



**Global  
Witness**



**ALYANSA  
TIGIL MINA**

# **Power, Corruption and Reprisals**

**How Philippine communities pay  
the price for Europe's electric  
vehicle boom**

**DECEMBER 2025**



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## Introduction

When Nick Iriberry was just five years old, he became the youngest plaintiff in a landmark lawsuit against a nickel-mining company accused of a litany of harms – to the environment, to human rights, to local people’s livelihoods.

The year was 2010, and the lawsuit united fisherfolk, farmers, community activists, Indigenous people and children like Nick against Marcventures Mining and Development Corporation. The place was Cantilan, a sleepy Spanish colonial-era coastal town nestled under lush green mountains in Surigao del Sur, southern Philippines.

Waters teemed with fish in this idyllic corner of the Philippines. Rich farmlands were the lifeblood of the local economy. These waters are now polluted by heavy metals and toxins leeching from Marcventures’ mines. These farmlands are now poisoned and exposed to floods and drought.

In the face of threats, intimidation and violence, the community launched their lawsuit. By law, the case was meant to be resolved within a year.

Nick Iriberry was 20 by the time the court finally reached its verdict.

### EXPOSING THE DAMAGE

This investigative report – supported by our partner [Alyansa Tigil Mina](#) - exposes the damage nickel mining has done in Cantilan and beyond. It reveals an industry in the clutches of dominant and corrupt political dynasties – with the President’s cousin Martin Romualdez among those cashing in. It shows how Marcventures and its sister company Bright Green Resources – both of which Romualdez is believed to own – used his political connections to sidestep mining regulations and evade accountability.

It looks at the ruthless tactics these and other mining companies use to keep their operations running in the face of fierce community opposition – from false promises to bribes to violent repression.

It tells the stories of some of those threatened for speaking out.

It asks why in August 2025, after 15 years and all the evidence against it, the court found in favour of the company.

### THE FIGHT GOES ON

This is about much more than one company, one community and one country. Our investigation suggests that raw nickel from Surigao del Sur is very likely to end up in the value

chains of some of the biggest electric-vehicle producers in the world – including Tesla, Volkswagen and Mercedes.

Even though international due diligence standards require companies to assess human rights and environmental risks throughout their value chains, these are not mandatory. Our investigation shows why legally binding legislation is needed.

Under [upcoming EU legislation](#), it is expected that these companies would be obliged to conduct mandatory due diligence on human rights and environmental harms in their value chains. But aggressive lobbying from some of the world’s most powerful multinational companies – and backed by the Trump administration – is [putting that legislation under threat](#).

As the European electric vehicle market drives demand for nickel ore in the Philippines – one of the [most dangerous countries in the world to defend the environment](#) – this report shows why we must fight for strong due diligence legislation. It raises this question: what kind of global economy do we want to build in the wake of our transition away from fossil fuels?

The court’s verdict has been reached, but the story is far from over.

As Dodo Anino, a 79-year-old fisherman from Surigao del Sur, says. “We... go on with the fight.”



Marcventures nickel mining operations as seen from near Ayoke Island, Cantilan, the Philippines. [Erwin Mascariñas/Global Witness]

### THE GROWING GLOBAL DEMAND FOR NICKEL

President Ferdinand Marcos has [revived](#) the country's mining industry, as global demand for the minerals needed to transition away from fossil fuels gathers pace.

The Philippines is the [world's biggest exporter](#) of raw nickel. It [shipped out nearly US\\$1 billion](#) in 2024 as it races to meet soaring demand from the global electric vehicle industry. Red earth is trucked straight to nearby ports and shipped off – [mainly to China](#), which imports most of its raw ore from the Philippines. Smaller amounts go to Japan, Thailand and increasingly to the world's largest producer Indonesia.



Red earth is trucked straight to nearby ports and shipped off. [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

China is the dominant global player in nickel processing and manufacturing, including the production of stainless steel and electric vehicle (EV) batteries. Its firms produce around [two-thirds of the world's EVs](#) and more than three-quarters of EV batteries. EV batteries are expected to account for [more than 50% of the growth](#) in nickel demand by 2030.

The EU and the United States are the [next biggest global](#) markets for EV sales. Our research shows the strong likelihood that some of the world's largest car companies – including Tesla, Volkswagen, Mercedes, BMW and Audi – source battery components using nickel from mines in the Philippines, including Marcventures' mine, the focus of this report.

### How nickel is mined

In Surigao del Sur, nickel is extracted using open-pit strip methods, a process that involves denuding the mountain and stripping away the topsoil and rock. Heavy machinery scoops out the nickel-rich soil, leaving barren brown landscapes behind.

Nickel mining has been linked to deforestation, soil erosion and habitat loss, fuelling vulnerability to landslides, flooding and droughts. A [2025 study](#) found that the land footprint of nickel mining could be up to 500 times greater than previously reported, especially in areas covered in mangroves, endemic to the coastal areas of Surigao del Sur.

## THE DARK SIDE OF NICKEL MINING

The world needs to transition away from fossil fuels, and EVs are part of that shift. But there's a dark side to the intensifying quest for the minerals EVs rely on.

**RIVERS OF RED: POISONED FISHING WATERS**

Dodo Anino has fished the turquoise waters of the idyllic Ayoke Island his entire life. When he was young, he would paddle out a few metres from the shoreline and plunge his head under the clear blue water to find shoals of fish, squid and octopuses. He would just hold his breathe and dive, using just a spear to catch 20-50kg of fish a trip.



Rivers near Marcventures' mining sites turn an orange brown in rainy season. [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

Then mining began in the mountains of mainland Surigao del Sur.

“Before mining, it was abundant with fish here,” says the 79-year-old. “But every year since mining started, we’ve noticed the catch getting smaller.”

Ayoke Island is downstream of Carac-an and Alamio rivers, part of [a critical protected watershed area](#) now polluted by Marcventures' mining operations. In the rainy season, water floods the mines and washes pollution into the rivers and out into the sea.



The picturesque Ayoke Island has seen dwindling fish stock since mining began in the mountains of Surigao del Sur [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

“Starting in [the rainy season from] January to March ...siltation would reach the island. The water would turn a dark brown.”

An independent court-appointed commission tasked with investigating the company’s impact on communities and the environment concluded that Marcventures had “polluted the Alamio and Carac-an rivers by releasing sediments, silt and heavy metals... which were transported downstream ... [and caused] well-pronounced sedimentation in the coastal area that had adversely affected coral growth and fish production.”



Fisherfolk on Ayoke Island can no longer afford to send their children to college [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

**“Before mining, it was abundant with fish here. But every year since mining started, we’ve noticed the catch getting smaller.”**

**DODO ANINO, RETIRED FISHERMAN**

This has also hit a [community-protected marine area](#) off the coast of the Ayoke Island. Siltation covered the coral reef, eventually killing it.

The company maintained that it implements effective silt control and reforestation programmes that minimise water runoff.

#### **FLOODED AND POLLUTED FARMLAND**

Farming makes up a major part of the economy in Surigao del Sur. It is the lifeblood of many families.

But like the fisherfolk, farmers have been hit with a catalogue of troubles since Marcventures started operating here.

Farmers in Cantilan and the neighbouring municipality of Madrid in Surigao del Sur rely on the protected watershed to irrigate their crops. A network of irrigation canals sustained by Carac-an River supply their rice fields.

**“Our irrigation canal becomes orange in colour and it goes into our rice fields.”**

**CLARA LAMAS, FARMER**

Up until the 1990s, Carac-an River was so full and its waters so clear that Clara Lamas, who heads the Madrid Farmers’ Association, remembers swimming and washing her clothes in it.

“It was beautiful, we could even drink the water from the stream,” Clara says.

Since mining began, the canals have turned a ruddy orange brown. Farmers can no longer plant in the dry season as there isn’t enough water. During the rainy season, the canals often overflow with nickel-red mud.

“When it rains the siltation overflows and goes down our rivers, into our irrigation canals, into our farms,” says Clara, who has been fighting against mining for more than a decade. “Our irrigation canal becomes orange in colour and it goes into our rice fields.”

### **“The waterbed doesn’t exist anymore.”**

#### **MARIA FE HUERTE, NATIONAL IRRIGATION ADMINISTRATION**

Mining has exacerbated the effects of the climate crisis along the typhoon-prone coastal towns, with flash floods becoming more frequent. Expert analysis, including that of the court-appointed commission, has identified mining-fuelled deforestation as a leading culprit.

“Flood waters are faster to rise because there are no more trees to hold it at the watershed area,” says Maria Fe Huerte, officer in charge of the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) in Cantilan. “The waterbed doesn’t exist anymore.”

Testing carried out by the court’s team of experts found ‘heavy’ loads of the toxic metal cadmium and nickel in the water supply, rendering it unsafe for aquatic life and human use.

Marcventures argued that its nickel ore had no known traces of cadmium. It also denied that its operations could be responsible for water shortages, instead blaming poorly maintained irrigation canals and the activities of other mining companies in the area.

### GROWING POORER

People here have become measurably poorer since mining began. Fish stocks have plunged and rice yields have more than halved since mining began, according to local fisherfolk and farmers. At the same time, the costs of producing rice have soared – extra fertiliser is needed for their ailing crops and more pesticides required to fend off the rats and insects they say come down the mountain due to deforestation.

Some farmers told *Global Witness* they had ended up in debt as a result. Some have fallen prey to loan sharks or lost land used as collateral on loans.

“Before the orange mud – we didn’t really borrow that much or often because we didn’t need to,” says Jerome Guillen, a farmer in Madrid.

Many families can no longer afford to send their children to college or university. So young people end up leaving for Manila in search of domestic work or odd jobs.

“I am just glad my kids had finished their schooling and college before the mining started,” Dodo says. “One thing is sure: we would not have been able to afford to send our kids to college [now].”

### REPRISALS

Activists and community members mobilising against the project have been stalked by reprisals – from death threats to surveillance.



Farmers like Jerome Guillen have ended up in debt since mining began to pollute their rice fields. [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

A federation of farmers participated in the lawsuit against Marcventures. But without consulting its members, the federation chair made a deal with the company and agreed to drop the case in exchange for some agricultural machinery.

The chair was ousted after an uproar and the machines were left in a field to rust.

Shortly afterwards, the new federation chair Fidel Arreza who joined the case against the company began receiving threats and intimidation. His phone pinged with unsettling text messages. Cars turned up outside his house. Unidentified people on motorbikes would follow him. It was clear he was under surveillance, according to the people in his circle.

**“You better hide because something will happen to you.”**

#### **ACTIVIST RECALLS HEARING ON THE RADIO**

A fisherman and friend of Dodo’s from Ayoke was a vocal critic of Marcventures. He spoke at rallies and criticised the company. Before long, he found himself stalked by unidentified men. They turned up at the docks asking about his whereabouts. His name was mentioned on a local radio station owned by the late governor Vicente Pimentel. “You better hide because something will happen to you,” another activist recalls hearing on the radio. “We know your whereabouts in the sea, you better go home.” He went into hiding for several months and when he came home, he dropped out of public view. He was rumoured to have allied himself with a rival political clan as ‘protection’ against Governor Pimentel.

Leading anti-mining activist Emma Hotchkiss was on her way home one night, when she noticed an SUV following her. Other suspicious vehicles soon began passing by her house late at night, leaving trails of nickel-red tire marks behind.

A few days later, somebody broke into her home.

This was during the height of her campaign against Marcventures in Cantilan.

Emma was no stranger to intimidation. In the early 2010s, the former owners of the company’s mining permit (already transferred to Marcventures) slapped her and two other activists with a malicious harassment lawsuit for campaigning against the project.

For several months before Emma was subjected to surveillance, she had also been threatened by the provincial governor on his live radio channel.

She later heard through a friend that Governor Pimentel had placed a bounty of 1 million pesos (around £12,800) to have her killed. “An insulting figure,” she reflects, sitting on the wind-swept terrace of her beachside bungalow. But it was, she believes, intended to send a message.

There is no indication that Governor Pimentel or any other agents of intimidation acted on the instructions of Marcventures or any other mining company.



Emma Hotchkiss has faced threats, surveillance and judicial harassment for her anti-mining activism. [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

## POLITICAL CAPTURE

As communities in Surigao del Sur fight to protect their land and livelihoods, what are they up against? Who controls nickel mining in the Philippines? Our investigation lifts the lid on the murky links between politics and mining.

### POLITICAL DYNASTIES AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Philippine politics is dominated by a small number of family dynasties, who control land, resources and positions of power. The past four Presidents dating back to 2001 [have come from political clans](#), including incumbent President Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr, son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr, who ruled the country from 1965 to 1986.

Almost [80% of Congress and more than 50% of elected officials](#) in the Philippines hail from political families. Research shows this dynastic system fuels corruption, poverty and inequality, while fostering a climate of fear and impunity for attacks on land and environmental defenders.

Recent months have been overshadowed [by an escalating feud](#) between the Marcoses and the country’s other main political dynasty, the Dutertes. The incumbent administration and outgoing President Rodrigo Duterte, who is currently in the custody of the International Criminal Court in The Hague [facing charges of crimes against humanity linked](#) to his war on drugs, have been publicly gunning for each other. In early 2025, the Marcoses pushed to have Vice-President Sara Duterte [impeached](#) and backed the extradition of her father to The Hague.

The ongoing corruption scandal is being weaponised by both sides to score political points against the other. Political [analysts see this as manoeuvring](#) ahead of the 2028 presidential election.

### DYNASTIC INFLUENCE ON MINING

Many of the biggest mining companies in the Philippines have connections to political clans who can influence the way extractive industries are regulated. For example, former president of the Senate Manuel Villar is part of the Villar dynasty, which has a significant interest in Caraga’s nickel industry. His wife, Cynthia Villar, chairs the Senate Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Climate.



Filipinos prepare an effigy depicting Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and Vice President Sara Duterte, during a protest against corruption in Manila. [Lisa Marie David / Getty Images]

These conflicts are especially pronounced in mining hotspots like Surigao del Sur. There are two main political clans – the Pimentels and the Pichays – who have [fought for political control](#) in the province for years. The [Pimentels won](#) in the mid-term and local elections in May 2025. Both clans have ties to the mining industry.

**“The underlying issue is money. Money, money, money.”**

#### MAYOR RODRIGO ELEAZAR

According to multiple sources, mining subcontracts are also dished out to companies linked to these clans, demonstrating how political influence can be leveraged to secure financial advantage and increase revenue for those within the network.

“[Politicians] give permits to companies so they can mine, then they get subcontracts – the underlying issue is money,” says Mayor Eleazar. “Money, money, money.”

Both the Pichays and the Pimentels [lobbied heavily](#) against the progressive Environment Minister Regina Lopez, who cracked down on the mining industry in Caraga under Duterte.

### POLITICAL TUG OF WAR

Communities are caught in the middle of a tug-of-war between clans.

Your political allegiance will determine whether you receive financial support, like subsidies, from the authorities, says Maria Fe Huerte, officer in charge at the NIA. “If you’ve something to request you have to bow down to them. You have to promise your political support,” she explains. “They will ask us ‘Are you green or red?’”

Green refers to the Pimentels, red to the Pichays.

“It’s discouraging to see the ongoing conflict between the Pimentels and Pichays. Both sides have links to mining so there is no other choice for us,” says Dodo, the retired fisherman who has campaigned against mining for decades. “They are playing us for fools.”

Campaigners are [fighting for a new law](#) to implement an existing constitutional ban on political dynasties. But approval lies with the very politicians the law targets.

#### **THE MAN BEHIND MARCVENTURES: MARTIN ROMUALDEZ**

One big political player is Martin Romualdez – linked to the Marcos dynasty, cousin of the president and, until recently, seen as a frontrunner to replace him.

And this is where we come to the heart of this story – and exactly who owns Marcventures Mining and its sister company Bright Green Resources. Both companies are subsidiaries of the PHP2.2 billion (£30 million) conglomerate Marcventures Holdings. Several political and community sources told *Global Witness* that Martin Romualdez – a former Speaker of the House of Representatives and a serving Congressman – is a beneficial owner of the companies. Many people cited information they'd received from people working for the company, including family and friends.

National media frequently [report](#) on Romualdez's ownership ties to the companies, alongside other connected mining companies, such as Benguet Corporation. This includes [reporting](#) by the national broadsheet the Philippine Inquirer, which is owned by the Romualdez family.

Under Filipino law, public [officials are prohibited](#) from having business interests that pose a conflict of interest. This means Romualdez should have stepped down from any mining interests as soon as he took public office in 2007.



Congressman Martin Romualdez (r), cousin to President Marcos, remains an influential political figure. [Ezra Acayan / Getty Images]

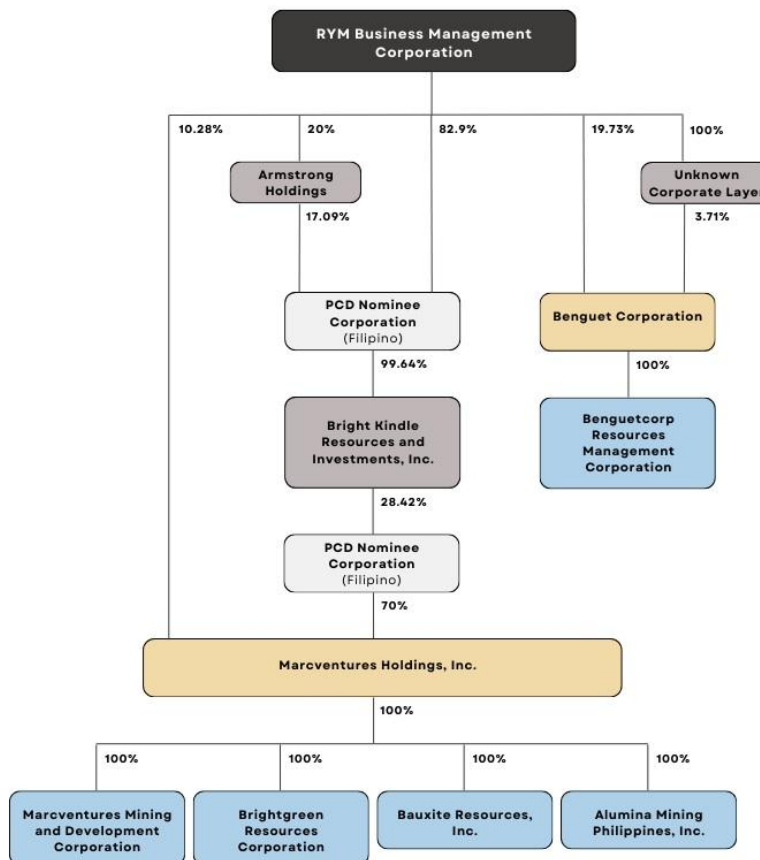
But his ownership status is hard to prove. A report commissioned by Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM) – an environmental coalition opposing destructive mining in the Philippines – found that “the beneficial owners of mining firms in the country are largely concealed through multiple layers of corporations and dummy shareholders.”

But our investigation found strong grounds to suspect that Romualdez maintains financial and beneficial control over Marcventures and Bright Green Resources.

Numerous political, community and business sources told *Global Witness* that Martin Romualdez is behind the two companies. Some described it as an open secret.

The ATM report notes that “Romualdez has a considerable level of control, as evidenced by (i) the presence of certain family members and close Romualdez allies on the board of several firms across the ownership chain, (ii) the interconnectedness of their management, and (iii) the link of the Romualdez’s family with the networks and flow of influence which ultimately shaped the firms’ current ownership structures throughout the years.”

Close associates and family members of the former Speaker have also held powerful positions at Marcventures. This includes Kwok Yam Ian Chan, a British national from Hong Kong, who was controversially [granted Filipino citizenship](#) in 2021 through a parliamentary bill Romualdez drafted. Until May 2025, when he was elected to Congress, Martin Romualdez’s 25-year-old son



RYM’s ownership stake in Marcventures, BrightGreen Resources and other related companies [Alyansa Tigil Mina]

Andrew [was a company director](#) and board member of Marcventures and its major stockholder BrightKindle Resources.

A detailed analysis of Marcventures' corporate structure found RYM Business Management Corporation – a company deriving its name from the initials of Romualdez's wife Yedda Marie – is a major stockholder. RYM is also a major stockholder of Benguet Corporation, the Philippines' oldest mining company. Martin Romualdez was a significant stockholder of Benguet Mining between 1991 and up to at least 2008, according to financial disclosures made by the politician. His [brothers previously held senior posts](#) in the company.

Romualdez has expanded his business empire during President Marcos Jr's term in office to include [more mining companies](#) and [assets](#). Meanwhile, he has promoted industry-friendly initiatives in parliament, including a [controversial sovereign wealth fund](#), which is [bankrolling the mining industry](#).

**“It's unprecedented for a policy on mining to get railroaded in little more than a year.”**

**LEON DULCE, LEGAL RIGHTS AND NATURAL RESOURCE CENTRE**

If reports of his mining interests are correct, Romualdez stands to benefit substantively from the passage of pro-business legislation he helped turn into law, specifically the Mining Fiscal Reform Bill. The then Speaker was a key figure in passing the fast-tracked bill, which [slashed taxes](#) for mining companies.

“It's unprecedented for a policy on mining to get railroaded in little more than a year,” says Leon Dulce, Campaigns Support and Linkages Coordinator at the Legal Rights and Natural Resource Centre, which participated in the bill's drafting.

An analysis of committee-hearing transcripts suggests that industry lobby groups, including the Chamber of Mines, were given a disproportionate voice in the drafting process. Less than a handful of civil society groups were invited to participate, and representatives told *Global Witness* they were sidelined.

The US government, which is looking to expand critical minerals trade with the Philippines, also played a role in pivoting the legislation in an investment-friendly direction. Specifically, it supported research that was used by industry lobbyists to push for tax relief for mining companies.

Romualdez [publicly recognised the Chamber of Mines](#) for its input on the legislation. Another inside source, who asked to remain anonymous, said the lobby group “has direct access to the President... a form of regulatory capture.”

While an executive at Benguet Corporation, Martin Romualdez's brother Benjamin Philip was President of the Chamber of Mines for 12 years until 2017.

## **ABUSES OF POWER**

The presence of major political players in the mining sector contributes to tipping the balance of power heavily in favour of mining companies like Marcventures and away from the communities opposing the impact of their operations. Abuse of power is fuelling violations – from permit violations to bribery.

### **PERMIT VIOLATIONS AND IRREGULARITIES**

Our investigation found evidence of permit violations and irregular practices seemingly designed to circumvent community opposition to mining.

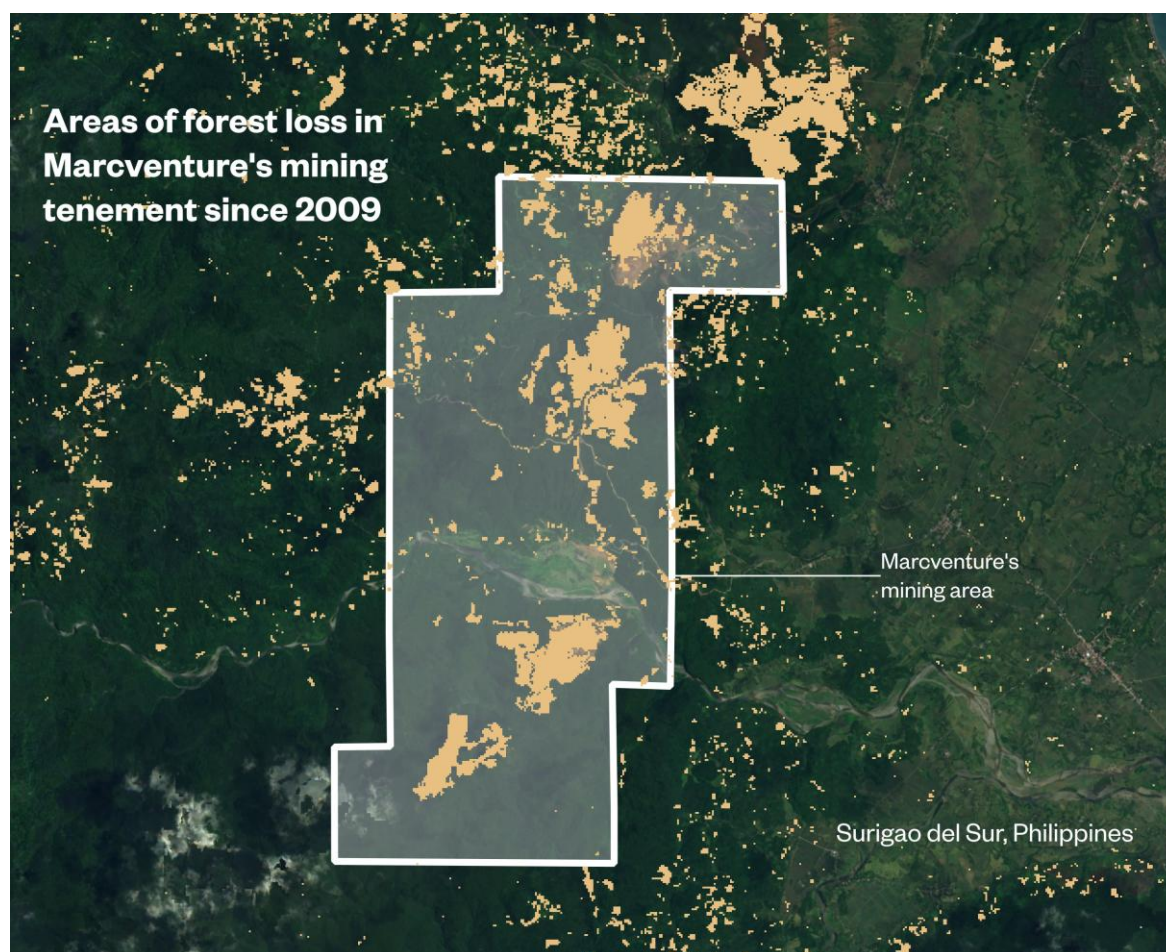
Marcventures has secured yearly tree-cutting permits from the regional government, despite official documentation showing they had failed to comply with previous replanting requirements. A letter sent by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to the company in September 2021 noted a backlog of nearly 7 million unplanted replacement seedlings. The letter also imposed a penalty on the company for mining outside the designated mining area. But the DENR had still issued a new tree-cutting permit the previous day.

In late 2024, the company allegedly cut down trees before securing a permit to do so, according to a letter sent to the company by municipal authorities in Cantilan. The company then sought to get approval for the cutting via the mayor at the time – a member of the Pichay clan – who endorsed the application.

Responding to the letter, the company denied cutting down any trees without a permit.

According to satellite analysis, the company has caused 587 hectares of forest cover loss within its mining area since 2009. The amount of tree cover gain during the same period was negligible.

Sources close to the case told *Global Witness* that the company has circumvented concerns about mining by playing politics – sometimes technically within the bounds of the law. Under [mining regulations](#), a company can obtain a permit by securing permission from just two of three relevant levels that make up the Local Government Unit in the Philippines – provincial, municipal or barangay (village) authorities. This was intended to circumvent local resistance to mining.



Satellite analysis of Marcventures' mining site shows substantial forest cover loss and negligible reforestation since 2009

**“The company has caused 587 hectares of forest cover loss within its mining area since 2009.”**

### **SATELLITE ANALYSIS**

In March 2009, 43,601 hectares of forested land and rivers, including Alamio and Carac-an rivers, were declared a [critical watershed forest reserve](#) by the Philippine government. It ruled that mining should be prohibited from taking place in the area, which overlaps with the mining area of Marcventures and its sister company Bright Green Resources. But the companies preserved their existing licences as they were already operating in the area.

The companies have since managed to secure multiple permit renewals, raising eyebrows among community members and activists.

In 2016, Marcventures controversially extended its mining permit shortly before being [temporarily shut down](#) by Regina Lopez for environmental violations. It managed to use a ‘force majeure’ provision in the mining law to extend its permit, a legal tool blaming reasons outside its control from stopping the company from mining to the full extent of its permit. This extension prevented further scrutiny of its operations, including their impact on the protected watershed. Activists suspect Marcventures used political pressure at the highest level of government to secure the use of a force majeure.

“Watershed mining shouldn’t be happening, but big fish in politics are behind that operation,” said Mayor of Cantilan, Rodrigo Eleazar.

In 2022, Marcventures’ sister company Bright Green Resources, which is still in the exploration phase of its operation, also [used force majeure to extend](#) its permit by two years. Since 2024, it’s been embroiled in an escalating feud with local authorities about the renewal of its mining permit for another 25 years. The company secured support for the permit renewal from the provincial governor Alexander Pimentel, despite community and municipal opposition.

Authorities held a community consultation in Cantilan, where widespread concerns were raised about continued mining. A position paper against the renewal adopted by the legislative council of Cantilan was also presented.

**“Watershed mining shouldn’t be happening, but big fish in politics are behind that operation.”**

### **MAYOR OF CANTILAN, RODRIGO ELEAZAR**

The President of Marcventures, Eduardo Francisco, reportedly dropped Romualdez’s name to the protected area management board, an authority whose approval is needed to mine in critical watershed to help sway their decision. Still the company did not get approval for its permit renewal from the board.

Marcventures has maintained it has always secured the necessary permits to operate.

### **BAGS OF CASH**

Politicians with influence over mining permits – from the barangay level through to the provincial governors – are routinely offered massive cash bribes. The late Governor of Surigao del Sur, Vicente Pimentel, who was implicated in the rampant harassment of defenders opposing mining, reportedly received 50,000 pesos (around £650) per shipment of nickel out of the province.

His brother is now Surigao del Sur’s governor.

Two mayors in mining towns in the province told *Global Witness* they had been offered cash to support mining operations. In one case, a prominent former politician allegedly offered a mayor 5 million pesos (around £65,000) per shipment. In the other, a Bright Green Resources representative allegedly pushed to obtain a tree-cutting permit for the company through bribery.

Both mayors declined the offers.

**“Most land is owned by clans or companies, so their influence is huge. If you don’t vote for the families who own the land, you can get evicted, so it’s more than vote buying ... it’s coercion.”**

**JHAY DE JESUS, HUMAN RIGHTS ALLIANCE IDEFEND**

The [mining industry also bankrolls politicians](#) running for office. This fuels corruption in places like Surigao del Sur where vote buying is rampant. Most people interviewed for this investigation reported being offered money in exchange for their votes during elections.

“Most land is owned by clans or companies, so their influence is huge,” says Jhay de Jesus from human rights alliance iDefend. “If you don’t vote for the families who own the land, you can get evicted, so it’s more than vote buying ... it’s coercion.”

### **FALSE PROMISES**

Marcventures’ mining tenement encroaches on the ancestral domain of an Indigenous Manobo tribe. By Filipino law, this means the company must obtain free, prior and informed consent from the community ahead of any mining operations. In trying to quell Indigenous opposition, Marcventures appears to have given hollow incentives to persuade communities to support the project.

In 2019, it made numerous financial promises to the community as part of a Memorandum of Agreement. These included paving or maintaining a new road and constructing an estimated multi-million-dollar flood control dike.

But six years later, most of these promises have not been fulfilled.

Anger began to build within the community and grievances were raised with the company, according to a village official, who asked to remain anonymous. In 2024, the company backtracked on its promises, claiming it couldn't afford to pave the road or build the dike. But according to two Indigenous insiders who were part of discussions with the company, the President of Marcventures offered the community access to a government-backed flood control project with the help of then-Speaker Romualdez.



Datu Eduardo Tawas, an Indigenous elder who opposes mining on their ancestral land [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

Romualdez is currently also [embroiled in a massive corruption scandal](#) involving flood control projects. He is accused of taking bribes to issue infrastructure contracts to political allies and cronies, many of which were never built or were substandard. Community members are now worried about the future of their dike.

Romualdez has consistently and strenuously [denied all allegations](#) of corruption, dismissing them as politically motivated. But, in September, he was [forced to step down as Speaker](#) of the House as the scandal threatened to engulf the Marcos government.

#### LURED

In 2023, a group of Indigenous young people submitted a resolution of non-consent against the renewal of Bright Green Resource's permit. The document blamed the "lack of sincerity" of its sister company, Marcventures, which it accused of having "no respect for the Tribal Community and ... abusing our ancestral land."

But tribal leaders unilaterally cancelled the resolution. Sources told *Global Witness* they were lured by an offer to mine 300 hectares of land for the community – only to find out the earmarked land contained no significant minerals.

Datu Eduardo Ombo Tawas was among 18 leaders consulted about the proposal. He said, "I knew they would only give us lesser land, I know how greedy they are. But the decision wasn't [just] mine."

**"I knew they would only give us lesser land, I know how greedy they are. But the decision wasn't [just] mine."**

**DATU EDUARDO OMBO TAWAS, INDIGENOUS MANOBO LEADER**

#### FUELLING COMMUNITY DIVISIONS

The mining project has fuelled divisions within the community, with 'free, prior and informed consent' often relying on a hierarchy of influence within the tribe. Filipino law demands that

Indigenous communities get **a minimum 1% royalty** from mining operations on their territory but doesn't stipulate how it should be split. This is negotiated between the company and the community.

In practice, tribal elders have capitalised on royalties at the expense of families. According to Indigenous leaders, 18 tribal leaders and 951 families were both allocated an equal 10% share of the annual 1% royalty. As a result, households receive around 8,000-9,000 pesos (£100-114) each year, while leaders could receive around £6,000 a year. Leaders were allegedly also enticed with other financial offers from the company, like jobs.

But, says Datu Eduardo, "It's not worth the destruction the mining has done. We could have earned much more from our livelihood before and the environment wouldn't have been destroyed."

In the early 2020s, Indigenous young people challenged their elders about unaccountable leadership and spending, pushing for a greater share of royalties. Soon after, they faced death threats.

"When we had meetings, straight to my face I would be told by certain tribal leaders 'you need to stop what you're doing or something bad will happen to you'," explained one of the Indigenous young people, who asked to remain anonymous due to fear of reprisals.

Soon they heard reports of people being hired to kill them. Five suspected assassins were captured by police in a neighbouring village. They were reportedly found carrying pictures of five of the young people involved in the campaign.

**"When we had meetings, straight to my face I would be told by certain tribal leaders 'you need to stop what you're doing or something bad will happen to you'."**

**ANONYMOUS INDIGENOUS YOUTH LEADER**

Despite everything, the young advocates don't necessarily oppose mining, but they want a fairer share of the proceeds. "Many mining companies come in and bring their lawyers who tell us we should only get 1%," says another young Indigenous leader. "[But] we are the owners of the ancestral domains, it should be 50/50 or 40/60."

## **AN ECOSYSTEM OF REPRISALS**

Mining companies have benefited from an ecosystem of violence and repression against land and environmental defenders in the region.

**THE DEADLY THREAT OF THE MILITARY**

Outspoken defenders, not connected to the NPA, who oppose mining have been **'red tagged'** as communist sympathisers or terrorists, arrested or even killed. Many activists have fled, gone underground or toned down their advocacy to avoid being targeted.

Military outposts dot the landscape around Surigao del Sur, ostensibly to fend off NPA threats to mining operations. Since 2018, the Philippines has **pursued a 'whole of nation' approach** designed to stamp out insurgency and terrorism. It provides substantial cash incentives for local authorities to become

'insurgency free'. These funds are often opaque and unaccountable, **fuelling corruption**.

"Whenever there is a big investment, there is the military," says Father Raymond Montero-Ambray, an outspoken priest who has been 'red-tagged' as a communist sympathiser for his activism. "They're not improving the peace and order in the country. They rely on people pointing each other out, on filing trumped up charges."

The military is the biggest lethal threat to defenders across the Philippines, according to *Global Witness* data. Between 2012-2024, it was responsible for 138 out of 306 killings in the Philippines, the **deadliest country in Asia** for defenders year on year. Nearly 80% of killings linked to mining were on Mindanao.

Many activists have been subjected to intimidation, threats or attacks linked to the military or counter-terrorism operations.

**"Whenever there is a big investment, there is the military."**

**FATHER RAYMOND AMBRAY**

**Christel Yparraguirre**, an environmental activist affiliated with ATM and local environmental watchdog Baywatch in Cantilan, experienced first-hand the reality of the government's anti-terrorism drive. In 2019, she discovered she'd been placed on a 'high level red alert' list at her bank for working for a civil society organisation. She still struggles to withdraw cash. She is one of many activists targeted under the country's anti-terrorism financing laws.

**Chito Trinalles** survived an assassination attempt at the height of his campaign against Marcventures. He was asleep at 1.45am when he woke to the sound of revving motorcycles. A gang of heavily armed thugs had descended on his backyard. They scattered when his mother turned on the lights in the house. The next day he heard through a high-level military contact that he'd been the target of a 'hit' on his life – allegedly the former governor was behind it. The



Father Raymond Ambray has been red tagged for his outspoken activism against mining [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

would-be assassins were reportedly recruited from former armed rebels and military. Chito went into hiding for months.

### ARMY-TRAINED MILITIAS

The army has also set up and trained quasi-official militias – known as [Citizen Armed Force Geographical Unit](#) (CAFGU) – to guard mine sites against insurgents. They recruit from the community, including Indigenous Peoples, former insurgents and sometimes common criminals, [who are handed weapons and taught to fight](#).



Cerina Balbuena received death threats on a company-run radio channel after speaking up against Tribu Manobo Corporation. [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

These units have been implicated in [serious abuses against defenders](#).

In 2024, Alberto Cuartero, a village leader opposed to mining, [was gunned down in](#) Madrid, Surigao del Sur, in a drive-by shooting. He had recently testified in court against nickel firm Tribu Manobo Corporation, presenting evidence that it forged his signature, alongside that of several other authorities, to press ahead with mining exploration in the towns of Carmen and Madrid. The alleged driver for the hitmen has since been brought to trial. The suspect's family are connected to a local CAFGU unit and the Philippine military.

Nothing in the evidence at trial has exposed a direct connection to Tribu Manobo Corporation.

Defenders interviewed by *Global Witness* described being threatened by anonymous thugs in the run up to the killing.

**Jeffrey Palma Suazo**, an anti-mining leader in Ezperanza, Carmen, near to the site of Tribu Manobo's mining area, reported that a black Toyota SUV passed his office shortly after the case was filed against the company. One of vehicle's occupants rolled down the window and gestured a slit across his throat, Jeffrey recalls.

**Cerina Balbuena**, another activist, recalls hearing threats against her on a local company-run radio station around the same time in 2023. "This small woman will be wiped from the face of the map," she remembers one of the broadcasters saying. "I was worried, I could not go out alone especially at nighttime. I just stayed home."

Tribu Manobo Corporation, while on paper an Indigenous Manobo-owned company, is suspected of taking money from an influential political clan in the province. One local official said the company's owners had spoken openly about its political links.

Jeffrey Palma Suazo says of the company's alleged illegal mining: "Tribu Manobo would not have the guts to do this kind of stuff ... forging signatures unless they were backed by a very powerful individual."

## COMMUNITIES FIGHT BACK

### TAKING ON GOLIATH IN COURT

Communities in Cantilan and the surrounding areas have spent the past 15 years rallying against Marcventures.

In 2010, the community had filed a case to stop the company's "destructive and illegal" nickel mining practices. It brought together fisherfolk, farmers, community activists, women, Indigenous Peoples and children like Nick to challenge the company over a litany of allegations. These included permit violations, pollution, endangering a critical protected watershed, along with destruction of the environment and livelihoods.

They called for a permanent environmental protection order preventing mining in the watershed forest reserve and for the company to fund an environmental rehabilitation programme.

They had to wait 15 years, until August 2025, for the case to reach an outcome. To the devastation of Cantilan's communities, the court found in favour of the company.

It argued that it was impossible to prove that Marcventures rather than other companies were responsible for the damage. It also denied a request for a rehabilitation fund.

### A CASE OVERSHADOWED BY CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The case was fraught with difficulty from the beginning. Conflicts of interest overshadowed every step of the judicial process.

"Surigao del Sur is the mining capital of the Philippines," explains Attorney Buboy Mendoza, a lawyer with the Cagayan de Oro-based Balaod Mindaw, who has led the case from the start. "It's difficult to find lawyers there that aren't connected with the mining companies."

Plaintiffs had to travel nearly 400 kilometres to the Northern Mindanao region to find representatives without these mining entanglements.

**"Surigao del Sur is the mining capital of the Philippines. It's difficult to find lawyers there that aren't connected with the mining companies."**

**ATTORNEY BUBOY MENDOZA, BALAO MINDAW**

A few months after the case was launched, the presiding judge had to recuse himself because his son had been hired to represent Marcventures. Over the next two years, three other judges had to step down for similar conflicts of interest. A fifth judge eventually left the case too, again amid reports of having ties to the mining industry.

The plaintiffs were hit with multiple other delays in proceedings or last-minute hearing cancellations. Sometimes their legal team had already travelled for 10 hours to reach the court in Cantilan before getting a call that the judge would be unavailable.

Over the years, witnesses dropped out of the case – some out of fear of reprisals, others because they were paid off by the company.

While disappointed at the court’s verdict, Buboy Mendoza wasn’t surprised. “There is a lot of political pressure... I thought the judge might not be brave enough to stop the mining, but I thought they might order some compensation and rehabilitation funds.”

### **GO ON WITH THE FIGHT**

Some communities in Cantilan and the surrounding areas are hopeful that they will be able to stop Marcventures from renewing its licence when it comes up for renewal in 2027. This is their biggest opportunity in years to prevent further deforestation and mining in their protected watershed.

Others worry that the influence of corrupt political clans will scupper their efforts.

“It’s been so long with nothing changing with regard to mining,” says Dodo. “Powerful politicians are behind them. But as we are already there we may as well go on with the fight.”



Retired fisherman Dodo Anino has been campaigning against mining for decades [Erwin Mascariñas / Global Witness]

## FROM CHINA TO EUROPE – A TOXIC SUPPLY CHAIN

The harms mapped in this investigation are being driven by global appetite for electric vehicles – [mostly in China, Europe and the United States](#).

Our investigation traced the nickel ore exported from Marcventures Mining to some of the biggest metal traders in China. These companies in turn supply Chinese stainless steel and battery producers, who sell onwards to some of the biggest corporations in the world.

Among their clients are the world’s leading car manufacturers, including Audi, BMW, Hyundai, Mercedes, Tesla and Volkswagen.

We do not suggest these companies have breached any existing due diligence legal obligations.

Existing voluntary due diligence standards, including the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, already demand companies address risks in their value chains. But *Global Witness* and other investigations have repeatedly demonstrated how voluntary standards are failing.

Where mandatory due diligence rules are in place, such as in Germany, they have a limited approach to how far companies must actively investigate risks in their value chains, with a very limited approach to tackling risks beyond their direct suppliers. This opens a major loophole in accountability.

A spokesperson for Audi told Global Witness, “We are aware of our responsibility for the economic, ecological and social impact of our actions. We also expect this of our business partners, particularly where human rights, health and safety at work, environmental protection and combatting corruption are concerned.”

The EV companies named in this report are potentially subject to a new EU regulation – the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which is expected to come into force in early 2029. The EU law, which is currently being re-negotiated, is expected to require large companies, including European ones and large US players such as Tesla, [to screen for human rights abuses and environmental harms](#) throughout their value chain. However, [leading companies are lobbying to weaken](#) its protections—or even scrap it entirely—potentially allowing them to continue evading accountability for harms linked to their value chains.



EV companies like Tesla are highly likely to be sourcing nickel linked to human rights and environmental harm. [Ashley Cooper / Getty Images]

Mandatory climate transition plans for these companies are also at risk of being deleted altogether.

And companies fighting to undermine the law are making gains. In November 2025, the EU Parliament voted in favour of lowering the threshold for eligible companies, watering down penalties for violations and scrapping plans for a legal accountability system for communities.

Any further threats to the legislation will be devastating for communities in Surigao del Sur, who have laid their lives on the line to fight nickel mining.

## Conclusion

The independent-court appointment commission concluded that mining was “not economically and environmentally feasible” for communities affected by Marcventures’ operations. Municipalities and villages would get around 0.006% of the estimated 202.9 billion pesos (GBP 2.6 billion) in profits from the project. But the environmental cost would reach an eye-watering 3.2 quadrillion pesos (GBP 41 trillion).

“It’s our minerals and soils here – it’s [extracted] here but ... we are not benefiting. And then it is corrupted by our government officials,” says Clara Lamas. “We gain destruction in our place. It has not improved our lives – it has improved the life of Romualdez only.”

Clara’s words sum up the impact of nickel mining on communities in Surigao del Sur. This is the cost of the growing global demand for nickel, driven by EV manufacturers including Tesla, Volkswagen and Mercedes.

**“It’s our minerals and soils here – it’s [extracted] here but ... we are not benefiting... We gain destruction in our place.”**

**CLARA LAMAS, FARMER**

Civil society organisations are calling for companies to be held to account for any abuses on which their profits grow, however remote that abuse may be – in the Philippines and overseas. Only robust rules that hold the most powerful accountable can help create a fairer, more just world.

While defenders and local ecosystems—such as communities in Surigao del Sur—must be safeguarded where mining occurs, in places like the EU, where major corporations can influence improvements in their value chains, Global Witness and its partners are [fighting for stronger regulations](#) that prevent further abuse of our planet’s resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendations

### European Union: CSDDD (Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive)

#### SCOPE OF COMPANIES COVERED

- Retain the current scope of the CSDDD by upholding thresholds of 1,000 employees and €450 million global turnover for EU companies, and €450 million EU turnover for non-EU companies.
- Avoid a fully harmonised approach that would restrict EU Member States from adopting more ambitious due diligence requirements.

#### VALUE CHAIN COVERAGE

- Apply a risk-based approach: Ensure due diligence obligations follow a risk-based approach, grounded in the principles of severity and likelihood of adverse impacts
- Apply this approach across the entire value chain without limiting it to direct business relationships as most adverse impacts are likely to occur further down the value chain
- Avoid placing limits on SME data: Do not introduce a cap on the retention of information sourced from SMEs to ensure robust due diligence efforts are supported

#### CIVIL LIABILITY

- Establish an EU-wide regime: Introduce a harmonised civil liability framework at EU level, incorporating an overriding mandatory principle that allows for the application of the law of the Member State where the proceedings take place.
- If a harmonised EU-wide civil liability regime is not included in the final Directive, individual Member States should establish such a regime including an overriding mandatory principle provision within their national legislation to strengthen the Directive's enforcement.
- Member States shall reintroduce an adequate minimum limitation period for victims to file claims.
- Member States shall enable representative legal actions by NGOs and trade unions, strengthening access to remedy for affected stakeholders.

#### STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- Adopt an inclusive definition of stakeholders and rightsholders to support meaningful engagement

in all due diligence steps.

- Establish strong safeguards to protect the anonymity, security, and physical safety of stakeholders and rightsholders, particularly in contexts where participation could expose them to reprisals.
- Allow civil society organisations to engage in stakeholder engagement to enhance the due diligence process, particularly in cases where directly affected stakeholders are unable to engage.
- Offer guidance and the best practices for undertaking due diligence in conflict-affected and high-risk areas, including jurisdictions, where local communities and defenders are at elevated risk of attack.

### **CLIMATE TRANSITION PLANS**

- Ensure that companies within the scope continue to be obliged to adopt and implement climate transition plans that are aligned with the EU's climate neutrality goal for 2050, the Paris Agreement, and the 1.5°C pathway.
- Require implementation to commence without delay, avoiding provisions that enable deferral or postponement.

## **2. Governments, multilateral bodies, and corporate buyers on Transition**

### **Mineral Policy**

The global energy transition must not drive new waves of environmental destruction, land grabs, and human rights abuses, including defender harms. Policies on transition minerals should prioritise absolute demand reduction, circularity, community rights, and strong environmental oversight, rather than simply accelerating extraction.

### **REDUCE DEMAND, ESPECIALLY IN THE GLOBAL NORTH, AND SCALE UP CIRCULAR SOLUTIONS**

- Adopt comprehensive mineral demand-reduction strategies including transport demand management, material efficiency standards, smaller battery and vehicle design requirements, and public transport investment to lower total mineral consumption.
- Mandate ambitious recycling and reuse targets for batteries and renewable energy technologies, supported by producer responsibility schemes and right-to-repair rules.
- Scale urban mining and secondary sourcing by investing in collection, refurbishment, dismantling, and advanced recycling infrastructure, particularly in Global South countries currently locked into extractive roles rather than value-added circular industries.
- Require recycled-content standards for EVs, batteries, and renewable technologies procured by governments and public bodies, with progressive annual increases.
- Prevent false green narratives by prohibiting corporate climate claims that rely solely on future recycling or demand “offsets” while expanding extraction.

- Consider sufficiency and efficiency measures to encourage a managed reduction in economic activity in wealthy nations to reduce environmental impact and promote social equity.

### **ESTABLISH LEGALLY BINDING MINING EXCLUSION ZONES**

- Enshrine strict no-go zones for mining and related infrastructure in all remaining primary forests, protected areas, Indigenous territories, key biodiversity areas (KBAs), and critical watersheds.
- Require mining legislation to recognise Indigenous land tenure and FPIC as creating permanent exclusion zones where communities do not consent.
- Create independent monitoring bodies with enforcement authority to investigate and sanction violations of exclusion rules.

### **EMBED COMMUNITY CONSENT AND RIGHTS AS PRE-CONDITIONS FOR MINING**

- Legally codify Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as a binding right to approve or reject projects, not a procedural consultation requirement.
- Prohibit the granting of licences, financing, or permits unless FPIC has been independently verified through credible audits and community validation.
- Require governments to enact and enforce legal protections for environmental and human rights defenders, including anti-SLAPP laws and emergency protection mechanisms.
- Guarantee accountability and access to remedy. Establish cross-border civil liability regimes allowing affected communities to pursue justice in home states of mining and buyer companies.
- Ensure that affected communities are part of the decision regarding access, management, and benefits derived from the resources they have.

### **SHIFT TRADE AND INDUSTRIAL POLICY AWAY FROM EXTRACTION-FIRST MODELS**

- Reject resource nationalism that prioritises rapid extraction over rights protection, environmental safeguards, and long-term community benefit.
- Trade deals, mineral partnerships, and development finance must require human rights benchmarks and FPIC compliance as preconditions for cooperation.
- Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) and similar initiatives must explicitly exclude mining projects that violate rights or operate in fragile biodiversity and community contexts.
- Generate a cost-benefit analysis that clearly reflects the true costs of extractive projects. This analysis of a mining project should not be simply about the cost of operating the mines and how much profit is expected from selling the minerals. The more significant costs, such as environmental, social, cultural and health costs, must be included.
- Update laws on mining, energy, and land use management to capture the current reality of climate change and extreme weather events. Investments and development projects should be made accountable for its contributions to climate change. Their climate impact, greenhouse gas (GHG)

emissions, or carbon footprint must be recorded and considered when crafting laws and enforcing policies.

### **3. Philippine Government**

- Establish a comprehensive public registry of beneficial owners of all companies holding or applying for extractive licenses to prevent corruption and money laundering.
- Legislate an Anti-Political Dynasty Law that prohibits political families from holding multiple government positions simultaneously.
- Strengthen enforcement for violations of conflicts of interest regulations for persons holding public office.
- Repeal the 1995 Mining Act and create a stronger legal framework that prioritises environmental sustainability, Indigenous rights and long-term community welfare.
- Investigate links between corruption involving flood control projects and the mining industry
- Improve transparency and governance by strengthening civil society engagement in the Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI). Government must investigate cases of intimidation and ensure that civil society members can express critical views publicly without fear of reprisals.