

CoDev Research Identifies Options after Mining Disaster in Bolivia

By Ginger Gibson

On March 31, 2003, citizens of Chima suffered a landslide that resulted in the loss of life and infrastructure. Chima's citizens are extremely poor, relying largely on small-scale gold mining for subsistence. This incident has aggravated already difficult living conditions and inflamed existing conflicts, largely because the landslide is blamed on the miners from the region. CoDevelopment Canada, in cooperation with the Mining Policy Research Initiative, sponsored a rapid assessment of the urgent needs and resources of the community. The study—completed by Fernando Loayza and released this week—points the way to a number of programs and initiatives for the future.

400,000 cubic metres of material covered three neighborhoods in Chima, roughly 30% of the community. 69 people were killed, with 49 still missing. The community is left with 59 orphans, the destruction of 149 houses, and the loss of machinery from the Chima Gold Cooperative.

A key finding of the Loayza study is that the largest obstacle to sustainable development in the zone is a marked institutional weakness of the principal actors in Chima: the state, the local population and the mining cooperative, Chima Limited. The absolute lack of a state presence has led to a social vacuum, leaving people with confused and contradictory perceptions about their rights and obligations. The potential for conflict is high. Future programs in capacity building, organizational strengthening and rights and responsibilities may help to address this vacuum.

According to Loayza, the most important thing now is to define the legal situation and rights of the community, the cooperative and the state. Currently the community outside of the cooperative does not have clear legal rights to land—the land is claimed by the cooperative—which makes the community vulnerable. These rights cannot be defined without the participation of the state, which has been to date ignoring the situation and reacting only to emergencies. Secondly it is critical that the community be relocated, because if they aren't, this tragedy will simply repeat itself in a few years. However, how can one relocate a community that has no defined rights, if they have no certainty or titles to property that they can prove to the cooperative or the state? This is the heart of the problem. If this is not resolved, Chima will never diversify the economy or achieve sustainable development.

Mining is, without a doubt, the central economic activity in the zone. The gold mining cooperative has been working the area for decades, but lacks the technical capacity to finance any modernization of their technology. Further, they have limited information about the geology of the area or the gold reserves. As a result, the cooperative is forced to continue their operations with ancient techniques at high environmental risk to themselves and the citizens of Chima. They have already begun to mine for gold again, despite warnings that another landslide is probable.

The citizens of Chima are anxious about their dependence on mining and are seeking economic diversification. The report suggests relocation, but this is complicated by the lack of legal rights of the communities, and the remoteness of the community. The community consists of independent gold miners, small shop owners, and dependents of the Chima cooperative—with a very low level of organization and few opportunities to diversity. The community is 190 km north of La Paz, with a dangerous and rarely open highway into the zone. In these circumstances, the population is not open to being relocated because they want to stay close to the gold reserves. However, relocation is a key recommendation with the goal of reducing the risk to the population.

CoDev will work with partners in the south and north to develop programs to respond to these long-term needs of the citizens of Chima and the mining cooperative.

For a copy of the full report, please visit the CoDev website at <http://www.codev.org/codev/> or at <http://iipm-mpri.org/>.