

Country profile

World Vision

Brazil

GEOGRAPHY

Brazil, the largest nation in South America, shares a border with nearly every other country on the continent. It includes the vast lowland drained by the Amazon River system, the grazing lands of the Plata River basin, the Guyana highlands in the north, and the Brazilian highlands, which fall steeply to a coastal plain in the south.

The climate varies from hot and humid in the Amazon rainforest, to temperate in the south. The northeast suffers periodic droughts while torrential rains cause severe damage in the south, especially in poorer areas of the cities.

PEOPLE

Brazil's population is around 195 million. Indigenous people are vastly outnumbered by Brazilians descended from European colonists or from African slaves. The official language is Portuguese. Christianity is the major religion, with over 70 percent of Brazilians having links to the Catholic Church. Brasilia, located inland, is the seat of government. Sao Paulo (around 20 million people) is considered the commercial capital, while other large cities include Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. The majority of Brazilians live in urban areas.

HISTORY

The earliest inhabitants of this region comprised many distinct groups living as hunters and gatherers, farmers and craftspeople. The Portuguese landed on the coast in 1500AD but did not find the gold and spices they were seeking. The traders did not at first enslave the indigenous people, but later settlers tried to force them to work on their sugar estates.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

When they met indigenous resistance, the colonists imported slaves from Africa.

After three centuries of Portuguese rule, Brazil became an independent nation in 1822. Brazil remained a monarchy until 1889, when army officers took power and then proclaimed a republic. Brazilians have had regular elections since 1989. In October 2010, Dilma Rousseff was elected Brazil's first female President, succeeding Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva who had served two four-year terms.

ECONOMY

Although Brazil is a leading producer of coffee, soya beans, sugar, iron ore, bauxite and numerous industrial goods, around 12 percent of Brazilians earn less than US\$2 a day.

Agriculture illustrates Brazil's uneven development. Land ownership remains very unequal, with most of the fertile land owned by a small percentage of landowners. With a landless labour force in the millions, estate managers employ workers who cannot reject low wages and poor conditions. Farmers with small plots often lack access to transport, storage and credit facilities. As more land is used for export crops and livestock-raising, the production of basic foods (rice, potatoes, beans) is not keeping pace with population growth. As a result, Brazil has become heavily dependent on imports, especially of wheat.

The combination of these pressures and growing industrialisation has resulted in Brazilians flocking from the countryside to the cities. However, the rapid industrial growth which is centred in the southeast (especially in Sao Paulo) has not benefited everyone. A minority of workers have steady jobs with adequate wages.



World Vision assists families to improve food production.

Brazil has vast mineral reserves of bauxite, gold, uranium, iron ore and platinum. Several mining operations have been criticised for environmental damage, indifference to indigenous traditional lands and poor working conditions.

The precious Amazon rainforest is under threat from land-clearing, road-building and bushfires. To reduce oil imports, many Brazilian cars run on ethanol, produced from sugar cane. Hydro-electricity and geothermal power sources are being developed.

Brazil's economy outweighs that of all other South American countries and is expanding its presence in world markets. Economic reforms have meant that Brazil is enjoying robust growth, yielding increases in employment and real wages. Nevertheless, the government still faces many challenges to restrict inflation and debt, create jobs and address the needs of millions of Brazilians living in poverty.

LIVING CONDITIONS

The gap between the wealthiest Brazilians and their poorest counterparts is vast. Black and indigenous Brazilians are especially disadvantaged. Female-headed households are the poorest, because women are paid much less than men.

Wealthy landlords own vast estates, but their workers rent sub-standard huts and risk being evicted. In cities like Rio, modern apartment blocks contrast sharply with the flimsy shacks of the favelas (slums) built on steep hillsides or wasteland.

Rich Brazilians enjoy a wide range of goods and services, whilst the poor often suffer from an inadequate diet. One of the staple foods, manioc (tapioca), is a root crop which is high in calories but low in protein. Rice and beans are also important. Meat is mostly eaten by the wealthy.

Health spending has been directed to urban hospitals and doctors, rather than to preventive and community health services. Disease is common in poor neighbourhoods. Only



Improving literacy and access to educational opportunities is a focus of our work in disadvantaged Brazilian communities.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	BRAZIL	AUSTRALIA
Population	195.4 million	21.5 million
Urban population	86.5%	89.1%
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$10,607	\$38,692
Population with an improved water source	97%	100%
Adult literacy rate	90%	99%
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	5.2%	0%
Under-5 mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	22	6
Life expectancy at birth	72.9 years	81.9 years

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

a quarter of people in rural areas have adequate sanitation. Children are especially vulnerable to measles, respiratory infections and other illnesses linked to contaminated water and poor hygiene.

EDUCATION

Education is free and compulsory for all children aged from seven to 14 years, but many children from poor families enter the workforce before completing primary school. The transfer of education funds to local authorities is part of a national campaign to make education more accessible to all.

Officially, 90 percent of adults can read and write, yet many have only basic skills and only 25 percent of young people are enrolled in secondary schools. Millions of children live and work on city streets, exposed to violence, drugs and prostitution, despite children's rights being recognised in Brazil's Constitution.

Brazilians are noted for their love of football, music, dance and joyful celebrations of feast days.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN BRAZIL

- assists sponsored children, their families and communities to meet basic needs in areas such as healthcare, education and housing;
- works with families to improve their diet by growing vegetables and raising livestock;
- assists families to increase their income through the establishment of small businesses such as broom-making, bakeries and food carts;
- supports relief projects that provide food and other supplies for families affected by severe drought or floods.