

A Senior Phase  
Interdisciplinary  
Learning  
Resource

 **SCIAF**  
Uniting for a just world  
Caritas Scotland



# DIGGING DEEPER

Exploring the human  
and environmental cost  
of gold in Colombia.





# Introduction

This interdisciplinary learning (IDL) resource explores illegal and predatory mining in Colombia—through the lens of faith, social justice, environment, and language.

The Digging Deeper resource helps learners develop as responsible citizens, critical thinkers, and compassionate global neighbours.

This resource gives learners access to real-world language, genuine case studies, and opportunities for discussion and deep reflection on the values that shape our responses to injustice and environmental harm.

It encourages creativity, connection, and a willingness to see things differently aiming to help learners connect their 'heads' to their 'hearts'.

**“As educators you are forming the head, hands and heart together; preserving and enhancing the link between learning, doing and feeling in the noblest sense.”** Pope Francis

The resource empowers learners to consider what it means to live simply, sustainably and justly.

**This resource is designed for use with Senior Phase learners, particularly those working at:**

- Higher/ Advanced Higher Spanish with any of
- Higher/ Advanced Higher Modern Studies
- Higher/ Advanced Higher Geography
- Higher / Advanced Higher RMPS



## Core Themes:

This resource has been designed with Learning for Sustainability (LfS) at its heart. It provides opportunities for learners to explore global issues, reflect on their own values and actions, and develop the skills needed to create a fairer, more sustainable world.

### Modern Languages

- Developing reading/listening skills through authentic material.
- Expanding vocabulary in global/environmental themes.
- Building confidence in discussing societal issues.

### Global Citizenship and Culture

- Concern for the environment and others.
- Awareness of rights and responsibilities in society, including our own roles.
- Awareness, understanding and reflection on global issues including social inequality, human rights, and environmental conflict.
- Understanding of SCIAF's role as part of the Church Society.
- Discussing the impact of predatory mining on Colombian communities including health, displacement, and economic challenges.
- Exploring the ecological consequences of illegal and predatory mining, such as deforestation and pollution.

## Key Learning Outcomes:

Through this interdisciplinary resource, learners will:

- Investigate the environmental and social impact of illegal and predatory gold mining in Colombia.
- Explore the Church's response, through SCIAF, to global injustices.
- Engage with authentic Spanish-language materials to build vocabulary and listening comprehension related to environmental justice.
- Reflect critically on ethical issues raised and consider their responsibilities as global citizens.

## How can this resource be used?

This is a flexible and adaptable resource. It can be used in several ways:

- IDL Day or Week: pupils rotate through RE, Modern Studies, and Spanish activities.
- Curricular integration: using the resource over a few weeks, culminating in a shared output or reflective event.
- Themed day: As part of a global citizenship or LfS focus, such as Fair Trade, Laudato Si' Week, International Day of the World's Indigenous People or Earth Day.
- Interdisciplinary Project (IPL): As a project where pupils co-design aspects of the learning and take ownership of an output (reflective event, whole school display).
- Supporting your Laudato Si' Schools journey: particularly Response to the Cry of the Earth and of the Poor, Ecological Economics, and Ecological Education.

We recognise that every school and class is different—so the activities are designed to be flexible. While we've suggested a structure and timings of activities, feel free to adapt the resource to suit your context, your learners, and your classrooms. There's no single way to do it—that's part of the learning journey.



# Teacher Notes

## What are the issues?

Use these notes for your own learning and reflection before the leading the activities. Reflect on some of the questions you will be asking learners.

## Gold

Gold is a rare natural resource, difficult to find and extract. Across cultures, it has symbolised wealth and power, and today it remains a sought-after commodity used in jewellery, finance, and electronics. More than half of the 161,000 tons of ever mined has been extracted in the last 50 years. Much of it is stored as currency. But still, the global demand for gold continues to rise.

**This resource asks learners to think critically about gold's perceived value.**

Why does gold still hold such status?  
Where is it mined today, and at what cost?  
Who are the winners and losers in the global gold industry?

## Mining

Precious metals like gold, silver, and copper are central to the production of everyday goods—smartphones, laptops, and lots more. They are also held in national reserves as signs of financial security. Yet behind these materials often lie stories of exploitation. The extraction process frequently brings harm to people and the planet, with the greatest burdens falling on communities in some of the world's poorest places. Human rights abuses, environmental degradation, land grabbing, and displacement are all too common.

**This resource encourages learners to question the cost behind the products they use.**

What is the story behind the materials in our pockets?  
Who bears the burden of that production?  
Are we connected—perhaps unknowingly—to exploitation through the things we buy?

## Resource Exploitation

In Colombia, the exploitation of natural resources has escalated dramatically. Vast stretches of rainforest, including areas that are home to rich biodiversity and ancient ecosystems, are being cleared for short-term profit. These forests are not just environmental treasures; they are ancestral lands for indigenous communities like the Emberá, who have lived in harmony with the land for generations. As illegal and predatory mining expands, communities are being displaced, their rights violated, and their cultural heritage threatened.

**This resource invites learners to examine their place in global systems.**

How are our lifestyles connected to the destruction of environments both locally and globally?  
How do social and environmental justice overlap?

## The Human Cost

In the Chocó region of western Colombia, the Atrato River has long been central to the lives of the communities who live there. But in recent decades, illegal gold mining has brought serious harm. Without regulation or safety controls, these operations poison the river, damage the land, and put communities' health at risk. Armed groups often control or profit from these activities, creating a dangerous environment of violence, fear, and displacement.

In response, community leaders, with support from NGOs including Tierra Digna and SCIAF, took their case to Colombia's Constitutional Court. In a historic ruling in 2016, the court recognised the Atrato River as a legal person with rights—requiring the government to protect it and support affected communities. The decision was groundbreaking, acknowledging that the wellbeing of people, land, and water are deeply connected.

Despite this, illegal mining continues, and government response has been limited. A team of 14 Guardianes del Atrato (River Guardians) represent and defend the river, but they were given no funding to carry out the work. Still, they continue to risk their safety to protect their environment and way of life.

**This resource invites learners to reflect on the role they can play in global justice.**

How can we speak out for the poor and the vulnerable?

How can we put faith into action?

## Consumerism

In wealthier parts of the world, overconsumption has become the norm. We are constantly encouraged to buy more, requesting express or next-day delivery – clothes, food, gadgets – often without questioning the true cost and impact. Pope Francis warned against this “throwaway culture” and urged us to reject the idea that endless consumption leads to fulfilment. He reminded us that behind every product lies a story: the raw materials extracted, often in the Global South; the workers, frequently underpaid or exploited; the emissions produced to transport it; and the waste left behind once it's discarded.

At our current rate of consumption, we would need 1.75 Earths to sustain our resource use. Simply put – we're taking more than the planet can give.

**This resource invites learners to reflect on what it means to be a responsible consumer.**

How might we live in a way that honours creation, rather than contributing to its harm?



# Activities

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You may wish to invite **Justice & Peace Scotland** to this IDL project to deliver their "Fast Fashion, Human Rights" workshop



## Speaking seats

**15**  
minute  
activity

**Aim:** To help pupils explore and express different viewpoints on global justice and development issues in a safe, structured way.

You will need:

- Chairs
- A stopwatch, or some way to let learners know when 30 seconds is up.

### Instructions:

Explain that this is a structured way to hear different sides of an issue.

Two pupils at a time will take on roles to express opposing views—even if those views aren't their personal opinions.

Label two chairs - one "Yes, because..." and the other "No, because..."

The rules:

- You'll read out one of the statements below
- One pupil sits in the "Yes" chair and gives a response starting with "Yes, because..."
- The other sits in the "No" chair and responds with "No, because..."
- Each pupil has up to 30 seconds to speak
- The rest of the group listens respectfully—no interruptions or debate yet
- After each pair, a short group discussion or reflection can follow

### Statements:

The statements are designed without clear 'right' or 'wrong' answers, encouraging learners to think critically, consider multiple perspectives, and engage more deeply with complex global issues.

- 1. IT'S UNFAIR TO EXPECT POORER COUNTRIES TO REJECT ECONOMIC GROWTH, IF IT HARMS THE ENVIRONMENT BECAUSE WEALTHIER COUNTRIES HAVE PRIORITISED GROWTH OVER CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE PAST.**
- 2. WE CAN'T CARE FOR THE EARTH, IF WE DON'T FIRST CARE FOR THE PEOPLE.**
- 3. BEING AN ETHICAL CONSUMER IS A PRIVILEGE NOT EVERYONE CAN AFFORD.**
- 4. IT'S NOT MY PERSONAL FAULT THAT OTHER COUNTRIES ARE POOR, SO IT'S NOT UP TO ME TO CHANGE MY HABITS.**
- 5. IT'S THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENTS, NOT INDIVIDUALS OR BUSINESSES, TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT.**

### Debrief

You might want to invite students to shakedown/brush off to physically get out of the persona they assumed.

- We've heard lots of different ideas/opinions through the seats, how might these opinions or ideas be formed?
- Where might we learn our views on specific issues?
- How can we learn new ways of thinking about the issues?
- How might we learn to think about the issues in ways that are more compassionate and kind for everybody?

You can revisit this activity by having pupils create their own statements based on what they've learned at the end of this project.



## Brainstorm

2  
minute  
activity

**Aim:** To quickly discuss

- *What do we know about where gold comes from?*
- *Who benefits? Who suffers?*

### Debrief

- Some small scale mining (e.g. prospecting in streams) has been used for centuries and played a central role in historical gold rushes worldwide.
- Large-scale mining requires heavy machinery for extensive excavation, often through tunnels or open pits.
- Gold is extracted in countries including Ghana, Mali, Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Burkina Faso and Sudan.
- Mining can bring money and jobs, but can also cause pollution, deforestation, and conflict over land and resources.
- Some mining companies follow the law, but others exploit weak regulations, harm communities, and damage the environment.

## Issue exploration

10  
minute  
activity

You will need:

- Current Issues PDF
- Mining in Colombia PPT

Share the Current Issues PDF with the group.  
Allow 5-10 mins to look at the infographics  
on current issues.

Use the Mining in Colombia PPT  
to introduce key words and terms.





## The river with rights

15  
minute  
activity

**Aim:** To explore how vulnerable communities in Colombia are fighting for justice.

You will need:

- “La Voz” PDF

In 2016 the Atrato River in Colombia was recognised as a legal entity with rights after a long process brought about because of pollution and environmental depredation. The decision was groundbreaking, acknowledging that the wellbeing of people, land, and water are deeply connected.

Despite this ruling, problems persist, and the government response has been limited.

This article is a version of [A River with Rights: Community Response to Illegal Gold Mining in Chocó, Colombia - ABColombia](#) and has been written specifically for this resource.

### Share the “La Voz” PDF

#### Debrief

Questions with a shoulder partner or as a group:

*What part of the article stood out to you the most? Why?*

*What did you learn that surprised you?*

*What would justice look like in this situation?*

Optional follow up activity:

Ask the pupils to write a mini editorial (a short, personal opinion piece or a letter to the newspaper) in response to the article to allow them to respond to the issues raised using their own voice.

## The River Guardians

20  
minute  
activity

**Aim:** You will need:

- [Guardians of the Atrato video](#)  
(English/Spanish audio + English subtitles)
- Bernardino’s Story PDF

Watch the video then read Bernardino’s story as an introduction to the River Atrato and SCIAF’s work.

The video is 7 mins long.

#### Debrief

*What are some the issues raised in this film?*

*What are some of the dangers to the environment and to the people?*



## Meet the actors

**30**  
minute  
activity

**Aim:** To help pupils explore complex perspectives on illegal and predatory mining, environmental justice, and human rights by stepping into the roles of people involved in the mining industry – the “actors”.

You will need:

- Character cards PDF
- The story of gold PDF

This activity is called **“Meet the actors”** because it plays on two important meanings of the word “actors.”

Firstly, that pupils will act out the roles of different people involved in the story of gold mining. Secondly, in global and development studies, “actors” also means all the individuals, groups, and organisations who play a part in complex real-world processes like mining and selling gold.

By using this term, learners will become familiar with important vocabulary they will encounter in later activities – where “actors” refers to everyone involved in the mining industry, from miners to manufacturers to consumers.

Share The story of gold PDF to show pupils how these “actors” relate to each other.

### Interviews

For this activity you might want to set up the space like a press conference with the 10 actors/ characters sitting at a top table and the reporters (the rest of the pupils) facing them.

#### 1. Assign Roles

- Give 10 pupils each a character card (PDF)
- Characters should spend a few minutes reading and preparing to take on the role as that person, using the backstory, motivations, and key points provided.

#### 2. Set the Scene

- Explain that the classroom is now a space where the reporters will interview the “actors” involved in mining in Colombia.
- The class reporters will ask questions to understand their point of view. You can give them some of the sample questions at the end of the character cards PDF.

#### 3. Running the Interview

- Each character should quickly introduce themselves and explain their role.
- Invite the reporters to ask questions.
- The “actors” should answer in character, using what they know about their situation.

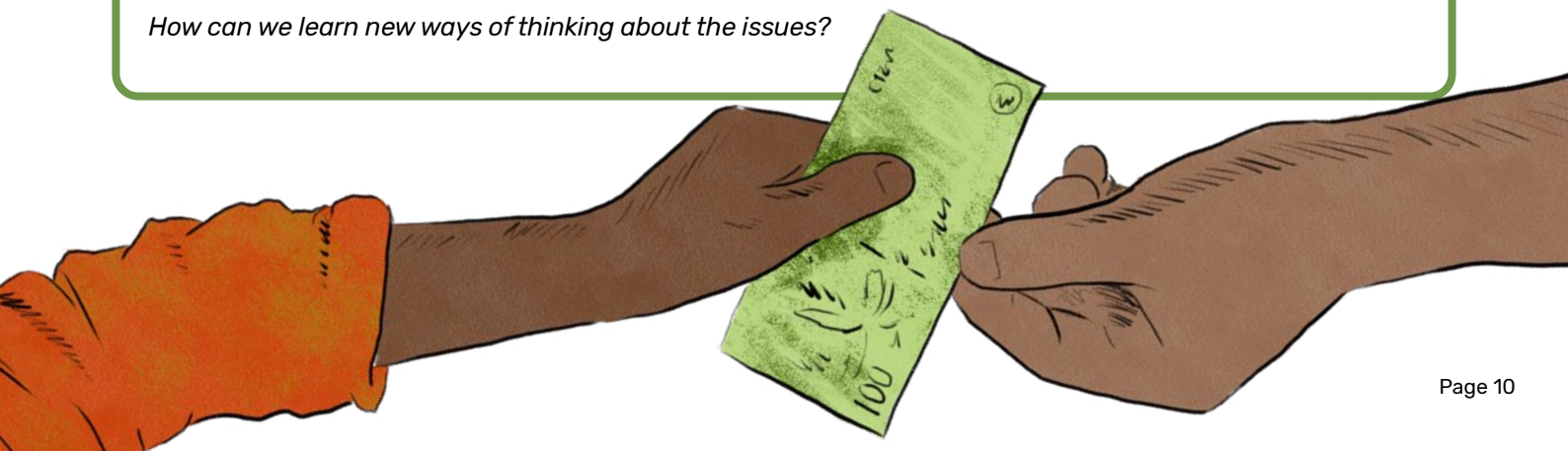
### Debrief

You might want to invite pupils to shakedown/brush off to physically get out of the character they assumed.

*What surprised you about the different points of view?*

*Did any character change the way you thought about the situation?*

*How can we learn new ways of thinking about the issues?*





# Who wants to be a millionaire with predatory mining?

**40**  
minute  
activity

## ¿Quién se quiere hacer millonario con la minería depredadora?

### Aim:

You will need:

- 3 x animation videos
- Key Vocabulary PDF

Share the Key Vocabulary PDF to give pupils the Spanish vocabulary and key phrases to look out for in the next videos.

### Animation

Watch the three animation videos, each is under 2 minutes long

- Play once with Spanish audio + Spanish subtitles.
- Pupils could underline familiar words or check off words they recognise from the vocab list.

Optional second viewing:

- Play each video once with the English subtitles version for full comprehension.

### Post-Viewing Comprehension

In pairs or small groups, answer a few comprehension questions in English or Spanish (based on your group's level) e.g.:

- Who is doing the predatory mining?
- What is the environmental and social impact?
- What does the government do about it?

Optional:

Use sentence starters for a short discussion in Spanish:

- *"Creo que..." (I think...)*
- *"Es un problema porque..." (It's a problem because...)*

Optional:

Ask pupils to write 2–3 reflection sentences in Spanish about what responsibilities we have as consumers when it comes to gold including an opinion, a reason and a suggestion for action.



# The voice of the River Atrato

## “la voz del Río Atrato”

**10**  
minute  
activity

Spanish or English

**Aim:** To give pupils a chance to write a message on behalf of the River Atrato and to have this acknowledged and reinforced by their peers.

Ask pupils to write their response to one (or all) of following questions on a piece of paper. When they are done, each person will read out their message one by one.

**What it's like to be me?...**

Describe where are you based, what you see daily, how you smell, what other smells surround you.

**Why am I so special?...**

Describe what people love about you, what is it that you bring to the community?

What have some people done to me?...describe how some people have mistreated or helped you.

**How I want you to treat me from now on?...**

Tell humans how you want to be treated

Start each sentence with

*“I speak for the River Atrato...” / “Hablo por el Río Atrato...”*

## Ideas for action

Make a video/take a picture of solidarity to send to the River Guardians.

Organise a school debate about alternatives to mining and resource extraction.

Hold a SCIAF fundraiser in you school.

Organise a prayer and reflection service.

## Further useful resources

SCIAF's partner SIEMBRA: <https://www.sciaf.org.uk/our-work/partners/271-siembra>

SCIAF Reflection video, Colombia: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8FnJ6avWQw>

Fairtrade Gold: [www.fairtrade.org.uk/buying-fairtrade/gold/](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/buying-fairtrade/gold/)

Fairphone: [www.fairphone.com](http://www.fairphone.com)

### Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund

SCIAF is the official relief and development agency of the Catholic Church in Scotland and a proud member of the Caritas family.  
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