Investigation in Zambia highlights human rights risks in mining of ICT minerals

Unsustainable extraction of copper, a mineral frequently used in ICT products, has caused environmental degradation and adverse impacts on human rights in local communities in Zambia, a new Swedwatch report finds. The report stresses the need for ICT companies to address human rights risks in their sourcing of all high-risk minerals, beyond conflict minerals and cobalt.

In the report *Copper with a cost – Human rights and environmental risks in the minerals supply chains of ICT*, Swedwatch presents findings from research in Zambia where it assessed human rights risks in the large-scale mining of copper. Copper is used in a vast number of information and communication (ICT) products, and as Zambia is one of the largest copper producers in the world, there is a clear possibility that Zambian copper is found in today’s global ICT supply chains.

Zambian mining projects have often been linked to adverse human rights impacts, particularly for communities located near the mining sites. Swedwatch’s research in two of the country’s mining areas found that environmental pollution from copper mining impacted negatively on the right to clean water and health for community members in the Chingoila district. In the district of Kalumbila, community members who had been relocated due to the establishment of a new mine claimed they were facing unemployment and had problems accessing markets where they could sell their crops.

“Swedwatch’s study finds that communities have suffered from food insecurity and lowered income levels as pollution of soil and water has degraded their farmland, and that relocation of communities following the establishment of mining projects have proved challenging. Even in cases where a mining company has provided compensation or invested in community programs, livelihoods have been difficult to restore”, says Linda Scott Jakobsson, researcher at Swedwatch.

Swedwatch’s case study illustrates several human rights risks inherent in large-scale mining of minerals, particularly in poor areas with weak institutions and low enforcement of law. Findings also highlight the need for efficient human rights due diligence by companies that source high-risk minerals. In recent years, companies in the ICT sector have taken steps to address risks particularly associated with the extraction of so-called conflict minerals and cobalt. Although efforts may vary between companies, Swedwatch’s findings indicate that the ICT sector needs to expand this scope in order to adequately address human rights and environmental risks.

“It is positive that the private sector is taking steps to address human rights risks in minerals supply chains. However, considering the vast number of minerals that ICT products contain, our findings indicate that there is a need for the ICT sector to enhance human rights due diligence efforts in their sourcing of all high-risk minerals”, says Linda Scott Jakobsson.

In order to respect human rights and the environment in line with international guidelines throughout their supply chains, the report also calls for companies along ICT supply chains to safeguard against pollution of water, soil and air and to engage with stakeholders and rights holders in mining communities to prevent and mitigate human rights risks and impacts.

The report *Copper with a cost* was conducted within the EU-wide campaign Make ICT Fair.