

New mining projects are being re-branded clean, green and vital to climate action across Europe. The reality is very different.

There has been a surge in the number of mining projects and a massive expansion of areas under mining concession in the island of Ireland, Fennoscandia and across Europe in recent years.

As much as 27 percent of the Republic of Ireland and 25 percent of Northern Ireland is under mining concession, with a single company, Dalradian Resources, holding concessions for 10 percent of the latter's land area.

Meanwhile, Nordic nations have issued mining exploration permits covering millions of hectares of land, including in Sapmí, the homeland of the Sámi Indigenous People.

Re-frame

Up to 11 percent of Finland's land area is under different types of concessions - 2,122 km² under active exploration and 25,361 km² under reservation, and more under exploration and reservation applications.

In Norway, 6,698 km² is currently under exploration and in Sweden 10,290 km². Metal production in Finland and Sweden has increased substantially over the last 10 years. Two new research dispatches from the campaign organisation Yes to Life, No to Mining Network (YLNM) explore how these nations - and the mining industry - are pursuing expansion.

They are doing this by re-framing metal mining as a solution to climate change in order to facilitate domestic extraction of so-called 'strategic', 'critical' and 'transition' minerals required for renewable energy, transportation, military and digital technologies.

The most pressing question isn't where new mining should happen. It is how we can immediately and dramatically reduce the need for new mines.

European nations keen to secure their own supplies - who have been backed by the EU - are creating incentives to increase domestic mining, whilst running comprehensive PR campaigns that paint mining as green and re-frame the industry as a leader in addressing climate change.

Regulating

Svein Lund, a co-author of the Fennoscandian report, says Norway was an early adopter of this framing.

"In 2013 the Norwegian government made a mineral strategy saying that mineral extraction should be increased and that it was acceptable to dump tailings into the sea," they add.

"The motivation for extraction was income for the state and municipalities and working places. There was no talk of any 'green shift'. That came three years later... Suddenly all mining companies and their allies became 'green'.

"This was an immense PR trick for them. Later, when northern Norwegian counties made their own mineral strategy, they presented the whole and sole motivation for mining as the

‘green shift’.”

These trends point to a critical conflict in the governance of mining across Europe. Governments have a duty to protect the environment and their people, for example by regulating industry on their behalf.

Reindeer

But after many decades of neoliberal capitalism, governments have also taken on a role as facilitators of harmful industries like mining, deregulating on their behalf in the hope of reaping foreign investment, meagre royalties and taxes.

Mining companies operating in Nordic countries and on the island of Ireland are doing everything possible to exploit this conflict of interest in a time of climate crisis, presenting themselves as green and, where possible, connecting their projects with soaring demand for transition metals.

In Northern Ireland, for example, mining company Dalradian Resources has changed tack to publicly present its Curragihault project not as a gold mine, as it was first advertised, but as a gold-copper-silver mine. Copper and silver are considered more integral to the renewable energy transition than gold.

In Norway, mining company Nussir ASA’s planned mine in Riehppovuotna/Repparfjorden claims to be the world’s first ‘net-zero’ emissions copper mine.

But despite its claims to be sustainable, the company plans to dispose of the mine waste generated by its operations directly into a neighbouring salmon fjord, and would cause massive impacts on reindeer herding.

Sacrifice

The company has also failed to secure the Free, Prior and Informed Consent of potentially affected Indigenous Sámi communities in contravention of International Labour Organisation Convention 169, to which Norway is a signatory.

The re-framing of the mining industry in climate-friendly terms, and promises of its expansion, have been accompanied by reassurances that, in Europe, the industry will be regulated to the highest standards.

These reassurances from both governments and corporations are intended to justify the ‘green mining’ moniker and allay the concerns of European citizens who view mining to be a harmful, fundamentally unsustainable industry.

However, YLNM’s research reveals that there is a vast gap between government and corporate rhetoric and the realities at Europe’s new extractive frontiers. It casts major doubt on EU and member states’ claims that European mining represents a gold standard that justifies new sacrifice zones.

Professor Tero Mustonen, a lead author of the latest IPCC report, and co-author of YLNM’s Fennoscandian research, says Finland, where the term ‘green mining’ was first popularised, is far from a ‘responsible’ mining utopia.

Ecosystems

“Finland and the Nordics should lead in global conservation and rights issues and that is why it is so sad that behind the international facade we find blatant power politics, greed and full dismissal of precautionary principles when it comes to mining on our lands, some of which are the last remaining intact wilderness in Europe.”

Mustonen’s analysis is backed up by multiple case studies of mining disasters and mismanagement in the European North, which reveal an industry that is far from sustainable and clean.

A prime example is the Talvivaara/Terrafame nickel-zinc-cobalt (uranium) mine in eastern Finland, which employed new bioheap leaching technology to extract these minerals from a low-grade deposit.

Since opening, the mine has caused a series of major toxic waste leaks into surrounding waterways. Damage from these leaks is ongoing. Despite these impacts, the mine - nationalised after the bankruptcy caused by the environmental disaster in 2012/3 - is now being touted as a prime example of ‘clean’ extraction for Finland’s nascent battery supply chain.

In both Fennoscandia and the island of Ireland, the authors of YLNM’s new research reveals how the mining industry continues - despite so-called world class regulation - to disrupt vital ecosystems, mistreat and sideline communities and violate indigenous rights.

Poorly-regulated

Arne Müller, a journalist and a report co-author, says that the green transition is also being used to justify *all* new mining in Sweden, regardless of whether it is related to the production of renewable energy.

“The whole mining industry in Sweden tries to present itself as part of the transition to a fossil free society.

“It is true that a number of metals are necessary for the production of renewable energy and electrical vehicles, but among the new mining projects you also find for example a number of gold mines, which have nothing to do with the ‘green’ transition.”

The continuation of ‘business-as-usual’ can also be seen in the EU’s unwillingness to address the ongoing supply of raw materials from non-EU countries, particularly in the Global South. The European Commission has made numerous attempts to frame domestic mining in Europe as a tonic to relying on poorly-regulated mining in the South.

Exploitation

Yet the same institution refuses to address its unfair and exploitative trade relations with so-called ‘third countries’ or to embrace calls to tackle Europe’s massive overconsumption of materials and energy and reduce extractive pressures globally.

There is growing evidence that the ecological toll of massive, market-driven global mining expansion will have a serious negative effect on our efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate

change - as well as undermining the human rights of communities worldwide.

Communities at the extractive frontiers in both Ireland and Fennoscandia know this and are seeing through the greenwash being liberally applied to sell mining at a time of ecological crisis.

Opposition to mining in Europe is intensifying, as are calls for states to recognise that we cannot mine our way out of the climate crisis.

Properly regulating the mining industry would be a start. Addressing historical and continued exploitation of the Global South is essential.

Dramatically

But communities are also advocating the need to pursue transformational pathways towards climate justice.

Lynda Sullivan, author of the island of Ireland dispatch, says: "Calls for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland's governments to recognise that we cannot mine our way out of the climate crisis are growing, as are community-led examples of alternative pathways out of the climate crisis and towards justice and lasting peace among people and with the land.

"The message from communities at the frontlines of the Island's new extractive zones is clear- respect our existence, or expect resistance."

The most pressing question isn't where new mining should happen, as European states and the European Union suggest.

It is how we can immediately and dramatically reduce the need for new mines by tackling the ultimate drivers of this industry - overconsumption, inequity and the pursuit of endless economic growth.

Source: theecologist.org