ASM and COVID19 remote data collection in Colombia

Narrative summaries

4th data collection phase

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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 .................................................... 6
      Quotes ............................................................................ 6
   Barequeros in Chocó ............................................................ 7
      Synthesis of Key Informant Response ............................... 7
      Key summary findings .................................................... 9
      Quotes ............................................................................ 9
Research limitations and difficulties ..................................... 10

Front cover: AM miners’ tools in Caquetá, 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
Overall responses have not shifted significantly since data gathering exercises 2 and 3.

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] (3 responses) or [Somewhat probable] (6 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. As mine activities have resumed in some operations male miners are back to work, although in some cases their hours/days have been reduced as they work in smaller groups and shifts to comply with physical distancing guidelines on site.

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
One respondent mentions a slight raise in insecurity, although this is linked to people being more likely to engage in petty criminality created by incomes loses. At the same time two respondents report lower levels of insecurity as people are staying at home more and there is more police presence in the streets to monitor the compliance with COVID19 mitigation measures.

No changes to the presence of armed groups have been noted.
It should be noted that while most respondents 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 before and now shorter and less frequent work shifts), 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 and third 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 crucially the mining operator they are working for. By the time of this final data collection exercise, the number of channels through which respondents have received information has grown to in certain cases encompasses all the options considered by this study. Suggesting robust, multi-channel communication on the issue.

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 as well as the time required to implement other COVID19 mitigation measures 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. Supply

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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.
stores earlier closing hours (15:00) has been noted as being problematic for mining operations. Government mandated restrictions have also made workers commute more difficult.

Key summary findings

i. Respondents’ answers show overall little to no variation from data collection periods 2 and 3. 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 extensive COVID19 mitigation measures are now being absorbed as part of OHS measures and no longer warrant specific emphasis by the respondents. OHS monitoring position often being staffed by women, this additional work now falls under the scope their OHS work. These measures are aligned with the guidelines issued by Colombian authorities.

ii. As in prior reporting periods, 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 exercises, the greatest difficulties faced by mining operators due to COVID19 impacts are the 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. As long as I don't get infected, I'd be willing to do as I am told. – “Con tal de no contagiarme, estaría dispuesta a tomar cualquier medida que se ordene”.

ii. It’s better to stay locked up for a long time than to risk contagion. Life before all else. – “Es preferirse quedarse encerrado por un buen tiempo que arriesgarse a contagiarse. La vida antes de todo”.

iii. It’s already difficult to access proper medical care in normal times, so I don’t even want to think about how impossible it would be now. – “Por lo general es difícil tener acceso a atención médica adecuada, entonces no quiero ni pensar en lo imposible que sería ahora”.


Barequeros in Chocó

Synthesis of Key Informant Response

Health & Safety
No respondent mentions a COVID19 case within their close social circle. Half of the respondents feel they are informed on COVID19 [4 Well informed] [1 Somewhat informed], the other half being either [4 Not that informed] or [1 Not informed at all but knows what COVID19 is]; overall this represents a gradual but sustained shift towards better knowledge of COVID19 by the respondents. The share of respondents that consider the probability of contracting the coronavirus as [Probable] has decreased from 6 in the previous data collection period to 4. Respondents are unanimous in believing that they would not receive appropriate treatment.

As in the prior data collection exercises, 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, findings from the current and previous data collection period as well as complementary 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. That female AM miners are 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 reasons.

Human Security
With two exceptions 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. Another respondent mentions that insecurity linked to petty criminality has slightly decreased due to the more extensive police presence now monitoring compliance with COVID19 mitigation measures.
Complementary qualitative interviews suggest that armed groups are currently backing the government enforcement of lockdown measures on their own. A possible factor 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.

Answers from the outlying respondent can be explained by the respondent’s particular context. That respondent lives somewhat outside of town, on the area him and his family mine and were they also cultivate crops (cassava, yam, plantain, banana, pineapple, lemon). As a result, this family unit is less dependent on food purchases and less exposed to COVID19 disruptions.

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.

Sources of support have remained consistent with the previous data collection period: (churches: 2 recipients; government agencies: 4 recipients; local civil society: 5 recipients; gold buying shops: 7 recipients).

Follow up questions with respondents that have received support from gold buying shops make it clear that these donations were purely philanthropic and that nothing is expected in return.

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. In the worst cases reported by miners, due to overlapping restrictions miners can only sell their gold once every 8 days.

Respondent have been gradually stressing out more and more the issue of permits issued by the municipality. These allow respondents to avoid issues linked to mobility restrictions but obtaining them is not a simple process. Requirements can be unclear to applicants, corruption and favouritism are reportedly entrenched, and miners need to demonstrate the legality of their occupation, an element perceived very differently between the authorities and the respondents.
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. This absence of a trend is likely linked to the respondents more limited mobility. While on the one hand gold prices have reached historical highs, on the other hand some AM miners are now unable to commute to the shops where they would usually be selling their gold, shops that offer them a better price than the competition.

Information collected from 4 AM miners indicate that gold is currently purchased (on average) at 35.61$ per gram of unknown purity, this represents roughly 60% of the LBMA price at the time of data collection. Based on the information provided by 2 AM miners since data collection exercise 2, no price variation has been noted for gold during that time period.

Key summary findings
Key findings are similar to those of the previous data collection period, which would indicate that the situation has reached a new equilibrium point of sorts.

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. Respondents points out that it is difficult for them to obtain a permit to commute to gold panning site as the issuing municipal authorities require them to go through a process that is unclear and in certain cases consider the sites they work on illegal, which they dispute.

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. Shorter opening hours at the gold buying shops coupled with different types of mobility restrictions drastically reduce the opportunities for AM miners to sell their production. Sometimes they can only sell once a week which is liable to cause cashflow problems.

iii. Most miners do not use any protection when carrying out mining activities, an approach they explain based on the following:
   o Masks are uncomfortable and highly disruptive when undertaking the physical activities that characterize gold panning;
   o As the activity takes place outdoor the risk of contagion is limited;
   o The activity is carried out in constant contact with water, which according to the miners minimizes risks.

Quotes
i. The only good thing with the pandemic is that the price of gold has gone up like we've never seen before – “Lo único bueno que ha traído la pandemia es que el precio del oro ha subido como jamás lo habíamos visto”.
ii. There's a high probability of contagion, but by trusting God nothing will happen to us – “Hay una alta probabilidad de contagiarse, pero teniendo confianza en Dios no nos pasará nada”.

iii. I don't think it's likely that we’ll get this virus because we're far away and it won't make it up to here – “Yo creo que no es probable que nos de ese virus porque acá estamos alejados y no llega”.

**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) 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.

The use of quantifying terms such as “probably”, “somewhat likely” etc… would beneficite 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.

As data collection exercises have taken place repeatedly respondents have grown familiar with the questions asked and interview times have been drastically reduced. This reduction has apparently plateaued during the current data collection period, and a small uptick has been observed in Chocó, an uptick linked to some final additional follow-up questions asked by the team, as well as final clarifications on data usage and heartfelt thanks offered by the team.