



## INFORMATIONAL TEXT

### **Towards a green world?**

In the face of rapidly advancing climate chaos and growing socio-environmental protests, the automobile industry is investing heavily in the electromobility market. This new model of transportation has allowed it to push governments and the business sector towards a green economic growth agenda and to respond to the criticisms of the past decades for delaying and avoiding regulations to protect our living planet.

Currently, the transportation sector uses mostly dirty fuels, such as gasoline, diesel, and gas. However, electric vehicles can become mobile through the generation of electricity with renewable energies. This is how electromobility has become a supposed opportunity to diversify the energy supply and to be a technological pillar of the transition to low-emission societies. Among the benefits presumed by the automobile industry are zero direct emissions of gases and fine particles, lower noise emissions, the reinforcement of competitiveness and innovation in the industry, and the possibility of promoting a greater generation of green energies.

The anti-extractivist movements claim that electric cars are a green wash, given that a greater demand for minerals is needed for the manufacture of these vehicles, besides not being a real solution for cities and the rural world. Despite all this, electromobility is seen as one of the main solutions for an energy transition to reach the climate targets set in the Paris Agreement in 2030.

### **A white gold**

In order to produce the batteries needed for electric vehicles, large quantities of minerals such as cobalt, copper, and lithium, among others, are required. One of the largest lithium reserves is located in the Atacama Desert in Chile, the driest place on

Earth after Antarctica. According to forecasts, world lithium extraction - also known as white gold - is expected to triple by 2025. The European Union plays an essential role: almost 80% of lithium exports go to this market.

Lithium is found in the groundwater of salt flats, which are fragile life support systems for a series of lagoons and wetlands with unique wildlife. Mineral extraction has put systematic and increasing pressure on the region's water goods, also affecting the traditional ways of life in the area, where agro-pastoral economies are still practiced, based on the rational use and distribution of surface water for drinking, harvesting food, and raising animals. Water shortages in different villages, contamination levels of vegetables, and lung disease among the mine workers themselves are recurrent problems throughout the area.

The abundance of minerals has led to the installation of large infrastructure projects and the implementation of public policies that mining companies have taken advantage of to transform the region's economy since the beginning of the 20th century. In Chile, mining participates in a relevant way in the national economy, representing around 55% of the country's exports in the last decade. These exports have been possible thanks to free trade agreements that often include investment liberalization, customs arrangements, and low taxes for the commercialization of minerals such as lithium.

### **Threatening extractivism**

Various anti-extractivist groups in the area and scientific investigations have pointed out that lithium mining has led to increased aridity of the rivers, a decrease in wetland vegetation, and chemical alteration of the salt flats and their microbial communities. The loss of biodiversity is a waste of the greatest life insurance for the people who live there. Lithium mining companies claim that they do not generate significant impacts on nature, being supported by state (and often municipal) authorities when granting environmental operating licenses, despite the fact that the projects have technical inconsistencies and fallacies.

This situation is aggravated by deficient processes of indigenous participation and consultation: many of the procedures are non-existent, incomplete, or have already been previously arranged with the communities themselves through bribery. The forms of corruption are articulated in a variety of ways that emphasize regulatory aspects, paying bribes to obtain a contract, secure a land concession, obtain environmental permits or seek to manipulate anti-extractivist movements.

In these contexts, companies try to advance in the social and legal validation of their projects through corporate social responsibility programs, external consultancies to present themselves to the international community, and the allocation of percentages of lithium sales in direct benefits to indigenous communities. The economic factor becomes essential in the face of the disappearance of traditional economies, fierce competition from local tourism, and the absence of a State that does not assume responsibility for social welfare. The result is a fracturing of social relations and forms of local politics between indigenous and non-indigenous communities, socio-environmental movements, and municipalities.

### **Old-fashioned mobility**

Germany is Europe's largest manufacturer of electric cars. In its green growth strategy, the German industry and government have set their eyes on lithium from the Atacama Desert. Recently, car manufacturers - such as Volkswagen, Audi, Porsche, and Mercedes Benz - have commissioned and financed through the German Cooperation Agency (GIZ) a series of dialogues with Atacama communities and Chilean government entities for the establishment of an "Association for Responsible Lithium". According to critics, this mechanism serves a relationship of greater dependence on automotive interests that promote greener lifestyles in the Global North, at the expense of territories and communities in the Global South.

From another perspective, automobiles - whether electric or fossil fuel-powered - spend most of their time parked and occupying a large part of public space. They also turn these spaces into hostile places that affect the mental health of humans and non-humans, and erode any possibility of establishing a minimum of urban life. Authorities also build and plan highways that reinforce inequalities, taking space away from housing, and displacing street markets that are an important part of the urban food chain.

The organizations for a cycling culture argue that the automobile has become a monoculture that has been imposed on the different urban and rural mobilities. They warn that the individual electric vehicle is equivalent to the replacement of one monoculture by another monoculture, and that the perception of a supposedly low environmental impact of these cars would lead to the substitution of the multiple uses of public transport and bicycles. In short, what for decades was a symbol of freedom, power and prestige, today means a model that urgently needs to become obsolete.

## **Towards a true transformation**

The Just Transition is a key part of the urgent transformation from fossil fuels to renewable energies. But in the face of the current political, economic and social situation involving the environmental emergency, social movements are asking whether this energy transition and the supposedly sustainable ways of life in the Global North is a form of green colonialism. The international climate policies and the automobile industry's proposals continue to reproduce colonial dynamics under the excuse of saving the planet, masked behind the material needs of the transition. Finally, it is limited to the consumption of natural common goods in territories such as Atacama, keeping them helpless, in order to transfer those same goods to the companies and elites of the Global North.

The questions of the movements are many: who will guide this Just Transition? Who will have access to electromobility? What kind of electromobility will people have access to? Who will benefit from a transition led by the large industries of the Global North? Will international cooperation agencies promote different non-extractive ways of living in territories where the minerals are? Is economic growth compatible when we have already exceeded the biophysical limits of the planet? Any answer will not be sufficient if the extractivist model as a whole is not questioned.

Through an effective social dialogue between governments, companies, social movements, trade unions and civil society, we must guarantee the creation of quality, low-emission jobs for the workers of the affected companies, decentralization and energy degrowth, social protection for the surrounding communities, large investments in the regeneration of vital supports for wildlife, and a redistribution of wealth that will lead us to more sustainable models of society.

## **Weaving majorities**

Building bonds of solidarity becomes very important when it comes to supporting the protagonism of indigenous and non-indigenous communities in climate change adaptation plans. The solutions are many: restoring dispossessed lands, guaranteeing access to water, protecting environmental defenders, and promoting legally binding treaties with corporations and human rights organizations. The recommendations given by environmental organizations also point to the importance of defending, promoting, and learning from the great plurality of non-extractive livelihoods, without appropriating or romanticizing their diverse struggles.

Likewise, solutions for sustainable mobility are long-standing: automobile travel must become the slowest, most expensive and inconvenient option, and all barriers to walking, public transport and cycling must be broken down. Also needed are the expansion of electric (mini)bus systems, production of commuter trains, streetcars, regional long-distance and freight trains, and intelligent transit management systems. Sustainable mobility designs have underlined the importance of neighborhoods, communes and regions being able to decide, in order to create community and a sense of belonging.

The collective capacity to propose a radical change of direction must come hand in hand with diversifying current narratives on Climate Justice and Just Transition, such as electromobility. New voices must be raised to continue forcing changes in education, but also in economic, ecological, social and political practice. This is how new majorities will shape new paths.

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