

# The Heart of Our Earth

COMMUNITY RESISTANCE  
TO MINING  
IN LATIN AMERICA

PROJECT REPORT

**'A sustainable future will be fairer  
and more rational,  
or it will not be sustainable at all'**

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# OVERVIEW

The Heart of Our Earth tells the story of the expansion of the mining industry in Latin America since the early 1990s, the social and environmental harms it has generated, and how local communities have organised and fought back.

It amplifies the voices of the people affected by the mining industry, to an audience in the Global North – where many of those who most benefit from mining extraction are located.

It contributes to debates on sustainability and the energy transition, debunking industry greenwashing and attempting to outline some of the true costs of the extraction upon which decarbonisation will depend.

Since The Heart of Our Earth was launched at the end of March 2023, we have sought out different ways of promoting the project and drawing attention to the issues which it raises.

Author Tom Gatehouse has given talks and delivered presentations, both in person and at webinars.

The book has been covered by journals and media outlets including the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), Diálogo Chino and El Clarín de Chile.

LAB organised a successful webinar in September, at which three Latin American experts who contributed to the book (two interviewees and one endorser) delivered presentations to a largely UK-based audience. Further details of these activities are provided below.

We will continue to seek out opportunities to promote the project in 2024.

Discussions are ongoing with the Anglo-Bolivian Society about a webinar. Tom is also due to speak at an event at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution in mid-April, while in May he will travel to Cornwall, to talk about the book to a group of local activists who are opposing the re-activation of mining in the region.





# THE AUTHORS

Tom Gatehouse

Tom Gatehouse is a writer, researcher, editor, and translator, who has lived and worked in Argentina, Brazil, and Spain. He worked as editor and project manager on LAB's *Voices of Latin America* (2019) and translated Bernardo Kucinski's novel *The Past is an Imperfect Tense* (2020). His writings and translations have been published on *Latin America Geographies*, *Mongabay*, *Red Pepper*, and *Folha de S. Paulo*, on the LAB website, and by literary publishers in Portugal and the UK. Currently employed at the University of Bath, he lives in Somerset.



Jo Griffin

Jo Griffin is a freelance journalist and writer who lived and worked in Mexico and Brazil for several years and has continued to report from Latin America. Jo spent ten years on staff with *The Guardian* and her articles have also been published by *The Observer*, *The LA Times*, *Al Jazeera*, the *BBC*, and *The Times of India*, among many others. She has worked as an editor and sub-editor and as a reporter for several short films, including *One Man, One City, Three Evictions*, for the Thomson Reuters Foundation, about the history of evictions in Rio de Janeiro. She is currently working on a book about a radical prison system in Brazil. She lives in London with her family.



# 3 BOOK CHAPTERS

## Chapter 1: Introduction: No means no

This introduction looks at the origins of the recent community resistance to mining in Latin America, focusing on two cases. It traces back an upsurge of mining conflict in late 2021 in Chubut, in Argentine Patagonia, to a famous case of resistance in the same province from the early 2000s, alongside a case from the north of Peru which has been similarly influential. The chapter also highlights some of the principal means with which communities have opposed the industry, including research, movement building, the call to defend water, and a local direct democracy mechanism known as the *consulta popular*.

‘This is an enormous province, which has uranium, gold, silver ... a whole load of minerals. But we only have one major river [the Río Chubut], which supplies the entire province with water ... And this is a very dry region. We depend on the river for everything. Sometimes there’s no water. If there isn’t much snowfall in the winter, the river runs low, and there are shortages.’

– Demián Morassi, art teacher and member of the Assembly in Defence of the Territory of Puerto Madryn, Chubut, Argentina



*Chubutaguazo massive demonstrations against the Chubut mega-mining project, 2021. Credit: Alex Dukal*



## Chapter 2: From old to new mining

This chapter provides an overview of two historical mining cycles in Bolivia: silver, focusing on the Cerro Rico in Potosí; and tin, focusing on Simón Patiño and the city of Oruro. It then analyses mining in Latin America since the 1990s, showing how this has taken on shapes and dimensions fundamentally distinct from those of mining in earlier periods. It then scrutinizes the role of the Canadian mining industry and the Canadian state in Latin America in recent decades. Finally, it tells the story of a famous investor-state-dispute-settlement (ISDS) lawsuit, brought by the Canadian company Pacific Rim against El Salvador.

‘The advance of mining in Latin America has been very intense, in a very short period of time historically. We’re talking about countries which have developed the industry over just two or three decades, countries which had no mining, but which have now been completely invaded by it.’

– Lucio Cuenca, director of the Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts (OLCA), Santiago de Chile



Cuajone Mine Peru. Credit: Grupo Mexico

## Chapter 3: CSR: We're in charge now

This chapter examines Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and community engagement strategies, illustrating how companies have used these tactics to neutralize community resistance and create a favourable social environment for operations. It focuses first on efforts by the Canadian junior Almaden Minerals to obtain the so-called 'social licence to operate' for its Ixtaca gold-silver project in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico; and then on the conflict between the Canadian giant Barrick Gold and communities in the north of San Juan, Argentina, following repeated spills at its Veladero gold and silver mine.

'Mining today provides very little in the way of employment. For reasons of both safety and efficiency, technology has replaced much of the workforce in the sector. Most of the employment is short term, available only during the construction phase. Once mines are up and running, demand for labour is minimal, and is largely for skilled professionals who are hired not from local communities, but from elsewhere in the country and sometimes from abroad.'

– Tom Gatehouse, author *The Heart of Our Earth*



*Second People's Water Summit at the Río Jáchal 2019. Credit: Oscar Martinez*



## Chapter 4: Resources before rights by Jo Griffin

**Community resistance to mining demands a response from companies and governments if projects are to advance. All too often, these responses have involved human rights abuses. This chapter presents a recent case of criminalization of mining opponents in Honduras; it then tells the story of the systematic violation of the human rights of Afro-descendant and indigenous Wayúu communities by the coal miner Cerrejón, in La Guajira, Colombia; finally, it examines human rights abuses during the conflict between local communities and the Yanacocha mining company in Cajamarca, in the Peruvian Andes.**

**‘They are using jails built for organized crime for the government’s opponents.**

**Since 2018 people defending land and water from contamination linked to mining have been sent to these prisons.’**

**– Karen Spring, Canadian human rights activist who has lived in Honduras for more than a decade**

**‘We want people in the countries which buy this coal to think more in depth about where it comes from. What effect does it have in the country or region where it’s mined?’**

**– Marcos Brito Uriana, Indigenous Wayúu activist from Provincial, an indigenous territory neighbouring Cerrejón in La Guajira, Colombia**



*Berta Cáceres' mother, with four of her children and her brother Roberto.  
Credit: RightsAction*



## Chapter 5: The mud is still flowing

**This chapter examines three major mining disasters of recent years: a chemical spill at a copper mine, in Sonora, Mexico, in 2014; the Bento Rodrigues tailings dam disaster, in Minas Gerais, Brazil, in 2015; and the Brumadinho dam disaster, also in Minas Gerais, Brazil, in 2019. It looks at the failure to repair the damage caused and provide justice to people who lost homes, loved ones, and livelihoods. It argues that in the absence of any meaningful reform of the mining industry, and given that those responsible have enjoyed near total impunity, such disasters are likely to recur.**

*(Right) A MAB activist blocks the Minas-Vitória railway, which connects mining areas in Minas Gerais to port in Vitória, Espírito Santo / © Thais Gobbo 2019*

**‘When they told us the dam had broken we knew something was heading our way, but we were expecting water. What came was something from another world. A monster. I saw it.’**

**– Marino D’Angelo Junior, a dairy farmer from Minas Gerais, Brazil, affected by the Bento Rodrigues tailings dam disaster of 2015**



*(Above) Damage in the Brazilian village of Bento Rodrigues after the 2015 Samarco tailings dam disaster. Credit: Romerito Pontes 2015 / CC BY 2.0*

## Chapter 6: Water: The industry's Achilles heel

**Mining has severe impacts on both the quantity and quality of water. Large mines can consume millions of litres of water a day, putting immense pressure on water supply for communities. Mineral processing also contaminates vast amounts of water, which may become a health and environmental hazard unless it is properly treated and contained. This chapter looks at these two aspects of the issue, focusing on illegal mining (garimpo) in the Brazilian Amazon; and industrial copper mining in Chile, in the context of the country's ongoing megadrought.**

**'There are Indigenous people and even some Indigenous leaders who say that mercury isn't an issue at all, that it's all nonsense, and that what's important is getting access to the gold ... The miners make them promises – cars, money, mobile phones, women – this co-opts them and creates division within Indigenous communities.'**

**– Jorge Bodanzky, Brazilian filmmaker, director of *The Amazon: a new Minamata?***



*A garimpo site in the Munduruku Indigenous Territory, Pará state. Mining is illegal in Amazonian reserves, but the activity skyrocketed during the Bolsonaro presidency of 2019 to 2022 (Image: Vinícius Mendonça / IBAMA, CC BY SA)*



## Chapter 7: The law of holes: Mining and climate change

If humanity is to prevent the worst impacts of climate change, it is essential that we decarbonize our economies. This will depend upon the widespread rollout of technologies which are enormously metal- and mineral-intensive. But mining is not without its social and environmental impacts, nor is it free of responsibility for the climate emergency. This chapter assesses to what extent mining may be part of the solution, looking at two metals which will be essential for the energy transition:

copper, focusing on the Cordillera del Cóndor, Ecuador; and lithium, focusing on the Salar de Atacama in Chile.

‘The assumption seems to be that mining can be made sustainable, or at least, that it can be reconciled with the demands of sustainable development. But what does this really mean? Is “sustainable mining” not an oxymoron?’

– Tom Gatehouse, author *The Heart of Our Earth*



*The Salar de Atacama in Chile holds lithium deemed crucial for the energy transition.*  
Credit- Matt Kennard

## Chapter 8: Conclusion: An end to business as usual

‘Since the 1990s, in line with the recommendations of the Washington Consensus, Latin American governments have ... reinforced and expanded an economic model based on the extraction of primary commodities for export. Mining, of course, is only one part of a much bigger picture. During this period, hydrocarbon extraction, agribusiness, electricity generation (including renewables, such as hydroelectric plants and windfarms), major works of infrastructure, and tourist developments, have all brought about extraordinary and unprecedented changes in the geography of Latin America.

‘The most alarming consequence of this is the ongoing and accelerating destruction of the Amazon, a ten-million-year-old forest of which, in little over half a century, nearly a fifth has been destroyed.’

‘I think the rights of nature have enormous potential. Enormous and completely transformative for our societies ... Especially in the context of climate change, biodiversity loss, and elimination of ecosystems in which we find ourselves, understanding the rights of nature as a limit on human societies is hugely important.’

– David Fajardo Torres, Ecuadorian law student and environmental activist with the groups Yasunidos and the People’s Council for the Water of Cuenca



Protestors stand together at the Rio Jáchal, San Juan, Argentina / © Oscar Martinez 2019



# 4 OUTREACH

## The Heart of Our Earth Website

The Heart of Our Earth website (a sub-section of LAB's [lab.org.uk](http://lab.org.uk) website), summarises the project and the importance of its subject.

It outlines who the project is designed to serve and includes a playlist of YouTube videos contextualising the issue, led by a compelling explainer video which served as the key to a successful 2020 Crowdfunder campaign.

This is an active website, which is constantly being added to, long after the publication of the book.

News about mining, its harmful effects, and community resistance – in a range of Latin American regions – pulls through onto the site which ensures that the project's arguments are constantly contextualised within actuality.

Instagram posts from the Heart of our Earth account pull through to the website alongside a link for donations and recent articles from LAB's relevant Environmental Defenders series.

Event information is displayed with images and video recordings.

The website is also a resource for readers and potential readers. It includes a synopsis, a link to buy the book, information about the authors, endorsements, relevant articles, press coverage of the book and a full list of contents.

Each chapter has its own page including a description of the chapter, embedded relevant articles and videos, and online references. These online references make it easier for the reader to access digital references.

The site has had thousands of views. Most came direct (searching on Google or typing in the web address – showing that we reached audiences outside of LAB's influence), through Twitter (showing social media engagement with the project), through our publisher Practical Action Publishing's website, or via LAB's newsletter.

Many users spent between one and four minutes reading the page (this is well above the average engagement time of 30 seconds or less on any given page).



# OUTREACH

## Events

### Book launch event at Lumen in Central London

- Introduction to the book 'The Heart of Our Earth: Community resistance to mining in Latin America' from the author, Tom Gatehouse.
- London Mining Network spoke on mining conflicts and resistance
- The exhibition 'For Dom, Bruno and the Amazon' looked at Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira's work in the Amazon, the impact of climate change and illegal mining on the Amazon, and defenders of the region killed for their action
- Drinks and food from local Latin American caterers were made available
- Copies of the book were sold alongside other LAB titles
- Speakers: Tom Gatehouse (author), Seb Muñoz (London Mining Network, War on Want), Sue Branford (LAB, Mongabay, FT, The Guardian, BBC World Service)
- 45 people in attendance, over 30 copies of the book sold.



### Talk at Morocco Bound Bookshop



- Tom was invited by Morocco Bound Review to speak on: 'Can mining help solve the climate crisis?'
- This book reading and talk was held at Morocco Bound bookshop in South London on 23 April 2023
- The talk attracted a younger crowd, not necessarily informed about environmental issues in Latin America.



# OUTREACH

## Events

Webinar – Mining and Environmental Justice in Latin America: A Closer Look, 28 September, 2023.

- **With simultaneous interpreting between English, Spanish and Portuguese, Tom Gatehouse, the author, invited special guests to take a closer look at mining and environmental justice in Latin America.**
- **Speakers:**
  - **Viviana Moreno, Argentine activist from the No to the Mine Assembly (Asamblea No A la Mina), Esquel**
  - **David Fajardo Torres, Ecuadorian environmental lawyer and activist, member of the groups Yasunidos and Cabildo por el Agua de Cuenca**
  - **Bruno Milanez, Brazilian industrial engineer and mining expert, associate professor at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora.**
- **The speakers gave in-depth talks contextualising their respective struggles, giving a depth and breadth of statistics, details, and first-hand accounts.**
- **56 sign-ups and over 360 views on the event page**
- **Recordings in three languages were posted to LAB's YouTube channel and have received over 115 views so far. [English](#) | [Spanish](#) | [Portuguese](#)**



*Bruno Milanez speaks on garimpo mining in the Amazon, the Yanomami Crisis and government denial around large-scale mining in Brazil at the webinar in September.*

# OUTREACH Events

## Collaboration with London Mining Network ahead of Anglo American AGM

- LAB contributed to travel expenses for Chilean-Mexican artist Amanda Piña to arrive at the annual general meeting of mining giant, Anglo American.
- Amanda performed at the AGM to protest against the company's socio-environmental impacts in Latin America, highlighting the harm that has been caused to local communities by Anglo American's mining and resource extraction.
- LAB also took part in a session organised by LMN with Victoria Uranga from Lo Barnechea, Chile, member of the No+Anglo group campaigning against their Los Bronces mine; Carlos Mitraud from Minas Gerais, Brazil, affected by Anglo's Minas Rio project; and Lourdes Huanca from FENMUCARINAP, Peru who works with communities affected by Anglo American's Quellaveco copper mine.



19 July – Resisting Mining Book Club: The Heart of Our Earth

## London Mining Network's Resisting Mining Book club event, 19 July 2023

- LMN invited Tom to speak at their monthly book club event. This was a really positive event, with plenty of interaction with the attendees, who dialled in from Chile and Brazil as well as the UK. The audience included students, journalists, teachers and activists.
- The recording is available [here](#).
- The talk gave an overview of resistance to mining in Latin America, but with a focus on mining industry corporate social responsibility. Tom opted to use as an example one case study from Mexico with which London Mining Network and its collaborators may have been less familiar, as the company concerned is Canadian and is not listed on the London Stock Exchange.



# OUTREACH Events

Presentation given to group at University of Essex for a module on “Contemporary Challenges in Latin America”, 2 November 2023

- Tom was invited by Dr Olivia Arigho Stiles to deliver a presentation on *The Heart of Our Earth* and the issues it raises to a group of her students. The group were Interdisciplinary Studies undergraduates, studying a module entitled “Contemporary Challenges in Latin America”.
- The presentation was followed by a Q&A session with the students who asked some great questions and provided some positive feedback on the book.

Ongoing collaboration with IPS

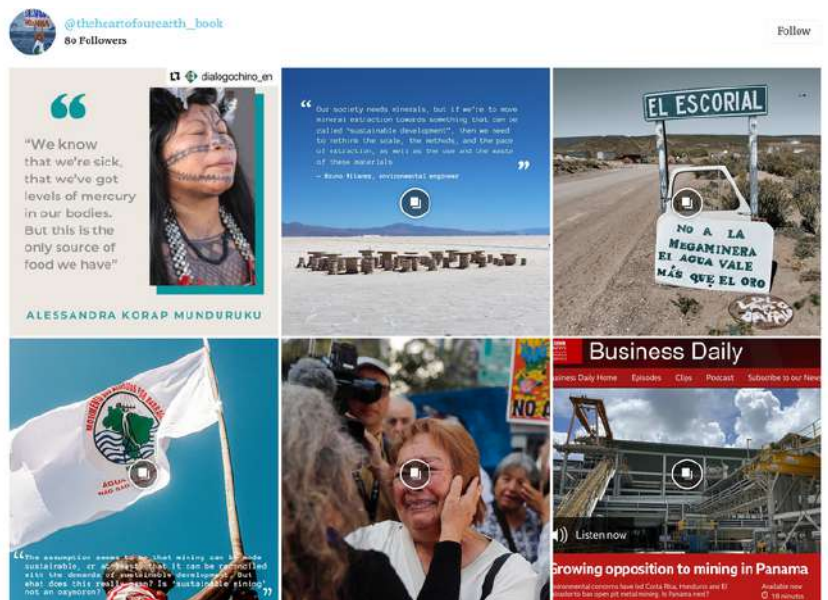
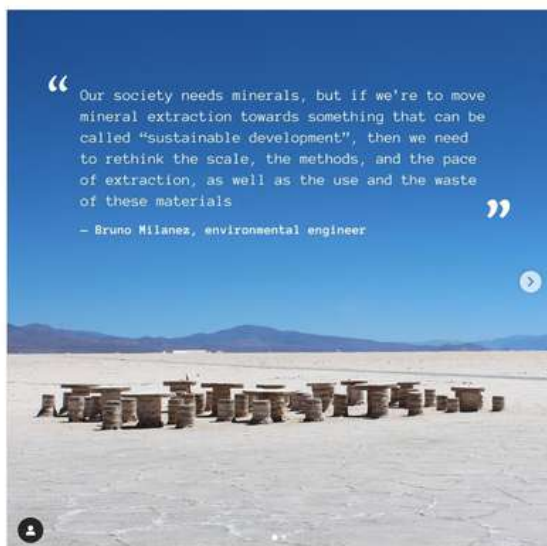
We are also working with the Institute of Policy Studies, Washington DC, where Jen Moore (formerly of Mining Watch Canada and an early supporter of the *Heart of Our Earth* project) is an associate editor. For LAB’s website, Moore has documented threats to overturn El Salvador’s 2017 ban on metal mining and the difficulties around Investor State Dispute Settlements (ISDS) in Colombia, whereby international investor rights – often found in bilateral investment treaties between resource extraction companies’ nations and Colombia – come before the rights of nationals to e.g. water, land, self-determination or local economy.



# OUTREACH

## Social Media

- With the help of three volunteers, we were able to create compelling, professional social media images telling some of the stories contained in the book and highlighting key issues explained within.
- We posted on LAB's general account and on a designated Heart of Our Earth account set up as part of the project. The specific project account serves as a list of resources and the LAB account helped us reach more users. Some of the posts were "collaborative" meaning they appeared simultaneously on both accounts.
- We used quotes and images from the book to create Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter posts and stories.
- This coverage helped us to secure reviews of the book, media coverage, and bookings for Tom to speak about the book at events. For example, social media posts around the myth of 'sustainable mining' led to an invitation for Tom to speak at Morocco Bound bookshop in London on the topic of 'Can mining help solve the climate crisis?'. Short quotes of Tom's writing around the need to make do with less led to a major outlet asking to publish an extract of the book on their website (and even translating it into Portuguese and Spanish).
- A paid post reached 24.5 thousand users and led to 168 clicks on a link to the Heart of Our Earth website. Another reached 18,000 users. Although this engagement is hard to measure in terms of impact, we know that it has brought this critical topic to wider audiences.



# OUTREACH

## Press coverage, podcasts, reviews

- **Thanks to support from NSC, we were able to devote time to sending out press releases and writing to journalists, reviewers, universities, libraries and bookshops. The Heart of Our Earth was widely featured in the press in the form of reviews, extracts, interviews, and podcast features, which brought these important stories to wider audiences and spread awareness both of the harms of mining and of the exemplary resistance to it found in many Latin American communities.**

*"The Heart of Our Earth is an urgent, timely and hopeful look at people's power against mining in Latin America. It is a vital read for anyone interested in resistance to mining movements, not only in Latin America but around the world."*

[The Heart of Our Earth review | Jasmine Haniff | NACLA](#)

*"Reimagining what urban mobility looks like would not only benefit people in Bristol but also the frontline communities in Chile and Argentina who are seeing their water resources being depleted due to mining activities."*

[The Author Telling The Stories Behind Latin America's Mining Industry | Valentina Hernández Gómez | Bristol 24/7](#)

[The Heart of Our Earth review | Vanessa Baird | New Internationalist \(print\)](#)

[Book extract: 'They're killing us' | Diálogo Chino | \[English\]\(#\) / \[Spanish\]\(#\) / \[Portuguese\]\(#\)](#)

["Nacionalización" del litio: de la trampa política al problema social | Elena Rusca | El Clarín de Chile](#)





# OUTREACH

## Press coverage, podcasts, reviews

[The Hearth of our Earth: Entrevista a Tom Gatehouse | El Clarín de Chile](#)

[Latam Dialogues podcast | EP14: Mining in Latin America](#)

[Latam Review of Books podcast | Podcast 2 with Tom Gatehouse](#)

[Ecuador: people of Cuenca deal blow to 'strategic' mining projects | Kinga Harasim and Tom Gatehouse | LAG blog](#)

[Colombia Calling podcast | 362: Socio Environmental Effects of Mining in South America](#)

[Climate and Capitalism, Ecosocialist Bookshelf, July 2023](#)

[Latin America Bureau, Voz VII | II. The Salar de Atacama, Chile: draining the desert](#)

[Third World Resurgence, No. 355, THoOE featured on p. 40](#)

[Interview with Tom Gatehouse on De Rusca con Amor \(Spanish\) | Podcast](#)

[Cile, la finta nazionalizzazione del litio di Boric \(Italian\) | Elena Rusca | Ventuno](#)

[CILE | LA FINTA NAZIONALIZZAZIONE DEL LITIO DI BORIC \(Italian\) | Elena Rusca | Gli Stati Generali](#)



The Hearth of our Earth: Entrevista a Tom Gatehouse



### "They're killing us"

The problem is particularly acute in the communities which live along the rivers, including the Mursuruku, one of Brazil's largest indigenous groups. In recent years, they have come under increasing pressure from a range of different sectors, including illegal loggers, land grabbers, agribusiness, and hydroelectricity generation.

However, garimpo – which has been a threat to the Mursuruku intermittently since the 1970s – exploded during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–2022). Research by the Instituto Socioambiental found that the area of the Mursuruku Indigenous Territory degraded by garimpo increased 353% between January 2019 and May 2021. The impact on the Rio Tapajós – on which the Mursuruku depend for fishing, feeding livestock, bathing, and transportation – has been especially devastating.



"We know that we're sick, that we've got levels of mercury in our bodies. But this is the only source of food we have," says leader Alessandra Kirap Mursuruku. "We can't stop eating fish because it's contaminated with mercury. If we did, we would all starve because we depend on the river, we depend on the fish for our survival."

The level of mercury intoxication amongst the Mursuruku surpassed even the worst expectations of Erik Jennings and his team, who have been monitoring the situation closely in recent years.

"Our research [involving 109 residents of the Alto Tapajós region] shows that 99% of the population tested have levels of mercury in their blood which surpass the threshold considered safe by the World Health Organization," Jennings told *Reporter Brasil*. "Some of them are 15 times over the limit. It's extremely worrying."

Alessandra Kirap Mursuruku is an indigenous leader fighting to protect her people from illegal mining. *Wendie Cripps / Anisulha Free, CC BY-NC-SA*

# 4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is more than five years since LAB decided to commission a book on mining in Latin America. As the project evolved, dozens of individuals and organizations have lent generous support.

Emma Banks, Becky Branford, Matt Kennard, and James Thackara all contributed vital interview material to this book (more details are given in the Preface). Thanks to Matt and Becky for sharing photos from their research trips, and to Matt for sharing his work on No Bonanza.

Theo Bradford, Will Huddleston, Elizabeth Pillares, Rowan Ritchie, Matty Rose, James Scorer, and Chris Whitehouse all provided support with transcription and translation.

A special thank you both to David Lehmann for all his encouragement and careful reading of the draft chapters, and to copy editor Clare Tawney for her diligent work ensuring style and consistency throughout the text.

LAB volunteers Jasmine Haniff and Kinga Harasim produced excellent original mining-related articles for the LAB website, some of which have fed into this book.

Special thanks to Francisco Elías Prada and Angela Rodríguez Torres (Ojos Ilegales Red), who edited the video for the crowdfunding campaign; to Eduardo Vidal, who shot original footage, and to Tatiana Garavito, who voiced the appeal.

We were determined from the outset that our project, like the issues it describes, would not finish with the publication of this book. A generous grant from the Network for Social Change ensured that we were able to promote the book, organize discussion of the issues it raises, and chronicle ongoing events and conflicts on The Heart of Our Earth website. A special thanks also to Mark Brown.

Thanks to the volunteers who gave their time to help promote the book, namely Hughie Stanley, John White and Kim Sperrfechter.

Thanks to War on Want, particularly Sebastián Muñoz and Benjamin Hitchcock Auciello; to Matti Kohonen of Christian Aid; and to Jen Moore from the Institute for Policy Studies (formerly of MiningWatch Canada), all of whom provided support for the project, particularly during the early stages.

I would like to say a special thank you to everyone at London Mining Network, particularly Terry Blackman, Andrew Hickman, Lydia James, Javiera Martínez, and Richard Solly. They provided guidance and contacts, set up interviews, promoted the project, and were indispensable and loyal supporters throughout.

# 4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many other individuals provided contacts, set up interviews, and helped in other ways to make this project a reality, including Letícia Aleixo, Oliver Balch, Paola Bayle, Inge Boudewijn, Ann Chaplin, Luis Manuel Claps, Jeremias Goransky and family, Valeria Guarneros-Meza, Antonio Ioris, Katy Jenkins, Julia Mello Neiva, Isabela Ponce Ycaza, Ana Reyes-Hurt, Alan Septoff, Waldo Soto, Andrés Tapia, Bruce Wilson, María Fernanda Wray, and Saúl Zeballos.

Several LAB editors and council members provided valuable support: Sue Branford helped to advance the project during early discussions with our partners and provided input throughout. Grace Livingstone helped me with the description of the Atacama Desert in Chapter 7 and contributed photos. Shafik Meghji provided tips on how to promote the book and ensure the continuity of the project. David Treece provided contacts from Brazil.

Finally, Rebecca Wilson did outstanding work on fundraising and promotion, especially on the crowdfunding campaign in late 2020. Others at LAB who contributed include Natasha Tinsley, who did important work promoting the project on LAB's social media channels; and Emily Gregg, Tom Kissock, Karoline Pelikan, and all those involved with the Voices of Latin America Indigenous Peoples and the Rights of Nature webinar, which focused partly on the impact of Cerrejón and featured Marcos Brito Uriana (see Chapter 4).

Thanks to Tom Kissock for his tech support at our Mining and Environmental Justice in Latin America webinar.

Thanks also to the Friends of LAB patrons for their support: Jon Barnes, Alistair Clark, Malcolm Coad, Ivette Hernandez, Elizabeth Lethbridge, Mandy Macdonald, Sophie M., Nick Parker, David Raby, Bert Schouwenburg, Rachel Sieder, and David Treece.

Our partners, Practical Action Publishing, provide all the skills for production and distribution without which LAB could not continue to publish books. Our thanks to Chloe Callan-Foster, Rosanna Denning, Andrea Johnson, and Jutta Mackwell.

A very special thanks to LAB editor Mike Gatehouse, for his unshakeable enthusiasm for and belief in this project, and to Verónica Menargues Soriano, for her patience and support throughout. This book would never have made it to publication without them.

Last but not least, thank you to all those who agreed to be interviewed, their families, and communities. I only hope this project can contribute in some way, however small, to greater awareness and understanding of mining and the true costs of the industry for local communities, ecosystems, and our planet as a whole.



# Acknowledgements

Suzie Beckley (LAB)  
Elsa Kenningham (Morocco Bound)  
Meskerem Kitel (Lumen)  
Javiera Martínez of (London Mining Network)  
Daniel Selwyn (London Mining Network Book Club)  
Saul Jones (London Mining Network)  
Tom Kissock  
Verónica Menargues Soriano (interpreter)  
ngela García Achalandabaso (interpreter)  
Marcela Nicolao Forastieri (interpreter)  
Sergio Corella (interpreter)  
Olivia Arigho Stiles (University of Essex)  
Elena Rusca (El Clarín de Chile)

Jasmine Haniff (NACLA)  
Valentina Hernández Gómez (Bristol 24/7)  
Vanessa Baird (New Internationalist)  
Susannah Birkwood (China Dialogue)  
Patrick Moore (China Dialogue)  
John White  
Hughie Stanley  
Sonja Rijnen (LatAm Dialogues)  
Richard McColl (Colombia Calling)  
Ian Angus (Climate and Capitalism)  
Lean Ka-Min (Third World Network)  
Gavin O'Toole (Latin American Review of Books)

## FUNDING

**Generous funding for research and writing came from Christian Aid, the Lipman-Miliband Trust, and David Lehmann. LAB would also like to thank everyone who contributed to the crowdfunding campaign in 2020, particularly Sophie M., Emily Ryan and Bill Flinn.**

**A generous grant from the Network for Social Change ensured that we were able to promote the book, organize discussion of the issues it raises, and chronicle ongoing events and conflicts on The Heart of Our Earth website.**



**The Lipman-Miliband Trust**

Network for  
Social Change



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