

THE MECHELEN LETTER

Your circular economy wheels do not turn and your pits still stink. We need a better plan.

„Vast raw material needs are at the core of the current proposal of an energy transition that exceeds planetary and societal boundaries.“

Dear panelists, dear audience, dear interested public,

From 9 to 11 September, KU Leuven holds their first Hydrometallurgy Symposium in the Lamot Center of tranquil Mechelen. Mining and oil companies, associated scientists and consultants are flying in from all over the World. They are presenting their latest research on how to sell mining and metallurgy as responsible and circular, while still relying massively on carbon emissions, extraction of ever more ores, toxic pollution, and perpetual growth and consumption.

In March 2024, communities, whose agricultural livelihoods and natural environments are critically endangered by the massive rollout of metal mining, have sent a letter and proposal for dialogue to the KU Leuven organizers of the Hydrometallurgy Symposium: There will be no such thing as responsible mining - neither in the European peripheries nor in the Global South - without a honest and inclusive dialogue that centers on the true cost and impacts of growth-based consumption and extractivism.[1] Organizers and their publicly funded commercial projects responded in rejection and by accusing communities of “*louzy tactics of anti-mining ideologists*”, “*shame on you!*”, and of “*moronic behavior*”.

The doors of this Symposium’s satellite event on the social acceptance of mining were then restricted to academic and industry audiences, while invited NGO panelists canceled their participation in solidarity with affected communities.

That is why we stand here, today, in pacific protest and to tell you that we will insist on dialogue proposed earlier. We consider your reactions of derogatory refusal not only culturally inappropriate, but also deeply concerning in terms of scientific codes of conduct, and in general destructive to a democratic European society founded on trust and tolerance.

Silencing and closing out the public and opposition, as well as verbally fooling rural communities that do not

share your industrial interests and world view are worrying signs of division and hatred that recently haunts various corners of Europe and the World.

It is under exactly these circumstances - avoiding societal scrutiny and accountability - that human rights and the environment usually suffer the most. And yet, while closing out the public, you warmly welcome those and accepted their sponsorship, that have a proven track record of abuse and violence:

Swedish mining major **Boliden** is responsible for the 1998 Doñana disaster, a toxic waste dam breach that led to vast destruction of arable lands and areas of the Doñana National Park in Southern Spain. A court case between Boliden and the regional Government of Andalusia began only in 2023. Currently, Boliden tries to develop two new open-pit mines for copper, iron and rare earths in Northern Sweden, a proposal that endangers the existence and Indigenous livelihoods of Sami reindeer herding communities near Kiruna and Alsbyn.

Savannah Resources, a mining investor from the UK, tries to develop a large lithium mine with various open-pits and waste sites in the FAO classified Barroso region of Northern Portugal. After years of conflict with the local population, Savannah recently tried to usurp community owned Common lands. Their latest community letter directly threatens land owners with expropriation. Savannah’s experts for ‘crisis communication’ and ‘social license’ also advocated for BP in the case of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and for the Gemfield Montespuez ruby mining operation in Mozambique, known for artisanal miners being buried alive by company bulldozers, villages raided and resettled, and machete militia acting for the operator.

In the case of the Thacker Pass lithium project of **Lithium Americas** in Nevada, Indigenous tribes and

environmentalists claimed a lack of free, prior, and informed consent, the destruction of sacred sites, impact on traditional livelihoods and a general greenwashing campaign around the open-pit project. In turn, Lithium Americas sued a group of environmentalists in 2023.

Sponsors of the Hydrometallurgy Symposium also include **SQM** backed Adionics. SQM is the world's No. 2 producer of lithium from salar brines and was accused by Indigenous communities' for excessive groundwater use in the Atacama desert. In the End of 2019, a Chilean environmental court ruled against SQM's operation, as it endangers fragile desert ecosystems and Indigenous livelihoods.

The Symposium is also supported and joined by oil major **Shell**, one of the top-ten corporate greenhouse-gas producers in the World. Internal documents from the company released in 2022, reveal private communication saying Shell does not have any plans to drastically reduce emissions for next 10–20 years.

Socio-environmental conflicts around the roll-out of the vast raw material needs for the energy transition seem thus not the exception around the World or in the peripheries of Europe. Together with a lack of significant carbon and fossil reduction, they are the very problematic core of the current proposal of a growth-based transition exceeding planetary and societal boundaries.

Or, in other words and as highlighted by a quantitative report on the excessive energy transitions resource needs issued by the Finnish Geological Survey GTK in

2021: "The World needs a new plan to build a genuinely sustainable non-fossil industrial ecosystem." [2]

Current climate and raw materials policies are based on the myth that we can maintain and even grow our current consumption levels by using renewable energy systems instead of fossil fuels. But the EU already consumes more than double of what would be sustainable and fair. Estimates show that fossil consumption just continues and renewable consumption only comes on top of it. The so-called decoupling of the economy does not have a feasible or scientific foundation when it comes to the numbers and proposals on how to construct and feed such a system in terms of raw materials needs.

This cannot continue: it jeopardizes the survival of all Life on Earth. Because our backyards of arable land, forestry, and traditional livelihoods are also your global backyards. And under the current proposals - also considering the greenwashing campaigning of industry-academic alliances to manipulate public opinion towards more mining - we will not accept for our backyards to be dug up for the short term profit of a few.

Policy must formulate concrete objectives to reduce the overall demand and consumption of raw materials in the EU and must investigate how the demand for raw materials can be reduced across the economy, e.g. by addressing military use and spending, looking at reduction measures.

It's time to start the discussion.

[1] The Leuven Letter, available at <https://bit.ly/leuven-letter>

[2] It's Time to Wake Up - There Are Bottlenecks in the Raw Materials Supply Chain, available at www.gtk.fi/en/research/time-to-wake-up/

The Signatories, Monday 9th of September 2024

Asociație 'Peisajul Cultural Roșia Montană' ROMANIA

Associação Unidos em Defesa de Covas do Barroso PORTUGAL

CATAPA BELGIUM

Ecologistas en Acción SPAIN

Fundação Montescola GALIZA

Growth Kills BELGIUM

Marš Sa Drine SERBIA

MiningWatch Portugal PORTUGAL

Miningwatch Romania ROMANIA

Movimento Ação Floresta Viva PORTUGAL

Movimento SOS Serra d'Arga PORTUGAL

Plataforma comarcal contra os vertidos da mina San Finx GALIZA

Plataforma No a la Mina de Cañaverla SPAIN

Plataforma Veciñal Mina Touro O Pino Non GALIZA

Plataforma Salvemos Las Villuercas SPAIN

Salvemos Esparteros - Plataforma Ciudadana Sierra de Morón SPAIN

Salvam Rovina ROMANIA

Trai cu Rost ROMANIA

XR Leuven BELGIUM

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