



A Green and Just Transition, for Whom?

An analysis from Latin America

Executive summary

In recent years, the concept of a just and green transition has gained relevance as a response to the climate crisis and the urgent need to adopt more sustainable economies. However, this approach faces significant challenges, particularly in its implementation in regions of the Global South, such as Latin America, where the impacts of extractivism have historically been devastating for local communities and ecosystems.

This paper examines the potential impacts on human rights, global justice and the environment of European policies aimed at promoting a green energy transition model and ensuring strategic autonomy in the supply of critical raw materials (CRMs). In particular, it analyses the possible consequences of these policies in Latin America, a region rich in natural resources and CRMs. It questions whether this model could lead to a deepening and perpetuation of extractive practices with impacts on communities, territories and the environment. The case of the "Lithium Triangle" (Chile, Argentina and Bolivia) is presented as an example where excessive water use and the absence of clear prior consultation mechanisms are causing concern.

It is argued that in order to truly advance towards a fair and sustainable energy transition model, a systemic and global justice approach is needed, one that establishes robust regulatory and institutional frameworks based on human rights, and that considers and incorporates the perspectives and needs of communities in the Global South who are most directly affected by the consequences of extractivism and the climate crisis. The decisions made in this transition could perpetuate historical inequalities or, conversely, generate opportunities to build more just and equitable models of society and make investments more sustainable. It is therefore crucial to analyse how current policies affect local communities, especially in resource-rich regions such as Latin America.

EU policies for a green transition

Since its launch in 2019, the European Green Deal has been at the heart of the European Union's climate policies. With the central goal of transitioning to climate neutrality by 2050, through this pact, the EU seeks to promote renewable energies and a circular economy.

However, this transition requires vast quantities of critical raw materials such as lithium, copper and nickel, for which the EU is highly dependent on a few suppliers.

On the other hand, in recent years, the war in Ukraine, competition with China and, in general, a complex global geopolitical context have exposed this vulnerability, leading the EU, on the one hand, to prioritise 'strategic autonomy' through the diversification of supplies and, on the other, to favour competitiveness, rearmament and deregulation over the ambitions of a green and just transition, backtracking on its own policies and legislation

on sustainability and human rights.

The Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) is central to the EU's strategy to secure the supply of CRMs through diversification, increased domestic extraction and recycling, although imports will remain key. However, the CRMA and its implementing measures have been criticised for restricting democratic debate, ignoring international human rights and environmental standards, and relying excessively on non-binding regulatory mechanisms.

With only 6% of the world's population, Europe consumes between 25 and 30% of all metals produced. The CRMA and related European policies are based on projections and scenarios of continued growth in demand and consumption of raw materials, which are incompatible with the availability of these resources. In addition, recent massive investments in weapons and artificial intelligence compete with renewable energies for the use of already scarce CRMs. While we welcome the priority that the EU is giving to recycling and the more efficient use of CRMs, and the references to the importance of a circular economy, these measures and intentions are not enough.

In this context, Latin America has emerged as a key partner, due to its abundance of resources such as

copper and lithium, which are essential for the European energy transition. Thus, starting in 2023, the EU has revitalised its relations with Latin America through the resumption of the CELAC-EU Summits and a new agenda for the region, with a strong focus on trade, investment and the supply of critical raw materials. One example is the Global Gateway initiative, which allocates €45 billion to investment projects in the region in sectors such as energy, transport and mining.

However, this "new paradigm" that marks the way in which the EU wants to cooperate and partner with other countries has not been without criticism due to the risk of deepening neocolonial dynamics that privilege European economic and geopolitical interests, reproduce global inequalities, and eventually cause negative impacts on human rights and the environment.

A view from Latin America: just and green transition – for whom?

Latin America has been relegated to a historical role as a supplier of raw materials since colonisation, consolidated during industrialisation and perpetuated today. The intensive extraction of natural resources mainly for export has increased significantly in recent decades, accounting for 37% of the region's exports between 2015 and 2017. This expansion has generated tax revenues but also significant social, environmental and cultural costs. The negative impacts include, among others:

- **INCREASE IN SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS:**

Tensions in local, forced displacement, criminalisation of environmental defenders and violent conflicts in mining regions.

- **INEQUALITY AND ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY:**

Dependence on raw materials exposes countries to the volatility of international prices, concentrates benefits among local elites and perpetuates structural inequalities.

- **POLLUTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION:**

Water and soil pollution, accumulation of toxic waste, and significant contribution to climate change.

Historically, most of the profits from the extraction and export of natural resources in Latin America have remained in the hands of powerful economic groups and a small portion of Latin American societies.

On the other hand, communities affected by extractive activities suffer a double impact, as they are often the ones that experience the consequences of the climate crisis most acutely in their territories, caused largely by the consumption and business activities of the most industrialised countries. By perpetuating traditional extractivist logic, the green transition model promoted by the EU runs the risk of falling into green neocolonialism, exacerbating historical inequalities between Europe and Latin America.

Notable examples include copper mining in Peru, where heavy metal pollution has severely affected the health of communities, and lithium mining in the "Lithium Triangle" (Chile, Argentina and Bolivia), which is causing tensions due to intensive water use in arid areas.

In response to the extractivist model, Latin American social movements, indigenous peoples, peasants and Afro-descendants have proposed alternatives based on principles such as "good living". These visions promote harmony with nature, collective well-being and local sovereignty challenging extractivist logic.

Resistance strategies have been deployed, ranging from the organisation of popular consultations to the creation of transnational support and solidarity networks. These initiatives seek not only to halt specific projects, but also to propose alternative models of development based on equity and respect for nature, achieving certain advances in the protection of rights. We can highlight the Escazú Agreement and Advisory Opinion 32/25 of the IACHR on the climate emergency, which, among other things, recognises the rights of nature.

Recently, alternative narratives about a just transition model have also emerged from the region. These narratives propose systemic change through the transformation of power relations, the assumption of responsibility for the ecological debt of the North to the Global South, and the establishment of more equitable relations between countries at the centre and the periphery, and within countries, between elites and citizens. This implies not only repairing historical damage, but also strengthening local capacities to manage their own resources in a sustainable manner.

Conclusions and recommendations for a just transition for Latin America and Europe.

The green transition represents an opportunity to tackle the climate crisis. However, if we aspire to a fairer and more sustainable model, we must adopt a systemic and comprehensive approach that takes into account the economic and socio-environmental impacts of the transition in regions such as Latin America, as well as the historical and structural inequalities and violence that underpin them.

A truly just and green transition cannot be limited to replacing fossil fuels with renewable energies. It requires a profound transformation of production and consumption systems, prioritising global justice, human rights and environmental justice. To this end, the EU must assume responsible leadership that does not only consider European geopolitical and commercial interests, but also places the experiences and needs of countries and communities in the Global South at the centre, promoting equitable and respectful collaboration with life and the planet.

With these considerations in mind, we propose a series of key approaches, actions and processes that should be implemented by the EU, its Member States and organised civil society in order to move towards a green and just transition at the global level:

1. A green and just transition requires a systemic approach and global justice

RECOGNITION OF ECOLOGICAL DEBT

Recognition by the EU and its Member States of their historical and ecological debt to the peoples of Latin America, their significant role in causing the triple environmental crisis, and their greater responsibility in seeking reparations is a fundamental step towards a truly horizontal and values-based bi-regional alliance, as proposed by European institutions.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE ECONOMY

Following the recommendations of the UN International Resource Panel, the EU must prioritise the transformation of its economy to one based on circularity and sufficiency, setting limits on the consumption of each critical raw material (CRM), with measurable targets for each sector of the economy. The adoption of a European Circular Economy Law offers a good opportunity to do so.

PRIORITISATION OF RESOURCES

CRM resources must first and foremost serve to meet basic social needs, such as mobility, energy and housing, in Europe and Latin America. These must take absolute priority over other growing uses of CRMs, such as military applications or infrastructure for artificial intelligence.

TRANSFORMING GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEMS

The EU must contribute to the transformation of food systems by supporting sustainable practices and banning the export of dangerous pesticides.

ENERGY SOVEREIGNTY AND AUTONOMY

The EU must respect Latin America's energy and decarbonisation needs, taking into account local solutions and proposals.

2. A just and green transition must be democratic and participatory

PARTICIPATION AND FREE SELF-DETERMINATION OF PEOPLES

Latin American communities affected by extractive and renewable energy generation projects must have their right to participate in decisions about the use of their natural resources guaranteed, in accordance with internationally recognised agreements.

RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

In its projects in the region, the EU must ensure respect for the rights of indigenous and rural communities in Latin America, in accordance with ILO Convention 169, UNDRIP and UNDROP.

FREE, PRIOR AND INFORMED CONSENT

This non-negotiable right must be guaranteed at all stages of projects affecting the territories of indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant communities.

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Transparency and access to information on partnership and treaty negotiations and Global Gateway projects must be ensured, including accountability mechanisms for communities and civil society organisations. We also call on the EU to promote and respect the implementation of the Escazú Agreement in its relations with Latin American countries.

PREVENTION OF CORRUPTION

It is essential to establish and strengthen coordination mechanisms between national authorities and international organisations to identify, prevent and punish acts of corruption in MPF supply chains.

3. A green and just transition must put human rights and the rights of nature at the centre

GUARANTEES FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The EU and its Member States must establish binding and effective mechanisms for the protection of human rights and the environment in all policies and instruments related to the green transition, such as strategic partnerships and projects, trade agreements and Global Gateway investments.

REORIENTATION OF THE GLOBAL GATEWAY STRATEGY

A bi-regional partnership based on values requires a reformulation of the Global Gateway Strategy, placing the real priorities of local communities and governments at the centre for their just transition, without deepening and perpetuating extractivist and neo-colonial logics.

GENDER AND INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH

European policies for a green transition must include a gender and intersectional approach that considers the differentiated impacts on women and other groups, ensuring their participation in decision-making.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Protected natural areas, ecosystems with high biodiversity, which contain important water reserves or have great cultural and spiritual value, must be excluded from MPF exploration and extraction projects.

BINDING RULES AND DUE DILIGENCE FOR COMPANIES

In its drive for simplification and deregulation, the EU must not undermine the core of the Due Diligence Directive, which is currently at risk of being seriously weakened. Similarly, the EU must become more actively involved, with a more ambitious mandate, in the negotiations for a binding United Nations treaty on business and human rights.

PROTECTION OF CIVIL SPACE AND DEFENDERS

It is essential that the EU strengthens protection guarantees for civil society and defenders of the environment, land and territory in the Latin American countries with which it has relations, recognising and promoting the diversity of voices, leadership and perspectives.