ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

The decarbonisation divide

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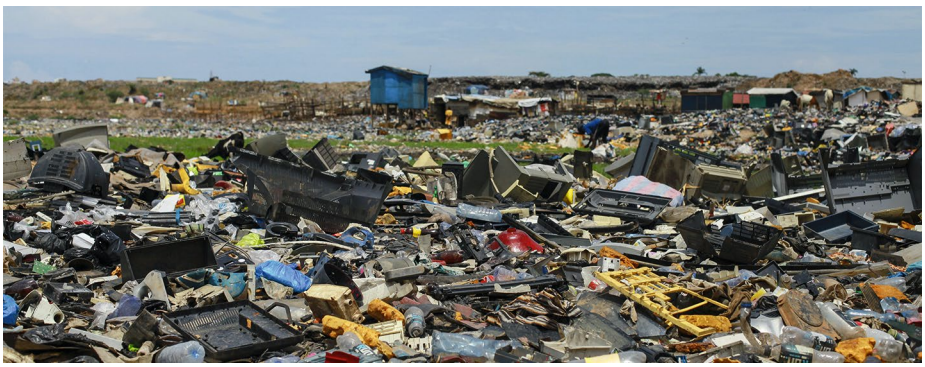

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Demand for low-carbon technology is growing globally, with innovations such as electric cars and solar panels becoming increasingly mainstream. We acquire the materials needed for such technology via mineral and metal extraction, and the downstream outcome is a rise in electronic waste (e-waste).

Benjamin Sovacool of the University of Sussex and colleagues investigate the upstream and downstream ends of the low-carbon supply chain. They present qualitative research investigating cobalt mining in Democratic Republic of Congo and e-waste facilities in Ghana. They find that mining and e-waste processing present serious risks to environmental and public health and depend significantly on child labour, as well as exacerbating gendered health inequalities and the marginalization of ethnic groups. Based on views expressed by expert respondents and community participants, they identify 24 distinct policy recommendations towards a more just supply chain.

Overall this study shows that, at present, the transition to low carbon-technology for cleaner production in the Global North is taking place at the expense of environmental and social harm in the Global South. In global perspective, contemporary decarbonisation is neither sustainable nor renewable.

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