

# CHILDREN AROUND THE WORLD



## VIVI'S LIFE UNDER SOCIALISM



# Welcome to Venezuela

Venezuela is a country in northern South America—a place blessed with both natural beauty and **natural resources**. Its landscape features stunning snow-capped mountains, waterfalls, sparkling beaches, lakes, valleys, jungles, and plains. In a letter written to the king and queen of Spain in 1498, Christopher Columbus called the land that later explorers would name Venezuela “Heaven on Earth.”

For three centuries, Venezuela was a thriving Spanish colony. In 1811, Venezuela became an independent nation. In those days, most people lived off the land as farmers, fisherman, or ranchers. It was an agricultural country that received very little attention from the rest of the world. Things continued that way until April 15, 1914, when Venezuela drilled its first oil well. That’s when everything changed.



## Natural Resource:

Something that is found in nature and can be used by people for economic gain.

Examples: water, plants, gold, etc.

# Meet Vivi

This is Viviana, but no one calls her that. To her family and friends, she's Vivi, and she lives in Caracas with her mother and grandmother. Caracas is the capital and largest city in Venezuela. Her mom, Maria, works in a hotel restaurant, and her grandma, who she calls Lita (short for Abuelita) has health problems and needs to stay home most of the time. Vivi's dad, Cesar, lives in Miami, Florida in the United States.

Like many who live in Caribbean countries, Vivi is never far from music. When she's with her friends, Vivi likes to listen to popular artists like Shawn Mendes and Bad Bunny. However, it's with Lita when Vivi gets to listen to her favorite music. On nights when there is little to do, her grandmother brings out her old vinyl records and teaches Vivi dance steps while they listen to the **Salsa** and **Cumbia** hits from Lita's youth.

As much as Vivi loves music and dance, her favorite hobby is making jewelry. Using threads, wire, beads, and gems, Vivi has made jewelry for as long as she can remember. Her specialty is earrings, but she also makes necklaces and bracelets. Just a few years ago, she often sold jewelry to girls and ladies in her neighborhood, but no one has money for jewelry anymore.

Vivi, her mom, and grandmother were each born in Caracas, but their childhoods couldn't have been more different. Since the discovery of oil, Venezuela, and especially its capital city, has gone through many changes. Lita can remember the days of her youth in the 1960s and 70s when Venezuela was a peaceful place full of hope and opportunity. By the time Maria was growing up in the 1980s and 90s, it was an uneasy place, divided over a dramatic gap between rich and poor. Sadly, for Vivi, Caracas is now a place of desperation. Days without electricity and running water sometimes turn into weeks. Having enough to eat is a challenge, and fear of violence is always present.



## **Salsa:**

A type of Latin American dance music that became famous during the 1960s and 70s, and remains popular around the Caribbean today.

## **Cumbia:**

A type of Latin American dance music that originated in Colombia and became popular in countries like Peru, Mexico, and Venezuela.



# A Blessing and Curse

Oil is one of the most desired resources on Earth. It not only powers machines, but is used in the making of thousands of materials from clothing to plastic. According to geological surveys, there is more oil underneath Venezuela than any country in the world. In fact, Venezuela has about 20% of Earth's known oil reserves. However, to use oil for energy, or sell it for profit, requires complex processes of drilling, pumping out, and cleaning up.

When oil was first discovered in Venezuela, no local people or businesses knew how to process it, so outside help was needed. The Venezuelan government allowed privately owned international oil companies like Shell and Chevron to control the land where oil was found. These companies brought in highly trained scientists, engineers, and businessmen and began processing and selling the oil underneath Venezuela. In return for control of the oil, the companies agreed to split the profits 50/50 with the Venezuelan government.





*Lita's parents arrive in Venezuela*

shop and named it La Esquina Café (The Coffee Corner). Lita's mom and dad worked very hard and built a successful business. The shop was a favorite for many oil engineers and scientists and a few years after it opened, Lita was born.

During Lita's childhood, the global price for oil was high, which meant a lot of profits for oil companies. The government was getting half of those profits, so there was a lot of money available to invest in the country and make it a better place. This investment happened in Caracas, which was transformed into a beautiful modern city with magnificent buildings and parks, but not in the rest of the country. Instead of using oil money to improve the countryside and small towns in the nation's interior, many government leaders were **corrupt** and stole hundreds of millions of dollars for themselves and their friends.



*Lita learning the family business*

# Lita's Venezuela

Lita is the daughter of European immigrants who came to Venezuela near the middle of the 20th century. Their homeland had been devastated by war and they wanted to raise a family in peace. Caracas attracted waves of European immigrants and in the first forty years after oil was discovered, its population more than tripled. Lita's mom and dad used their life savings to sail across the Atlantic Ocean and rent space in a neighborhood where oil company employees lived. They opened a coffee



*Lita's parents start La Esquina Café*

Wealthy neighborhoods became common in Caracas, and Lita's family was part of a growing middle class. Her teenage years were carefree. Lita often took long walks through the clean and safe city streets, and she loved that her city was surrounded by beautiful tropical hillsides. Unfortunately, by the time Lita was running La Esquina Café, and had a daughter of her own, life in Caracas had changed, and most of the green hillsides were gone.

## Corruption:

Dishonest behavior by those in power, typically involving bribery and theft.



# Trouble Rises

It is very risky for a country to be overly reliant on one industry, like oil. Things can be great when prices are high, but can be very bad when prices drop. During Lita's childhood, the Venezuelan government could have used oil profits to develop other ways that the country could make money, but they did not. This led to a lack of opportunity for Venezuelans from small towns and the countryside, and many moved to Caracas looking for work. Over the last half of the 20th century, the population of the city tripled again, but there was no room for the newcomers. Soon, **shantytowns** surrounded the city, covering up the beautiful tropical hillsides. In the 1970s, the price of oil plummeted, which cut off the country's main source of income, leading to lots of problems for Venezuela.

The Venezuelan government was desperate to raise money, so in 1976 they decided to try **socialism** and **nationalize** their oil industry. This meant that the international private oil companies, with all their knowledge and expertise, were kicked out of the country, and the government would now receive 100% of the oil profits. Unfortunately, the government had no idea how to run the oil business, and the country became poorer.

Having the government control oil made life worse in Venezuela, and eventually the poor people of Caracas had enough.

## Nationalize:

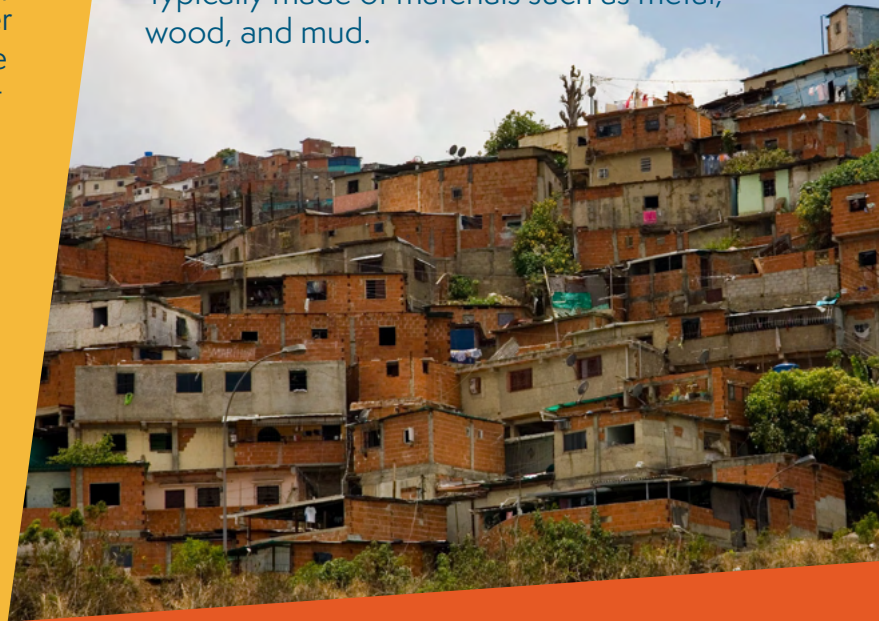
When things that are privately owned are taken over by the national government.

## Socialism:

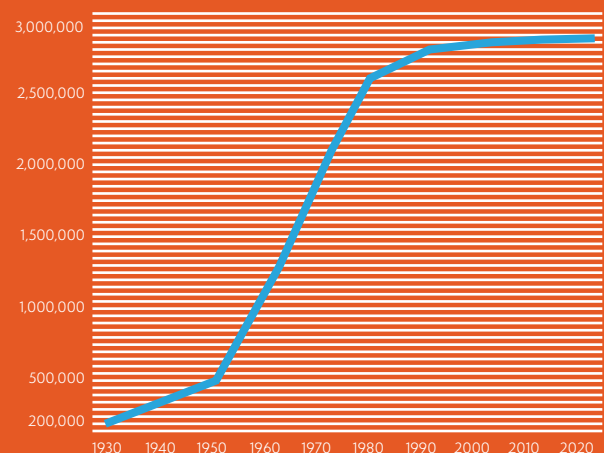
A system where you are not allowed to own anything individually and the government controls what everyone can buy and own.

## Shantytown:

A settlement of improvised buildings typically made of materials such as metal, wood, and mud.



## Population of Caracas



# Maria's Venezuela

In 1989, when Maria was nine, poor people from shantytowns came down from the hills to riot and loot wealthy parts of Caracas. Lita and Maria were not harmed, but rioters did break the windows of La Esquina Café. The government sent in the military, and after nine days of violence and chaos, things finally settled down. The riots became known as El Caracazo. According to the government, 276 people died during the unrest, but many claimed the number of deaths was over 2,000.



*Maria meets Cesar*

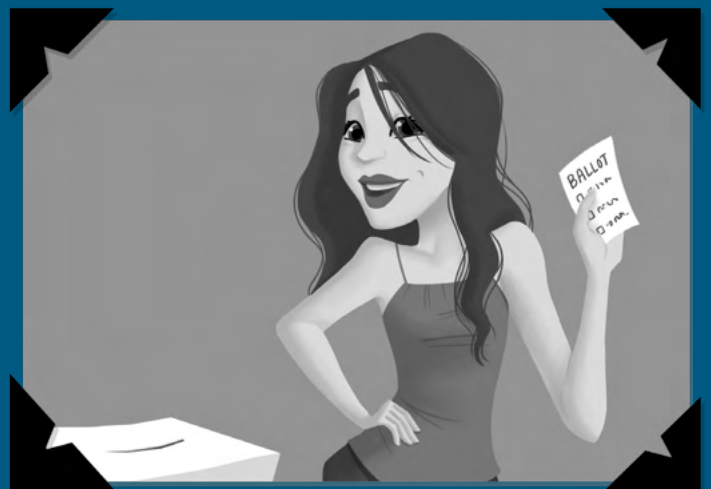
After El Caracazo, the Venezuelan government knew it had to make changes, so it allowed private oil companies back into the country. Oil profits immediately increased, which helped the economy and created more jobs, but the government remained corrupt, robbing the country of millions of dollars, and most Venezuelans remained poor.

Maria made the best of her teenage years, and made wonderful memories with family and friends, but she never forgot El Caracazo. She hated knowing that so many of the people living in the shantytowns suffered. Maria loved the family coffee shop, but wanted to do something where she could help people more directly. She decided to become a teacher and work in a poor neighborhood.

A few weeks after turning 18, Maria was excited to vote for the first time. A man was running for president who was promising to end poverty and give lots of money to schools in poor neighborhoods. It wasn't new to hear politicians make promises to fight poverty, but this man was different—he was very different.



*El Caracazo*



*Maria votes for the first time*





# A New Voice

In 1998, Venezuela elected Hugo Chavez to be their new president. Presidents before him had all talked about making Venezuela a better place for poor people, but they had all come from wealthy upbringings. Chavez had grown up poor, in a small town far away from Caracas and its oil money, so his promises to make Venezuela a fairer and more equal place sounded different. He called his plan “21st Century Socialism,” and promised that as president, he would end three things: corruption, poverty, and Venezuela’s dependence on oil.

Most of the poor people in Venezuela voted for Chavez, but many who were in the middle class did too—including Maria. Chavez promoted equality, and Maria believed that more equality in Venezuela would make it a better country. Lita, on the other hand, was suspicious. She had seen socialism fail in her country before. Lita was angry Maria hadn’t followed her advice to vote for a non-socialist candidate.



# A Socialist Disaster

During his first two years as president, the price of oil more than doubled, providing Chavez with money to fund socialist programs he called his “Bolivarian Missions.” To the delight of many, he used the government’s oil profits to build free housing for people who were living in shantytowns. He also built hospitals and free health clinics, and his Missions provided free lunches and school supplies for the nation’s students. Poor people were given free food and free gasoline, and Chavez was very popular. Then, in November 2001, the price of oil crashed.

Low oil prices meant less money for Chavez to use on his socialist programs, but he refused to lower his spending. He believed his Missions brought “social justice” to Venezuela, and he didn’t care if paying for them had negative consequences. Chavez was desperate for money, so once again the private international oil companies were forced out so that all profits would go to the government. This strategy hadn’t worked in the past, and it didn’t work for Chavez. Just like before, putting the government in control of Venezuela’s oil led to corruption and disastrous mistakes. Anyone who questioned Chavez’s decisions were fired, and the result was thousands of oil managers, scientists, and engineers began to leave the country.

During the summer of 2008—the same year Vivi was born—the price of oil rebounded and reached a record high, but the country with the most oil in the world couldn’t benefit from it. Chavez had filled Venezuela’s oil industry not with qualified employees, but with his friends and loyalists who didn’t know what they were doing. The nation’s oil industry collapsed because of their failures. The government also ran out of money to pay for his socialist Mission programs. In a desperate move to grab any money that he could, Chavez imposed heavy taxes on businesses in all other industries, including Lita’s coffee shop—La Esquina Café.

Chavez remained president until he died from cancer in 2013. He left Venezuela in much worse shape than it was in when he arrived. It is true that his socialist government did improve the lives of many poor Venezuelans—at least temporarily—but he also robbed them of the chance to rise out of poverty. Those helped are still poor and now almost everyone else is, too.





# Vivi's Venezuela

Vivi was six when Lita had to permanently close La Esquina Café. Her health was getting bad, and she could no longer pay the last employee she had left—her son-in-law and Vivi's dad, Cesar. The oil engineers and scientists had left the neighborhood (and country) years ago. Nobody had money for fancy coffee anymore. Vivi remembers her grandmother's tears that day. She cried, too. Vivi is now a teenager, and in the years since her family's shop closed, Venezuela's situation has become even more desperate.

When Hugo Chavez died, a friend of his named Nicolas Maduro took over as president, and he remains in power today. Instead of learning from the mistakes that Chavez made, Maduro has tightened government control, destroying the economy further.



*Closing La Esquina Café*

The United States' currency is called the dollar. Venezuela's currency is called the bolivar. Because of decisions that Chavez and Maduro have made, one single U.S. dollar is equal to MILLIONS of bolivars. So, something that costs very little in most places of the world, like a pack of gum or candy, requires millions of bolivars. Venezuela's currency is basically worthless. Vivi used to have shoe boxes full of bolivars in her closet, but Maria recently told her to throw them out with the trash. They were useless and took up space. Now in Caracas, people pay for most things with U.S. dollars—when they can get them.

Thanks to Chavez—and now Maduro's—socialist programs, Venezuelans can collect free food and supplies, but the amount that the government can give people is not enough to survive in Caracas. It got so bad in 2017 that the average adult in Venezuela lost 20 pounds! People are starving and desperate. Desperate people will commit crimes to stay alive—Caracas is now one of the most dangerous places on earth.







*Cesar goes to Miami*

Maria and Cesar knew that without U.S. dollars, they couldn't ensure Vivi or Lita's health and safety, so they started thinking creatively to find ways to survive. They downloaded a language app so they could learn English and made some major life changes. Maria quit her teaching job and began working at one of the last remaining nice hotels in Caracas. The hotel pays her in worthless bolivars, but when she interacts with wealthy customers, they give U.S. dollars as tips. Maria practices English as much as possible. She began making beds and now waits tables at the hotel restaurant.

Cesar was not able to find a job in Venezuela where he could make U.S. dollars, so he had to leave his family and move to America. For two years, he has been living in Miami with a cousin, and he works in a fancy coffee shop that looks a lot like La Esquina Café. When he first arrived, his English was very weak, so he couldn't interact much with customers. He could only work as a cleaner and dishwasher. Now, thanks to his language app and nightly practice over WhatsApp with Maria, Cesar's English is strong. He's even taking orders from customers and running the cash register.

Every dollar Cesar makes that he doesn't need for his own survival gets sent home to help Maria cover the cost of food and to pay for their two-bedroom apartment high in the Caracas sky. Between the money that both of Vivi's parents are making, she and her grandmother are safe.

Luckily, Vivi's favorite food is **arepas**, and they are cheap to make. Usually Lita makes them domino style (stuffed with cheese and black beans), but when the family has a little extra money, she'll make reina pepiada style filled with chicken, cream, and avocado. Sometimes Vivi gets tired of arepas, but she never says anything. She knows that many Venezuelans have to dig through trash cans in search of food scraps, and that she is very fortunate.

Vivi and Lita rarely go outside since it is too dangerous. The risk of kidnapping and robbery is too high. These crimes happen all over the city each day. In the worst parts of town, up in the hills, people are killed regularly. Venezuela has one of the highest murder rates in the world.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many kids around the world have missed time in school, but Vivi hasn't gone to school in almost two years, even before the pandemic started. Her school has no electricity, and because there are not enough working toilets, most students don't get to use a bathroom. Some kids still attend school, usually because of the free government lunches, but Maria and Cesar decided it would be best if Vivi is homeschooled with Lita as her teacher.



**Arepa:**

Grilled dough made from maize stuffed with meats, cheeses, and other yummy ingredients.



It's not easy being a teenager in Caracas right now, but Vivi is grateful for what she and her family do have. She feels fortunate to live in a safe apartment high above the violence on the streets, and she loves living with and learning from Lita. She knows her parents love her and are working hard for her and her future. She misses her dad every day, but understands why he is in America, and that her health and safety depend on it.

Vivi is also very smart and understands why the problems in her world exist. Thanks to Lita's teachings, she knows that Hugo Chavez and his socialist government were not the beginning of Venezuela's problems—they were consequences of almost a century of corruption and mismanagement. However, she also understands that Chavez, and now Maduro's, socialist government is the source of the fear and sadness she feels during her childhood. Thanks to socialism, Vivi has a computer tablet that she got for free from the government. She uses it to video call her dad through WhatsApp—when she has Internet and electricity, which isn't that often. But it's also thanks to socialism that her dad has had to leave the country just to provide for her and their family.

Cesar is one of 5.4 million Venezuelans who has left the country during the last decade. Just like Cesar, most did not want to leave, but were forced out of desperation. For centuries, Venezuela was a land of opportunity that attracted outsiders to come and make a good life. Now that opportunity is completely gone, as are the talents and abilities of millions of Venezuelans who have fled. Cesar would love to bring his family to America to be with him, but it isn't possible—he doesn't have enough money for them to join him and Lita's health is too poor to travel a long distance. It sickens him that he is not in Caracas to watch as his little girl grows into a young woman, but what can be done? When Cesar and Vivi have their video calls, they pray that life will get better. Venezuela needs prayers from us all.





# Fun Facts



Venezuela has won the most titles in the biggest international beauty pageants - Miss Universe, Miss World, Miss International and Miss Earth.



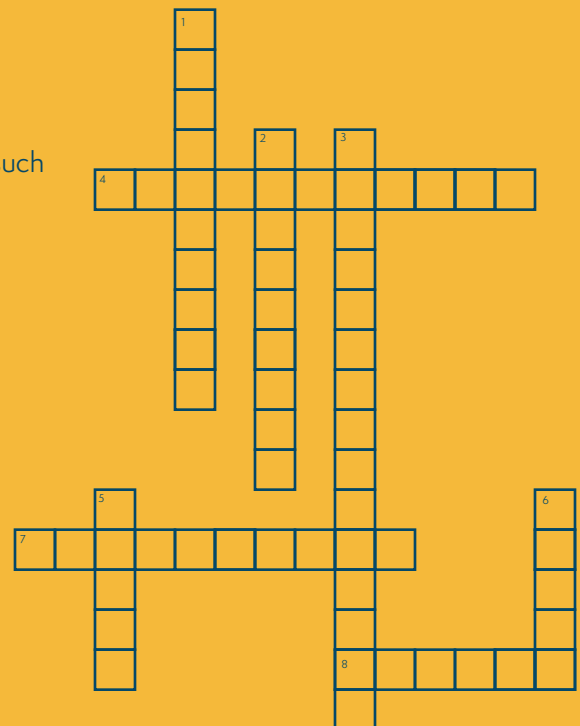
Miguel Cabreras, Major League Baseball first baseman for the Detroit Tigers, was born in Maracay, Venezuela.



Angel Falls is the tallest uninterrupted waterfall in the world.

## Crossword

1. A settlement of improvised buildings typically made of materials such as metal, wood, and mud.
2. A system where you are not allowed to own anything individually and the government controls what everyone can buy and own.
3. Something that is found in nature and can be used by people for economic gain. Examples: water, plants, gold, etc.
4. When things that are privately owned are taken over by the national government.
5. Grilled dough made from maize stuffed with meats, cheeses, and other yummy ingredients.
6. A type of Latin American dance music that became famous during the 1960s and 70s, and remains popular around the Caribbean today.
7. Dishonest behavior by those in power, typically involving bribery and theft.
8. A type of Latin American dance music that originated in Colombia and became popular in countries like Peru, Mexico, and Venezuela.



# Traditional Recipe for Arepas

**Cook Time:** 25-30 minutes

**Servings:** 6-8 arepas

## Ingredients

- 2 cups arepa flour (i.e. Masarepa or Harina PAN)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups warm water
- oil for grilling

## Instructions

1. Combine arepa flour and salt. Slowly add warm water. Knead to form a dough ball. Rest for 3 minutes

2. Divide the dough in 6-8 pieces and roll into a ball. Flatten dough to make a disk 1/2 inch thick.

3. Heat griddle or iron skillet on high heat with thin layer of oil. place the dough discs on the griddle and cook for 3-5 minutes on each side. Then, lower the heat and cook for 5-10 minutes on each side to cook all the way through.

Using a knife, cut the arepas in half long ways - keeping the two sides together on the end. Fill with fillings of choice.

## Filling ideas

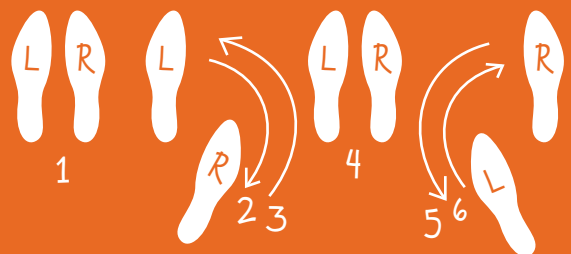
- Black beans
- Cheese
- Shredded beef
- Avocado
- Shredded chicken
- Tuna



## Learn to Dance!

### Cumbia:

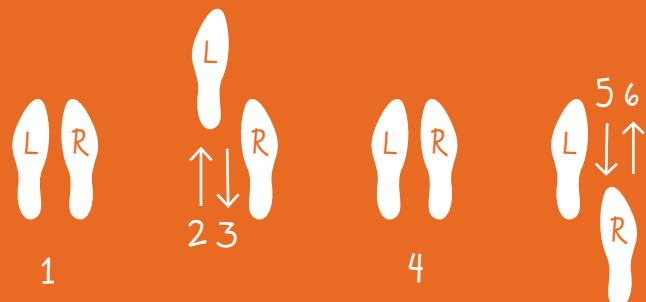
Follow the footprints below to learn the basic dance steps. Then, play some Cumbia music and start moving!



and repeat!

### Salsa:

Follow the footprints below to learn the basic dance steps. Then, play some Salsa music and start moving!



and repeat!



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Images: Getty Images, 123rf, Unsplash

# Answer Key:

