



# Searching for a heart of gold

It's dawn in the Chocó region in the north-west of Colombia. A cock crows as the dark of night begins to retreat, making room for the first rays of the early morning sun. The doors of the small houses in the main street of the village are still shut. Inside, people begin to wake, switching on the radio.

**T**he voice on the radio can be heard from the street: "Calling all artisanal miners out there! The Green Gold initiative invites you to help preserve the rivers and creeks and to keep them clean! Remember: don't use chemicals when you're mining. Let's protect nature! Stay tuned on 104.5 FM Tadó Stereo. Now, let's listen to some chirimia music!" Soon the artisanal miners will be on their way to the forest. They will return with the certified Green Gold, the first of its kind in the modern world; this is gold mined in a sustainable, responsible way.

History is in the making in Chocó, a major biodiversity hotspot with many open wounds from its past. Here, an unprecedented sustainable development model is giving people the chance to escape a life of hunger and poverty, and is turning previous wastelands into thriving new areas of jungle. It is the story of determined members of Afro-Colombian communities taking their destiny into their own hands. It is the dramatic outcome of the Political Constitution of 1991 which – for the first time in Colombia's history – acknowledged the rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples.

Two years later, in 1993, the Colombian government issued a law which returned the collective property rights of ancestral lands to Afro communities. The law recognised self-determination and bestowed local community councils with the right to manage natural resources autonomously. The community councils of Tadó and Condoto turned this opportunity into gold.

**EXPLOITATION** The Afro-Colombians are the descendants of African slaves brought to Colombia by the Spanish conquistadores who entered the Chocó region in the 16th century, in search of gold. Chocó has always had a natural deposit of gold and platinum – treasures of the Andes brought down the mountain by its rivers. Mining of these precious metals in soil and riverbeds represented 40% of world production after the arrival of the

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Spaniards. They first used Indians and then African slaves to extract the gold and ship it over to Europe.

Even after Colombia's independence from Spain in 1819, the slavery of Afro-gold miners continued as the country's elite were becoming wealthy from this exploitation. In the 20th century, multi-national corporations, with the approval of the Colombian government, raided the isolated region, using large dredges and heavy-duty machinery to mine the gold. Large parts of the Chocó tropical forest was turned into devastated, environmentally degraded wasteland and traditional social structures were broken.

When the multinationals moved out at the beginning of the eighties, illegal miners from other parts of Colombia moved in, handing out another blow to the local Afro-population of Chocó. Soil and rivers were contaminated with mercury and the region was robbed of tax revenues as the gold was taken away and sold elsewhere. The Political Constitution of 1991 was the beginning of a new dawn for the Afro-Colombians who had been subjugated for so many generations. Only a few years later would they discover, in a strange twist of fate, that centuries of slavery had in fact provided a gift for them after all: their ancestral knowledge of artisanal mining would be instrumental in their chance for a better future – together with a little help from new friends.

**ALLIANCE** At the end of nineties, a group of socially engaged, young intellectuals decided to set up a new NGO: Amichocó, short for Amigos del Chocó, Friends of Chocó. Their analysis was that traditional, artisanal gold mining methods could be a catalyst for sustainable

### GREEN GOLD IMPACT INDICATORS

Around 1,300 persons protect their land, increase their food security and diversify their livelihoods from mining, forestry and agriculture.

There is an estimated 7,954 hectares of protected tropical rainforest in Chocó. 194 productive units working with techniques of responsible mining and actively participating in the social and political process of the Afro-communities.

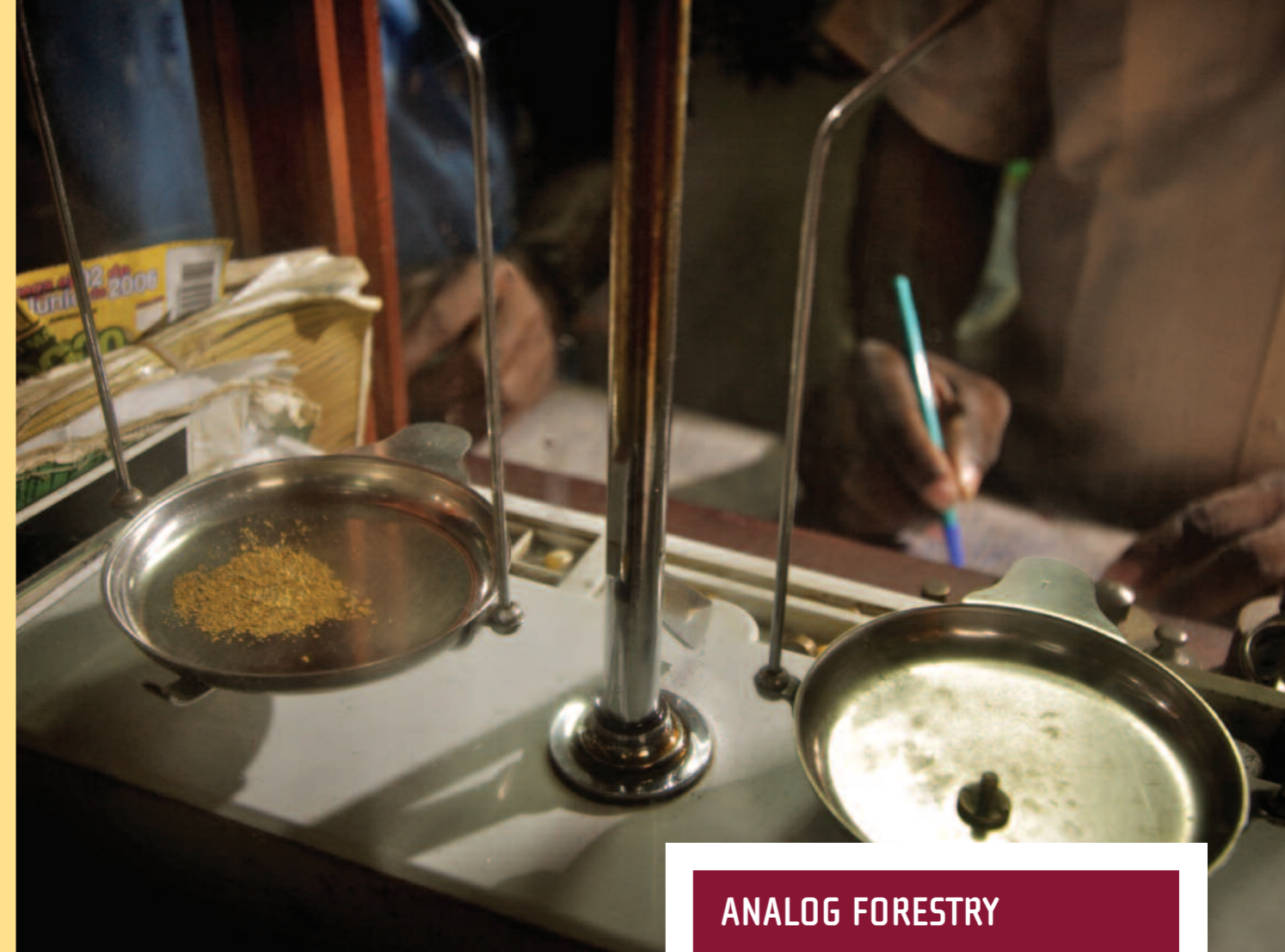
20 planted lots using analog forestry techniques.

Qualitative impacts: strengthening of community organisations, appropriation of the land, community empowerment and capacity building, increased food security and livelihood improvement for mining communities, sale of certified metals in Colombia, United States, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and Germany, among others.

Source: [www.communitymining.org](http://www.communitymining.org)

development in the region and the restoration of the devastated forests. They sought the scientific advice of Dr. Ranil Senanayake of Rainforest Rescue International, contacted the community councils of Tadó and Condoto and, together, they discussed the direction to be taken. After extensive input and the consent of members of several communities, a new project, a new alliance and a cutting-edge sustainable development model were born: the Green Gold project of artisanal, responsible mining. At the heart of the scheme was 'analog forestry', combining food security, cash crops and the restoration of lands.

The alliance was formally established in 2000 under the name 'Green Gold Corporation', consisting of the



### ANALOG FORESTRY

Analog Forestry is an innovative technique that enhances the recovery of ecosystems and their biodiversity with a methodology that accelerates the processes of forest succession. Research and traditional knowledge were combined to develop a scheme where a selection of so-called analog species mirrors the original forest in structure and ecological performance. This programme also seeks the integration of environmental, economic and social aspects.

Source: [www.communitymining.org](http://www.communitymining.org)

community councils of Tadó and Condoto, the local NGO Mojarras Foundation and Amichoco. The Institute of Environmental Research of the Pacific (IIAP), linked to the national Ministry of Environment, was to act as certifier.

Artisanal miners who join the Green Gold initiative mine sustainably using small shovels, their hands and pans to catch the gold, without the use of mercury or other contaminants such as cyanide. Currently, around 7% of the mining families in these municipalities have joined the programme. The IIAP checks the water of the creeks, which has to be clean to keep the certification.

Certified artisanal mining requires very hard manual labour, but these miners do get a better price for their

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gold at the Green Gold Corporation. And they get more than that. They receive esteem for their ancestral mining techniques from outside technicians who, in turn, give their advice on how to improve these techniques further.

Certified miners receive assistance to restore the small-scale impact of their mining activities and to restore devastated areas of the gruesome past. They plant carefully selected trees and plants which mirror the original jungle and replicate its conditions. This is analog forestry. The plants may be cash crops too, like the achiote whose fruits are used for a natural paint. Furthermore, certified miners receive plants to grow for their own food security.

**BOTTOM-UP** Food and water is the source of well-being and, after centuries of suppression and social exclusion, self-esteem shines from healthy-looking faces. Members of the communities manage their own land and take the final decisions of what is best to do with it. Bottom-up sustainable development is what it's all about in Chocó.

Nubia Mosquera is one of the certified miners in Chocó. This is her comment on non-sustainable mining practices: "The machine comes and passes two or three times exploiting the land. That money is no good for us because it's here today, but tomorrow we won't be left with anything. If the land is ours, every day we are able to just go and retrieve our daily grain from it. The land is still there and we receive the sustenance for ourselves and our children – do you understand me now?!"

The Green Gold Corporation was clearly able to see the new opportunities that would be made available to the communities of the Chocó region; from the outset they were acting locally, thinking globally. Amichoco, initiator and member of the Green Gold Corporation, connects Nubia and the other certified miners with the green markets in the world which are slowly becoming main stream.

Today jewellers in the United States and Europe sell jewellery and ornaments made of Oro Verde, Green

Gold. They purchase the Oro Verde from the Green Gold Corporation for a price which is 10 to 14 percent higher than the world market price for gold.

Some say jewellers do not pass on the overheads of the 'raw material' to consumers. But in fact, the costs of the added value processes make this a minor issue in fixing the selling price for this finished product.

**MARKET TRENDS** Market trends in Europe and the USA today show consumers appreciate authentic products. The intangible quality of a product is gaining weight in purchasing decisions as people begin to appreciate the history of a product. Consumers want a product that has the least possible environmental impact, uses methods that respect human rights and share benefits fairly among workers at the beginning of the supply chain.

Gold represents financial value and value for investment. However, most of the gold in the world – over 85 percent of it – is used to make jewellery, ornaments and luxurious consumer goods. It is estimated that in 2006 there were between 11 and 13 million artisanal small-scale miners in the world. The Intentional Labour Organization (ILO) estimates between 80 and 100 million people depend on this small-scale industry for their survival.

No doubt entrepreneurs will ask to adapt the Chocó approach to local contexts in the Amazon region and elsewhere in the world. No doubt Green Gold is a good investment.

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### GREEN GOLD PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

The task of social development is not one of isolated individuals or organisations. Success requires the consolidation of partnerships and alliances with organisations that pursue similar objectives or whose expertise can help address the gaps that the programme may have. Along this line, the following strategic alliances have been fundamental in the success of the Green Gold programme in various aspects:

- Project funding, international dissemination of its progress and identification of new allies. In this aspect, the most significant contributions have been from international NGO's and International Cooperation Agencies and Funds, such as Oxfam Novib, Both ENDS, CEPF, Conservation International, Global Giving, Tiffany & Co Foundation, Ashoka and the Fund for Environmental and Childhood Action, among others.
- Research in areas pertaining to the Green Gold initiative, such as fair trade and green markets, development of business plans, core mining issues, environmental impact assessment and the

role of cultural identity, have been sponsored by universities and research centres such as the Institute of Regional Studies of the University of Antioquia, the Technological University of Chocó and Eafit University.

- Volunteers have contributed to different activities such as market studies, publicity and design, translations, campaigning for the promotion of specific products and other kinds of cooperation. In particular, the Colombian School of Design and the Professional Excellence Program (PEP) sponsored by private sector entrepreneurs from Medellín (Colombia), among others.
- Refining of the metal, design, manufacture and distribution of jewellery. For this purpose partnerships have been made with several national and international private sector companies, such as C.I. Invergutí, CRED Jewelry, Alea, Artesanías de Colombia and Tienda Mola of the Museum of Antioquia.

Source: [www.communitymining.org](http://www.communitymining.org)



## Jewellery manufacturer Rob Hollander: 'I saw opportunities instead of problems.'

Flamingo company of Nieuwegein, the Netherlands is a manufacturer and supplier of jewellery. Flamingo offers a range of rings made of Oro Verde, green gold from the Chocó Region in Colombia. Director Rob Hollander recalls how and why he got involved.

'In 2003 I took part in a jewellery fair in Switzerland. During that week two young ladies, Maaïke Schouten from Crem Consultants, now working for Solidaridad, and Flavia from the Fair Trade Organisation came by. They asked if they might explain the concept of Green Gold to me.

I had come to Switzerland to sell jewellery. Buying gold was not my main objective and I had no intention whatsoever to pay more for purchasing raw gold material.

Nevertheless I observed common politeness and invited them to my booth. During the discussions with both ladies I noticed that it was

difficult for them to convince companies at the fair to buy Green Gold that has been mined in a sustainable way. Then I saw opportunities instead of problems.

I saw the perspective of a win-win situation to create a business that is good for both Oro Verde and the Chocó region in Colombia and for the Flamingo jewellery company in the Netherlands. Because when you are the first to start something you will always remain first and the first blow is half the battle. But I certainly hope that more companies will join me and make it a world-wide success.

There are moments when you have to decide to say yes or no. If you do not know how gold is mined, you cannot be held responsible. After Maaïke and Flavia informed me about the impact of bad gold mining practices and about the good practice of Oro Verde, I was no longer uninformed. I felt responsible and I said yes to Oro Verde, the Green Gold.'



### Neil Young | Heart Of Gold lyrics

I want to live,  
I want to give  
I've been a miner for a heart of gold.  
It's these expressions I never give  
That keep me searching for a heart of gold  
And I'm getting old.  
Keeps me searching for a heart of gold  
And I'm getting old.

I've been to Hollywood  
I've been to Redwood  
I crossed the ocean for a heart of gold  
I've been in my mind, it's such a fine line  
That keeps me searching for a heart of gold  
And I'm getting old.  
Keeps me searching for a heart of gold  
And I'm getting old.

Keep me searching for a heart of gold  
You keep me searching for a heart of gold  
And I'm getting old.  
I've been a miner for a heart of gold.