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Artisanal gold mining in the Middle Caquetá region of the Colombian Amazon: blessing or tragedy?

In Colombia, redressing poverty and inequality through social policies goes hand-in-hand with President Santos' urge to turn extractive industries into the country's "locomotive for development". To-day, up to 70% of the Colombian Amazon has been allocated for future mining purposes. With mining being central to both economic development and poverty eradication, it is hardly surprising that a blind eye is turned towards illegal, artisanal gold mining. While the social and environmental impacts hereof are enormous, little is known about this in the literature on the (Colombian) Amazon. In our study of the Middle Caquetá river we therefore document the pernicious effects of this mushrooming activity (14 dredges in February 2012 vs. 120 in September 2014). More specifically, we delve into the way in which the social, environmental and economic factors of artisanal gold mining affect the livelihoods of indigenous peoples. Our methodology involved participant observation, market surveys and production capacity information on fishing and swidden agriculture. Preliminary findings show that the quality of life in the communities studied has worsened significantly as a result of gold mining, which changes the sexual division of labour and jeopardizes food security, distorts markets, affects indigenous rights and the territorial integrity of Indigenous Reserves, damages the environment, and is linked to the appearance of uncommon diseases. We conclude that it is expedient to re-design the political autonomy of indigenous territories in order to regulate resource extraction, minimize 'perverse' incentives, and move forward on issues related to governance, co-management, collective action, and socioeconomic development.