ASM and COVID19 remote data collection in Colombia

Narrative summaries

3rd data collection phase
13.07 – 17.07.2020
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Table of contents

About this research .................................................................................................................. 3
Approach .................................................................................................................................. 3

Respondents ............................................................................................................................ 3

Antioquia and Santander ......................................................................................................... 3
Chocó ......................................................................................................................................... 3

Results ........................................................................................................................................ 4

SSM miners in Antioquia and Santander .................................................................................. 4

Synthesis of Key Informant Response ....................................................................................... 4
Key summary findings ................................................................................................................ 5
Quotes .......................................................................................................................................... 6

Barequeros in Chocó ................................................................................................................... 6

Synthesis of Key Informant Response ....................................................................................... 6
Key summary findings ................................................................................................................ 8
Quotes .......................................................................................................................................... 9

Research limitations and difficulties ......................................................................................... 9

Front cover: illegal mechanised gold SSM operations in Chocó, 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.

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*

Overall responses have not shifted since the prior data gathering exercise.

Only one respondent mentions a possible (non-confirmed) COVID19 case within her close social circle. Respondents feel they are well informed on COVID19 but they are split on whether they would receive appropriate care or not (3 [yes] vs 7 [no]).

Respondents see the possibility of being infected by the coronavirus to be [Probable] (4 responses) or [Somewhat probable] (5 responses), only 1 respondent sees it as [Not probable].

As all interviewees are workers of SSM operators, their place of work has been highlighted as a key channel for information dissemination and 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. This *modus operandi* is in line with existing guidelines from the Colombian government on COVID19 mitigation in SSM operations.

*Gender*

Overall men have been more impacted by the COVID19 pandemic and the government mandated mitigation measures as a higher percentage of them have been furloughed due to the impact of these on mining operators. Gradual easing of these measures is decreasing the impact of said furloughs.

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 stoppages caused by the Government mandated lockdown. Respondents are mentioning less and less the role of women in the mitigation of COVID19 on the mine sites (2 respondents as of this data collection exercise) suggesting that COVID19 mitigation measures are becoming an integral part of OHS supervision tasks.

*Human Security*

With one exception respondents characterize the insecurity situation as similar to pre-COVID19.

One respondent mentions a slight raise in insecurity, although this is linked to petty criminality created by job losses and not to any changes in the presence of armed groups.

It should be noted that while most respondent qualify the security situation as ranging from [Safe] to not worse than [Not that safe] Antioquia and Santander have 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. This includes the municipalities where data collection is taking place.

**Food Security**
While half of the respondents report no change in food security and half of them report a rise in food insecurity not a single respondent household has had to skip meals.

The causes of raising food insecurity are linked to more limited incomes (furloughs), local price inflation, and lack of availability of foodstuffs. One respondent also mentions doing less food shopping to avoid any potential contamination.

In line with data from the second collection period, compared to the first data collection period food insecurity created by mobility limitations is no longer mentioned by respondents suggesting a disappearance of the issue with the gradual easing of lockdown measures.

**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 crucial the mining operator they are working for.

Only two miners have received some sort of COVID19 mitigation package in the form of foodstuffs and household sundries, respectively from a government agency and a school.

**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. Mines are gradually starting to operate normally again, but some employ a lighter workforce per turn as a COVID19 mitigation measure. Shorter work hours and the time required to disinfect materials and tools are also noted as impacting the operations.

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**

\(i\). Respondents' answers show overall little to no variation from the previous data collection period. Suggesting that the situation on the ground might have reached a form of, temporary at least, normalcy. As part of this normalcy it seems that COVID19 mitigation measures are now being absorbed as part of OHS measures and no longer warrant specific emphasis by

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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.
the respondents. OHS monitoring position often being staffed by women, this additional work now falls under the scope their OHS work.

ii. Respondents unanimously agree that if mandated they would temporarily stop their mining activities as part of the Government’s COVID19 response. This answer is made possible by the fact that even while furloughed they received part of their salary from the operators and their social security was paid. This might be a sampling bias as the respondents work with mines that are linked to the Better Gold Initiative (BGI) and might thus have received financial support to keep their employees on the books.

In addition to this support, BGI and other actors in the realm of better mining sector governance are providing technical advisory to the operators they work with to facilitate the uptake and implementation of the COVID19 mitigation guidelines for SSM operators published by the Colombian government.

Given the current results of this combined financial and technical assistance approach, this outlines a potential COVID19 mitigation strategy at the level of the producers for donors and downstream actors that not only lessens the impacts but further pushes SSM operators towards best practices.

iii. Similar to the findings of the previous data collection exercise, one of the greatest difficulties faced by mining operators are shortages of productive inputs, and especially explosives. Fittingly this issue is particularly stressed by respondents that are in charge of organizing mining operations in one way or another (mining team leaders and OHS implementers).

Quotes

i. The risk of contagion is always present, especially since you can be taking care of yourself but you cannot know whether the colleagues are doing so as well – “El riesgo de contagiarse siempre está presente, sobre todo porque puede que uno se esté cuidando pero no se sabe si los compañeros de la mina también lo hagan”.

ii. In the mine we try to keep the distance between coworkers, but there are activities that don't allow it – “En la mina tratamos de mantener la distancia entre los compañeros, pero hay actividades que no permiten ese distanciamiento”.

iii. If you have to stop working because of the risk of getting infected, you have to do it. Life comes first – “Si toca dejar de trabajar por riesgo a contagiarse, hay que hacerlo. Primero la vida”.

Barequeros in Chocó

Synthesis of Key Informant Response

Health & Safety

Only one respondent mentions a possible (non-confirmed) COVID19 case within her close social circle. Half of the respondents feel they are informed on COVID19 [1 Well informed] [4 Somewhat informed], the other half being either [3 Not that informed] or [2 Not informed at all but knows what COVID19 is] but they are unanimous in believing that they would not receive appropriate
treatment. The share of respondents that consider the probability of contracting the coronavirus as [Probable] has surged from 2 in the previous data collection period to 6.

Respondents seem relatively well informed about the different measures that can be used to prevent the spread of COVID 19, government messaging played a key role in informing them.

Yet, with few exceptions, measures that are not already part and parcel of gold panning (outdoor activity with a certain distance between the participants) are not implemented. The use of a face mask is noted as being very uncomfortable and thus eschewed on site. However respondent report using them, in some cases along with gloves, while commuting to the gold panning sites.

**Gender**

Gold panning does not have an ingrained gender attribution of roles in the region as traditionally women make half of the workforce in the activity and there is no division of tasks in gold panning. However, the third data collection as well as complementary qualitative interviews with sector experts seem to indicate that there is a gendered impact of COVID19 on the presence of gold panners on sites.

Female panners are noted as now operating in closer proximity to their place of abode due to the mobility and transport restriction. These closer sites also concentrate miners that have taken up the activity due to COVID19 impacts on their everyday livelihoods, and are thus experiencing an increase in activity. Barequeras operating closer to home is influenced by their role in the family unit. In particular as school are currently closed due to COVID19, remote education solutions are being implemented but generally require support from a parent. On the other hand, male traditional miners continue to journey to their usual sites, where presence of miners has diminished due to the same, gender influenced, reasons.

**Human Security**

With one exception respondents characterize the insecurity situation as similar to pre-COVID19.

One respondent mentions a slight raise in insecurity, although this is linked to petty criminality created by job losses and not to any changes in the presence of armed groups. Complementary qualitative interviews suggest that armed groups are currently backing the government enforcement of lockdown measures on their own. Providing a possible explanation as to why surges in insecurity are only linked to petty criminality and overall very limited.

It should be noted that while most respondent qualify the security situation as [7 Safe] and that it is not felt to be worse than [3 Not that safe] 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**

As in prior data collection exercises, with a single exception, all respondents have mentioned lower food security. The number of respondents having had to skip a meal has also stayed at the same level, with 7 such respondents.
The factors impacting food security are related to lower family income and the inflation of the prices of foodstuffs. The latter is now noted by all 9 respondents that consider that food security has decreased, from half of them in the prior data collection exercise.

One respondent highlights the difficulty to access credit to buy foodstuffs.

Personal mobility limitations as part of the Government-mandated lockdown measures was only noted by a single respondent. However, these measures are still noted as impacting the number of hours panners can work and thus impacting their income.

**Service Delivery & Government Engagement**

All respondents report having heard about COVID and how to protect themselves from it. Radio and TV as well as WhatsApp and social media, and face to face interaction are the relevant channels of information dissemination.

All respondents have received support, in the form of foodstuffs and household sundries. Compared to the prior data collection period government agencies provided support to 1 additional respondent, for a total of 4, while civil society provided assistance to 1 additional respondent for a total of 5. Gold buyers continued to provide support to 7 respondents.

**Markets & Supply Chains**

Similar to the information collected during the prior data collection periods levels of mine-site activity have been impacted by the Government-mandated measures. Limitations to mobility and working hours of minors and gold buyers in particular are noted as affecting the respondents’ ability to make a living out of gold panning. Mineral buyers continue to work shorter hours which makes it difficult for panners to sell their gold daily, creating day to day cash availability constrains.

While production is noted as being lower and sales more complicated by 9 respondents, there is no trend in relation to the gold and platinum selling price as miners report lower, higher, and similar prices with no trends at the municipal level. However, the respondents mentioning different trends for gold and platinum indicate that gold is faring better than platinum whose price is now lower than before the pandemic.

**Key summary findings**

i. Transport to the areas where gold panning occurs has been noted as more difficult by respondents, in particular as some local authorities have required them to obtain permits to do so. A respondent points out that he was not able to obtain a permit to commute to his gold panning site as issuing authorities called the site illegal, which he disputes.

AM miners do not require a mining title to undertake their activities, but would they be operating on the license of a title owner they would require their approval. Complementary interviews have brought to attention the fact that some miners believe local authorities are capitalizing on the restrictions created by COVID19 to discourage their work on licensed areas that are not currently in operation. Whether this is the case could not be substantiated at the time.
ii. In addition to the difficulties posed by: time restrictions imposed by local authorities, the shorter opening hours of gold buyers, and the lack of transportation as well as its increase of in costs, some AM miners are having difficulties selling their gold as they are no longer registered as AM miners due to a combination of the effects of COVID19 pandemic and changes in administrative procedures.

At the onset of the pandemic AM miners had to be registered on the SI Minero platform by local mayoral authorities to receive an identification number (a RUCOM number) they could use to mine formally and to sell to gold buyers. This process was temporary suspended due to COVID19 and the fact that a new platform for AM miners was to be shortly rolled out. The new GÉNESIS platform now requires AM miners to possess an email to be registered, a requirement that is often not met by AM miners in Chocó and for which they would require assistance. Due to the limitations in the provision of technical assistance at the moment it is thus not feasible for these AM miners to register on GÉNESIS and they thus operate illegally and cannot sell their gold formally.

iii. While unconfirmed it is likely that some miners are selling their minerals through other miners due to the shorter opening hours of gold buying shops, which does not allow them to spend enough time on the mining sites.

Under the Colombian mineral traceability system (RUCOM) this would be considered a mis-declaration of mineral origin.

Quotes
i. I don't think COVID19 will come to here. We are isolated and it is always the same people doing the activity – “No creo que ese virus llegué por acá. Acá estamos apartados y siempre somos los mismos haciendo la actividad”.

ii. That virus has changed our lives. We are no longer free to pan as we were before – “Ese virus nos ha cambiado la vida. Ya no somos libres para barequear como lo éramos antes”.

iii. You have to follow the rules to protect yourself, but if you can't go out to work then you don't die from the virus but instead starve – “Hay que cumplir las reglas para protegerse, pero si no se puede salir a trabajar, uno no se muere por el virus pero se muere de hambre”.

Research limitations and difficulties
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 BGI.

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
ASM and COVID19 remote data collection in Colombia: narrative summaries

3rd data collection phase (13.07 – 17.07.2020)

perspective a point of interest that should be incorporated in future data collection exercises that do not depend on remote data collection.

The use of quantifying terms such as “probably”, “somewhat likely” etc… would beneficiate from standardization, in other words assigning a fix probability range to each of these terms to ensure consistent data collection. However, this can no longer be for this data collection as it risks creating an artificial shift in the data collected. This measure would thus have to be considered for any new subsequent data collection exercise. Note that the deployment of this approach risks making the interviews somewhat “clunky” if not managed properly.

Data collection exercises are smoother and smoother as time passes and data collection is now much briefer, even in Chocó. The team expects the improvements to have reached a natural plateau of sorts during the current data collection period.

### Summary of interview times

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<td>Chocó</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Maximum: 18'30”</td>
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</tbody>
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