

Fact sheet – case study

River stretch between Sena and Riberalta, departments of Beni and Pando (Norte Amazónico), Bolivia

General information	
Population size and number of households	The area under study comprises of a river stretch of about 50 km, where a number of floating mining operations (<i>balsas</i>) are situated. In general, the Norte Amazónico is a very sparsely populated area, and except for some medium towns (like Riberalta and Guayaramerin) and villages in the area, only few people live in the forests. We therefore cannot indicate with a lot of precision what the total population size is. In the area under study (the river stretch), approximately 500 people are directly involved in small scale gold mining, 2500 indirectly. Among them <i>balsa</i> -owners, <i>porcentajistas</i> (workers on the <i>balsas</i>), providers of food, equipment and fuel, and others. On the family-composition further research is needed. Most miners have their home and their families in Riberalta, because it is on the river and makes travelling easy.
Demographic changes in the past 10 years in the community as a result of in and out migration, and natural growth	See PNUD report 2003, growth of the major hubs has been considerable (Riberalta: 43.454 inhabitants according to Censo 1992 and 64.511 according to Censo 2001; Guayaramerin: 27.706 inhabitants according to Censo 1992 and 33.095 according to Censo 2001; Cobija: 10.001 inhabitants according to Censo 1992 and 20.820 according to Censo 2001) We also know that people moved out of the region because of lack of employment or in search for better education for their children, whereas many others (especially from western Bolivia) moved in, attracted by the expanding gold mining activities. In 2012, a census will take place in Bolivia, which might give more clues about actual migration tendencies.
Ethnic composition of the population	The miners are <i>Mestizos</i> and people of indigenous origin from outside the region, and as mother tongue speak Spanish, Aymara, Quechua, Guaraní or other indigenous languages. In the region, furthermore, various ethnic people live, but there is confusion and indetermination on how 'native' they are.

Socio-economic aspects of small scale gold mining	
Number of small-scale miners in community	It is not a 'community' – it comprises of people from all over the country, in shifting compositions. About 500 people are directly working in or on the gold mining. During the mining they work and live on the <i>balsas</i> , otherwise they live in Riberalta and make no 'community' in the strict sense of the word there.
Number of mining units / teams	There is one cooperative ("ASOBAL", 240 members), and in all likelihood there are also around 240 <i>balsas</i> , or 'production

	units', of which some owners are more loyal and obedient towards the cooperative than others. Also, some non-associated <i>balsas</i> exist.
Proportion migrant miners of total miners community	Unknown, probably high
Proportion of gold miners in community who are women	Unknown, we know there are <i>balsa</i> -owners (between 25 and 30%), wives of miners (sometimes with their spouses on the <i>balsas</i> , but not often), cooks, and ambulant prostitutes. Most wives of both <i>socios</i> (the <i>balsa</i> -owners) and <i>porcentajistas</i> (the people working on the <i>balsas</i> for a percentage of the profits) do not work in mining activities
Proportion of community women who are miners	Low, negligible
Share of workers who are under the age of 16	Low, although some 15-plus work as <i>porcentajistas</i> ; they will often already have a family. The majority is 18-25 year-olds
Where do community members go to sell their gold?	Most of it: in Riberalta. Some of it illegally to (Peruvian and Brazilian) buyers travelling the river. EBO is the key factor here, in Riberalta it opened its first agency. The presence of the military in the region speed up the 'formalization'.

Community perception of small-scale mining

First impression: positive. People appreciate the employment, the money, and the concomitant local (economic and other) dynamics. Together with the Amazon nut, it is the main economic activity in the city. The Department of Pando protests, because the gold is actually found in their territory. Worries about (environmental) damage are there but not very strong. Recent external pressure does foster such environmental concerns.

Description of natural resources in and around community

Forest, arable land, fishing, some logging. In fact, the region is rich in natural resources: Amazon nut, tropical wood, rubber, fruits, rich fauna and flora: a huge biodiversity.

Access to and use of natural resources by community members, male and female

Depending on land titles, dominated by men, but informal access very common. The native's communities use resources for subsistence. There are also logging companies, 'colonists' (land seekers), there is Amazon nut collecting, and illegal small scale mining – and many of these activities negatively influence the environment

Use of mercury in local mining operations

High, to amalgamate, necessary to extract the gold because of its size. Because of the high mercury prices, attempts to recycle the mercury are high. Still, the mercury is handled in a bad manner and excessively used.

Mining-related pollution, including mercury pollution

In all likelihood: some mercury (both wasted and escaping when burning the amalgam), oil in the river, gases and acoustic pollution because of the *balsa*-engines, sediments returned to the river, inorganic waste in the river (plastic bottles, cans, cigarette butts, paper), also organic like food leftovers and faeces.

Annual deforestation because of gold mining

Low: only to build or repair the *balsas*, wood is chopped, often indistinctively or searching for specific types. River shores however get damaged because of the *balsas* maneuvering.

Health effects as a result of mining activities (direct & indirect)

Serious. Working conditions are such that, in actual fact, many workers play with their lives. Mercury

is part of the problem, but general sanitary conditions, tropical and mining-related diseases, work-related accidents. Living and working conditions are intertwined here.

Existence and activities of mining cooperatives and interest groups

One central cooperative in the region, uniting all the *balsa* owners: ASOBAL. A wild guess is there are 250 *socios*.

Existence and objectives of community funds

unknown

Occurrence of child labor in mining

As far as we know: none

% of producers who are mining legally, according the national mining legislation

Allegedly: all of them. However, some information we have suggests that still some 'unorganized', illegal balsas operate, and that, moreover, not all *balsa* owners sell 100% of their produce to ASOBAL. We estimate that about 70% of the mining activity in the region is legal and attempts to comply with mining and environmental legislation. But because of the difficult access and the insufficient controlling means, 30% of operations are not legalized.

Local knowledge on existing mining legislation and related laws (environmental and workers' rights)

High. The recent increasing presence of state 'Frontier Organization' entity ADEMAF forced the miners/*balsa* owners to catch up. State gold-buying entity EBO provides further info on the administrative details. Miners need to know these things to obtain their concessions, and provide authorities with all the information and documentation on the environmental impacts of their work, and need the documentation on taxes they pay to get medical assistance at the *Caja Nacional de Salud*. Informally working miners, however, evade the rules.

Gold mining related conflicts in the community

Initial info suggests that a) some *balsa* owners are still 'informal' and receiving pressure from ASOBAL, that b) miners amongst themselves fight over access to working places, a problem largely solved through ASOBOL having now 10 concessions, c) some inland communities dislike the presence of the *balsas*, and that d) not all *balsa* owners like the conditions imposed by ADEMAF and EBO, but at the same time want to comply, to be able to 'work without worries'. Tensions persist because the tight control on fuel sales (also by the army) frustrate the miners.

Also, the conflicts between Beni and Pando persists: both Pando-authorities and the communities in Pando demand the revenues of gold-searching in their Department. The 'comuneros' are also angry because the deal they have with the *balsa*-crew that they should not fish in the river is often not lived up to. Finally, the damage done to the *Reserva Nacional de Vida Silvestre Amazónica Manupiri*, through which the river flows, produces protests.