



TIN: CONNECTING COMPONENTS, DIVIDING COMMUNITIES

This is a summary of the report "Connecting Components, Dividing Communities: Tin production for consumer electronics in the DR Congo and Indonesia," Finnwatch, December 2007

Consumer electronic gadgets have become an inevitable part of modern-day life. Inside your PC, your mobile phone, your MP3 player or game console, most components are connected to the circuit board with solder containing tin. Today the electronics industry accounts for 35 per cent of the world's tin consumption.

As our demand for consumer electronics increases, so does the demand for minerals – and in some countries this demand is fuelling violent conflict. For example, the income from tin ore is lining the pockets of armed groups in some areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), one of the mineral richest countries – producing 2-3 per cent of world's tin. Three years ago, eastern DRC's richest mine, Bisie, was controlled by one of the region's most prominent warlords. During the period of his control, tin ore from Bisie found its way to international markets. At the time of writing, Bisie is under the control of a non-integrated brigade of the army, which has also committed many crimes against humanity.

DAANGEROUS CONDITIONS

Many miners live and work in dangerous conditions in mines like Bisie. In 2006 alone, ten fatal accidents were reported there. Some mine tunnels are up to 200 metres long, more than twice the length allowed by national mine legislation. Most small-scale miners in the DRC earn between 1 and 2 Euros per day. The UN estimates that 75 per cent of these miners are unable to cover minimum family needs with their earnings. Because many miners live quite a nomadic existence and arrive in large numbers at new mining areas, local communities also suffer from a sharp increase in the price of food and increased inflation. makeITfair found out that the trade routes from the DRC's tin mines lead directly to Asian tin producers and towards many solder producers and component manufacturers that supply some of our biggest electronics brands.

ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

Tin mining is also causing a wide range of environmental problems. In Indonesia, the world's second biggest tin producer, tin mining has caused environmental destruction of the islands of Bangka and Belitung, the country's main tin production area. Much forest cover and many water sources, as well as species of flora and fauna, have been lost to tin mining. In places, the islands resemble a moonscape, with old, gaping pits littering the landscape.

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WHAT CAN BE DONE?

In April 2007, makeITfair contacted the 20 market leaders of consumer electronics. They argued that it is difficult to trace metals and that they cannot influence the extractive industry since they, as individual companies, only use limited amounts of metals in their products. However, as this report shows, the electronics industry is a significant tin user. There is a direct link between their products and mining in the DRC, Indonesia and many other developing countries. makeITfair is calling on big brand electronics companies to take responsibility for the human rights abuses and environmental degradation taking place at the bottom of their supply chain. If they act together, they could make a huge difference – helping to reduce environmental damage and violent conflict.