

Short report

SODISEES Kick off conference

Brussels, 7 December 2023

IndustriAll Europe and Euromines, which represent the European metals and minerals mining industry, have jointly unveiled their EU-funded project titled 'Enhancing Social Dialogue for Advancing Sustainable Practices in the European Extractive Industries.'

Critical for both industry and the realization of the European Green Deal objectives, raw materials play a pivotal role. Despite their significance in achieving Europe's climate goals and ensuring strategic autonomy, mining activities in Europe often face negative perceptions. The social partners firmly believe that initiatives focused on social dialogue can contribute to securing responsible and sustainable raw materials from Europe, playing a crucial role in the transition to a decarbonized economy.

Spanning two years, from 2023 to 2025, the project aims to foster social dialogue within the sector, making a concerted effort to enhance sustainable mining practices in Europe. Additionally, the project seeks to showcase instances where sustainable mining and raw material processing have been successfully implemented in Europe, with social acceptance cultivated through the facilitation of social dialogue.

The project commenced with a conference in Brussels, bringing together key figures from the extractive industry to deliberate on crucial matters related to occupational health and safety (OHS), sustainability, and the essential social dialogue required to establish favourable working conditions in the sector.

Firstly, it discussed the latest developments of the Critical Raw Materials Act at a moment when the European Parliament was still ratifying the agreement reached with the Council of the EU. Among the main points presented were the increase in the recycling benchmark from 15% to 25%, the addition of aluminium and synthetic graphite to the Act, the restoration of nature after the exploitation of resources, and the acceleration of issuing exploitation permits and footprint certifications. Recommendations from the European Commission, in addition to the supervision of the European Parliament, should guide the action in each country. However, concerns about the secret defence clause of the Act, which can be claimed by any Member State, pose a potential danger for the collection of information by the European Commission. Another important point raised was the need to maintain European sovereignty through its own access to resources on our continent, rather than buying from third countries outside the EU, whose companies usually do not comply with the necessary labour and environmental standards.

Secondly, another aspect discussed during the conference was the need to create more dialogue with the different stakeholders, including local communities in order to improve acceptability. But the main aspect that was discussed is the need to improve the social dialogue. The extractive industries are an economic sector without a positive image within local communities, and there is a need to change the narrative while including everyone. The Green Deal requires a significant number of raw materials for green technologies. In this context, the Swedish Mining Association presented a communication project they launched in recent years to reach specific target groups of the public against mining. They launched several advertising videos to promote the necessity of mining in Sweden. According to their data, the result of the campaign was positive. Furthermore, Just Transition should be addressed which also requires a strong dimension of collective negotiation, as many workers face the need for upskilling and re-skilling into green energy low industries and technologies.

Thirdly, the exchange of information on the situation of extractive industries in EU countries, the sharing of best practices, and the crucial role of social dialogue were present throughout the conference. The European Commission is planning to deliver guidelines to monitor sectorial agreements and promote best practices. Among the risks identified in social dialogue was the absence of direct feedback from workers engaged in on-site mining activities. That's why it is important to maintain dialogue at the national, sectorial, and company levels. Greece seems to lag behind in engagement at the company level, especially in small and medium-sized companies that may need further guidance in the social dialogue process. Moreover, the discussions in social dialogue have been limited, especially to health and safety measures, but it is believed that the topic can broaden.

In contrast, in the Swedish case, it can be observed that the TU is working along the entire supply chain and at all levels, establishing social dialogue. They organized ad hoc problem-solving working groups directed to tackle specific challenges. It was agreed that capacity building in both senses is a key point to create better social dialogue, especially within trade unions and with small and medium-sized enterprises. A just transition approach should guide the works and the discussion, as there are already some institutional structures where workers, employers, and CSOs are collaborating to establish the policy frame for the transition.

As one of the best examples of the success of collaboration and social dialogue between TU and employers is the NEPSI project, in the sector of crystalline silica. This is a critical material whose pure contact with humans can cause huge harms. Starting in 2006, and through dialogue, they created the NEPSI Social Dialogue Agreement, which sought to protect health, minimise, and prevent exposure to respirable crystalline silica (RCS), and share good practices, releasing a guide. Workers predominantly supported the agreement, and health and safety measures were improved in the sectors dealing with RCS.

Finally, representative of IndustriAll Europe and representative from EUROMINES presented the rationale for the SODISSES Project: When there is good social dialogue, there are good working conditions, which undoubtedly falls within the scope of the social dimension of the CRM Act. A study will be launched and will be drafted based on desk research, interviews, and data collection from the partners. Three workshops will be delivered in Sweden, Spain, and Poland, and a final conference in 2025 will take place to discuss the results with key stakeholders. At the starting point of this project, there are already two challenges to be discussed with the partners and the Commission: to find a definition for sustainable mining and a definition for responsible raw materials.

In summary, the extraction of raw materials and mining are at the core of the foundation of the Green Deal and the Transformation. Social acceptance and social dialogue need to go hand in hand to ensure that good jobs are a key aspect of the transitions. Workers should be actively involved in a systematic way in the exploitation process to provide harmony not only within workers but also with local communities. EU investments should be accompanied by social conditionalities to ensure the participation of stakeholders in the new European extractive strategy.

Apart from the interventions of speakers such as MEP Hildegard Bentele, a representative of the European Commission's DG Grow, and a representative of the European Commission's DG EMPL, the discussion was lively, thanks to the different trade unions and employers' organizations that form part of the partnership. The richness of the debate made this conference a perfect starting point for the SODISSES project.