

Beware Europe's New Green Colonialism

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Europe is leading the world in cutting carbon emissions. By 2020, the European Union had reduced emissions by an [estimated 34 percent](#) over 1990 levels, which puts its promised 55 percent reduction by 2030 safely within reach. By comparison, the United States has managed only [a 7 percent reduction](#) over the same period.

But this European success story comes with a big asterisk. The European Union has made these cuts largely thanks to the Global South. Make no mistake: it's not an equal partnership. A new "Green colonialism" dominates north-south relations, and it comes in two principal forms.

Many of Europe's most carbon-intensive industries have relocated outside the EU, while still supplying products to European consumers. This "emissions outsourcing" has allowed European countries to appear virtuous, even as they simply move emissions around in a global shell game. France, Italy, and Germany are among the world's [top importers of embodied carbon](#) in the form of cars, industrial machinery, and domestic appliances shipped from countries like China and India.

The EU has also been able to cut emissions by shifting to clean energy technologies like wind and solar. But these renewable sources require critical minerals—many of which come from the Global South. A great deal of the lithium for lithium-ion batteries is dug up in Argentina, Bolivia and Chile while much of the cobalt in the magnets used for wind turbines is extracted in Congo. At the same time, the rush for balsa wood, used for the construction of wind turbine blades, is having terrible consequences for the Ecuadorian Amazon and the indigenous communities that inhabit it. Additionally, some of the dirtiest processing of these minerals takes place in the Global South, like the world's [largest single rare earth element refinery](#) in Malaysia.

Because of these forms of Green colonialism, Europe's carbon footprint is far greater than its stated emissions. And right now, the European Union is discussing several "clean energy" policies" without sufficiently acknowledging this Green colonialism.

The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is supposed to reduce the "carbon leakage" associated with the offshoring of carbon-heavy industry and agriculture by imposing a tax on imports that don't meet strict EU regulations on carbon content. On the face of it, this seems like a sensible way to prevent polluting companies from setting up shop overseas.

But CBAM hits the Global South with a double whammy. Exporting countries dependent on European markets—like Senegal's fertilizer producers—will suddenly find that their carbon-heavy products are no longer competitive. And the money raised by the border tax will go to help European industries—not industries in the Global South—to reduce their carbon footprint. The EU must consider extending financial assistance as well to Global South producers, or else the gulf between a "clean" Europe and a "dirty" Global South will only grow.

The second piece of legislation is the Critical Raw Materials Act. Here, the EU wants to secure access to the inputs that make its high-tech, clean energy transition possible.

The sad truth of the matter, however, is that there's simply not enough [accessible lithium](#) for all cars to shift to EVs or [enough indium and neodymium](#) for all the solar panels and wind turbines needed to replace oil. This competition among countries and regions to mine, process, and purchase critical raw materials resembles the colonial-era rush to secure gold, silver, and copper in the Global South.

Some aspects of the Act are commendable—particularly the emphasis on recycling and home-shoring the mining and processing in a way that reduces extractivism in the Global South. But when combined with provisions in new EU trade agreements to ensure access to critical minerals, the European approach becomes more ominous. The EU's recently concluded free trade agreement with Chile, for instance, [limits](#) the latter's ability to supply local producers with critical materials like lithium at cheaper prices in order to build up its own clean-energy industries. This becomes an obstacle to the equally-needed energy transition in the Global South.

Europe is not alone in this approach to the Global South. The decarbonization of the North through green growth depends on a new phase of environmental despoliation of the Global South, which has once again become a zone of sacrifice. We see this in the dash for fossil gas in Africa, due to the war in Ukraine, as well as investment in Green Hydrogen for export to Europe which does little to enhance the real economic or political power of supplying countries.

Decarbonization is necessary, but it is not enough, much less an end in itself. It should not consolidate new forms of extractivism and sacrifice zones in the Global South. The world needs an alternative to this new Green colonialism. As set out in the [Manifesto for an Ecosocial Energy Transition from the Peoples of the South](#), a truly equitable energy transition would address the unequal distribution of energy resources and advance energy democracy. It would de-emphasize large-scale institutions—corporate agriculture, huge energy companies—as well as market-based solutions in favor of sustainable, community-led solutions.

We want an equal partnership with the European Union, one which promotes a clean energy transition for both North and South. Transitions will only be fair if there is climate justice. In this way, we can help the EU remove the asterisk attached to its successful reduction of carbon emissions.

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