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# Sustainable development and sacrifice in the rural North

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**Abstract**

In this article, I examine how the grand narratives of sustainability, development and mining impact local governance in a Swedish municipality. I do this by studying three mining projects under implementation and relate them to notions of development and sacrifice to lend insights into what the new trends of mining in Europe outlined above mean for the rural North. I regard sustainable development as a political concept ascribed to activities (such as political programmes or investments). Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Storuman municipality, I show how politicians, political parties and government administrators position themselves in relation to the three mining projects. I provide a detailed account of perceptions, responses and practices in a local government that engage with three mining companies seeking to open mines within the municipal borders. I show how a tug of war between ideas of sustainable development or survival through sacrifice depoliticises and stabilises a dominant political line in favour of mining within local politics. While the respondents differed in what they thought that sacrifice might lead to, ranging from environmental disaster and

social suffering to economic prosperity, I reveal a process wherein sustainable development becomes translated into 'that which must be sacrificed'.

**KEYWORDS**
local government, mining, sacrifice, sustainable development

## INTRODUCTION

Clarifying the government's stance on mining in Sweden, the then-newly appointed Swedish Minister of Enterprise explained to a journalist, 'It is not that we take environmental issues lightly, but yes, we, the Social Democratic Party[1] love mines' (Uggla & Nilsson, 2021). With this statement, the minister reaffirmed the central place of mining in the country's economic development.[2] This view on mining aligned the government's mining policy with the 2013 Swedish Mineral Strategy where mines are portrayed as being crucial for employment generation and economic growth, especially in rural areas facing economic decline. This is not to say that mining is a non-political issue. It has generated huge protests from environmentalists and Indigenous rights defenders, as well as created clashes between government agencies (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018; Anshelm et al., 2018). More than ever in Sweden, mining is a deeply political issue with several interests pitted against each other.

The pro-mining narrative resonates with recent developments around the world where new mining is justified by its contribution to 'sustainable development.' The extraction of critical metals (e.g., copper, cobalt, nickel and vanadium) is described as crucial for renewable energy production, electric car manufacturing and energy storage (Herrington, 2021). Drawing on Nightingale et al. (2019), I regard sustainable development as a political concept ascribed to activities (political programmes, investments, etc.) that seemingly pursue a 'state of sustainability' and that these activities contain normative, contentious or contradictory understandings of what sustainability and development entail. While much research has focussed on the political nature of sustainability, less attention has been paid to what it means for rural areas in the EU and in Nordic countries. Studies from Europe (del Mármol & Vaccaro, 2020; Wilson & Stammler, 2016) however indicate that rural areas, in relation to mining, are taking the brunt of the impact from these extractivist interests, revealing the unequal power relations between urban centres and rural peripheries. For rural areas where welfare services are being dismantled and crucial infrastructure is suffering from neglect, mining investments hold a strong allure for local and regional governments, as they are believed to be able to kickstart the local economies, helping them to catch up with the economically stronger metropolitan areas. As Dale et al. (2018) argue, mining zones, which predominantly are rural, stand out as spaces that are more readily sacrificed for the 'greater good' (i.e., the supply of minerals to green transition projects). As one of the main European mining regions, this has specific implications for the far north of the Nordic countries due to the relatively high presence of undeveloped mineral deposits. In this article, I show how the concept of sustainable development is referred to in attempts to shape the outcomes of mining investments at a local level in Storuman on the Nordic periphery.

I study how the grand narratives of sustainability, development and mining impact local governance in a Swedish municipality. I do this by studying three mining projects under

implementation and relate them to notions of development and sacrifice to lend insights into what the new trends of mining in Europe outlined above mean for the rural North. The term mining project is used to describe mines that have not yet begun operation but still exist in some form such as through an exploration permit, land claims, company projections or municipal policies. Thus, they are substantive enough for people to imagine them as a fully operational mine, which shapes how actors react to them, and at the same time, they are surrounded by a high degree of uncertainty as they might or might not be realised (see Stiernström & Arora-Jonsson, 2022).

Municipalities and local governments are important institutions for democracy and development for the local area. They are the political authorities closest to the places impacted by resource extractivism. Research on mining in rural regions of the Nordic countries has provided valuable and varied insights into how actors (e.g., state agencies, mining companies, civil society organisations and reindeer herding communities) relate to mining projects ranging from proposed to operational mines (Lindahl et al., 2018; Poelzer, 2015), as well as into the relationship between mining companies and local actors as they co-construct visions about the future (Haikola & Anshelm, 2018; Komu, 2019) or who holds relevant knowledge in the making of a mine (Dannevig & Dale, 2018). Here, I focus on the narratives of mining and sustainability that unfold through the work of politicians and bureaucrats that are crucial to what sustainability is at a local level. I turn the gaze to what unfolds *within* local politics as the mining projects have unclear futures. Although local governments are shown to be key actors in the studies outlined above, their role and perspectives in shaping mining projects through political (e.g., producing public reports that emphasise the benefits of mining) or administrative practices (e.g., public planning and/or environmental monitoring) need more attention, especially in relation to sustainable development.

I show how the pursuit of new mining projects becomes connected to 'sustainable development', both through large-scale narratives of 'green transformation' and locally through visions of economic growth, adding to recent research on the relationship between the pursuit of a sustainable society and increasing resource extraction (cf., Skorstad et al., 2018). I show how politicians and civil servants in their efforts to develop a stronger economy and social welfare feed into a national political position, wherein mining comes to be perceived as a reasonable sacrifice that will avert the challenges the municipality faces. While marked with tensions and juxtaposed positions between the political parties in local government, the mining projects hold a strong position in municipal politics, a position that at times is regarded as apolitical. I show how this position is maintained, through processes of depoliticisation within the municipal administration and through the reiteration of a history of a rural region that, as Arora-Jonsson (2013, pp. 55–59) puts it, is regarded as 'left behind' and therefore in need of development.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Storuman municipality, I show how politicians, political parties and government administrators position themselves in relation to the three mining projects. The projects seek to extract different minerals and vary in degrees of local protests. I provide a detailed account of perceptions, responses and practices in a local government facing mining projects in order to understand how a tug of war between ideas of sustainable development or survival through sacrifice depoliticises and stabilises a dominant political line in favour of mining.

In the next section, I discuss the literature on sustainability and development in mining as well as work on bureaucracies, to study how the municipal government shapes local mining politics. I then present my methods and background context on Storuman. The analysis begins with a presentation of the local political parties' positioning. From there, I describe how the local bureaucracy depoliticised mining and discuss how this obstructs the participation of municipal citizens. In the final section of the article, I conclude with a discussion on sustainable development,

mining and sacrifice in local politics. Furthermore, I show how sustainability and development can be highly contested and given different meanings at the local level but also how it connects to a readiness to be sacrificed.

## Sustainable development, sacrifice and depoliticisation in local mining politics

In the European Union, the push for new mines is evident in policies such as the Green Deal (European Commission, 2019), the Raw Materials Initiative (EURMI) (European Commission, 2008) and more recently in a Communication from the European Commission (European Commission, 2020) wherein increased mineral extraction within the EU is described as being crucial for sustainable development. In the wake of ongoing energy transitions and the pursuit of the elusive goal of sustainability, 'green mining' is re-emerging as a transformative, capitalist presence in rural areas, sometimes marked with dramatic turbulence and violence (Verweijen & Dunlap, 2021). Research on new mining proposals in Europe has found increased tensions between miners, mining companies, local communities and anti-mine activists in Romania (Szabo et al., 2022), Germany (Brock & Dunlap, 2018), Sweden (Fjellborg et al., 2022) and Greece (Hovardas, 2020). In Portugal, Chaves et al. (2021) predict that the EU's increased demand for lithium will lead to new tensions and challenges for local communities. In their overview of extractivism, del Mármol and Vaccaro (2020) assert that mining is becoming a driving force behind socioeconomic transformations in peripheral areas across Europe, egged on by EU policies such as the EURMI.

In rural regions, the reasons behind mining initiatives (and other forms of extractivism, e.g., forestry or energy production) follow a similar logic associated with extractivism across the world (del Mármol & Vaccaro, 2020; Wilson & Stammler, 2016). New extractive projects are seen as protecting 'peripheral areas' from economic stagnation through the development of new infrastructure, local industries and employment opportunities (see also Dale et al., 2018). These processes and effects of mining are oftentimes the result of combining 'mining' with 'development' (Skorstad et al., 2018). Meanwhile, as critics argue, extractivism implies that resources are removed from the region to generate profits elsewhere, causing local environmental degradation and the breakdown of rights and relations to land (for recent examples, see Dunlap & Jakobsen, 2020; Kirsch, 2014; Willow, 2018; Wilson & Stammler, 2016). Lately, research on mining and development has reiterated how mines bring uncertain and disruptive promises of 'development', as capitalist ventures acquire large land areas and transform environmental, social and economic aspects of the everyday lives of local communities (Bebbington & Humphreys Bebbington, 2018; Stiernström & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). These insights, and the tension between development and mining, provide a backdrop for this article.

Sustainability, understood as safeguarding economic, social and environmental dimensions of life becomes impossible to reconcile with the political and social turmoil, often through the disruption of property rights and destruction of ancestral lands, that mining engenders (Skorstad et al., 2018). Research on mining and sustainable development has shown how implementing policies for sustainability in mining does little to transform actual mining practices (Kirsch, 2014, pp. 166–168; Kirsch, 2010). Rather, the mining industry tends to re-define the concept, emphasising that sustainability is about economic stability and growth, downplaying its environmental and social dimensions.

While sustainable mining can be understood as a 'corporate oxymoron' (Benson & Kirsch, 2010), Bebbington and Humphreys-Bebbington (2018) invite us to consider how sustainability

can relate to mining, not in terms of how mining itself can be sustainable but rather if mining can provide the basis or be part of the development of sustainable regions. In the Nordic countries, research can be divided into several fields. First, there is extensive research on Indigenous livelihoods and land rights (e.g., Åhren & Lawrence, 2017; Kløcker Larsen et al., 2016; Lawrence & Larsen, 2017; Lawrence & Moritz, 2019; Österlin & Raitio, 2020. In the former, the development of new mines can be seen as furthering a history of colonial practices, where Indigenous rights are ignored, lost or transformed into 'interests' rather than rights, in order to support industrial investment on Indigenous lands. This is a pattern that repeats itself across the globe (cf., Willow, 2018). Second, research has also focused on the development of labour and employment at local and regional levels (e.g., Moritz et al., 2017; Tano et al., 2016), which suggests that mining indeed may be a boost for local economies, but it also creates a situation where communities are precariously dependant on mining for their livelihoods (Poelzer & Ejdemo, 2018; Willow, 2018). A third strand of research focusses on community participation and (mainly social) sustainability (e.g., Hedin & Ranängen, 2017; Jagers et al., 2018; Poelzer, 2015; Segerstedt & Abrahamsson, 2019; Suopajärvi et al., 2017; Tarras-Wahlberg, 2014; Tarras-Wahlberg et al., 2017). These show that the large-scale mining that dominates in the EU can be understood as an outside force imposed and acting on an area rather than a local initiative for natural resource management. Mining, when introduced, is an activity that local residents have to react to, as it takes control of the local environment and dramatically transforms it. Jonas Anshelm and Simon Haikola have examined dominant discourses in Swedish mining politics, as well as the positioning among politicians, the mining industry and resistance movements (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018; Anshelm et al., 2018; Haikola & Anshelm, 2016, 2018). They highlight how mining always is highly political, although it sometimes appears to be depoliticised.

The studies presented above lend valuable insights into how wider mining politics and specific mining projects impact local communities. However, they give limited attention to municipal government activities, as politicians and bureaucrats relate to the prospect of a new mine and face claims and counterclaims on how to proceed. This is crucial, as local governments are well placed to be the arena for deliberation of regional natural resource governance. Furthermore, it is at the local level that the connections between mining, sustainability and 'sacrifice' become most prominent.

## Sacrifice zones and visions for the future

In their work on mining in the Arctic, Skorstad et al. (2018) discuss the paradox of sustainable mining as a tension between sustainability and 'sacrifice zones'. Lerner (2012) uses sacrifice zone to refer to an area that becomes endemically toxic and polluted through industrial activities and is in a sense sacrificed for the profit of other areas. As such, it is a way to encapsulate the local effects of extractivism, from the perspective of the site where extraction takes place. In my use of the concept, sacrifice zone is not limited to the mine and its direct environment but is also used to describe a region whose continued existence is dependent on a willingness to sacrifice resources in order to sustain itself. Skorstad et al. (2018) argue that mining will always include spaces that are sacrificed (environmental damages, pollution or loss of land), thereby making the question of mining and sustainability a question about what scale (i.e., local, national or global) sustainability is to be achieved. This has especially important implications for local governments in the rural north given their economic dependency on natural resources. Arora-Jonsson (2013) has shown that in policy-making and the mainstream national imagination, urban areas in

Sweden are equated with economic growth and development, whereas the northern inland is seen as the antithesis, an underdeveloped backwater mainly suitable for resource and energy extraction. Rural inhabitants of the North are similarly depicted as those 'left behind' with few prospects (ibid: pp. 55–59). I show how both the concept of sacrifice and the notion of being 'left behind' intersect in the ways politicians position themselves regarding mining projects.

In the rural North, local governments face high costs to provide social services due to long distances and decreasing revenue arising from a shrinking population. There is a general sense that these challenges must be addressed through political intervention, but these interventions are often made to address an immediate problem rather than finding a long-term solution (cf., Keskitalo et al., 2019; Syssner, 2014). Drawing on work that studies struggling communities in Europe and the US, Syssner (2014) argues that when a certain problem (e.g., declining population) becomes tightly tied to a specific solution (e.g., stimulate local businesses), local governments tend to disregard or downplay alternative ways of understanding and dealing with the problem, creating a set of 'perceptions of what is possible to do'. The tendency to lock down government responses to a problem along a single line of solutions furthers a process of depoliticisation as it narrows down the space for political debate that can offer alternative solutions. In light of this, I go on to show that the view within a local government that a certain sacrifice is necessary for survival (i.e., a willingness to participate in the making of a sacrifice zone) can become regarded as an apolitical and pragmatic standpoint.

In contrast to the perceptions of what is possible, Komu (2019) argues that expectations associated with mining projects can be likened to dreams connected to prosperity, part of a wider narrative of modernity and progress, via industrial transformation with historical antecedents of what Scott (1998) calls an ideology of high modernism. This argument fits the history of the rural North, where industrial investments were regarded as securing progress and developing the left-behind areas (Sörlin, 2019), and I show how the expectations associated with a mining project, as well as perceptions of a broader historical narrative of land use and the relationship between citizens and state, and dreams of economic, social and environmental sustainability, are crucial to understand why politicians act in certain ways.

Haikola and Anshelm (2018) describe how local expectations of benefits from a mine are shaped by a multiplicity of actors (i.e., the mining companies, state institutions, expert consultants and local community actors) who together produce vibrant visions of the future where the new mine drives off problems that the community and local government faced previously. They show that these visions are often persistent even in the event of failure, for example, when a mining company declares bankruptcy without having delivered any of the promises of economic growth or continuation of social services. Building on Haikola and Anshelm's study (ibid.), I show a connection between the visionary aspects of sustainability and mining within municipal politics and everyday practices of policy implementation where public servants contribute to the continuation of the political line. The everyday practices of civil servants and the role of expertise will be the subject of the next section.

## Expertise and depoliticisation in local politics

In his work on national mining politics in Sweden, Envall (2018) shows that political debate combines both antagonistic positions regarding mining development and descriptions of mining as being a highly complex and technical issue not suited for non-experts. As Mitchell (2002) has shown in the governing of post-colonial Egypt, access and control over expertise can give

considerable influence (or even set) the political agenda. When 'experts' identify problems but also formulate what resources and methods will provide solutions to these problems, this puts them in a position of power vis-a-vis non-experts. Olsson and Hysing (2019), in their work on 'activist civil servants', show the importance of networks where politicians, civil servants and other experts interact to produce, sustain or challenge policies. I demonstrate how civil servants and politicians that engage with mining projects not only operate within the confines of the municipal administration but draw on larger networks and forms of accepted knowledge and expertise when they formulate plans and statements.

Dannevig and Dale (2018) demonstrate that the lack of political discussion about mining in local government is dependent on the notion that mining is a technically advanced issue that local government lacks the expertise to address. Similarly, assumptions about the infallibility of scientific expertise and that the global north is seen as 'developed' come in the way of questioning 'development', let alone addressing questions of resistance and democracy in relation to environmental interventions (Arora-Jonsson, 2017, 2018). Arora-Jonsson (2017) shows that the tendency to treat social and political issues as technical matters makes it harder to question the underlying assumptions made by policymakers, not least in the Global North where the professionalism and expertise of state institutions are seldom questioned. Swyngedouw (2011, 2014) argues that it is these processes of bureaucratisation and transforming the 'political' into 'politics', that is, constraining a free political debate in favour of formalised politics that constitutes depoliticisation. This insight is important for the political discussion about sustainability, as it suggests a need to be attentive to contested meanings on sustainability and when the governance of natural resources is reduced to technical issues. In the analysis below, I show that these processes in local mining politics *within* the municipality maintain the current dominant position.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

Sustainability is a temporal concept and connects present practices to the future, that is to say, how we use natural resources today impacts the potential for a sustainable future. This suggests that the question of time is important for the ways in which informants make sense of events. Therefore, I have been attentive to how research participants make sense of political events by drawing on both history (e.g., a history of colonialism or industrialisation) and the visions of the future (e.g., talking about economic development/decline or promises made about future prosperity). I take inspiration from Haikola and Anshelm (2018) on mining in northern Sweden and their analysis of how expectations relating to mining projects are formed. Second, I draw on work that argues for the use of ethnographic methods when studying policy and bureaucracy in order to understand how these are maintained through everyday actions (Mosse, 2005; Newman, 2020; Newman & Clarke, 2018) As Fischer et al. (2015) suggest, this means paying attention to contrasting official statements and policies, compared to the actual practice of politicians and bureaucrats, but also to identify the work that policy texts do to maintain (or subvert) a political line.

The fieldwork that forms the basis for this article was conducted in the Storuman municipality for in total of 5 months based on recurring visits between April 2017 and March 2020. I made a selection of interviews, policy texts, newspaper articles and participant observation. In all, 21 people were interviewed; 13 with municipal politicians across the whole political spectrum and eight with civil servants working in positions that dealt with issues of planning, environmental management, property and demography. Perspectives from the municipal administration are unfortunately lacking interviews with the office for enterprise and businesses, as the planned

interviews had to be cancelled due to unforeseen events (out of the author's control). To remedy this, particular attention was given to interviews with politicians who work in close connection with the office, as well as an analysis of documents issued by the office.

Nine of the interviewees were women and 12 were men. While the politicians' educational backgrounds varied from vocational training to higher education, all the civil servants had received higher education. In addition to the research participants from the municipality, I include three interviews with people who are official stakeholders in the permitting processes and have in the past criticised municipal practices. These three interviewees serve to provide parts of the background for the article. All interviews were semi-structured. The research participants have all been given fictional names. However, as the study is conducted in a sparsely populated area and all respondents have public positions, anonymisation is hard to achieve. To take this into consideration, all research participants were made aware of how the interviews would be used in the research.

The initial interview selection was made on the basis of the individual being in a position with direct contact with administering mining permits. I increased the selection by 'snowballing' from the initial interviewees for new research participants, in part by enquiring who they thought I should talk to and in part by asking about particular administrative responsibilities, for example, property and land management. Furthermore, I have regarded the interviews as expressions of the individual interviewee's beliefs. The interviewees were made aware of the background of my research in general, explained as an interest in how the three mining projects are perceived by the informants and what they think they mean for the local communities. This was done so that all interviewees would have the same level of understanding about what my entry point to the field was and how their responses might be used. When prompted, I disclosed my own position regarding mining in Sweden, which I described as being cautiously but not categorically critical of new mining projects and the national mining policy.

As a complement to the interviews, I carried out participant observations at public meetings and spent time in the municipal offices and had lunch or informal meetings with the municipal staff. During these observations, I participated in conversations, discussed my research project and made field notes. Apart from the informal meetings, I also attended two public council meetings and one closed meeting with the planning committee for Indigenous interests.

The municipality has issued three publications on the socioeconomic effects of mining investment (Duvdahl, 2012; Lindahl et al., 2016; Umander et al., 2018). These were referred to in the interviews and seemingly remained relevant in planning procedures and public discourse. Likewise, the mining companies themselves produced material to promote the local and national benefits of their projects. These reports (ibid.), together with local news and editorials, are analysed in relation to the interviews and practices observed on the ground. A comprehensive list of the written material can be found in Appendix A.

## Three mining projects in Storuman

Like most northern Swedish municipalities, Storuman has faced a declining population since the 1970s (SCB, 2021). My interviews show that the population, and in particular taxpaying residents, remain a central concern for the local government. Fjertorp et al. (2013) argue that while an increase in population does not necessarily generate a stronger municipal economy, it does improve the local government's ability to maintain welfare services. This is also a key reason given in the interviews, aligning with the Swedish Mineral Strategy (2013), that mining initiatives will

generate jobs and sustain the local economy. However, Storuman's unemployment rate is lower than the national average, even when compared to the rates of larger cities such as Stockholm according to Statistics Sweden (SCB, 2021). According to a city planner at the municipality, finding people willing to move to remotely located Storuman, even for high-paying jobs, is the main challenge in the area.

Actual mining activities in Storuman are comparatively recent and few, in relation to the heavily mined municipalities immediately east. The first operational mine within the municipality was a gold mine that started in 2005. The gold mine is now depleted, but according to the Australian owner, Dragon Mining (2015), the company is exploring adjacent sites for further extraction. Between 2008 and 2012, two other mines opened only to be abandoned as the mining companies declared bankruptcy. These now infamous mines, Blaiken and Svärtträsk, and their negative impacts on the environment[3] as well as their failure to provide secure employment and pay their bills, have negatively affected municipal residents' views on mining. The three mining within this study projects consist of a nickel project in the valley of Rönnbäcken, owned by the Swedish company Bluelake Minerals, a fluorspar project outside the village of Blaiken/Ersmark at a mountain called Kyrkberget, owned by the British company Tertiary Minerals, and finally a gold mine project pursued by the US/Canadian company Agnico-Eagle located outside the village Barsele. During fieldwork, only the Agnico-Eagle project was operating. The Kyrkberget project had appealed to have their permits re-instated, while Rönnbäcken remained at a standstill since 2016.

## The three mining projects in municipal politics and administration

In recent years, mining politics in Storuman have mostly revolved around the three potential and the two abandoned mines. Here, I lay out the background to the new projects, but I also show how the projects have been drawn into municipal politics, in part through the actions of citizens but also by the municipality taking an active stance on the projects.

During fieldwork in April 2018, environmental officers in the municipality explained that Agnico-Eagle had weekly correspondence with the municipal administration, while the other two projects led a relatively quiet existence. This was not always the case. Since 2008, the Rönnbäcken project, then owned by the company Nickel Mountain Resources, was the cause of much controversy and led to the formation of the Stop the Mine resistance network in Rönnbäcken that took on international proportions (see Persson, 2015; Stiernström & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). Storuman municipality is located in Sápmi, the traditional homeland of the Indigenous Sami people, whose livelihoods and culture are tightly connected to their access to land, and the resistance network organised a large part of the Sami population (ibid). During the conflict, the municipal leadership adopted a firm pro-mining stance, with promised investments and the potential of an increase in the population due to work-related migration given as the main reasons (Tidholm, 2014, pp. 40–62; Müller, 2015, pp. 228–230). The different positions of, for and against the mine led to tensions both within and outside of the municipal government. However, in 2016, the Rönnbäcken mine came to a halt (in part due to the protests) and has remained dormant until spring 2021 when it came under the name of Bluelake Minerals. Since then, the new owners have been attempting to revive the project.

The stance taken by the municipality shows that a municipal administration can and does move beyond the formal permitting process (described in full in Appendix B) to influence the implementation of mining. Furthermore, in 2012,[4] Storuman municipality published the report

*Investment effects in Storuman Municipality 2015–2030* (Lindahl et al., 2016), written by external consultants, outlining the potential benefits of investments where mining was a substantial part. The report formed the basis for a glossy magazine named *Storuman Tjugo20* [Storuman twenty20] (Duvdahl, 2012), with interviews depicting a bright future of sustainable development for Storuman, although the magazine also contained views that suggested that the path towards the future would be complicated and would entail conflicts. In the magazine, sustainability is depicted by a range of aspects such as a long and enjoyable life, economic prosperity and environmentally sound use of resources. However, all these aspects were dependent on investment capital flowing in to the municipality through activities such as mining.

The municipal government also participated as a partner in the project Regional Innovation in the Nordic Arctic and Scotland, an EU-funded project for regional development through 'smart specialisation', a method of identifying and utilising (underdeveloped) municipal resources (Jungsberg et al., 2020). In Storuman, one of the identified resources was minerals. These elements, taken together, reveal how the municipality has taken a strong position to favour mining projects. At the same time, the leadership like to create the appearance of being part of an apolitical planning process. In the next sections, I will contrast this position with the role of politicians and civil servants in municipal mining politics.

## Sacrifice, survival and development in local mining politics

In the interviews with politicians, their support or opposition could broadly be identified as one to three positions. First, some respondents were completely opposed to the projects, connecting them to neo-colonialism and environmental destruction. Second, some emphasised the benefits that might come from mining investments. However, placing themselves somewhere in between these positions, there were a diverse group of politicians who presented themselves as being pragmatic. Their positions are more blurred but can be further divided into those who regarded the mines as a necessary evil, and those who saw them as bringing potential benefits, but only under certain conditions.

### Opposing the mines

In March 2019, I met Peter who represents the Left party in Storuman Municipality. Speaking as a member of a Sami community as well as a politician, Peter described the mining projects as recent examples of neo-colonialism, perpetrated by the Swedish state in the northern inland and in Sápmi. Most typical is the case of Rönnbäcken. Peter explained that the mining project is targeting a river valley that has a history of living with the Swedish state's resource extraction, particularly during the development of the system of hydro-electric power plants that reshaped many rivers of the northern inland.

> The [general] feeling among the people around here is that when the state wants something, they just come here and take it. […] You just take what you want. Meanwhile, [we] see how welfare services disappear at an increasingly rapid rate. (Peter, 2019)

Peter expresses a sense of the northern region being a smorgasbord for the Swedish state, a notion that was largely shared across the political spectrum. Caroline from the Social Democrats, the

largest oppositional party to the Center-Right coalition that rules Storuman, was critical about state politics that promoted predatory behaviour from the mining industry. 'They come here and pillage and give nothing back'. In this, she is close to what Maria, a liberal-conservative politician and member of the Sami Parliament told me.

> I used to work in the Blaiken mine [...] so I've seen the consequences [...] Everyone is affected, the impacts on the land are huge[...] We who live here, and enjoy living with nature, notice how the land gets smaller and smaller [...]. The rest of Sweden lives of our resources and we get nothing for it. (Maria, 2020)

In these descriptions, the imagery of the 'sacrifice zone' as a place utilised and later discarded for the benefit of some place elsewhere (Dale et al., 2018; Skorstad et al., 2018) is strong. Interestingly, while this sentiment was echoed in social movements against the mines, such as the *Stop the Mine Network* in Rönnbäcken, it had not led to any stronger coalitions or party positions within municipal politics. While the Left party has been a staunch critic of mining and many of its members were part of the resistance moment against the Rönnbäcken mine, the other party representatives described the mining project as existing outside of or away from municipal politics.

When I later asked Peter why the protest was limited to the resistance network, he told me that the people living in the northern inland have long since learned that protests take you nowhere, so instead they assume a position of stoic endurance (cf., Stiernström & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). The interviewees also shared a sense that it does not matter if they protest due to them being so few in comparison to the external interests exerting pressure on them. Their explanation shows a sense of voicelessness, that connects to a notion of being both left behind and sacrificed for external interests. The stability of municipal politics regarding mining in Storuman can be compared with recent developments regarding often quite successful mobilisation against mining investments outside the confines of municipal politics, where even local governments have been involved (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018).

## A pragmatic position: Mines as a necessary evil or conditional benefactors

Krister from the Christian Democrats is a member of the municipal council. He agreed with the image of northern Sweden being internally colonised but argued that the utilisation of resources is inevitable and therefore something that cannot be disregarded in local politics. In the event of a mine opening, he saw that there might be economic benefits like employment leading to an increase in revenue. He also wondered what would happen to Storuman if there was no extraction of resources. By doing so, he suggested that, although he would prefer alternative solutions, the mines represented a path of survival through sacrifice. Eva, a representative of the Swedish Democrats, continued with this logic, when she argued that although the mines bring with them many complex problems, not least environmental ones, the mining projects also represent means to a future existence. Both Krister and Eva explained that since society at large is dependent on mineral extraction, perhaps there is also a moral obligation to accept the presence of mining projects. Here, the respondents depict Storuman as a sacrifice zone but also highlight how this sacrifice can be considered part of the larger pursuit of sustainable development that provides a means of survival locally.

The view of the municipal leadership was clarified in interviews with Adam, the chair of the municipal council and member of the liberal Center Party. He described his stance on mining

as optimistic, provided that the companies passed the national permitting processes. The mines might deliver new job opportunities and thereby create municipal economic growth, both through the influx of residents, but also through an increase in revenue through labour taxes (cf., Fjertorp et al., 2013). He argued for a pragmatic approach, asking how they might best benefit from a situation wherein the municipality had little sway. Adam actively supported the mines by attending a yearly conference in Stockholm, where the municipality organised mining investment seminars. Adam also represented the Swedish Municipalities' interests in the SGS Advisory Board, set up by the Swedish Geological Survey. This places him in a network of public servants, mining industry representatives and politicians, which he then could draw upon to push his political position (cf., Olsson & Hysing, 2019). In Adam's position, opening mines does not signify a sacrifice as long as the mines adhere to the current environmental requirements. Rather, he regards them as a solution to the problems induced by being left behind, that is, the lack of funds needed for municipal development. Seeing them as a solution to these problems has also encouraged Adam to act to realise the mines.

When Tertiary Mineral's permits were withdrawn from Kyrkberget based on an appeal to the Mining Inspectorate,[5] Adam, upon the mining company's request, wrote a letter to the national government describing the long-term social and economic benefits the mine would have and signed it as chair of the municipality. In the letter, Adam equates the mining projects with sustainable development but does not explain how this connection is made, preferring instead to talk about the economic benefits that can be made from mining investments. To him, and similarly to the *Investment effects in Storuman* report, the mines were an untapped source of economic development. Through the letter and his placement in a government network that advises on mining development, Adam shows that he is willing to go beyond the cautious optimistic stance to make mining projects become a reality.

The letter from the chair of the municipality was not available in the public archive in Storuman, to the surprise of the municipal secretariat. When I had the opportunity to ask him about the letter, he explained that it could be seen as an expression of the established political line of the municipality. He described the formal position as only being prudent, presenting the push to move the projects forward as mostly an administrative task. Still, Adam acknowledges that the projects are controversial and claims to understand the points raised by critics, for example, the resistance network in Rönnbäcken. He even accredits them an important function in mining proceedings, describing them as a safeguard that can minimise the social and environmental impacts of the mining projects as they voice concerns that might be otherwise overlooked. This is an acknowledgement of the existing conflict and the politics involved, but it also reduces the resistance network to a functionary in the formal permitting process, whose calls to have their (Indigenous) rights acknowledged are reduced to environmental concern, thus depoliticising them.

## Mines as opportunities

Johnny, of the local party The Municipal List, held a more utopian view on mining when he suggested that the employment opportunities in the mines will generate an increase in population of up to a thousand new municipal residents. His own estimate was far greater than anything suggested by the mining companies and would mean a boost for municipal revenue, although he did reflect on the precariousness of mining investments, (cf., Poelzer & Ejdemo, 2018), and he was critical about the Rönnbäcken mine due to (as he saw it) the low quality of the mineral

deposit. However, for Johnny, all industrial investments (from wind power to mines) that may generate new taxpayers should be welcomed as they will secure the economic development of the municipality. His positive view of the mines went even further than the cautiously optimistic stance promoted by the municipal government. Although he thought that the municipality could do more to ensure mining investments, he supported the descriptions of the mines as potential boosters of the local economy, made by the municipal leadership.

The account made by Johnny regarding the untapped potential of mining in parts comes with the urgency of economic survival. He appeared driven by an idea that something must be done to safeguard the future existence of communities in the rural North. Both he and Adam present themselves as pragmatic realists, willing to do what it takes to achieve sustainable development. Here, sustainable development is interpreted as being primarily economic, although it will also support social sustainability. In this, they also push back against critics of the mining projects and the current political line. Consequently, being against specific mining projects in Storuman meant opposing sustainable development, as the mining projects were viewed as engines that would power sustainable growth in the municipality. Adam, through his actions, attempted to secure the pro-mining position, and in his role as chairman, he presented this position as the established line of the municipality. Each in their own way does work to depoliticise local mining politics, in part by dismissing concerns raised by the opposition and in part by downplaying the role of municipal decision-making in permitting processes while supporting the mines.

In our discussions, Adam asserted that preparing for the implementation of the mining projects is only a 'rational' response to a process over which the municipality has little sway, and this places limitations on the actions a municipality can take in relation to the mining projects. Acting in other ways, such as opening up the question for debate, is constructed as being non-realistic. Thus, voicing concerns can be construed as making emotional arguments that are not as valid as those that are 'rational'. Adam gives the example of public referendums, a tool that he thinks of as strengthening local democracy but that he also considers a double-edged sword as one can never be sure if the citizens vote based on knowledge and information or if they are led by their emotions. Mining, in this perspective, appears as an issue that is too technical for local deliberative democracy (cf., Dannevig & Dale, 2018).

## Expertise and pragmatic planning in the municipal administration

Depoliticising mining through pragmatism and reiterating the limited power of local government was also prevalent when the municipal administration planned for the future. In this section, I will turn my focus to how the mining projects appeared in planning procedures and public meetings.

In an interview with two civil servants, Olof and Carl, I began to sense that the complex views among the politicians also permeated the administration of the municipal government. Both described a one-way flow of resources from the northern inland to the central power in the south of Sweden and a process of enrichment carried out by both state-owned and private companies. When I interviewed Carl, who held a key position in the administration as a planner, he explained that while he felt frustrated about the imbalance of power, he believed that the municipality needed to be 'realistic' when dealing with mining projects. For Carl, being 'realistic' meant two things. First, limited power over the permitting processes and lack of resources in the municipality meant that mining projects were beyond municipal capacity. Second, realistic meant that the municipality nevertheless had to plan for the possibility that the mines might open, building houses, planning for infrastructure, setting up services and so on. From the perspective of the civil

servant, Carl saw this type of planning as a non-political task, a way of preparing for the future. But his statement also lays bare a space for deliberate action where the municipality does have some influence over the mining projects: the creation of a suitable infrastructure and a welcoming political climate for the mining projects. As shown in Appendix B, municipalities in Sweden are responsible for societal planning. During the interviews, this planning was described mainly in terms of reacting to plans made by the mining company.

The restraint of formal procedure and pragmatism put on the municipality exemplifies the sense of inevitability described by Newman and Clarke (2018), when politicians argue that there is only one solution to a problem. Here, I make a parallel to Syssner (2014) who points out that loyalty to a certain policy practice might hide opportunities to do things differently. Via processes of planning and pragmatism, mining is not a question about sustainability or even survival but administration, which can only be handled by those with the right resources and expertise—and in extension those with the right scientific credentials (cf., Mitchell, 2002). This is a situation that does not open up for political debate, and in fact, as I will show below, it can be used as a tool to subvert attempts to repoliticise mining.

When I attended a municipal public forum, I witnessed the denying of a motion made by a politician who wanted to adopt a municipal stance against the decision to withdraw the concession permits for the Kyrkberget mine. In his motion, the politician Erik wanted the municipality to take a clearer pro-mining stance, ensuring future employment and to see that the municipality did not miss out on the possibilities accompanying the mining enterprises. By taking a pro-mining stance, it might seem that he was declaring his support for a strengthening of the current policy. Instead, it soon became apparent that this 'pragmatic realist position' placed limits on any attempt to re-politicise mining.

Erik argued that all the politicians who were against the mines should return their government-issued tablets and smartphones, as none of them would be possible without the mines. He claimed that all who used such technology should also be in favour of opening mines; otherwise, they took a stance for environmental injustice and were hypocritical by virtue of not being willing to face the consequences of their personal mineral use. His motion was denied by the assembly after the municipal leadership made clear that it was outside of the municipality's responsibilities. However, before the vote, the Left party made a point that one should always be wary of new mines and the promises that are made by the mining companies. The party member asked Erik to remember the mines in Blaiken and Svärtträsk and that it is not the place of the municipality to go against an environmental impact assessment carried out by the county administrative board (CAB; see Appendix B), if it suggests that a mine posed a threat. The meeting then proceeded with other topics.

In this short episode, two things become apparent. First, the denial of the motion was in part based on the limited responsibilities of the municipality on mining permitting issues. Second, while this exchange partially opens up mine establishments for debate, it was the Left, who have been adamant in their resistance to the Rönnbäcken mine, who depoliticised mining politics in the municipality by referring to the expertise of the CAB, rather than formulating a rebuttal to Erik's argument. When I later interviewed Erik, he expressed frustration over how mining was kept out of political debate. Apart from his wish for debate, Erik also pointed towards the importance of sharing and discussing knowledge about the mines and so emphasised the need to address both facts and opinions on the matter. While he was certain that his view would persevere in the end, Erik expressed a wish for increased participation in mining procedures. What Erik's statements point to is how the hegemonic position that signifies municipal mining politics limits participation in political deliberations, making mining less political.

## Between sacrifice and development in municipal politics

As I carried out interviews, it became apparent how across political parties and governmental offices, politicians and civil servants had assumed a critical position vis-a-vis mining. They argued that resource extraction under current national legislation was not well suited to generating wealth and social stability for the municipality (e.g., increasing the municipal population in order to generate revenue that will support welfare services). Politicians and public servants alike described living in a peripheral region where mining was viewed as an activity that repeated a long history of extractivism, where natural resource extraction was carried out to generate wealth elsewhere. As is shown above, this understanding of mining could be further divided into partly overlapping positions, ranging from those who viewed it as a neo-colonial practice with no benefits to those who presented themselves as pragmatics, trying to see the benefits of receiving at least some 'development' in an unjust system. In the latter group, people were in favour of the project, at the same time expressing feelings of being taken advantage of. Regardless of the position, there is a shared understanding of being left behind. This for some led to compliance to sacrifice in municipal politics. The development of a sacrifice zone was also understood as a way of taking responsibility for a global need for metals. Thus, the mining projects simultaneously become connected to ideas of sustainable development through mineral extraction on a global scale and a means for development or at least survival through sacrifice locally.

A second finding from the interviews was the relatively limited attention mining projects received by local politicians. In my discussions with politicians, it became clear that most of the parties had not established a coherent party line regarding the projects. This did not appear to be an issue for local political debate. Rather, it was understood as a routine administrative task for the public administration to handle, if regarded as an issue for the local government at all. When I enquired about the limited debate across the parties, politicians returned to the fact that they have little formal influence over the permitting processes. While they had plenty of ideas about which projects, they were in favour of (if any), influence over the extractive industries seemingly remained out of their grasp. This understanding can be contrasted with the heated and (to a certain degree) successful resistance movement that mobilised around the Rönnbäcken mine, where the mine became a matter for international debate (see Stiernström & Arora-Jonsson, 2022). This shows that outside of municipal politics, mining remains highly politicised.

Although mining projects rarely came to the fore in political debates in the municipality, both politicians and civil servants felt strongly about the proposed projects. The mining projects were both (and sometimes at the same time) presented as a continuation of how the rural North was sacrificed for the prosperity of urban, southern Sweden, and as a pathway towards local development and sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, limited formal influence in mining proceedings, the promise of economic development, a history of the futility of resisting colonial practices and the perception of an existence as the result of resource extraction (cf., Sörlin, 2019) gave mining projects a sense of inevitability in local politics. The mining projects connected local development politics and survival to 'green transitions' as evidenced in this research. Both the local pursuit of development and a feeling of taking responsibility for the minerals needed for the 'green transition' generated a sense of compliance to sacrificing the local environment. Thus, the mining projects came to be understood as enterprises

where national and even global interest in creating a 'greener', more sustainable society met with local needs of investments and capital for development. At the same time, outside of the confines of local government, the mining project in Rönnbäcken was (and still is) the subject for a national protest movement. While this did generate conflicting positions in municipal politics, the connection between mining and development remained strong, and even though there was critique against the mining projects, they were still regarded as a necessary evil among the politicians. The resilience of the bond between mining and development within the local administration was based on the idea that 'sustainable development' was modern and represented progress and growth. I have shown how this points to the importance of being mindful, not only to how 'sustainability' is used to motivate increased resource extraction (cf., Kirsch, 2010) but also to the fact that we must investigate how sustainability and development are used to generate compliance, especially at a local level. Behind words such as rationality and prudency, the space for municipal governments to steer formal permitting processes was downplayed. At the same time, there existed an understanding that 'something has to be done' about the lack of economic development, wherein the mining projects became viewed as (un)welcomed solutions.

This research has shown how local history (also described as colonial history) fostered a view that 'development' meant sacrifice. Connected to a largely shared view of regional history, there seemed to be a similarly shared understanding among politicians: being part of a peripheral region of the nation, often constructed as being 'left behind' or 'in need of development' in national politics (cf., Arora-Jonsson, 2013). While respondents differed in what they thought that sacrifice might lead to, ranging from environmental disaster and social suffering to economic prosperity, mining projects were united in an idea of what could be called 'development through sacrifice' wherein Storuman became viewed as a sacrifice zone. In this case, the sacrifice made is an environment irrevocably transformed by the mines, in return for potential economic gain, but it also signifies a place where the local effects of the grand project of green transformation unfold.

In light of recent research that shows the rise of mining in Europe (del Mármol & Vaccaro, 2020), and in a context of decreasing societal dependency on mineral imports, as well as the pursuit of green transition, we can expect an increased pressure on rural areas, which begs the question how mining is perceived and motivated not only from above but also from below. The present study shows that concepts such as sustainability and development can be highly contested and given different meanings at the local level, and, at the same time, this contestation can be hidden by an apolitical veneer wherein 'sustainable development' comes to mean 'that which must be sacrificed'.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest associated with this article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

[1]The dominant party in the Swedish coalition government between the 2018 and 2022 elections.

[2]The statement signaled an attempt to break with the 8 years that the Social Democrats ruled with the Green Party in a national government where the political discourse on mining was ambiguous and marked by internal conflict (Envall, 2018).

[3]For more information on the mines see SGS (2021a, 2021b).

[4]A second edition of the report was released in 2016.

[5]The role of the Mining Inspectorate is outlined in Appendix B.

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## APPENDIX A: TEXT MATERIAL

**News articles**:

Published: 9th November2013, https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/gruvan-intelivsviktig

Published: 11th July 2014 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/regeringsbeslut-om-gruvdrift-rattsprovas

Published: 15th July 2014 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/kritiken-mot-gruvplaner-vaxer

Published: 31st October 2014 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/renagarna-forlorade-igen

Published: 13th November 2015 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/krav-pa-gruvbolaget-avveckla-tillstanden

Published: 17th May 2016 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/kanadensiskt-foretag-storsatsar-i-barsele

https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/6701302

Published: 17th January 2019 https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7133913

Published: 11th February 2019 https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7153100

Published: 29th September 2019 https://www.svd.se/sluta-hyckla-om-metallbehovet

Published: 12th November 2019 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/vasterbotten-mecka-for-mineraljagarna

Published: 7th December 2020 https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasterbotten/fn-s-uppmaning-till-sverige-om-ronnbacksgruvan-gor-om-gor-ratt

Webpages and Social Media:

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Bluelake mineral webpage, Rönnbäcken projects, available at: https://bluelakemineral.com/en/projects/nickel/ [Accessed 26th April 2022].

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Storuman Tjugo20 digital magazine, available at: https://issuu.com/forfuture/docs/tjugo20 [Accessed 26th April 2022].

Swedish geological Survey webpage, mineral resources, available at: https://www.sgu.se/en/mineral-resources/ [Accessed 26th April 2022].

Tertiary Mineral webpage, Storuman project, available at: https://www.tertiaryminerals.com/storuman-fluorspar-project-sweden [Accessed 26th April 2022].

Vapsten Sitje webpage, available at: https://vapsten.se/ [Accessed 26th April 2022].

## APPENDIX B: THE MINING PERMITTING PROCESS

| Permitting process |
|---|
| The permitting processes involves the following state agencies: |
| Mining Inspectorate (MI): The MI is the central agency for the administration and control of mining activities in Sweden. It offers support to mining companies and holds a substantial role throughout the permitting process. The MI is headed by the mining inspector. MI sorts under the Swedish Geological Survey, which oversees Sweden's water and mineral resources. |
| County administrative board (CAB): The CABs represent the Swedish state on a county level. While being agencies in their own right, they have a close co-operation with national agencies (e.g., the Board of Agriculture) and execute policies on their behalf. |
| Environmental administrative courts (EAC): Courts that make rulings based environmental and societal planning legislation. |

(Continues)

| Step | Involved agency | |
|---|---|---|
| Exploration permit: This grants the exploration/mining company exclusive right to explore a specific area | MI | Throughout the processes it might be necessary to include other agencies (e.g., the Environment Protection Agency or the Ministry of Defence) |
| **Possibility to apply for exploratory extraction permits or demands for special permits concerning Nature 2000 reserves** | CAB and/or EAC | |
| Concession permit: Grants the mining or exploration company the exclusive right to extract minerals from a deposit. The company needs to prove that the deposit is economically viable for extraction and should include an environmental impact assesment (EIA). The application for a permit is sent for referral to the CAB who also contact the affected municipality(ies). Should the MI and the CAB reach different conclusions, or other stakeholders make a successful appeal the decision on the permit is moved to the national government | MI | |
| Environmental permit: Mining is by default considered an environmentally hazardous activity and must therefore show that measures have been taken to mitigate the impacts on the surrounding environment and communities. The mining company must provide an EIA, which must include a consultation with affected stakeholders and relevant government agencies (e.g., CAB). In most cases this include the municipality | EAC (can also include municipalities) | |
| Land allocation: The company applies to have land allocated for the purpose of extraction. This gives the company not only right to extract the mineral but to use the land above ground to erect the needed infrastructure. May include the municipality as a stakeholder | MI | |
| Construction permit: The company applies for a permit that allows them to erect the buildings and facilities needed to begin extraction. | Municipality | |