

As part of its Raw Materials Action Plan, the European Commission is striving to create the conditions for more mining in Europe by convincing the public that mining can be "green." "Green mining" is an oxymoron that is gaining traction in the EU and pushes a risky narrative about an environmentally destructive sector. In northern Portugal, this battle of narratives takes centre stage.

Mining dominates, exploits and pollutes, suppressing other ways of living with the land. In low-income countries, it can be deadly. Activists, civil society and grassroots movements have been loud and clear about the dangers posed by the mining sector, yet few politicians seem to listen. In the European Union, the European Commission and mining operators are clearly aware of the issues. But unless your community has been targeted as the next mining project to supposedly meet the EU's climate goals, you are probably not aware of how destructive mining can be.

Foolish

Last month, the Portuguese presidency of the EU organised a European conference on so-called green mining in Lisbon. Only one civil society organisation, the EEB, was invited to what had all the appearances of an industry convention rather than a green policy forum. However, outside the venue, over a hundred activists from grassroots movements and citizens organisations protested the conference and the government-backed lithium mining projects in northern Portugal- despite COVID restrictions.

To gain the social license to operate, politicians and industry are challenging previous civil society backlashes against mining projects by equating mining with renewable technologies. Even raising concerns over the toxic fallout of continuous extractivism is deemed foolish. When communities fight for their right to decide their futures, they are labelled as suffering from a case of nimbyism. Portuguese Secretary of State for Energy, João Galamba even went so far as mentioning that "those who are against mines are against life." This scramble to mine is about lucrative business and actually undermines the energy transition. New low-carbon infrastructure needs to be built to enable the move away from fossil fuels, which means money.

Lithium

Lithium, for example, is one of the most sought-after metals for low-carbon technologies and Europe is almost 100 percent dependent on battery-grade lithium from third countries, especially Chile. An often-cited figure is that, by 2030, under 'business as usual', Europe will need around 18 times more lithium and up to 60 times more by 2050. Therefore, to make the switch to renewable technologies and be competitive, Europe wants to scale up supply

to avoid bottlenecks, right in its own backyard. But this strategy comes with serious concerns. The mountainous Barroso region, for example, sits on Western Europe's largest lithium deposits but is also located 400 metres from the Covas do Barroso community, in the municipality of Boticas. Even the Boticas mayor, Fernando Queiroga has spoken openly against the project over pollution, water and environmental worries. He also fears the negative impact it would have on the region's agricultural, gastronomy and rural tourism sectors. According to Savannah Resources, the mining operator behind the Minas Do Barroso, the mine would generate €1.3 billion of revenue over its 15-to-20-year lifetime.

Overconsumption

In terms of helping the EU meet its demand, the project would only provide 5 to 6 percent of Europe's projected lithium requirement in 2030. A study conducted by the University of Minho for Savannah Resources found that the lithium output of this mine would be "insufficient to meet the demand for lithium derivatives for the production of batteries in Europe". This region is one of only seven in Europe to make the Food and Agriculture Organisation's list of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems. Communities here use "very few surpluses where]the level of consumption of the population is relatively low compared to other regions in the country" as the FAO's website indicates. In the age of overconsumption driving the ecological crisis, it is ironic that low-impact communities are targeted for green growth pursuits. If the Mina do Barroso project is allowed to proceed, the region's proud agricultural heritage would be undermined and would surely lose its international recognition.

Frenzy

With 30 million additional electric vehicles planned to hit Europe's roads by 2030, it should come as no surprise that communities on the ground do not want their land to become the next sacrifice zone to feed the EV frenzy. In Europe, there are three other proposed mining projects where environmental concerns have also been raised, including in Caceres, Spain. The Iberian Peninsula is a major target for mining companies. In Spain, there are around 2,000 potential licenses for new mining projects. In the case of Portugal, 10 percent of the country's territory is already under mining concessions. In the northern Portuguese regions, the situation is troubling amid concerns that open-pit mines may even be allowed near protected areas, as in the case of Serra d'Arga. The Mina do Barroso project is now undergoing public consultation for the environmental impact assessment. Despite government and industry rhetoric that public participation will be respected, and the needs of local communities will be met, local organisations and activists are not convinced. In

January 2021, an NGO submitted an environmental information request to the Portuguese environment ministry, but no access was granted.

Denial

The same request was sent in March to Savannah Resources, but the company also refused. Although the Commission for Access to Administrative Documents (CADA) issued a report stating that the environmental information that had been requested should be made immediately available, the Portuguese authorities decided to ignore the request. Only some documents were made available during the public consultations and nearly three weeks after the consultations started. The lack of access to information kept civil society and local communities in the dark and they lost around 3 precious months. For the past month, they have had to scrutinise more than 6,000 documents. A formal complaint was submitted in the context of the Aarhus Convention, which protects the right of access to environmental information, over claims of deliberate denial of access to information.

Courts

The case is already before the Portuguese courts and the public prosecutor. The end of the public consultation period for the EIA was to end on June 2nd, the same day of the launch of the Yes to Life, No to Mining joint position statement to the European Commission, but public pressure over irregularities forced the Portuguese authorities to extend the consultation period to July 16th. Green mining relates to the belief that we can decouple economic growth from environmental impacts, however, this mindset ignores a larger issue and will ultimately have irreversible consequences on the environment. Perhaps instead of putting such emphasis on the supply of lithium or other raw materials, we can take a look at the demand. For example, by prioritising circularity over primary resource extraction, we can greatly reduce our need to mine more resources. Political action to limit global warming is necessary and urgent. This means that we need to find the quickest paths to decarbonisation. But we must do it in less materially intensive ways. We can build cities that are less car-dependent, increase public transport, promote walking or enhance micro e-mobility. Cycling, for example, is ten times more important than electric cars for reaching net-zero cities. Other solutions include urban mining initiatives that move us toward more circular societies. In an inspiring example from Antwerp, 70 creative makers gather the waste from the city and turn them into a wide variety of products: lamps from old boilers and chairs from paper and sawdust for a whole jazz club.

Solutions

The solutions exist, we just need the political will.

By making the most of the resources we have, European cities can greatly reduce the impact that they create for European rural communities and in low-income countries where most of the mining projects are slated to take place.

However, broader policy measures are also needed. For starters, the EU should agree on creating a headline target to cut its material footprint and continue to promote measures on targeting energy efficiency, recycling, material substitution, use of innovative materials, and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles.

Another way to do this is to look at the energy transition through an environmental justice lens. Granting communities, the right to say no to mining projects by taking inspiration from already enshrined protocols in international law as in the case of Free, Prior and Informed Consent for Indigenous Peoples, the brunt of the energy transition will not have to be put on low-impact communities around the world. This can address the current imbalance of power between mining companies, governments and communities and the future EU horizontal due diligence law can offer such opportunity. Banning mining projects from taking place within or near protected areas is a necessary step forward.

Living

So can mining ever be green? Maybe that is not the right question. We should instead ask, how do we change the way our societies operate? How can we create well-being economies? Or perhaps more ambitiously, how do we move away from the need to grow the economy? Only then can we figure out how much we need to mine. After all, decent living does not have to, and must not, cost us the earth.

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