

The European Green Deal, with the damaging and illogical idea of 'green growth' at its heart, is helping drive the endless mineral extraction to satisfy Europe's overconsumption of energy and materials. Part of the Commission's strategy is to bring mining closer to home – the idea goes that this would kill two birds with one stone: a boon to the EU's drive for strategic autonomy for resources, and an opportunity to oversee projects in a more sustainable manner.

This month, 14 grassroots movements and citizens associations gathered to demonstrate outside the Portuguese presidency's event on 'Green Mining'. They oppose new mining projects in Portugal and denounce the narrative of 'sustainable' extractivism. Many came from the Covas do Barroso community in northern Portugal where conflict is rife over a planned lithium mine. Lithium is one of the metals intensely sought-after for electric vehicle batteries and renewable energy storage. The Covas do Barroso case is one of the increasingly visible and growing number of conflicts over raw materials mining in Europe.

Engineering 'social acceptance'

The problem with mining is that you can't choose where the materials you want to dig up are. If you're a mining company, your path to profit relies on getting rid of inconvenient obstacles like people living in the area, and irreplaceable parts of ever-more-fragile natural world. This is why the mining industry is working hard to ensure that communities in Europe (and worldwide) have no real power to reject mining projects, and ensure they can be bought off. It uses the industry-coined concept of 'social licence to operate' to smooth the way for mining in Europe with as little community input and dissent as possible. The premise of social licence to operate is that companies will eventually start mining, and that local communities do not have a genuine right to stop them. When community feedback or objections do not comply with prevailing pro-mining agendas, citizen contestation is frequently labelled and dismissed as originating from a 'not-in-my-backyard' (NIMBY) attitude.

This discourse reinforces an already unacceptable power asymmetry between mining companies and local people and creates pro-industrial bias in what should be neutral and objective consultation processes. It is also untrue that mining projects will be less environmentally-damaging in Europe because environmental regulations are stronger. Last year, the Responsible Mining Index found that the performances of even the best-scoring mining companies worldwide fall considerably short of societal expectations in all areas including community wellbeing, working conditions and environmental responsibility. A little over a decade ago Europe was the region with the second-most mine tailings dam

incidents in the world. Mining is even allowed in Natura 2000 protected areas. Community testimonies, investigations and submissions to both the Aarhus Convention and the European Parliament's petitions committee have time and again reported that local processes are lacking in good governance, that there has been little or no transparent sharing of data from public institutions and from mining companies, and that companies are failing to declare their interests to citizens at research, development and prospecting stages of the mining process.

If there is going to be a European mining boom, the signs are not promising for the natural world or people who've lost the resource postcode lottery.

The false pursuit of social licence to operate must be abandoned in place of stronger, more democratic and fairer mechanisms that would actually allow local communities to have a real and decisive say in their future. These instruments already exist. "Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)", including the "right-to-say-no", is already described and enshrined in both international law and in UN treaties for Indigenous Peoples. It provides guidance on the need for – and purpose of – meaningful procedures that enable communities to either give or withhold consent for projects affecting them.

Developing similar legally-binding FPIC protocols for all potentially-impacted communities in the EU, which specifically protect communities' right-to-say-no to projects they find unacceptable, represents one important way to address the current imbalance of power between mining companies, governments and communities. No one's homes, lands and waters should be treated as sacrifice zones.

This can be put in place in the upcoming EU horizontal mandatory legislation on human rights and environmental due diligence. Importantly, this new law will also apply to the EU's global supply chains. Almost half of all metals and minerals are imported to the EU. For some resources, such as rare earth elements and lithium, this figure rises to 100 percent. Ultimately, the goal must be less mining. This means stopping the growth obsession and policies which uphold it, and making sure actions to reduce consumption, decarbonise, and make the economy more circular must all happen in parallel.

As a start, the EU should agree a headline target to cut its material footprint.

To support this target, socially and ecologically just de-growth strategies must be implemented in Europe. For example, policies reducing reliance on car travel and the number of cars on the road, while making high quality public transport accessible to all and promoting active commuting like cycling and walking.

Natura 2000 and Ramsar sites, other state-designated and supranational conservation areas such as UNESCO world heritage sites, Indigenous and community conservation areas, as

well as the deep seas and the Arctic, should be strictly protected as no-go areas for extractive industries. These are the tough but necessary changes that must be made to our economic system if we want to save communities and the natural world from being sacrificed at the altar of growth for growth's sake.

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