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# The Global South's double burden

## The Global North's energy transition cannot continue at the expense of those least responsible for climate change — indigenous peoples in the South

Most EU member states, the United States, and Canada all hope to make a substantial contribution to achieving climate neutrality by deploying renewable energies and electromobility. Amidst the urgency and accompanying fanfare, however, it is easily forgotten that the energy transition will require huge quantities of metals and minerals, such as lithium, copper, and other rare earths.

According to calculations made by the International Energy Agency (IEA) in 2021, the use of minerals and rare earth metals will multiply if the targets set by the Paris Climate Agreement are to be reached. For instance, the average electric car requires six times more minerals than one with a combustion engine. Compared with a similar-performance gas power station, a wind power station needs nine times the quantity of minerals.

To facilitate electromobility a 40-fold increase in the use of lithium has been estimated by 2040, while the use of copper will double, mainly for electric cables. And three times the minerals will be needed for renewable energy generation from wind and solar power. Currently known resources or planned mines cover only about 50 per cent of the necessary lithium and 80 per cent of the copper, however. Unless new deposits are discovered the energy transition will simply not be possible.

A large proportion of the minerals and metals used in Europe come from Latin America. The region is currently attracting the highest investment in mining worldwide, as there are major deposits of the metals crucial needed for the energy transition and electromobility.

## Latin America’s ‘Lithium Triangle’

In particular the deposits in the so-called ‘Lithium Triangle’ of Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina – accounting for an estimated 55 per cent of global

reserves – are now being developed. There, lithium can be found in salt lakes in unique ecosystems at heights of over 5000 metres. The three countries hope to use their rising revenues from lithium mining to tackle the economic crises exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The increasing exploitation of mineral deposits, however, harbours the danger of social conflicts and considerable environmental destruction.

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According to recent studies, the extraction in the Lithium Triangle can have severe negative consequences. Besides the high demand for water lowering the ground water table, the main problem will be the wind drift of dry chemical residues. Both threaten not only the environment, but also the basis of life of the (often indigenous) people living in the Triangle, who overwhelmingly live from agriculture.

Although there are environmental laws in all the countries, compliance often falls short because of weak government institutions and governments' craving for resource exploitation. They make far-reaching concessions to most foreign mining firms. Consultation mechanisms for indigenous groups are often inadequate, even though most countries have ratified the relevant international agreements, such as ILO Convention No. 169. The lack of voice in many Latin American countries often leads to fierce protests, sometimes even violent clashes.

## The people on the frontlines of climate change

Overall, the local population generally does not benefit from the material gains of resource exploitation. It is, however, exposed to the negative social, economic, and environmental effects, largely without protection.

Although local workers are involved in the construction phase, subsequent exploitation is carried out by highly qualified employees from other regions. The opening up of these often remote regions, with the influx of service providers from other parts of the country, and consequent rising prices, threatens residents' traditional lifestyles.

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The danger is that the indispensable transformation of the energy sector in the Global North will help to extend neo-colonial inequalities in the Global South, threatening its ecological and social sustainability. The very

*of resource scarcity and climate impacts.*

population groups who have contributed least to the climate crisis could thus suffer most from the consequences of the economic transition. All stakeholders should thus work together to limit the negative effects as far as possible and aim to benefit the whole of society.

## The responsibility of the Global North

The producer countries must adhere to the relevant environmental regulations. In order to ensure local residents' broad participation, for example, objective environmental impact studies – which precede every new mining project – should be carried out. They should be made available to the local population in good time and, if necessary, in local languages. Decisions on, for example, project approval or production conditions should not be left to the local administration or investors. They must first be discussed with those affected. Compliance with environmental regulations, possible damages for the local population or compensation payments should be priced in to the overall cost of projects from the outset.

Certificates guaranteeing environmentally friendly and socially equitable resource extraction should also play a more prominent role. International labour standards, such as occupational safety and health protection and the ban on child labour, should be respected. Other international agreements and conventions, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – enshrining, for example, the right to a clean environment – or the Escazú agreement on access to information, political participation, and justice in environmental matters in Latin America and the Caribbean should be part of bi- and multilateral trade agreements. Apart from that, the Supply Chain Act (*Lieferkettengesetz*) that has already been adopted in Germany, but is still under discussion in the EU, could provide new impetus.

Consumers also have an important role to play, for example, concerning what new cars or household goods they buy, and their personal energy consumption. Primary responsibility, however, falls on the resource processing countries. Over the coming decades, the importance of recycling and closed raw material cycles will increase because of resource scarcity and climate impacts. This is the only way of ensuring that climate protection in Western industrialised countries does not take place on the backs of disadvantaged groups and ecosystems in Latin America and other parts of the world.



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