



ALLIANCE FOR
RESPONSIBLE MINING



COMMUNITY STORY

The women miners at Puerto Jobo



"We earn our living from mining, but we have become isolated."

We recently met with a group of female gold panners from the rural district of Puerto Jobo in the municipality of Zaragoza. They told us of life in an impoverished village, held afloat up until recently by mining.

The women used to do well with the gold they panned from the river, but over the years the land and its minerals have become so overworked by many different miners that the gold has settled to much deeper and difficult-to-reach depths. Before the only tools needed were a shovel and a batea (traditional South American carved wooden gold mining pan), but in order to dig deeper heavy machinery like backhoes are now required. Once backhoes arrived on the scene, the dynamics along the rivers changed: today artisanal gold miners can no longer safely work on the banks of the rivers. A backhoe operator must give a mining permission to access the deep holes they create to find gold. Once inside, it is a difficult and dangerous task, since the holes are very deep and there is always the risk that the sides will collapse and trap the people inside.



This type of operation is actually prohibited, because the backhoe operators are working without the legally required title, which are all held by a single large mining company that staked claim to most of the region. As part of the government's actions to combat illegal mining, the police visit mining territories to remove illegal miners. Given the lack of job opportunities in the area, however, some resort to continue mining illegally and run the risk of getting caught. When the police show up, the miners and gold panners flee.

"They treat us like criminals, as if we were stealing."



Even if they do find any gold, it's hard for the miners to sell it. Nobody wants to buy it or try to resell it, not even the shopkeepers, and so they can't even exchange gold for food. In Puerto Jobo, gold has lost its luster.

The decrease in mining in the rural district directly impacts household revenue, since many families directly depend on gold sales. When there is mining to be done, there is money; if there is no mining, all commerce grinds to a halt in the village. Some families grow rice and cassava, but during a heavy winter rainy season the river can overflow its banks and flood the crops, ruining their harvest. Some women set up small businesses, like making corn cakes and fritters to sell. When people can mine, consumption increases and the women's businesses do well. Under the current situation, times are tough and there are no other economic opportunities to sustain families, which can run large. One woman told us that in her family of ten, there are only two people making money to support the whole family.

"If mining ends, I'm done for. What are we going to live on? Where will we get money to provide for our family?"

Women gold panners have been selected to be beneficiaries of the Somos Tesoro project, and they are very grateful for the support they have received. The project has focused on establishing other means of earning a living, such as agriculture and fish farming, to substitute or complement gold panning, and in raising children that are not obligated to work in mines during their childhood and adolescence. The Alliance for Responsible Mining has provided assistance in how to use mercury responsibly and to progressively eradicate it. Prior to the intervention, the women used to burn off the amalgam (gold mixed with mercury) with a spoon inside a cooking pot, right next to other pots of food on the kitchen fire or stove.

Through the project these women have learned how to grow vegetables and raise mercury-free *Colossoma macropomum*, a river fish species common in the region. But it takes a while for these activities to begin generating a profit, and meanwhile families must subsist somehow. Furthermore, additional investments need to be made before the fields can be cultivated. Money is what is lacking, as is evident in the humble abodes in the village.



The gold panners are requesting that the government enact a reclamation project for land degraded by mining, recognizing that land is an important resource to sustain families and communities. The women have seen how agriculture can be an alternative to survive, but so far it has not provided enough: they need more income. They are eager to learn and would like to participate in more projects to start up new economic activities, but they need support. These mothers desire more education for their children, so that they can live in better conditions and not have as hard of a life.

Somos Tesoro is a leading child labor reduction project in mining areas in Colombia. Funded by the United States Department of Labor, it is implemented by PACT, Fondo Acción, Fundación Mi Sangre, and the Alliance for Responsible Mining. Among the strategies implemented within Somos Tesoro for the prevention and eradication of child labor, ARM guides mining organizations in becoming formalized, placing emphasis on safety and security.