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Arctic Circle Student Briefing

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Kiruna, a city on the move

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Mining is one of the economic activities that generates the most capital in the world, and due to this, it raises many interests within the public and private sectors of different nations of the world. However, it is not only companies that are involved in this activity, since wherever there is a mine, there is a group of local population that is impacted by it, both positively and negatively.

The mines create a large number of jobs and bring wealth to the local inhabitants, but also carry great environmental impacts and can shape the life in a town or city. When a new mine appears, the topography of a place and the lives of the people who live there are forever conditioned, and this is the case of Kiruna.

Kiruna is a city of almost 23,000 inhabitants located in the north extreme of Swedish Lapland. For more than 100 years, mining activities have been carried out at the city to extract iron in mineral form.

The Kiruna mine is the largest and most modern underground of its kind and since 2008 has placed the city on the world map and on the lips of many international media. Until that moment, the mine had a depth of 1,045m but in that year, after a dispute between different mining companies took place, LKB obtained a concession to expand prospecting by 325m more by 2030.

What is shocking about this case is that this decision implies that the land on which the city is settled and where a large part of its inhabitants live will collapse and will not be habitable. At this point, the mining company gave the inhabitants of Kiruna two options: close the mine, which would mean the end of all economic activity in the area, or move the city.

As Marie-France Stendahl, Head of Business Development of Canada and PhD candidate at the University of Lund (Sweden) explained during a panel at the Arctic Circle Conference 2021, the inhabitants of Kiruna agreed to move the city, relocating it to a safe area.

The plan that the company intends to follow is not only to move the city from the site in order to continue the excavations, but also to follow a whole strategy that will intelligently design the city for both summer and winter climatic conditions and generate a long-term local economy that will allow Kiruna people to remain in their homes after the mine is closed in approximately 100 years, when all the iron has been mined.

From my point of view, the case of Kiruna is both an example of the human capacity to shape the environment through a feat of engineering, but also of how economic interests prevail over the natural world and the lives of people themselves.

It is surprising to see how in such a case, the inhabitants of a city are willing to renounce to their cultural heritage and the land where their ancestors settled for a foreign mining company to extract their minerals, although we cannot forget that they are forced to do so for a more important economic reason.