
Responsible, sustainable, renewable and certified: An economy that destroys the planet?

The extraction of raw materials includes metals and minerals, as well as industrial agricultural commodities. When referring to raw materials, capitalist discourse stresses the presumed essentiality of these resources for the global economy. In so doing, it justifies ever more extraction at any cost, and in quantities that far exceed the integrity of the planet, and the safety, lives and health of people.

In the face of undeniable evidence of the devastating impacts of their industrial activities, extractive companies persist with greenwashing strategies to validate themselves. This has increased during the pandemic. “Certifications” for productive chains or raw materials, the use of concepts like “sustainable” or “responsible,” and “offset” mechanisms are some of the tactics that environmental movements denounce.XXX This extends to the way in which the term “renewable” is used to label new energy sources, in the context of so-called energy transition processes. These tactics are very deceptive, particularly in light of a transition that is anything but just. This is precisely the hypothesis from which I begin.

The prevailing idea is that economic growth based on the large-scale extraction of raw materials must occur, no matter what. With industries’ polluting emissions at their peak, governments claim to be focusing their efforts on saving the planet from the climate crisis under the terms of the Paris Agreement. In this context, there is talk of an energy transition to achieve “climate neutrality.” In other words, the industrial extraction of raw materials is being sold as acceptable, as long as it can “neutralize” or “offset” the destruction or contamination caused by another project in some other place.

Renewable

Renewable energies are called upon to replace fossil fuels (at least in part, for the time being). Due to their natural traits and with adequate management they do not run out; it is possible to use them continuously. These energies include hydroelectric, biomass, wind and solar energy for domestic and industrial use. For the transport sector, biofuels or agrofuels based on palm or soybean oil are promoted, as well as electric cars. Unlike conventional fossil fuel-based cars, electric cars do not produce polluting emissions while in use; however, a much greater quantity and variety of metals is required to manufacture electric cars and their massive batteries, thus opening a spectrum of problems related to the mineral extraction of these metals. Therefore, the mining industry is part of this discussion and is under the spotlight.

Renewable energies are presented as the “green” solution to *decarbonize* the economy. The Green Deal is the alleged metal- and mineral-dependent solution. But civil society is already criticizing the European Union for fabricating this lie on such a scale, since the Green Deal further drives the plunder of raw materials at the global level, within a green framework (1).

For promoters of this kind of renewable energy, it is not very important to reduce the over-extraction,

over-production and over-consumption of energy. Instead, they focus on calculating reductions in polluting gas emissions when renewables replace fossil fuels. Yet, the truth is that counting carbon dioxide is a very problematic activity, and one that serves capitalist interests of maintaining growth in energy production and consumption worldwide. There is no true monitoring of the contamination and impacts caused by the entire chain of renewable energy production.

As if that were not enough, the ultimate goal of many of the new energy projects around the world is no longer to cover people's basic energy needs. Rather, they aim to supply cheap energy to large industries, such as mining, metallurgy, automobile, aviation, arms production, construction, digital technology, and many others. Among other things, this reveals how the drive for renewable energies allows the violence and abandonment intrinsic to this energy system to continue unquestioned.

Sustainable

The truth is that these days, any company or initiative can call itself "sustainable" with only a minimum of effort. It is such a broad and vague term, that even unmistakably destructive activities—such as oil, mining or industrial monoculture expansion (for both energy purposes and the wood/pulp industry for paper production)—can call themselves "sustainable" or "responsible," or receive a label for producing in these ways.XXX But the impacts of these industries are very often brutal. They include theft, land-grabbing and land destruction; they cause displacement and hunger and therefore the genocide of native peoples, the legitimate owners of territories. Highly-polluting industrial activities use toxic chemicals and heavy machinery in sensitive ecosystems, such as tropical forests, peatlands, wetlands, salt flats or deserts. These activities not only effect the expansion of the agricultural frontier, climate change, the water supply and the regulation of rain and fires; they also impact food prices (2).XXX The idea that "development" means producing for export to already "developed" countries has been imposed on traditionally sustainable communities, communities who coexist with their territories. Now, development is "green" or "sustainable," because it "certifies" production and extraction processes that were previously denounced as unsustainable. Certification labels—of which there are thousands—aim to convince corporate financiers and to sell products to end consumers, mainly in the Global North.

Certifiable

In the framework of growing discussions on climate change and agreements to move toward "green" or "low-carbon" economies, everything is certifiable. Most industrial operations, seeking to do business as usual, have no option but to resort to some certification as a way to greenwash their image.

Certifications are intended to determine whether a product is "sustainable," and to contain the risks involved in its production, by developing environmental (and sometimes social) criteria that the product or operation must meet.XXX But who develops these criteria? Are they valid? What control mechanisms exist for their implementation and compliance? What investment is needed to make this monitoring effective? Who will carry out monitoring? Who pays for it? What about the social and human rights issues that are not being considered? And what does it mean that there is talk of answering these questions, but the years go by and nobody can get satisfactory answers?

There are answers to all of these questions, though they are not satisfactory.

Carbon offset programs that seek to "neutralize" pollution, such as the REDD+ programs, turn to certification in order to gain legitimacy in the face of overwhelming criticism. Monoculture certification

initiatives (e.g. for biofuels), such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) (3) and the Roundtable on Responsible Soy (RTRS) (4) have, since their inception, been widely contested by human rights and environmental organizations as greenwashing. These organizations include the World Rainforest Movement and Rainforest Rescue. When environmental organizations began to directly challenge these schemes in the first decade of the 2000s, we came across the challenge (among other things) of having to show the public that a scheme presented as a solution to an environmental problem was actually a complete hoax. The “solution” to the problem was actually a problem.

The goal of these initiatives is for products to be accepted, to cut down on questioning, and to open new markets to meet high demand. But the underlying problems remain unresolved. The initiatives or roundtables that claim to bring stakeholders together are very industry-dominated. Affected communities that have participated in these spaces have later expressed that the experience was frustrating. There have been accusations of only using affected people to lend legitimacy to the roundtables. Companies also seek benefits through certification, such as getting into carbon markets, taking advantage of fiscal policies through subsidies and incentives, and entering the market with an ecological image and an “eco” product. The systems involve a lot of bureaucracy, and it is hard to fully scrutinize them.

Most certification schemes are private and voluntary. This means that a company that wants to get certified must find a certification company and pay for this. The payment is to certify the product, business, or part of the business specified by the contracting company. So, obviously, if the certifier wishes to charge for its work and continue getting clients and contracts, it will tend to write in its report more or less what the client suggests. It will accommodate the client’s needs. Under this scheme, certifiers are not able to act independently.XXX Sustainability certifications are widely used in companies’ advertising campaigns. There is no entity conducting thorough compliance monitoring. Also, it is very common for companies to certify only a small part of their businesses: precisely the part they will later use to advertise instead than their other unsustainable operations.

The mining tailings dam in Brumadinho, Brazil is a prime example of what can happen, and of the consequences of certification. The dam broke in 2019, causing nearly 300 deaths and many other serious impacts—just a few days after getting a certificate for the stability of the structure (5).

There is still no certification system for mineral resources. In the last 10 to 15 years, several initiatives have been launched for mineral resources (aluminum, gold, tin) or for specific regions. For example, there is the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA), and the World Bank fund that promotes “climate-smart” mining activities. However, these initiatives do not cover global mining activities, nor do they cover all mineral resources. The European Union is working on a sustainability standard for raw materials, which previous experiences will lead us to view with very critical eyes.

The strategies that promote “sustainable” production on a large industrial scale lead to the loss of local economies, ecosystems, biodiversity, and the ways of life of Indigenous Peoples and other traditional peoples—all despite of beautiful and environmentally-friendly words. Some large conservation NGOs are part of the roundtable discussions on standards. WWF is a co-founder of several labels, such as the MSC on “responsible” fishing—to which the organization itself has come to object (6). Greenpeace ended up leaving the FSC timber certification scheme (7), claiming that its terms did not guarantee the rights of forest-dependent peoples (8). And it recently released a very comprehensive report on the subject of certification (9).

It should also be noted that certification standards, principles and and criteria are voluntary; they are

not mandatory like laws, such as due diligence. However, the existence of laws does not ensure their compliance if there are no controls. Such is the case of FLEGT and EUTR, European legislation to prevent illegal logging, which have failed to prevent illegally-logged wood from flooding into Europe. Who is responsible for ensuring that the raw materials and energy will truly be renewable, sustainable and responsible resources? Certainly not certifications, for the reasons stated.

Stop greenwashing and make a just transition

The fact is, the dominant economic system is based on such blatantly destructive extractive industries, that an army of certifiers tries to promise consumers—as well as financiers and sources of public subsidies—that “there is nothing wrong.” However, we must not forget that it is very easy for an industry to call itself “responsible.” To be responsible is something else.

There are many well-studied cases of certified business operations which, upon analyzing the circumstances, reveal a very different reality than the certifications suggest. Such is the case of Veracel and Aracruz’s extensive eucalyptus monocultures in Brazil, and a large IFO logging concession in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—all certified with the FSC label for “responsible” forest management. Such is also the case for IOI or Sinar Mas’s industrial oil palm plantations in Indonesia, which have the RSPO certification for “sustainable” palm oil. Monitoring requires so much effort and so many resources that many other suspected cases cannot be thoroughly monitored; and thus they forge ahead, without penalty (10).

Society, especially Western society, needs to become more conscious and demanding. It is deceptive to talk about new energy sources as “renewable” and “sustainable,” while the energy production and its benefits are concentrated in the hands of a few multinational companies. This deception threatens other territories and their inhabitants. A huge proportion of the claims made in advertising and the mass media, including about “certifications,” are based on highly questionable assumptions, and confusing and even false definitions and terminology. It is therefore necessary to ask questions and to stand in solidarity with the struggles in affected territories, as well as break free of the logic of over-consumption, so that pressure on territories decreases.

The goal of industries and their allied financiers is to conduct business that is reliant on technology, growth and the forcefully imposed idea of “more and more”—while easily overlooking basic considerations like respecting mother nature and taking care of life.XXX In this light, it is urgent to have regulations and laws that include mandatory considerations regarding the behavior of companies with respect to human rights, the destruction of nature, the monitoring of supply chains and corresponding penalties. With laws of this kind, broad solidarity in coherence with grassroots struggles, and a prioritization of human rights and the rights of nature, we could make progress on the problem that voluntary certification schemes have become. If we do not look at the wake left behind by agribusiness, we are imminently doomed to repeat this problem in the field of mining and other raw materials. The only solution centers on a radical reduction in the use, and especially the abuse of resources.

Guadalupe Rodríguez

Latin America campaigner and reference for Rainforest Rescue, and regional point person for the Yes to Life No to Mining (YLMN) Network. <https://www.rainforest-rescue.org/>
<http://www.yestolifenotomining.org/>

(1) [Impulsando la minería destructiva: la sociedad civil europea denuncia planes de materias primas de la UE en el Pacto Verde Europeo](#)

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- (2) [FAO Food Price Index](#)
 - (3) [Greenpeace leaving FSC: what next for commodity roundtables?](#)
 - (4) [Briefing Roundtable on Responsible Soy: Can Monoculture Soy be Responsible?](#)
 - (5) [TÜV Süd será alvo de ação coletiva na Alemanha por Brumadinho](#)
 - (6) [Nos oponemos a la primera certificación MSC para el atún rojo del Atlántico](#)
 - (7) [Greenpeace leaving FSC: what next for commodity roundtables?](#)
 - (8) [Greenpeace denuncia que la certificación forma parte del greenwashing empresarial y no están frenando la destrucción de los bosques](#), 2021
 - (9) [Destruction: Certified](#)
 - (10) There are numerous studies and critical reports that present these and other cases, such as the one mentioned by Greenpeace, the [EIA investigation, Who's watching the watchmen](#), and the book and [documentary, The Silence of the Pandas](#). The websites, [FSC-Watch](#) and [REDD Monitor](#) are good resources on the topic of greenwashing, with many concrete examples.