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•**Summary statement**

How did we start? It is a story of more than two years. It started with “me” mistrustful, turning my back on the project exhibitors, by assisting but not participating nor signing.

Day by day, one activity at a time the process started showing some progress, I felt there was something important so I started to turn my back to see the exhibitor and what he had to say, after a while I was participating, listening and felt my views towards the project good or bad were being heard. The final picture was me standing up from my chair being consulted about the environmental assessment and taking action in planning our future, seeking for the best ways for me and my community to benefit from the Soto Norte Project. This could be a testimony of any resident of the Project.

And so it was ... For more than two years we underwent the challenge giving the importance that participation deserves and requires for social assessment, but how did we make participation a reality? Several challenges were faced, the first of them getting community members to attend the meetings, for which the advantages offered by technology and pedagogic tools were used, such as interactive videos, including social mapping, matrixes with the impacts and management that adorned the spaces suggested by the communities, the implementation of a project fair with models and exhibit stands that surpassed the local reality and our own professional expectations.

The result, participation and trust level was raised, and the desired consultation was reached. Why desired? Because it represented the effort to achieve that people could finally turn around face to face with trustfulness and confidence to consider the Project in the territory of Soto Norte.

From Attendance, to Participation to Consultation @ Soto Norte Gold Mine

One of the biggest challenges for a Social Impact Assessment (SIA) is to be able to open legitimate and true spaces that allow participation. However the meaning of participation should be asked. A valid question given the fact that this concept has value, definitions, aspirations and other fears expressed by those who promote it and those who avoid it.

In order to develop a SIA for a gold mining megaproject it was necessary to assume a definition. This was the first challenge for the Soto Norte Gold Mine Project, located in the municipality of California and Suratá in the Department of Santander, Colombia. The Soto Norte Project is immersed in a complex socio-economic, cultural and political environment due to its proximity to the Santurbán páramo (moorland), a high-mountain ecosystem with a very significant socio-ecologic value for the locals, the region and the nation.

The complexity of this territory is explained in several ways: i) There is a current mining tradition that faces many challenges, recent Colombian legislation limits this kind of activity on páramo areas ii) The historical absence of solid government entities, which encourages the lack of credibility and trust towards the different institutions iii) It is a territory that has been highly affected by the country's armed conflict iv) Several foreign companies have worked in the exploration for gold in the territory, generating changes in the local economy. Community perception in this territory has been that of the possibility of obtaining immediate economic benefits and high compensations and benefits, based on the perceived earning of a large scale mining operation v) Broken communities without a joint vision of the territory and in search of individual and personal gain over collective benefits.

When the Soto Norte Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) started (over two years ago), other large scale mining projects and each with ESIA had attempted obtaining an environmental license. However no other large scale mining project has obtained an environmental license – it should be noted that the Colombian legislation restricted all mining activities in páramo areas; several mining rights and titles overlap these areas (not those of Soto Norte). Under this condition, it is clear that in order for the Soto Norte Project to be viable, it needed to demonstrate, supported by the ESIA, that there would be no impact to the páramo lands. For local communities these conditions increased the sense of uncertainty, the Soto Norte ESIA was perceived yet as another attempt from another foreign company to obtain an environmental license for a large scale gold mining project..

Under Colombian common and standard methodologies participation processes consist of three meetings with stakeholders and interested parties. The first meeting's objective is to present the project (project description) and ESIA scope. During the second meeting, impacts and environmental and social impact management plan are identified together with communities. The third meeting presents the complete study and results - this last meeting is held prior to submittal for the ESIA to the environmental authority. However, given the project complexity, the community, socio-political and territory characteristics it was clear that a standard participation process and methodology was not feasible. This as yet another challenge for the ESIA development.

It was understood that for the Soto Norte Project participation, as defined by the International Association of Public Participation was that of: “a process that involves those affected by the decisions made during the decision-making process; those involved should receive the information needed for them to be significantly involved. The process provides information to participants as to how their comments and inputs can impact the decision process and outcomes. This promotes sustainable decision making (Sanchez 2012)”. In addition, Colombia’s Constitution supports that public participation is a citizen right.

Therefore, once the participation challenge had been understood in the context of the Soto Norte Project, and having a specific approach established, the public participation process began. This participation process included, amongst other things that: i) Identifying all stakeholders with an interest or with a degree of influence on the territory ii) Identifying common subjects like inclusion, territorial vision, economic income and livelihood iii) Agreement upon participation process methodology iv) Define that “dialogue” is a must v) Generate an open process in which word of mouth will encourage other people to understand the project directly from the promoters.

Before submitting the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment to the Environmental Authorities, eight participation encounters or moments were held. Each was unique with specific objectives, methodology, strategy and aiming specific results; each encounter was supported and accomplished by inter and multidisciplinary work in order to address project description and the social and environmental assessment. Over a two year process a community and stakeholder trust building process was developed. It was agreed, prior to submitting the ESIA to the authority, and as part of the trust and transparency process, that interested parties, leaders and authorities, would be given a complete ESIA (Final Version) copy. That way, stakeholders would have the same information as the environmental authority.

Some of the techniques and methodologies used during the Participation Encounters (meetings) include: **social cartography** combined with timeline mapping (past, present and future) under a territorial vision, the use of **videos or animated info-graphs** explaining the basic, but fundamental, concepts for understanding the Project and the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA), using simple language. **Workshops** using a matrix to identify impacts and management measures, these generated discussion and dialogue spaces between the ESIA professionals and communities and stakeholders that have vast territory common knowledge. A fair-style event, with stands, each with information on specific ESIA chapters, attended by an ESIA professional. In the same fair, specific activities for children were held. **House-to-house visits** to deliver a booklet containing a summary of the ESIA, led by professionals who explained all booklet content, answered questions and documented and registered any un-answered

question or comment so that at a different moment a follow-up visit with detailed information could be appointed. The preparation and broadcast of eight **tv programs** in a community channel. Each program addressed specific interest issues which had been identified by stakeholders and communities and in correspondence with the ESI content. The use of **scale-models** to represent the magnitude of the project, underground mine and tunnel system layout which enabled clear spatial location of the project. Implementation of **special interest workshops**, meetings and open dialogue conversations.

Once it was evident that the community and stakeholders were sufficiently informed on the project, its characteristics and the environmental and social management plan amongst other aspects, a “multi-stakeholder” dialogue was implemented. The object of this dialogue was to reach, by a three-party interaction (promotor-community-local authority) committee, specific agreements that were incorporated into the final version of the ESIA, specifically in the environmental and social management plan. Specific meetings and workshops with specific subjects related to territory and livelihood were held. Economic income, employment, small business, tourism, task reconversion and territory planning, amongst other subjects were discussed. This resulted in an ESIA built and trusted by stakeholders.

Project opponents promote their position to large mining projects based on the apparent impacts to high-mountain ecosystems and conflict between water and mining. It was considered necessary to provide clear and scientifically based information. Myths and realities related to the project were communicated clearly under a unified communications strategy. Project facts and study results were made of presentations, information exposed in social media and several additional information workshops. It was considered innovative and unique, for the project and its promotor to assume the misinformation and the creation of false myths and to create a communications strategy in order to directly clarify the information provided by opposing parties.

Specific subjects that were addressed were: water quality and quantity inside and outside of the project’s area of influence, impact to páramo lands due to a hydrogeology impact by the underground mine, impact to páramo lands to ecosystem and vegetation cover impact on nearby high mountain ecosystem, public road use, amongst others. Additional studies and analysis were developed, results included in the ESIA as well as presented in several workshops. These demonstrated no impact to water users outside the area of influence, described how public roads were to be used by the project and demonstrated that there would be no impact to páramo lands. Addressing myths and misinformation directly created a sense of trust and transparency amongst stakeholder and authorities.

In order to generate further and in-depth dialogue with stakeholders and interested parties it became necessary to understand, first hand, how the project, ESIA process, participation process, etc, were perceived within the projects area of influence. Two surveys were implemented on a house-to-house effort. Results were interesting and were taken as a constructive feedback and as essential for the projects social feasibility. Specific actions were implemented as a response to the survey results. It was interesting to observe that as the participation process evolved and trust was built the future vision of the territory included the project. It was also interesting that community valued the participation process, specifically the house-to-house visit, they identified this moment as private and one in which they could learn, comment and provide feedback on a one-on-one basis. It was also valued that written information was provided, as a proof of compromise and ownership by the promotor. It should be noted that the booklet was written in "first person", for example under the water management plan the booklet described "I commit to guaranteeing water quality and quantity...."

When the process started, the big bet for the project was to achieve a positive change in those who participated in the events and meetings. Initially, participants would provide their backs to event organizers and presenters. They rejected the project, as they considered that small scale gold mining could no co-exist with large scale mining. An extraordinary and unique participation process provided its benefits, the maximum level of participation "multi-stakeholder" was achieved, after two years of hard work and before submitting the final ESIA to the environmental authority, communities and stakeholder effectively participated in the decision making process and project definition.

This positive result confirmed that for communities and stakeholders to participate enough and clear information is necessary. This will allow them to participate effectively.

The learnings from the participation process of the Soto Norte Project as synthetized as follow: i) It is necessary that the design of the project would be taken from the mitigation hierarchy concept, this means preventing and avoiding impacts is the best practice. ii) Environmental and social management plans are a long-term proposal with direct influence on territory planning, as such it is necessary to include input from local stakeholders that incorpotates considerations for their future generations iii) Considering the socio-political context and precedent, the big challenge for the participation process was to build trust. The work done for the elaboration of the ESIA over a period of two years, was important to identify, get to know and wok with stakeholders, understand all social dynamics, analyze the social networks and identify decision making processes within the community. It was a gradual and scaffolded process, presenting normal tensions in the long-term trust building process, in which it was important to align visions and work on the territory according to its different temporalities. iv) Besides

the use of innovative pedagogic strategies, the analysis of the results in relation to uncertainties, opinions and concerns manifested by communities required a higher degree and in-depth analysis on impact assessment.

The participation process provided enough and sufficient information to identify that today's social context and conditions presented a considerable gap as compared with desired SDGs. This condition provided a unique opportunity to consider encompassing the environmental and social management plan under the SGD umbrella. Social and management plan is considered under a long term concept, benefiting future generations and considering its sustainability.

Creativity and innovation were necessary so that all communities involved would have an interest in getting to know the project and to participate in each of the organized encounters, meeting and workshops; if a traditional strategy for socialization had been set into action, the process would have fiddled. Given that each encounter and meeting had a specific and customized approach and methodology, each encounter had a fresh feeling which enabled communities and stakeholders to sustain the participation effort and feel renovated in each encounter. This effort was appreciated by the communities and stakeholders, as registered in the surveys.

The Soto Norte Project recognized the participation as a process that continues to implement outreach strategies, socialization and different mechanisms of participation even after ESIA submittal to the environmental authority but before the construction and operation phases. As a result of the participation process, a different perception of the territory has been achieved, with community development, community leadership and strengthening as well as common future vision of the territory. The participation process, the ESIA and the project activities have become an opportunity for women, youth, children and elders as they have been recognized as special interest groups and with direct participation in community, leadership and employment issues.

On the other hand this participation process was able to generate professional satisfaction in those who participated as part of the implementation team and as part of the ESIA development team. It was considered the process transcended the participation and effort supports the feasibility of the Soto Norte project.

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