ASM and COVID19 remote data collection in Colombia

Narrative summaries

1st data collection phase
15.06 – 20.06.2020
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Front cover: micro-gold dredge on the La Miel river, Colombia.

Back covers picture: gold panners in Sur Bolivar, Colombia.
About this research

The data presented here has been collected under the auspices of Delve, a global platform presenting data on the ASM sector funded by the World Bank. It has been collected by Afai Consulting under the coordination and guidance of Pact World, as part of Delve’s larger data gathering exercise looking to monitor and record COVID-19 impacts in ASM communities in countries across the globe.

Approach

Respondents

The two regions singled-out for data collection are the departments of Antioquia and Chocó. In the case of Antioquia, the sample is completed with 2 respondents from the department of Santander chosen for the similarity of their operations to those of Antioquia.

Antioquia and Santander

Selected miners work in SSM operations in Antioquia in the municipalities of Barbosa (5 miners, all male), Remedios (3 miners in total, including 1 female miner), and in the case of Santander the municipality of Vetas (1 male and 1 female miner), respondents either live in the same municipality or in a neighbouring municipality. The gender split of the sample is broadly representative of the sector.

Respondents include: miners, transporters, ore processors, mechanical maintenance, OHS and environment teams, mining team bosses.

Operators in Santander also extract silver as a by-product of gold extraction.

Chocó

Interviewed barequeros are located in the municipalities of Istmina (6 miners, including 1 male miner) and Condoto (4 miners, all male). Overall the gender split of respondents is 50/50, in line with trends in the Chocoan gold panning sector.

All respondents are barequeros and most of them also extract some platinum as a by-product of gold extraction. These artisanal activities are not complex and there is neither sub-division of roles nor is there a processing step in addition to gold panning.

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1 For more information visit: https://delvedatabase.org/covid-data
2 Barequero(s) (♂) / Barequera(s) (♀) are gold panners working exclusively above-ground and using manual labour. This type of mining activity does not require a mining title but registration with the municipal authorities.
Results

SSM miners in Antioquia and Santander

Synthesis of Key Informant Response

Health & Safety

Only one respondent mentions a possible (non-confirmed) COVID19 case within her close social circle. Overall respondents feel they are well informed on COVID19 but they are split on whether they would receive appropriate care or not (4 [yes] vs 6 [no]).

As all interviewees are workers of SSM operators, their place of work has been highlighted as a key channel for information dissemination as well as very importantly practice dissemination. COVID19 mitigating measures having become part of the daily OHS routine and thus forming habits for the miners that take them home with them. As a rule, all recommended mitigation measures are implemented on site and are often complemented with either shoe disinfection and/or daily temperature testing at the mine, in line with existing guidelines from the Colombian government on COVID19 mitigation in SSM operations.

Gender

It should be noted that as women in SSM mining typically have roles that require more training such as OHS and environmental monitoring. As a result, they are now typically in charge of the implementation of COVID19 mitigation measures and have been less furloughed as mines did not interrupt their maintenance works and environmental monitoring during the production stoppage caused by the Government mandated lockdown.

Human Security

Two respondents noted an increase in insecurity (a limited one and a strong one). According to the respondents this was caused by the people external to the community coming to sell goods during the lockdown (no further details at which kind of insecurity this has generated were provided) or to some furloughed miners taking up illegal mining activities.

It should be noted that a number of areas in Antioquia and Santander, including some of the municipalities where the respondents are based, are areas where the historical and ongoing presence of armed groups and violence will have influenced the perception of respondents compared to a more peaceful baseline somewhere else in the world.

Food Security

Impacts on food security have remained limited and while insecurity has risen somewhat due to more limited incomes (furloughs), local price inflation, and, mobility limitations from lockdown measures making food shopping more difficult.

On a positive note, despite this noted rise in food insecurity, not a single respondent or family member has had to skip a meal.
Service Delivery & Government Engagement

All respondents have received information on COVID19 and mitigation measures through a number of channels, including radio, TV, WhatsApp, social media and crucially the mining operator they are working for.

Only two miners have received some sort of COVID mitigation package, from a government agency and a school, in the form of foodstuffs and household sundries.

Markets & Supply Chains

Respondents do not sell their minerals as they are employed by the operators.

Their mining activities and thus income have been impacted by the Government mandated lockdown, which shut them out of the mines for a time.

Once mining work resumed Government mandated restrictions have disrupted the supply of productive inputs (in particular explosives\(^3\)), which has slowed the rate of production, and have made their commute more difficult. Supply stores earlier closing hours (15:00) has been noted as being problematic for mining operations.

Key summary findings

i. ASM miners working on SSM mines are employees and thus receive a salary. However, this salary may have been decreased as some workers have been temporarily furloughed.

ii. Women are less common in SSM operations than in AM operations but have roles that require more training and thus have more employment security. They are now in charge of overseeing and implementing COVID19 mitigation measures.

iii. Compared to respondents in Chocó, respondents in Antioquia and Santander live closer to bigger towns and are better connected to health, IT and road infrastructure as well as government services. As a result, the impacts of COVID19 appear to be much more limited. For example, not a single instance of meal skipping has been recorded among respondents.

Barequeros in Chocó

Synthesis of Key Informant Response

Health & Safety

There are no known cases of COVID-19 in the respondents’ social circles. Perceived probability of becoming infected oscillates between [Not probable] and [Somewhat probable]. Two respondents perceive the risk as [Probable] and also are the two only respondent that describe themselves as [Not informed at all but knowing what COVID19 is], all the other respondents consider themselves to be at least somewhat informed on COVID19.

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\(^3\) In Colombia the sale of explosives for mining (and any other) purposes is the monopoly of Indumil a Colombian SOE manufacturing arms and ammunitions.
ASM operators have been respecting the lockdown and public health measures enacted by the Government. Usage of masks and gloves during the commute to the extraction site has been frequently noted but those implements are not worn during the gold panning process due to their discomfort; during this process miners are located relatively far away from each one.

**Gender**
Changes in employment vary between respondents (from an [Increase] to a [Big decrease]) but there are no differences dictated by the gender of the respondents in the answers. Gold panners perform the same kind of work regardless of their gender, this response is thus unsurprising. The variation in number of gold panners follows no visible trend at this stage.

**Human Security**
No major changes in human security since the start of the pandemic. Three respondents in two different municipalities noted lower insecurity levels but no trend could be identified at this point.

Respondents perception of the security in their area varied from [Safe] to [Somewhat unsafe] and did not follow an identifiable trend at this point.

It should be noted that Chocó is one of the Colombian departments where the historical and ongoing presence of armed groups and violence will have influenced the perception of respondents compared to a more peaceful baseline somewhere else in the world.

**Food Security**
With a single exception, all respondents have mentioned lower food security and the entire household having had to skip a meal on occasion since the impact of the pandemic.

The factors impacting food security are related to lower family income, and in half the cases the inflation of the prices of foodstuffs. Personal mobility limitations as part of the Government-mandated lockdown measures have also affected the capacity of respondents to buy foodstuffs in addition to limiting the number of days/hours a day panners can work.

**Service Delivery & Government Engagement**
Information on COVID 19 is received through TV, radio, social media, WhatsApp. And also through face to face interactions with other members of the community, through the children’s school and through local health workers.

Relief is provided by (depending on the cases): government agencies, local civil society and very importantly and in the overwhelming majority of cases the gold buying shops where panners sell their gold. Relief consists primarily in foodstuffs and household sundries, which in rare case is complemented with money.

**Markets & Supply Chains**
Levels of mine-site activity have diminished due to the Government-mandated strict lockdown. As a consequence, mineral buyers are also less present in the localities and work fewer hours which impact the panners capacity to receive a good price for their gold.

There is no trend in relation to the gold selling price as miners report lower, higher, and similar prices with no trends at the municipal level.
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Information on variation of gold prices was difficult to collect as respondents struggled to find a concrete price benchmark pre-pandemic. Instead the information provided reflects the perception of the respondents regarding the fluctuations over the last few weeks.

Key summary findings

i. AM miners’ incomes fully depend on the sale of their mineral and have thus been heavily impacted by their incapacity to work due to government mandated lockdown and other anti-COVID19 measures such as "pico y cédula".4

ii. Older panners (over 70 y/o) have been more impacted by the COVID19 lockdown as government policy further limits their mobility due to their higher risk profile. They have thus not been able to work and have had to depend on family and social networks.

iii. Gold buying shops are noted as being the most common actor in the provision of support (foodstuffs and household and sundries).

Research limitations and difficulties

In contrast to Antioquia and Santander where no such issues were noted, in Chocó phone connectivity has proven to be an issue with respondents and frequent cuts have made interviews longer than they ought to have been under better circumstances, difference in education levels has also required longer explanations. Due to these issues the average time of interviews is higher by 5’45’’ (at 26’58’’) and one respondent required an interview of over 40 minutes, as can be seen in the summary table.

Information on variation of gold prices was difficult to collect from AM respondents as these were struggling to find a concrete price to their gold prior to the enactment of Colombia’s COVID19 responses. Instead the information provided should be understood to reflect the perception of the interviewees to the fluctuations over the last few weeks.

In Antioquia, due to the short notice of this data collection exercises, the sampling is biased towards miners working in formal mines and does not include miners working in less formal structures or the chatarreros, AM miners that are authorized to work on the tailings of mining companies. Our sample is also more likely to be receiving support from projects dedicated to the implementation of better mining practices such as the Better Gold Initiative.

In Chocó there are no representatives of indigenous communities in this sample (due to more pronounced phone coverage issues issues) and albeit Colombians hailing from indigenous communities only represent a minority of gold panners their higher vulnerability makes their perspective a point of interest that should be incorporated in future data collection exercises that do not depend on remote data collection.

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4 Under "pico y cédula" peoples’ ability to move out of their houses is based on the last digit of their national ID number.
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