

Almanac of the **Future**

A STORY OF SUCCESS

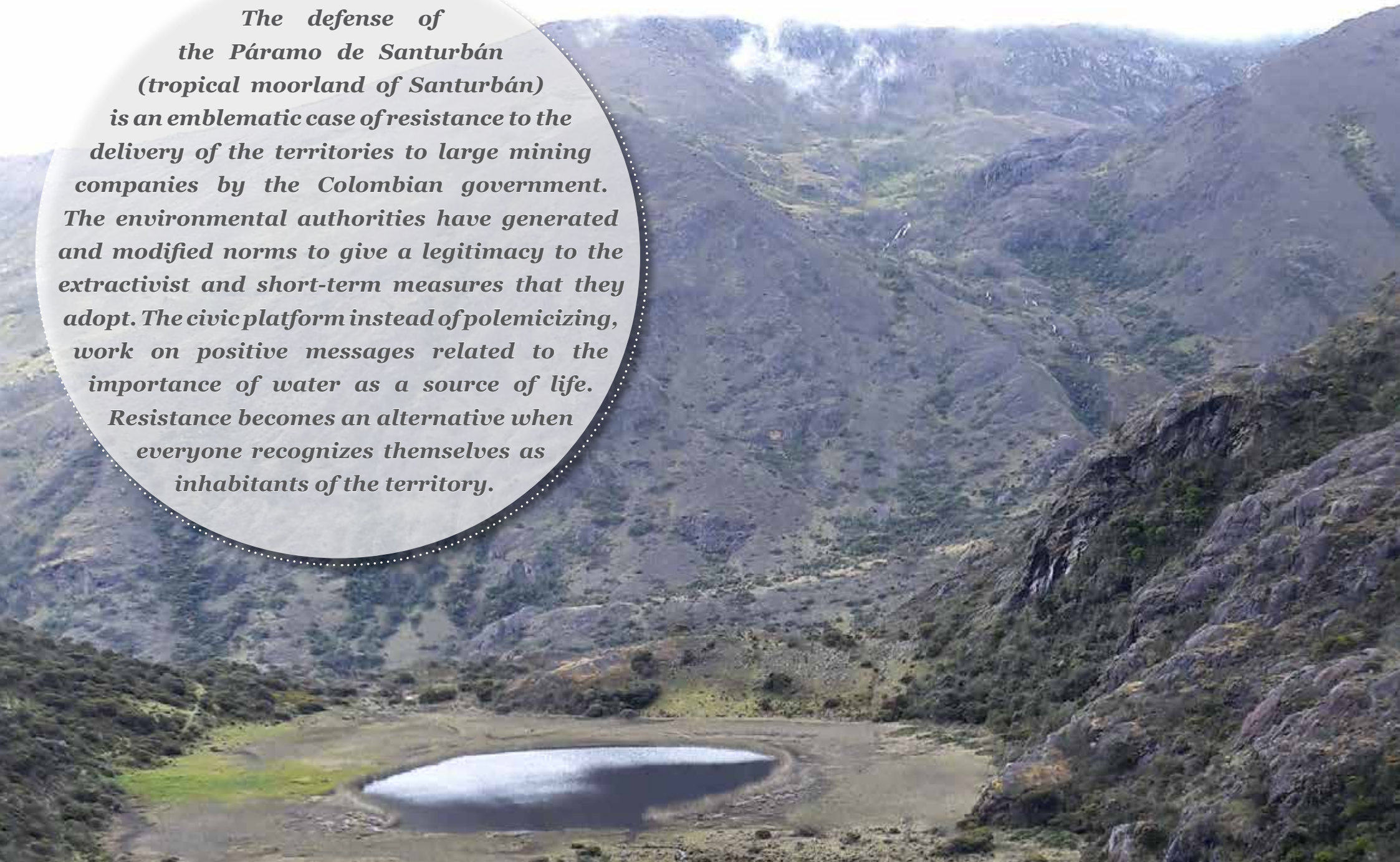
Motivational experience No. 30



**DEFENSE OF WATER AND LIFE
RESISTANCE AS AN ALTERNATIVE**

DEFENSE OF WATER AND LIFE - RESISTANCE AS AN ALTERNATIVE

The defense of the Páramo de Santurbán (tropical moorland of Santurbán) is an emblematic case of resistance to the delivery of the territories to large mining companies by the Colombian government. The environmental authorities have generated and modified norms to give a legitimacy to the extractivist and short-term measures that they adopt. The civic platform instead of polemicizing, work on positive messages related to the importance of water as a source of life. Resistance becomes an alternative when everyone recognizes themselves as inhabitants of the territory.



Páramos – water source

The Páramo de Santurbán is one of more than 30 tropical moorlands that Colombia has; they are inter-tropical mountain ecosystems, located from altitudes of 2700 meters above sea level to over 4000 meters above sea level. Páramos are also found in Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela and Central America. The Páramo de Santurbán covers an area of 190,000 hectares, a quarter of which is located in the province of Soto Norte in the department of Santander; the larger portion belongs to the neighboring department of Norte de Santander. More than two million people drink water from this tropical moorland: the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga with four municipalities is supplied by the Suratá, Tona and Río Frio rivers that are born in this páramo. Cúcuta and other municipalities of Norte de Santander are similarly supplied with water from the rivers that are born in the Páramo de Santurbán. “The vegetation and soil of the páramo receive and accumulate rain in the rainy season and allow water to flow permanently in summer, functioning like a sponge. This way we always have water”, explains Mario Flórez, one of the members of the Committee for the Defense of Water and the Páramo de Santurbán. About 80% of the Colombian population, more than thirty million people, depend on the water supplied by the páramos.



Conflicts of interest: Between greed and life

Colombia has traditionally not been a mining country but rather agricultural and agro industrial. Approximately fifteen years ago, the current governments decided to seek a transition from the economic matrix towards the great mining industry. In their narrative they speak since then of the mining locomotive as a synonym of economic progress. The invitation to transnational capital to invest in the large mining industry in Colombia was echoed: transnational mining companies began to buy mining titles, some of them for the purpose of stock market speculation, generating profit expectations and reselling titles again. In the Santurbán region, only two municipalities, California and Vetás are traditionally engaged in artisanal mining, mainly gold. Estimates indicate that the subsoil of Páramo de Santurbán contains up to 50 grams of gold per ton, in addition to other metals such as silver and uranium. Unlike artisanal mining, mega-mining severely weakens watersheds, pollutes groundwater and uses large quantities of water for processing. The local population tends to sell their land and are displaced, others end up working in the mining company even when they often work only temporarily, but start to depend on it. Underground gallery mining produces millions of tons of solid and liquid waste in the open air, the handling of which is costly. To this situation, the institutional gaps are added: the country does not have legal mechanisms or a liability regime to guarantee the recovery of mining environmental damages.

In addition to losing their water sources, citizens risk taking on the costs of remedying the environmental impacts whose manifestation may take years, that is, when the mining company has already left. It is a panorama where the benefits, product of greed, are for the few and the risks and very probable damages for the many. This is also known by mining companies, hence some are dedicated to buying awareness and pay for campaigns that favor mega-mining.

Route of events

In 2009, Greystar Resources, a Canadian mining company, requests an environmental license for its mining megaproject “Angostura”, to exploit gold in an open pit mine in the middle of the tropical moorland. Faced with this imminent threat of water and the tropical moorland, a civic movement of protest and defense was born in Bucaramanga; in October 2010, 5000 people participated in a march to defend water and the Páramo de Santurbán. The committee originally formed by unions, environmentalists and NGOs grows with the addition of the Trade Unions of Bucaramanga, the Society of Engineers of Santander and others. Informative hearings, demanded by law, evidence a known secret: the State and its institutions leave the field open to mining companies. At the same time strategies of threats and slander by some media outlets towards the Committee in defense of water and the Páramo of Santurbán began, labeling its members as enemies of development and false apostles of environmentalism. The answer does not take long: in the third protest march, summoned by the committee, 8,000 people joined. The Regional Autonomous Corporation for the Defense of the Bucaramanga Plateau (CDMB), a public environmental entity, presses the Committee in defense of water and the Santurbán páramo in



Table of some of the consequences of mining in Paramos

Risks of open pit mining	Risks of underground mining
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Destruction of native environments, landscapes and affectation of flora and fauna ● Alteration of surface and underground water basins ● Capture of surface water sources for mine consumption ● Generation of deposits and mining wastes with risk of spills ● Loss of water sources for all forms of life, the local and metropolitan population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Total or partial destruction of aquifers ● Alteration of the direction of the natural flow of underground water due to the tunnels ● Acidic waters (with a pH less than 4) ● Acid mine drainage ● Slippage of tailings affecting entire river basins ● Loss of water sources for the local and metropolitan population

early 2011 to withdraw from the environmental hearing; the response in February of the same year is overwhelming: a protest march with more than 40,000 people in Bucaramanga, sit-ins before the Ministry of the Environment in Bogota and protest actions in Norte de Santander. In March 2011, the State denied the environmental license to Greystar. The company abandons its project to exploit open-pit gold, changes its name alluding to Eco-Oro (Eco-Gold).

Law 1382 of 2010 declares the Colombian tropical moorlands as excluded areas of mining without specifying the delimitation of these ecosystems. The areas of high Andean forest from 2,500 meters above sea level belong, according to bio geographical

criteria, to this moorland ecosystem. But for political reasons, the Ministry of Mines achieves that the CDMB, without any serious support, raise the altitude level of the Páramo de Santurbán to 3,400 meters above sea level. In January 2013 the Regional Natural Park of Santurbán was created with 11,700 ha. This measure exposes, to the avarice of megamining, the aquifers, water recharge, sub-páramo, high Andean forest, peat bogs and the lagoon system of the páramo, all indispensable for the water cycle; old mining titles, now located in the park are validated. Due to the protests of the citizenship, demanding the protection of the páramos in front of the mining intervention on a large scale, the State through its different institutional entities begins with a delimitation of the páramos. This procedure leads, in the case of Páramo de Santurbán, to a territorial fragmentation of the ecosystem since the area of the Andean high forest is left outside this delimitation. The Alexander von Humboldt Institute, reference entity for the territorial delimitation of ecosystems in Colombia delimits the Páramo de Santurbán, based on bio geographical criteria in an additional 30,000 hectares more than the government. Precisely these 30,000 hectares not delimited coincide with areas that have mining titles in the hands of transnational mining companies.



Currently (end of 2018), the Mining Society of Santander (Minesa), a company formed by an investment and development business group of the government of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, has requested an environmental license for its Soto Norte megaproject; it's about underground mining in the municipalities of Suratá and California, drilling an immense system of tunnels, a few meters from the páramo. According to the schedule of the company, the project should start in 2018/19, the extraction would last from 2021 to 2044, finally the 'restoration' would conclude in 2048. The impacts in terms of direction and volume of groundwater from the drilling of the transport and other extraction tunnels are unpredictable. Experts in the field affirm that it is impossible for hydrogeological properties to return to their initial state once the project is completed. There are several questions that arise from the Soto Norte project: What will be the mining impact on the quality and quantity of underground water, what are the environmental liabilities in perpetuity, what is the risk of mining without a buffer zone towards the páramo and which the is scenario taking into account the seismic risk? The environmental impact study presented by the company does not offer convincing answers to these concerns. The CDMB does not fulfill its role as an oversight body and only under the pressure of

16 senators begins to fulfill its function, in a deficient manner, conducting a technical inspection while there is testimony of farms indicating that the first streams are drying up.

For the National Mining Agency, this “Soto Norte” project is a project of national interest and deserves all support; since 2014 Colombia opened the way for express environmental licenses. Since 2017, seven municipal consultations opted for water and said no to mining. Not so much ago the Constitutional Court made it impossible for municipalities to hold citizen consultations to make decisions on the subsoil; with this ruling, the territorial entities can only express an opinion about the implications of projects if there are environmental impact studies that many municipalities cannot afford. The commitment of the state to the mining locomotive is felt.

Provocated resistance

“Bucaramanga como vamos” (Bucaramanga, how are we doing?) is part of the Colombian network of cities “how are we doing”. In the opinion poll, conducted periodically in Bucaramanga, it shows that since 2011 the first concern of the Santander population is water pollution. The marches in defense of water and life evidence this fact. In October 2017, a march, called by the Committee for the Defense of Water and the Páramo de Santurbán exceeded the 100,000 participants; never before in the history of Bucaramanga had something similar been seen. What had happened?

In response to the mining extractive policy of the national government, concessioning the entire country and constantly manipulating the regulations to fragment protected areas and to sacrifice the páramos with their ecosystems, vital for water and life, the Committee for the Defense of Water and the Páramo de Santurbán was born in 2010. This civic platform, initially constituted by the Workers’ Union of the Bucaramanga

Aqueduct, various regional NGOs, social organizations, grew rapidly bringing together more than 17 organizations. The threat of contamination of the water that supplies the aqueducts of the city and the metropolitan area due to mining with cyanide and heavy metals has aroused resistance.

The fight is for water, not against mining

Wednesdays from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. the most permanent nucleus of the Committee for the Defense of Water and the Páramo de Santurbán meets at the headquarters of the Workers' Union of the Metropolitan Aqueduct of Bucaramanga to program its activities. Trade unionists, environmentalists, people from political parties, NGOs, academics participate, in sum, people who are outraged. It is an open and plural space and has chosen not to have legal status to avoid structures of hierarchy: moderation is rotary, there is no fixed spokesperson and all decisions are taken from the consensus and after debating. The range of actions is quite complete: ties of alliance with the media, with politicians and parties, unions, and other organizations, as well as lobbying with congress members; it also coordinates with international partners such as Mining Watch of Canada; Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) of the United States, Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) of the Netherlands and The Inter-American Association for the Defense of the Environment-AIDA.





The members of the Committee for the Defense of Water and the Páramo de Santurbán are constantly expanding their expertise around the legal-political, ecological and argumentation context around public policies. Informative work is done in the neighborhoods, breakfasts with community leaders and actions in public places; in addition, a survey of citizens' imaginaries around water and the Páramo de Santurbán is planned. Legal actions to demand the execution of technical inspection visits, public hearings in Congress with parliamentarians on mega-mining and Fracking seek the adherence of more parliamentarians to the issue. Mayerly López participates in this civic platform since she was a student at the public university. "We take care of the social prestige that we have achieved as a civic platform", explains the activist. "This cause belongs to everyone. The struggle of the committee has become a way of life." For Mario Flórez, remembering the nine years of struggle, there is no doubt: "The Committee for the Defense of Water and the Páramo de Santurbán is still alive thanks to the victories achieved." The slogan of the struggle and resistance does not defend interests but rights: defense of water and life; the fight is for water, not against mining; In addition, there are different scenarios when talking about artisanal mining or mega-mining. It is a constant that is worked with positive messages such as water / life defense or water yes fracking no. The civic platform practices plurality, there is a confluence of sectors and meetings of different lectures. What unites the group despite its heterogeneity is volunteering and civic commitment. The committee has overcome class thinking around allies. "We are not the civil society of Bucaramanga but a small

part and we need allies, they are important”, explains Mario Flórez. The only condition to participate is to fight authentically in favor of water. It is possible to summon political parties and business, trade unions and merchants, academics and environmentalists. The committee has gone through ups and downs and attempts to be instrumentalized. The committee is not governed by written rules but by the principles of its members. There is a constant relay in the functions of the committee, giving space to others, there is an exercise of social control from the collective. The financial shortage of the committee is chronic; but this, according to Alix Mancilla, another member of the committee “does not weaken but increases creativity”. Even anonymous supports enter the committee basket. Organizing marches of more than one hundred thousand participants with less than 20 million pesos (approximately 6 to 7 thousand dollars) is of the size of the committee.

Territory, we are all

“What happens in Santurbán will happen in the other tropical moorlands of Colombia”. Mario Flórez indicates that by 2019 a national meeting of defenders of páramos is being organized; there is a growing trend of the defense of the páramos. 22 of the approximately 37 páramos are threatened by mining. With the support of the lawyer collective Luis Carlos Pérez, as members of the Committee for the Defense of Water and the Páramo de Santurbán, the approach of law is worked through tutelage, petitions and demands. The Constitutional Court, reviewing the tutelage regarding the right to water, decent life, information, participation and healthy environment, in total 7 rights, declared vicious the process of delimitation of the Páramo de Santurbán. In the court’s legal support, the metropolitan population is recognized as directly affected by the threats of water and the páramo. With this there is a legal recognition that the territory belongs, in addition to the local population, the regional and metropolitan civil society.

Victories in favor of water and life

- Impairment of Greystar’s environmental license to operate open-pit
- The World Bank, initially involved with capital in Greystar, was observed (by the ombudsman CAO) and had to withdraw from the project
- Constitutional Court by ruling 0-35 of 2016 prohibits mining in the páramos
- Delay in the Minesa environmental license process
- The public agenda incorporates the theme of water and páramo
- Constitutional Court forces to redo the delimitation recognizing the population of the metropolitan area of Bucaramanga as directly affected
- Request to the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development to update / reveal information on the new delimitation process
- Impediment mining megaprojects in the páramo
- In the face of social pressure, regional authorities are inclined to reject projects
- The population associates water and life with the páramos and incorporated it into their narrative
- Defense of the Páramo de Santurbán is an emblematic event for the country
- Civil society realizes that mega-mining is not the panacea
- Not accepting the debate about the relevance of mining, but working to affect the economy due to contaminated water



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Messages to the future

The defense of water and the Páramo de Santurbán is an emblematic case of resistance to the delivery of the territories to large companies by the national government. Santurbán has achieved an echo in the country, the resistance grows.

National Government and environmental authorities have generated and modified norms to give a vision of legitimacy to the extractivist and short-term measures that they adopt. In the case of Santurbán, it is the metropolitan population that feels part of the territory leading the resistance from positive messages and in favor of water as a source of life.

Resistance can become an alternative when there is understanding and recognition that the territory belongs to all, local inhabitants and the metropolitan area. The resistance is magnified when with communication strategies and clear messages it is possible to inform and convince the civil society to defend the páramos as the heritage of all.

Almanac of the Future

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