

CASE STUDY

Bernardino



Bernardino is 62 years old. He lives with his wife, with whom he has seven grown up children.

“In this area one of the most challenging things is the violence and intimidation from the armed groups behind the illegal gold business.”

“The illegal mining is destroying the environment. The miners do not co-operate with the communities – they are simply interested in extracting and extracting and extracting, producing gold at whatever price. The ecosystems that we had on the riverbank – for example the wetlands – can’t be repaired, and some of these were very sacred for the communities.

“The area where my grandparents grew up used to be an area of unspoiled rainforest, with small farms in between. But when the miners came they destroyed this place. It’s practically a desert now – full of sand mounds. The mining has also left behind stagnant pools, which only bring disease because they encourage mosquitos, malaria and dengue.

“We are restoring eight hectares now with ancestral knowledge. I started by creating organic compost with big bags of vegetable waste I collected from people in the city. All the trees that have been replanted here have used organic compost.

“The mining also contaminates the fish, which in turn affects the health of human beings. Then there’s the contamination of the river, and the degradation of the river. Sometimes, if it doesn’t rain, you must drag your boat along the riverbed. This area used to be one of the deepest parts of the river, but because so much mining waste has been thrown into the river and sedimented, it’s now dry here. In the past, people would always fish here and be guaranteed a catch. Nowadays, there are virtually no fish, therefore no sources of food for the communities. Because of the mining, several people in the community have high levels of mercury in their blood – people here are getting sick and the effects are really serious.

"Those of us who have opposed mining have been threatened by armed groups working for the illegal miners. Recently I was at a meeting where we discussed the issues linked to mining. I spoke at that meeting, in support of the communities. But some people there didn't like that. As I was leaving my house a few days later, on the doorstep, I found a bullet sitting there. This isn't the first time either; two years ago, they did the same thing.

"I discussed the threats with the River Guardians, and with SCIAF's local partner SIEMBRA. They helped us raise this issue, through the UN, to the National Government, so they know what is happening. They have given me a bullet proof vest...and a phone that doesn't work.

"My daughter has urged me not continue as a social leader, because we are being persecuted in Colombia, and many of us are being killed. So I try to keep my family away from the news to keep them out of it, and to avoid worrying them.

"There is also a generation coming after this – and they won't have a way of resisting this either. So I think that's given us a reason to keep fighting.

"SCIAF has a very important role in Choco. They have always been at our side, supporting communities to defend themselves."

"My message to people in Scotland is not to lose heart, to keep believing in the processes that we are carrying out here. That we are doing it in the best possible way. Please keep supporting us as best you can, so we can keep moving this vital process forward. Thank you."



Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund

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