"Sustainable" mining: a contradiction in terms

One of the natural resource extraction activities that generates the most negative impacts, while also generating the most profits, is mining. Perhaps this is why the big global mining companies are now competing not only over mineral reserves but also to portray themselves most convincingly to the public as prime examples of “sustainability”.

Many mining companies operate in tropical forest areas. The publicity campaigns of so-called “sustainable” companies often highlight an activity aimed at favourably impressing the public: in areas where forests have to be cleared to reach the minerals in the sub-surface, some companies reforest the entire area, and not with eucalyptus trees, but with numerous species of native trees. This is meant to convince people that they strive to ensure the recovery of the natural environment as a whole, and as a result, there are no negative impacts from their “sustainable” operations. But is this really true?

First of all, it would be interesting to know if neighbouring communities agree that by planting native tree species, it is possible to reproduce the forest that formerly occupied the area where mining operations were carried out. Obviously, it is impossible to fully recover the former wealth of biodiversity, of water resources, of the multiple roles, including spiritual roles, that were once played by the forest, the product of a process that took thousands of years to develop. Nor is it possible to heal the trauma suffered by neighbouring communities subjected to the destruction, pollution, dangerous and poorly paid employment and human rights abuses that are typical of the vast majority of mining operations established in a region of conserved ecosystems. This is what is leading to the emergence and strengthening of local, national and international resistance networks to oppose destructive mining activities.

Secondly, the negative impacts of mining on the environment and local communities are not limited to the extractive process, but also spread wider and deeper through the construction of roads, railways and canals needed to transport the minerals; through large plants where the various minerals are processed and used, such as steel mills and nuclear reactors; and finally, through final products that are also sources of pollution and even contribute to global warming, such as cars, trucks and planes, not to mention the amount of waste generated throughout and at the end of the entire process.

Thirdly, the mining industry is characterized by enormous social inequality in terms of the distribution of wealth and benefits. The countries and regions of Africa, Latin America and Asia that are the leading producers of minerals are mostly regions and countries whose populations suffer all manner of violations, particularly women. In the meantime, the industry is dominated by transnational companies based in the highly industrialized countries of the North -such as the United States, Europe and Japan- where most of the final products end up. The average per capita consumption of natural resources including minerals in some of those countries is 16 tons – reaching even as high as 40 tons! – while countries like India, for example, consume an average of four tons per capita annually. (1)

Fourthly, it is interesting to note that, in the discussion and promotion of alternatives related to the so-

called “low carbon” and “green” economy, many supposedly “green” high-technology solutions depend on the exploitation of minerals (see the article on the EU in this bulletin). This significantly undermines the credibility and, obviously, the sustainability of these purported alternatives.

There are basically two real alternatives that need to be pursued with the utmost urgency: measures to drastically reduce the exploitation of mineral resources and levels of consumption, primarily in the industrialized countries; and the search for means to make more efficient use of these resources, in other words, to do more with less. A new UNEP report points in this same direction (see the related article in this bulletin).

Finally, replanting native trees is a praiseworthy activity, but not when it is linked to intentional and destructive deforestation. It is more than obvious that there is an urgent need for structural changes in the current model of unsustainable production and consumption in the industrialized countries, which has now been copied by emerging economies like China, Brazil and India.

(1)http://www.unep.org/resourcepanel/Publications/Decoupling/tabid/56048/Default.aspx