Setting the stage for a sustainable extractives sector

A recently released policy brief takes a look at the assessment of current practices and their importance in the transition towards sustainable extractive industries.

The EU-funded SUMEX project recently published the second edition of its annual policy brief. The document outlines how SUMEX assesses practices and their relevance for a transition towards sustainability in the extractives sector through the analysis of tensions and trade-offs, leverage points, the Institutional Resource Regimes (IRR) approach and qualitative policy analysis.

Efforts to achieve sustainability in extractive industries (e.g. mining, quarrying and oil extraction) while also balancing environmental, economic and social sustainability aspects inevitably lead to tensions between stakeholders and trade-offs among economic, social and environmental goals. “These tensions and trade-offs are present across the breadth of the extractive system, as extraction activities require land, interfere with nature and impact surrounding communities,” the policy brief states. The first step is to identify these tensions and trade-offs among stakeholders. The next steps involve identifying areas of disagreement, adopting deliberative and participatory learning approaches, and taking mitigating measures for more sustainable mineral extraction.

Tensions, trade-offs and leverage points
As reported in the document, most of the tensions and trade-offs in Europe’s extractive sector stem from issues relating to land use and social acceptance. Furthermore, “a notable number of tensions and trade-offs originate from the need for mineral raw materials for green technologies (e.g. battery technologies or renewable energy provision).” Interestingly, tensions and trade-offs stemming from human rights violations, harmful air emissions, circular economy and recycling are hardly mentioned at all.

In the discussion on leverage points – “places in a system where relatively minor interventions can lead to significant changes in specific outcomes” – SUMEX’s stakeholder-derived goals for sustainable land use management were found to lean more towards the edges of the leverage points scale. This means that they were aligned towards “shallow” leverage points (characterised by easy interventions with low potential to cause transformative change) and “deep” leverage points (characterised by challenging interventions with high potential to cause transformative change).

**The IRR and qualitative policy analysis**

Traditional environmental policies tend to focus on using the environment as a carbon sink, which is why they only regulate pollutant emissions. To address this issue, the IRR approach provides a resource-based method for sustainability. “In the IRR, the focus shifts from pollution restriction to the management of ‘stocks’ used from a resource in a way that will safeguard the reproductive capacity of the resource systems,” the policy brief reports.

This is followed by qualitative policy analysis that “investigates the implementation of policy instruments on the regional and local levels, as this is most relevant for the analysis of case studies. The qualitative analysis looks explicitly into evaluation criteria of effectiveness, justice, and legitimacy.”

All data collected within the project on EU industry and policy good practices in the extractive sector can be found in the [knowledge repository](#). The repository is open to all stakeholders looking for information on possible solutions to problems encountered by extractive industries.

On 17 November 2022, SUMEX (SUstainable Management in EXtractive industries) held a [workshop](#) summarising the results of regional workshops on permitting, land use planning, health and safety, reporting, and socioeconomic and environmental impact assessments. It has also launched a [massive open online course](#) on sustainability in the extractive industries.
Keywords

SUMEX, policy brief, extractives sector, extractive industry, tension, trade-off, leverage point

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