs are related to different ethical approaches or perspectives.

V.1. Mitigating Urban Inequality in Brazil and Bolivia

The most significant anti-inequality program in Brazil is the *Programa Bolsa Familia*. Since its conception through the consolidation of several other public works programs, the program's chief aim is to severely decrease income inequality within Brazilian slums by directly intervening at the family level. The program is meant to improve the efficiency and coherence of the social safety net and to scale up assistance to provide universal coverage of Brazil's poor. To put it simply, the program provides a minimum income level for extremely poor families that are unable to support themselves. To ensure that generational poverty does not persist, the initiative mandates that families bring their children to doctors to get their health checked and for those children to attend school. This way, kids are able to acquire the knowledge necessary to succeed in society once they come of age. At the same time, the program empowers the adult population of the era by providing them with access to complimentary employment training and social assistance programs.[7]

The impact of this program has been immensely positive; as of 2024, the program reached 13 million families, over 50 million people, and is able to assist a major portion of the nation's low-income population.[8] This program has allowed certain people to receive support that would otherwise be left marginalized; low-income parents are now receiving the capital necessary to invest in their children's health and education. Brazil's poor urban population is now able to pull itself out of poverty.

A major issue plaguing Bolivian cities is the very mountainous landscape, making travel via road extremely difficult. Because of this, traffic ends up becoming extremely congested, making travel by car or bus exceptionally time-consuming. This issue is exacerbated when it comes to poorer populations, as they tend to live far away from major business hubs where people work. An addition to urban life meant to mitigate this issue and reduce urban inequality is the introduction of an aerial cable car urban transit system. This system serves the La Paz–El Alto metropolitan area in Bolivia and is the first public transport system in La Paz designed for equitable access and connection between two socioeconomic urban areas.[9]

In La Paz, the poor communities are separated from the main parts of the city where people work. This means that getting to and from someone's job can be expensive, take a long time, and sometimes even be dangerous. But, because of the new cable car, called *Mi Teleférico*, a one-hour trip into the city now only takes about 10 minutes. Also, the price for a single cable car ticket is 3 bolivianos (or $0.43) as compared to 5 bolivianos for a one-way bus ticket. A cheaper ticket and not having to wait in traffic make it much easier for poorer residents of La Paz to get around. With broader access to the city, these citizens are able to find better jobs and then bring that wealth back home with them.[10]

[7] This paragraph is based on Centre for Public Impact (2019).
[8] World Bank (2012).
[9] This paragraph is based on Global Infrastructure (GI) Hub (2024).
[10] This paragraph is based on La Paz Life (2019).

The impact of *Mi Teleférico* has been immensely positive; the addition of cable cars has made travel within the city much faster, especially for the disabled and those who would otherwise not be able to move around as easily. Also, as of 2018, 225 of the 633 employees working on the cars are female. This means the cable cars are creating a greater number of job opportunities by providing transportation into the city and the necessity for people to work on the system itself. Not only has this project proved to be economically viable, but it has also been able to support itself without government subsidization while providing discounts to vulnerable populations. These populations include those with disabilities, the elderly, and students. *Mi Teleférico* has had an incredibly positive and equalizing impact on marginalized groups in Bolivia's capital.[11]

V.2. Ethical Approaches of Programs and Projects in Brazil and Bolivia

This subsection examines the various ethical approaches implicit in Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* program and Bolivia's public transportation cable car project.

V.2.a. Ethical Approaches of Brazil's Bolsa Familia Program

Brazil's *Programa Bolsa Familia* is an anti-poverty and anti-inequality program that falls in line with the Justice, Rights, Utilitarian, and Common Good Approaches as described by the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (2021). The *Bolsa Familia* program reflects the justice approach as it ensures that resources within urban settings are more fairly distributed. The primary way that the Bolsa Familia program supports families in need is by providing direct income assistance to families. This ensures that every person within a given urban setting is receiving the income necessary to sustain themselves and then contribute to society. This is in line with the egalitarian perspective; the *Bolsa Familia* Program wants to see that every family is equal in how they are able to sustain themselves. Such an approach and perspective are very good for battling inequality. This application of direct income assistance is also very similar to the rights approach.

While also being along the same lines as the justice approach, the *Bolsa Familia* program also follows the human rights approach. The program helps establish the idea that all human beings are entitled to certain human rights by providing direct income assistance. This direct income assistance ensures that all people within Brazil's urban settings have the minimum income necessary to sustain themselves and their families. This is also in line with the sufficiency approach as identified by Barrientos et al. (2016) as the *Bolsa Familia* program ensures that all families have sufficient resources to survive. The requirements that the program has for this income assistance are also in line with the utilitarian approach.

Although the *Bolsa Familia* program does seek to make Brazilian cities fairer and to help meet people's basic human rights, it also serves a large utilitarian purpose. In order to receive the assistance promised through the program, a family first must ensure that their children are attending school and are receiving regular checkups from medical professionals. This ensures that their children, the future of society, will be healthy and have the knowledge necessary to make their community a better place. This approach to dealing with the nation's inequality issues come from the utilitarian perspective; the *Bolsa Familia* program ensures that the population of Brazil will be healthy and educated for generations to come. Such a program that serves to secure the greatest net benefit for society also works for the common good of that society.

[11] This paragraph is based on La Paz Life (2019).

The *Bolsa Familia* program is also found to be along the same lines as the common good approach. In order to receive the benefits of this program, citizens must ensure that their children are receiving proper healthcare and education so that poverty does not follow their generation into adulthood. The less impoverished people there are within society, the better off that society will be. For this reason, the *Bolsa Familia* program promotes the common good of Brazil and is, therefore, in line with the common good approach.

V.2.b. Ethical Approaches of Bolivia's Mi Teleférico Cable Car Project

In Bolivia, the introduction of the *Mi Teleférico* project is an example of a policy intervention that follows the justice approach, utilitarian approach, and common good approach as described by the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (2021) as well as the anti-poverty approach for women as described by Mitchel (1994).

The *Mi Teleférico* implementation can be considered to follow the justice approach of ethical decision making as it ensures that all people within La Paz have relatively easy access to the rest of the city. *Mi Teleférico* provides quick and cheap public transportation that would otherwise not be accessible to a poor Bolivian citizen. This ensures that every person in La Paz is able to access any job found within the city; no place in the city is now physically out of reach to anyone within its limits. The way this supports the poor is in line with the egalitarian perspective; *Mi Teleférico* allows for there to be no individual prohibited by travel restrictions. At least in this respect, all citizens in La Paz are now equal. Such an approach and perspective ensure that the playing field is leveled across all of La Paz, Bolivia's capital.

The cable car system also serves a large utilitarian purpose. The cars are positioned in such a way that allows all citizens of La Paz to move over the city instead of through its dangerous traffic. In turn, this system of public transportation produces a massive benefit to all of La Paz by improving the speed and safety of travel. This approach to solving inequality through public transportation is in line with the utilitarian perspective; *Mi Teleférico* ensures that the population of La Paz can get where they need to go fast and safely. Such a program that serves to secure the greatest net benefit for a city also works to promote its common good.

The *Mi Teleférico* cable car system and its attempt to mitigate inequality in La Paz is also found to be along the same lines as the common good approach. A public transportation system is created for the purpose of moving people around a city with greater ease. Anything that makes the lives of ordinary citizens easier inherently promotes the common good. For this reason, the *Mi Teleférico* cable cars, through the promotion of easier access to transportation, promote the common good of La Paz.

In a similar way to the other approaches above, *Mi Teleférico* also follows the anti-poverty approach for how it assists women in La Paz. The anti-poverty approach for women in development considers women to be the poorest amongst the developing population due to discrimination in land and resource ownership as well as the labor market (Mitchell 1994). In other words, many societies have refused women ownership of that which could make them money or jobs on the basis that they are women. However, over one third of *Mi Teleférico's* employees are women, meaning that the public transportation system serves as an opportunity for impoverished women to make a living.[12] At the same time, the cable cars also provide childcare for the children

[12] Global Infrastructure (GI) Hub (2024).

of their employees.[13] This ensures that mothers can still come to work and make a living, even if childcare is an issue. For this reason, *Mi Teleférico* seeks to circumvent poverty amongst women by giving them jobs, therefore, it follows the same guidelines as Mitchell's (1994) anti-poverty approach for women.

VI. Conclusion

The share of the urban populations of Brazil and Bolivia is still increasing, but at a progressively decreasing rate. It is clear that past urbanization has impacted the inequality within Bolivian and Brazilian cities. The conditions of living in these societies are not equal. Even though significant progress has been made in providing access to electricity and basic water services, large portions of both countries' cities still live in slums.

Public service projects from both governments have made successful efforts toward combating inequality found within their cities. Brazil has been more successful in this respect. Through direct intervention programs such as *Programa Bolsa Familia*, the Brazilian government has been able to effect much greater change for its poorer populations than in Bolivia. For this reason, Bolivia should also consider direct income intervention programs as well as continuing to work on its infrastructure, as it started with the implementation of its *Mi Teleférico* cable car project.

Both Bolivia and Brazil are urbanizing nations and suffering from issues of increased inequality among their populations because of it. Both countries have made strides toward solving this issue of inequality and, although both have been successful in combating this issue to a certain degree, both nations still have a long way to go.

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