

## Raw Materials Week: EU must decrease consumption and embrace eco-sufficiency

Written by Leida Rijnhout and Riccardo Mastini on 8 November 2017 in Opinion  
Opinion

World needs to 'gear up' for natural resource 'paradigm shift' say Friends of the Earth Europe campaigners.



Extractive industries often viewed as a "resource curse" in Africa and Latin America, says environmental group | Photo credit: Adobe Stock

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Right now, "Raw Materials Week 2017" is taking place in Brussels. Raw materials, such as metals, minerals, and forest-based materials are increasingly important to the EU's economy.

They are indispensable for the existence of some strategic sectors, such as automotive and information technology. But they are also crucial for the desired transition to a low carbon economy, the needed shift to renewable energy.

European metals industry association Eurometaux forecasts that by 2050 we will need 300 per cent more metals for building solar panels.

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Most of those raw materials you will not find in Europe itself, but in Africa and Latin America. Although many people see it as a good trading opportunity for those countries, more often it is seen as the so called "resource curse".

Extractive industries cause a lot of irreversible environmental damage, at the sites themselves and with the ensuing toxic waste. Soil, water, air, and forests are polluted by mining activities, and often affect local communities in a negative way.

Obviously, this means an increase in local social conflicts. According to environmental corruption campaign group Global Witness, so far this year 158 people have been killed for taking a stand against environmental destruction.

At this current rate, chances are that four environmental defenders will be killed this week somewhere on the planet. In this regard, the Environmental Justice Atlas project is aimed at shedding a light on environmental conflicts taking place far from the eyes of citizens and consumers of the end products.

It is now generally accepted that we need to decrease our consumption of raw materials, because of environmental and social reasons.

The green growth pundits will argue that resource efficiency (also called decoupling) has increased over time and this will see our ecological footprint shrink in the long run. However, while the first claim is true, the second one unfortunately is not.

"We need to avoid under all circumstances that EU water, bird and habitat directives are undermined by the search for more minerals"

Part of the explanation is the "rebound effect". For instance, the production of aluminium in Europe has experienced a 53 per cent reduction in carbon emissions since 1990. Nevertheless, carbon emissions are constantly on the rise because the money we save from resource and energy efficiency, we spend in other products that use energy and natural resources, thus overall consumption rises.

Currently a sub group under the European Raw Material Initiative is proposing recommending to legislators to consider weakening EU Natura 2000 protections, to allow, under certain conditions, the exploitation of minerals in safeguarded sites.

We need to avoid under all circumstances that EU water, bird and habitat directives are undermined by the search for more minerals.

What we need is an “absolute” decoupling, meaning a decline in natural resource and energy use in absolute terms over time. This latter situation is essential if the global economy is to remain within the planetary boundaries.

But evidence of absolute decoupling happening anywhere in the world is hard to find.

As there is no technological breakthrough in sight that can help us achieve absolute decoupling and as a strategy focused solely on pursuing eco-efficiency can backfire, we must gear up for a paradigm shift.

"Resource efficiency alone leads to nothing, unless it goes hand in hand with an intelligent restraint of economic growth and consumption"

We have to break free from the green or sustainable growth dogma and embrace a strategy of eco-sufficiency.

Resource efficiency alone leads to nothing, unless it goes hand in hand with an intelligent restraint of economic growth and consumption. But this is hardly achievable given the debt-fuelled economic growth pursued by the reckless global financial system.

A new socio-economic structure needs to be brought into being if we want to find a way out of the impeding ecological crisis. We need to build an economy of “care”, both for each other (through investments in social work activities) and for the commons (through regeneration and conservation of ecosystems).

We also need to rediscover the long-forgotten concept of “craft”, meaning the appreciation for objects built to last and the desire for reusing them instead of throwing them away.

**Organised by Friends of the Earth Europe, the upcoming [Eco-sufficiency: moving beyond the gospel of eco-efficiency](#) [7] conference on Monday 20 November in Brussels at the European Economic and Social Committee, aims to spark debate around the crucial questions that will shape the transition towards a post-growth economy.**

### **About the author**

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[Development](#) [8]

[Economic Affairs](#) [9]

[Environment](#) [10]

[Trade](#) [11]

[Green week](#) [12]

[Foreign Affairs](#) [13]

## Categories

[Business and industry](#) [14]

[Circular economy](#) [15]

[ETS](#) [16]

[Environment](#) [17]

[International Relations](#) [18]



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- [13] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/tags/foreign-affairs>
- [14] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/business-and-industry>
- [15] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/categories/circular-economy>
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