The Mine at Home – The Impacts of Connection

With our consumption-based lifestyle, our dependence on minerals is growing exponentially; the solutions proposed by the Global North are geared towards increasing the extraction of these material resources in order to realise plans for digitisation and the electrification of mobility. According to forecasts by the International Energy Agency, the demand for some key minerals for these policies will multiply in the coming years, and there are not enough reserves to meet the demand.

We are witnessing a race for these resources, which is causing geopolitical tensions, in a context already strained by rising energy prices, inflation, pandemic-accelerated dynamics and wars. Faced with this situation, the European Union approved last December 2023 the Law on Essential Raw Materials, and is also approving some bilateral agreements to ensure the supply of these critical raw materials.

Today, we are denouncing that these policies mean an increase in the socio-environmental impacts linked to mining. This new regulation aims to diversify and guarantee imports of minerals from countries other than China, without implementing mechanisms that guarantee respect for human rights and environmental rights, which continue to be widely violated in the Global South.
For example, it is estimated that 35% of the demand for gold will be destined for electrical and electronic devices such as those we see here at the Mobile World Congress, with gold being one of the so-called conflict minerals. With major exporting countries such as Ghana where illegal and artisanal mining over-exploits people with abysmal wages, no protections and very dangerous cave-ins that take the lives of many people; materials such as cyanide and mercury, necessary for extraction, are impoverishing a land with no option for cultivation, leading to the displacement of thousands of people. And this is just one example.

It should not be forgotten that more than half of the energy transition mining projects are located on or near indigenous peoples' lands. In Europe, we currently consume 25-30% of the total global metal consumption, despite representing only 6% of the world's population. The new regulation continues to promote resource colonialism, and furthermore assumes that mineral consumption will multiply in the coming decades without taking any measures to mitigate or reduce this demand and its socio-environmental impacts.

On the other hand, this new law establishes that by 2030, 10% of the annual European consumption of these strategic raw materials must be extracted within the EU, having even relaxed the requirements for compliance with certain environmental laws for projects for the extraction of strategic raw materials.

In Spain, we are seeing multiple violations of environmental legislation in mineral extraction projects, where, according to the Iberian Mining Observatory, there are already 700 documented environmental violations in Spain. In Catalonia, just a few kilometres from here, the Súria mines, or the Sallent i Balsareny mines, have caused the salinisation of the Cardeners and Llobregat rivers, also affecting wells, springs and aquifers throughout the Bages region, which has led to several legal proceedings for environmental offences. And we are well aware that taking care of our water is vital, we are already in a drought emergency, among other things, due to poor water management.

We warn about the emergence of a new "mining boom" in Spain and Europe and about the socio-environmental impacts of extractive activity. There is no such thing as green mining; mining always entails serious impacts on ecosystems and ecosystem life.

The recently approved European law exacerbates the many obstacles faced by local communities in exercising their rights to information, participation and justice in the processing of projects that affect their territories; tight deadlines are set despite the complexity of the projects, without considering the great imbalance of power between communities and developers. The protection of nature and the rights of local communities affected by strategic projects inside and outside the European Union are undermined and subordinated to the objective of securing the EU's mineral supply.

How many minerals will we need to continue to digitise, to maintain our level of consumption, to implement energy transition or transport electrification policies? We are exceeding the biophysical limits of the planet. Mineral resources are limited, and we cannot forever supply the quantities of minerals we need in this digitised and connected world. The uses of these minerals need to be drastically prioritised and controlled. We therefore call for the following urgent measures:

➢ Reduce the demand for minerals, change the consumption and unlimited growth model of Europe and the countries of the Global North.

➢ Encourage reuse, and the circular economy. We produce more than 50 million electronic waste in the world, and we still do not have efficient and optimised recycling and recovery chains for this.

➢ The handling of toxics must be done properly, with the necessary protections for the health of the people handling the waste and without polluting our environment.

➢ Encourage remediation and promote demanding regulations that ensure the Right to Repair.

➢ We must commit to eco-design and techniques that minimise the social and environmental impacts throughout the life cycle of the products that are designed and launched onto the market. No more programmed obsolescence and the absurdity of repairing costing more than buying a new appliance.

➢ Promote laws that defend people and the environment above all else, without exploiting populations, without damaging the environment. Approach the debate and planning on the supply of mineral raw materials from a perspective of global justice that avoids reproducing existing international inequalities.

➢ Ensure that potentially affected local communities, inside and outside Europe, are involved.

➢ And finally, we also demand an end to the economic and resource exploitation of the Global South, ending trade and investment protection agreements that undermine government action to protect human rights and the environment.

The power of connection is devouring us, the impacts of connection are brutal, and like the case of mining, we will live closer and closer to it. We want a power of connection that is fair, that minimises these consequences. We want the big tech companies to make a real

commitment to fair and ethical electronics, to ensure that their multi-billion dollar profits are not funded by child and forced labour, and that they do not continue to promote resource colonialism. We don't want to be connected in this way, we don't feel the power of connection, we only feel its impacts.