Improving the lives of communities dependent on gold mining

Over 80,000 gold panners work in the Amazonian region of Madre de Dios, Peru, in dangerous and precarious conditions. Intensive panning for gold has dramatic consequences: destruction of the rainforest, pollution of soils and rivers, loss of traditional agricultural activities, and disintegration of the social and family structure. We support the global programme that Terre des Hommes Suisse has launched to address these issues with the aim of improving the working and living conditions of local communities and their children.

**DURATION:** 2013-2016  
**CHALLENGE:** Natural Resources Management  
**COUNTRY:** Peru  
**PARTNER:** Terre des Hommes Suisse

**CONTEXT**

In the Madre de Dios region in southern Peru, intensive panning for gold by some 80,000 individuals accounts for over half of the local economy. However, prospecting for gold in this Amazonian region of the country results in large-scale devastation: the destruction of the rainforest, the pollution of soils and rivers and the loss of traditional agricultural activities, not to mention the disintegration of social and family structures. The communities concerned live in extremely precarious conditions and barely manage to survive on the income they earn from extracting gold.
**ACTION**

Terre des Hommes Suisse has set up a global programme to address these issues and protect the rights of children in areas dependent on mining for precious metals. The Foundation supports two aspects of this programme:

- The technical aspect, which aims to develop and disseminate cleaner practices and techniques for extracting and separating out gold with methods adapted to suit the needs of these communities. These techniques will make it possible to reduce soil erosion, water pollution (caused by the use of mercury) and deforestation, while at the same time meeting the legal obligations imposed by the Peruvian government in its efforts to legalise prospecting activity.

- The agricultural aspect, intended to propose economic alternatives to prospecting: the Agrobosque cooperative promotes the creation of vegetable gardens for families and schools, the diversification of fruit crops, fish farming and the organic production of cocoa and its sale through the equitable trade system. The cooperative combines activities aimed at reinforcing food safety standards with aid enabling some sixty farming families to diversify their sources of income.

**EXPECTED RESULTS**

- Mining activities are safer and less polluting in the three pilot communities. The amount of toxic waste produced during the prospecting process is reduced by 20%. Work-related hardships (physical and biomechanical strain, exposure to noise and toxic materials, conditions linked with the organisation of labour and risk of accidents) are reduced by 30%.

- The safety and diversity of the food consumed by the farming families who make up part of the Agrobosque cooperative are strengthened, and the average income generated by agriculture in the case of at least 45 families is increased by 20%.

**LONG-TERM STRATEGY**

In its mining aspect, the programme insists on the need for prior understanding of local practices and skills, so as to be able to develop techniques with the gold panners themselves that enable them to improve their working and living conditions in the long term. The communities receiving aid are thus involved in the identification of the problems and designing of the solutions. The ministries concerned are also integrated in the work groups, as well as in the development of solutions within the existing legal framework and in the efforts to formalize the mining communities.

As for the agricultural aspect of the programme, the sustainability of the initiative depends upon the independence of the Agrobosque cooperative. It requires the consolidation of local institutions, especially through workshops on the governance and management of cooperatives, the financing of permanent paid positions within the team, and the promotion of the sale of its products, particularly in the case of the extremely resilient native varieties of cocoa that are in high demand on the international market.