

Norway: Saami communities contend with the latest form of discrimination – ‘green colonialism’

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Nussir ASA, a Norwegian mining company, is planning to open a copper mine in Repparfjorden (Riehpovuotna in Saami), a coastal area of Saamiland in the northernmost part of the country. The project's supporters have sought to justify the project on the grounds that the large amounts of copper it produces are a vital element in the production of certain renewable technologies. For the indigenous Saami living there, however, it is a striking example of the threat of 'green colonialism' to their way of life.

Besides its long-standing status as part of Saami traditional lands, Repparfjorden has also been designated as a national salmon fjord, fed by a number of smaller watercourses. Nevertheless, despite many years of resistance from the Saami parliament in Norway, local communities and environmental groups, the Norwegian government approved the concession in February 2019. The only way to stop the mine now is through a legal battle in the courts.

In the meantime, should the Nussir mining process proceed under the current permit, preparations are under way for large-scale protests. This is not the first time the community has been forced to take action against the expropriation of their land in the name of development. In the 1980s, the controversial Alta hydroelectric power station triggered a series of highly publicized protests that, while failing to prevent the dam's construction, had a lasting impact on the status of Saami rights in Norway. Among

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other issues, it contributed to the country's subsequent ratification of International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 169 on indigenous and tribal peoples.

Saami are hoping that protests could again bring visibility to what would be a catastrophic development for their community. 'No machine should be allowed into Nussir before the case has gone through the court system,' says Beaska Niillas, a Saami activist and politician who is mobilizing resistance to the mine. 'It could be a bigger thing than the Alta conflict in the 1980s. Five thousand people have signed up to a list indicating that they will come and stop the mine.'

An added challenge is that, notwithstanding the negative implications of the mine for the local ecosystem, many of its proponents have sought to justify it in environmental terms. For example, the Norwegian trade minister Torbjørn Røe Isaksen has pointed to the use of copper in electric vehicles, wind turbines and other 'green' technologies.

Unsurprisingly, Niillas regards these arguments with some scepticism. 'It looks like the state uses the climate change argument when there is a benefit to the capitalist economic interest,' he says. 'In my opinion, in reality they are usually not so interested in driving climate-friendly politics.'

Renewable resources such as solar, wind, tidal, hydro, biomass and geothermal energy are growing rapidly, and are now accepted to be an essential element in climate change mitigation. However, these solutions require a considerable supply of a range of materials, including copper, the production of which is highly intensive in terms of energy consumption and emissions. The Nussir mine would have an immediate negative impact on the fragile Arctic environment. The dumping of the waste from the mine would be harmful to the fjord, the reindeer and the fish. The mine, its widespread infrastructure and its noise pollution would reduce reindeer-herding pastures to a minimum in the area. The implications for sea salmon fishing

could also be catastrophic. And the people who would suffer the most, while benefiting the least, are Saami.

Representatives of the Saami parliament highlighted the devastating impacts the mine would have, not only on the local environment but also on the livelihoods that depend on it, including reindeer herding and salmon fishing. The Repparfjorden area is an important calving and summer pasture for the reindeer in Fiettar district, whose long-established life cycles may now be disrupted by this development.

Environmentalists are also worried about the impact of the Nussir mining on sea life, particularly through the dumping of mining waste in

the oceans. Norway, along with Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Turkey, is one of just four countries in the world where mining companies are allowed to dispose of mining waste in the sea. These mine tailings risk contaminating fish stocks in surrounding areas with heavy metals such as mercury, as well as disturbing spawning grounds, with devastating impacts on both the quantity and quality of local fish supply.

The implications, at both a community and national level, could be profound. Silje Karine Muotka, a member of the Saami parliament of Norway, argues that the country's fishing industry could be badly hit if the mine goes ahead. 'I am also really worried

A Saami woman stands surrounded by reindeer during the autumn migration in Arctic Norway.
Abbie Traylor-Smith/Panos



about the impact of mining on the fish population, on the reputation of Norway as a fish-producing country and even on the ability to sell fish as human food internationally', she says.

The Repparfjorden case is not the only headache for Saami people. Recently a southern Saami reindeer-herding village lost a court battle against the Fosen Vind wind turbine company in the Storheia area of Trondheim in central Norway. The company is now planning to build a wind farm on the community's reindeer-herding pastures: once built, it will be the largest operating onshore wind farm in Europe. This is part of a wider shift across Scandinavia to wind farms. While they may offer the possibility of a cleaner energy supply, at present hundreds of wind turbines are being built with little appreciation of the potential negative impacts on grazing

and migration for reindeer populations – or the Saami communities which depend on them. Research suggests that reindeer movement is dramatically curtailed in areas close to wind farms. Analysing data gathered from GPS-trackers for reindeer, one study found that the construction of two relatively small wind farms in northern Sweden led to a decline by as much as 76 per cent in the use by herds of their original migration routes.

Despite these setbacks, Muotka says that the Saami parliament is now preparing its next steps with regard to the Nussir mine, including a study on its potential impact on Saami livelihoods. Every argument, every piece of evidence and every aspect of traditional knowledge will be needed if the community decides to take on the Norwegian government in the courts. ■