



MINING COMMUNITY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF SUÁREZ

Cauca, Colombia

HISTORY OF THE MUNICIPALITY AND ITS COMMUNITIES

Suárez is located in the northwestern part of the department of Cauca. It was founded as a municipality in 1989 as a result of the income generated from the construction of the Salvajina Hydroelectric Dam.

Its population numbers roughly 18,650 people, with a distribution of 20% in the municipal capital and 80% in the rural area¹.

1. *Plan de desarrollo del municipio de Suarez 2016-2019 –“educando haremos paz”, según el DANE-2015*

Suárez municipality ←



A notable feature of Suárez is its ethnic diversity: 58% of the population is identified as Afro-descendant, 22% is indigenous, and 20% is mestizo.

There are several ethnic communities in Colombia, whose socio-cultural practices, visible through their customs and traditions, distinguish them from the population at large. The most numerous, representing 11% of the population, are the Afro-Colombian communities, descendants of multiple generations and formation of mixed race identities that can be traced to former African slaves. Indigenous peoples represent 4% of the country's population.

The large presence of the Afro-descendant community in Suárez is associated with the work they carried out in the mines of the area as slaves for Spanish colonizers since the 17th century.

The indigenous peoples are concentrated in the indigenous regional council of Cerro Tijeras, where approximately 4,000 people are grouped in around 37 rural districts.

2. *Plan de desarrollo del municipio de Suarez 2016-2019 –“educando haremos paz”,*



ARTISANAL MINING IN THE MUNICIPAL ECONOMY

The economic base of the municipality is mainly in the primary sector: agriculture (the principal crops are coffee and cassava) and gold mining.

According to data from the Colombian Mining Cadastre (CMC, for its abbreviation in Spanish), Suárez has 19 mining titles and 98 applications for concession contracts and legalization of traditional mining and about 70 mine entrances.

Gold extraction is most intensive in the southeastern area, where it provides the main source of income.

Mining in Suárez is just as diverse as its community. There is a small-scale mining cooperative in the municipality of Suárez, with 200 members operating in special mining reserve areas (ARE), as well as other small mines that have requested legalization of their traditional mining activities.

A large number of people, mostly women, pick over by hand the minerals discarded outside the mines, hoping to find an overlooked piece of gold.



THE KEY ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY COUNCILS

Organizations of ethnic groups in the municipality are represented by eight community councils and one indigenous council.

Community councils are organizations of black or Afro-Colombian communities, which are considered legal entities and were granted authorization by the national government's Act 70 passed in 1993.

Among the functions of the council are to delimit and assign areas within the awarded lands, safeguard collective property rights, preserve cultural identity, determine the use and conservation of natural resources, and resolve internal conflicts.

3. Article 2 of Act 70 of 1993 defines black communities as the set of families of Afro-Colombian descent who possess a culture of their own, share an history and have their own traditions that reveal and preserve identity awareness that distinguish them from other ethnic groups.



SUÁREZ MUNICIPALITY IN THE CAPAZ PROJECT

The feasibility analysis for the municipality of Suárez as a possible pilot site for the CAPAZ project began in a meeting held with the Cauca Office of Economic Development, the department within the regional government that oversees its mining affairs.

Subsequently, introductory meetings were organized between ARM and officials from the municipality of Suárez, together with miners from the pre-selected organizations. The department of Cauca covers a diverse region facing various challenges, but at the same time observing several opportunities to improve mining practices and commercial conditions. For these reasons, the municipality was chosen to participate in the CAPAZ pilot project.

The strategy needs to be developed in partnership with the councils of Afro-descendant communities in order to achieve the improvement actions jointly agreed upon, as they represent a significant social group.

One of the main issues will be managing the range of different mining practices in the area and the diverse composition of the cooperatives (including the previously mentioned chatarreras, small mines, and AREs, among others).

Additionally, the territory of Cauca has been heavily affected by the armed conflict. A community concern today is to conduct its activities in a traditional and responsible manner. For this reason, it is a favorable scenario to pilot test the approach of the Market Entry Standard.

Preliminary feasibility analyses indicated that local institutions were proactively looking to work with ARM and perceived the project positively. Regional and local authorities wish to work with the miners and tackle the challenges of mercury use, labor conditions, mine safety and hygiene, and environmental protection issues.