
The European Union Continues to Chase After Raw Materials

The European Union's policy pursues growth at any price. "Green" technologies require an increasing amount and variety of metals and minerals. Millions of public funds flow every year from the European Investment Bank to mining projects—under the cloak of "development."

Since the launch of **the European Raw Materials Strategy** in 2008, the European union (EU) has affirmed and implemented each and every step of said strategy. Broadly speaking, this means **policies for better access (as direct as possible) to the Global South's raw materials**, and the promotion of **mining within the borders of Europe itself**.

Concern about climate change and the need to reduce dependence on fossil fuels—oil, coal and gas—have paradoxically kicked off an intensified race for non-energy raw materials. Technologies on the rise require an increasing amount and variety of metals and minerals; but one cannot ignore the fact that the extraction, processing, transport and subsequent manufacture of these materials is highly dependent on fossil fuels. **The purpose of "renewable energies" is supposedly decarbonization; and innovation in digitalization is discussed. But without metals and energy, none of these processes that are meant to make Europe "competitive" can take place.** Thus, so-called decarbonization, which has been launched in some sectors of the economy, is not focused on significantly reducing energy consumption, but rather on progressively increasing the percentage of "cleaner" energy sources. Meanwhile, the global impact on the climate, communities and local territories increases.

Economies That Are Determined to Keep Growing: Digitalization and the Energy Transition

Dealing with the energy transition and digitalization in the coming decades could **double or triple the demand for metals and minerals**, given that these processes drive a boundless market for raw materials. Raw materials are needed to build all kinds of infrastructure, and to manufacture electric cars and batteries, etc. Mineral resources have become the key to a growth-based economy, which constructs a complex discourse to greenwash and justify itself. In the European Union, this happens through policies, discourse and economic incentives.

To manufacture **a mobile phone, a computer or a television screen**, it takes between 40 and 60 different raw materials—such as lithium (42 g), tantalum, cobalt or antimony—which are increasingly difficult to obtain. To manufacture an **electric vehicle**, large quantities of copper (80 kg), cobalt (10 kg), lithium (10-20 kg), nickel (30 kg) and graphite (30 kg) are needed.

According to CODELCO, the Chilean state mining company—which is one of the largest copper producers in the world—a single 1-megawatt windmill or wind turbine contains 4.4 tons of copper. China's copper consumption, for example, increased from 12% to 40% in just one decade.

The European Battery Alliance (EBA), driven by the German automobile sector, was established in 2017 to make Europe a global player in the manufacture and distribution of batteries. The battery market "could grow by 250,000 million annually, starting in 2025," making it

necessary to “accelerate and intensify coordination among strategic transnational projects throughout the supply chain.” These are the words of Maros Šef?ovi?, Vice President of the European Commission and head of the European Union’s Energy Union.

All of this demand for raw materials means **more and more extraction** of copper, cobalt, lithium, nickel and other metals and minerals, in places such as the rainforests of Congo, the Philippines and Indonesia, or the Andean highlands of Chile, Bolivia and Argentina.

Reducing the Dependence on Emerging Economies and Conflict Minerals

At the beginning of this century, the surge in the price of raw materials and the stockpiling of some minerals by emerging economies (such as China, which retains some of the raw materials it mines for domestic consumption) created **risks related to the supply of some metals and minerals**. It began to be difficult to access them, and in some countries there was an increased concern that prices would go through the roof. For example, China controls access to rare earth elements that are needed for batteries and catalytic converters—among many other applications. As another example, Indonesia is trying to control nickel exports.

Another well-known problem are the serious conflicts that exist in places where raw materials are extracted for the aforementioned key sectors. Such is the case for **the Democratic Republic of the Congo and conflict minerals**, or blood minerals: That is, minerals that are extracted amidst bloody wars, and that go hand in hand with mafias, illegal trafficking, child labor and other atrocities that seem to put environmental pollution and destruction in the background. After intense campaigns, timid legislation has been enacted in the EU. It is aimed at demanding traceability in supply chains, and it will not come into force until 2021. This legislation is insufficient, and is limited to regulating a few raw materials: gold, tantalum, tin and tungsten—leaving out other equally conflict-ridden minerals such as cobalt.

“Critical” Raw materials and the Mining Industry’s Responsibility

The European Union periodically identifies materials of economic or strategic importance for European industries—materials that may become scarce. Special attention is given to certain raw materials that are called “critical.” There are currently 27 on this list, which includes three of the four conflict minerals (cobalt, tantalum and tungsten), as well as the rare earth elements.

With this in mind, 100 billion euros from the European Commission are earmarked for flagship projects that cover the entire supply chain, including the manufacture of technology and cars. Additionally, mining activities are being promoted within Europe.

But the fact is that **sustainable mining does not exist**. The hidden face of this “energy transition” is the **social and environmental devastation that mining entails**. Communities affected by mining-driven destruction understand that this is a very harmful paradox: that **renewable energies and technologies considered to be sustainable require tons of minerals**.

The European Union’s current policy pursues growth at any price, in order to be competitive and “save the economy.” Many of its own deposits remain unexplored due to technological reasons, or because—in theory—use of, and access to land in Europe is much more regulated and protected than in other regions. However, **the perverse idea of saving the climate by continually increasing business and extraction prevails, and this poses high risks to forests and forest communities, largely in the Global South**. Corruption and lack of transparency about mining plans and projects

are also common.

European mining companies that are active in the Global South talk about “responsible mining,” which is basically the same destructive mining embellished with explanations about how they are doing local communities a favor. The most common arguments talk about the use of cutting-edge technology to prevent destruction and contamination; when in fact, this technology enables greater destruction of larger, more remote and often forested areas.

Likewise, **millions of public money flow every year from the EU’s European Investment Bank to mining projects—under the cloak of “development.”** In practice, this “development aid” facilitates mineral extraction and/or negotiation among countries and mining companies of the EU. **“Raw material diplomacy”** is applied to allow transnational companies access to raw materials; **this includes free trade agreements, and the use of World Trade Organization (WTO) tools** for conflict “resolution” in private courts. With these strategies, **EU companies and governments can justify highly violent and destructive practices**, such as what is happening in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with cobalt extraction.

With the growing demand for more raw materials from all over the world, several tons of waste are produced per person, per company and per year in the European Union. The first thing to examine and question is the economic model and lifestyle that leads to such incalculable destruction. We cannot bet on **an economy that must proceed with the savage extraction of raw materials**, with all the consequent violations of basic rights and the destruction of lifestyles and forests, mainly in the Global South.

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