

Experts at a special hearing warned the EU that its green rhetoric about its mining boom is dangerous and misleading.

At the heart of the European Union's Green Deal and COVID-19 economic recovery strategies lies a plan to dramatically expand mining operations within and beyond Europe. The aim is to secure both investment and supplies of so-called "critical raw materials" considered vital to the renewable transition and new military, industrial and consumer technologies.

The European Union adopted a new resolution entitled *A European Strategy for Critical Raw Materials* in November 2021 in which it is claimed that "the EU is subject to the highest environmental and social standards worldwide."

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The subtext of this resolution and other EU communications on this subject is clear. 'Don't worry about the obvious contradiction of expanding destructive mining to achieve green goals - Europe's world-class regulations will prevent any serious harms'.

A panel of independent experts has now warned MEPs that this is not only untrue both in theory and in practice, but that such an overstatement could prove to be extremely dangerous.

Steven Emerman, a hydrologist specialising in mining and co-author of *Safety First: Guidelines for Responsible Mine Tailings Management* attended the special hearing organised by the EU's Environment and Petition Committees on 2 December. He has analysed several mining projects in Spain and Portugal.

He warned that many aspects of current European mine waste regulations lag far behind existing requirements in countries such as Brazil, Chile, China, Ecuador and Peru.

Emerman strongly recommended that the EU should not "rush into opening new mines, or expanding existing mines, or re-opening closed mines in Europe without a convincing demonstration that there will be no adverse impacts on human life or the environment."

Biodiversity

Globally, catastrophic tailings dam disasters are becoming more, not less, common, according to global analysis.

The message - that another, post-extractive world is possible - becomes more urgent by the day.

Emerman's clearly stated rejection of the EU's assumed superiority in regulating mining waste is backed up by several recent examples of mis-management and mining disasters in European nations that boast about their regulatory credentials.

In Finland, for example, a recent investigation by the Yes to Life, No to Mining Network

explores the criminal negligence that led to repeated toxic waste leaks at the Talvivaara Mine, as well as other historic disasters, such as the tailings dam collapse at the Aitik Mine in Sweden.

Meanwhile, in Spain, Atalaya Mining has been publicly accused of misleading shareholders and the London Stock Exchange about the 'serious risk' of a tailings dam collapse at its Rio Tinto mine.

Beyond mining waste issues, the European Strategy for Critical Raw Materials also refuses to rule out the possibility of mining operations being permitted in Natura 2000 conservation areas and other biodiversity hotspots.

Disruption

The EU has allocated 100 million euros to projects researching and seeking to influence social acceptance of mining in Europe over the past five years – in anticipation of public resistance to mining expansion.

Dr Alexander Dunlap, research fellow at the Centre for Development and the Environment, University of Oslo, heavily criticised EU support for this so-called 'social licence to operate' during the special hearing.

Dunlap said that the EU's tactics, targeted at local communities within Europe, "closely mimic military manuals and population-centric counterinsurgency tactics used to occupy foreign countries".

In the context of Europe's mining boom, these tactics are designed to limit communities' "ability and willingness to identify and report corruption and ecological damage created by mines", said Dunlap.

More than 30 civil society organisations from across Europe have made formal complaints to the EU about its efforts to surveil local, democratic and broad-based anti-mining movements using EU funding and bureaucratic structures.

These complaints point out that the EU's heavy investment in social engineering efforts designed to convince, coerce and curtail the rights of local communities is itself evidence of the fact that EU mining expansion will not be the highly-regulated, green panacea EU decision makers claim.

Breaches

Elena Solis, a mining campaigner for Spanish NGO Ecologistas en Acción, argues that "environmental groups, local communities and individuals need to be supported, encouraged and empowered to exercise the rights and duties of active environmental citizenship in the face of a new wave of mining that risks turning European peripheries into an extractivist Wild West."

Solis stresses that the mining disasters and repression of communities highlighted during the hearing are part of a well-established pattern she describes as “systemic breaches of EU law prompted by corruption and indifference”.

During the hearing, experts also highlighted that, while the EU seeks to foreground its own green credentials for mining, much of the bloc’s growing raw materials demand will continue to be satisfied by imports from abroad, including from nations with extremely poor track records on corruption, human rights and ecological governance in the mining sector. Friends of the Earth Europe note that current plans outlined in the new *European Strategy for Critical Raw Materials* could boost unfair trade rules - ensuring market access for European investors to exploit raw materials in Global South countries.

Alternatives

At the root of this pattern of extractive exploitation lies the EU’s dedication to the mirage of ‘green growth’ - in which economies grow while ecological and social impacts fall.

Meadhbh Bolger, resource justice campaigner at Friends of the Earth Europe, said: “Nature and communities are on the frontlines of these plans for extraction and exploitation in a frantic search for ways to continue the EU economic growth model, yet be more ‘green’.

“This means more extraction beyond ecological limits, more exploitation of communities and their land, and more toxic trade deals.”

Bolger adds that EU “law-makers need to first and foremost aim at demand reduction in the EU through a binding target to cut material use by two-thirds. Reducing demand for raw materials is the best way to reduce mining and related harms.”

More than 180 organisations, community platforms and academics from around the planet have called on the EU to find meaningful ways to legally recognise communities’ democratic right to say no to unacceptable mining projects, both in Europe and in relation to European-linked mining projects abroad.

In a popular statement released earlier this year, these groups articulate why a just transformation away from climate and ecological disaster must move us beyond extractivism, outlining key principles and recommendations for EU decision makers.

Their message - that another, post-extractive world is possible - becomes more urgent by the day.

Source: theecologist.org