

Mining for lignite – or brown coal – in Greece is a huge industry. Together with Germany and Poland, the country accounts for more than one-third of the world's coal production. But for residents of villages in the extraction areas of West Macedonia, it has many impacts, from displacement to health problems. Photographs and research by Anna Pantelia.

Thick dust suspended in the atmosphere makes it hard to see the sun over Ptolemaida, a city 500 kilometres north-west of Athens in the West Macedonia region, known for its brown coal (lignite) mines and power stations.

Kostas works as a guard for the state-owned Public Power Corporation, like his father before him. “My father died of cancer when I was 12,” he says. “Four other men from his shift lost their lives from cancer.”

Despite strict EU regulations on coal and the declining profits that the industry faces, Greece has invested €1.3bn in the construction of two new plants in the area.

The post-apocalyptic landscape of Ptolemaida is composed of a sprawling black mine which spans 625 square miles and includes a few deserted villages. Ptolemaida is the biggest mine in the Balkans and reported to account for the 30% of the country's electricity production. Greece, along with Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic accounts for over a third of the world's coal production. However, coal is among the worst sources of toxic air pollutants globally. In 2012 alone, the World Health Organization reported that 7 million people died as a result of exposure to air pollution. In Europe, each death attributable to such exposure occurs prematurely by an estimated 11 years.

According to Greenpeace's Silent Killers report, coal combustion causes more than 1,200 premature deaths in Greece.

In a letter to the Greek Ministry of Health, the deputy regional health manager wrote that seven out of 10 deaths in Ptolemaida are related to cancer or thromboembolic disease (stroke, stroke, pulmonary embolism). Cancer cases have risen by 16% since 1950, and the number currently stands at 30.5%. Life expectancy in the region has been falling.

Mine-owners PPC and its partners have created 10,000 jobs in West Macedonia, where unemployment during the financial crisis was the highest in Greece. For more than 60 years, the local community has been deployed in the power production industry. The privatisation of PPC as part of Greece's bailout deal, as well as the EU's coal phase-out programme, has led the local community to economic decline and deadlock. Many, like Kostas, sacrifice their health for as little as €680 a month while others have had to give up land and houses that were engulfed by the expanding mines. Since 1976, more than 4,000 inhabitants of five different villages on coal reserves have been internally displaced.

Half-demolished houses, a few hungry stray dogs, dilapidated churches: this is Mavropigi,

the most recently abandoned village ready to be demolished for coal extraction. Aristokratis and his wife are two of the 10 last residents of Mavropigi. Even though PPC have officially relocated Mavropigi's residents, a few are still living in the village which is now few steps away from the mine and has no running water anymore. "I have my wife and my dogs here. I don't want to live anywhere else, this is my only home," he says.

Source: theguardian