



COLUMBIA GLOBAL ENERGY DIALOGUE

Critical Minerals Governance and Community Benefit Sharing in Mexico: Task Force Report

By Diego Rivera Rivota, Paloma García Segura, and Dr. Tom Moerenhout

Top discussion points

- Mexico is a major global mining country that can contribute to critical mineral supply chains and North American industrial integration.
- However, Mexico's 2023 Mining Law (Ley de Minería) has created widespread legal and regulatory uncertainty that is preventing new projects from developing.
- Recent policy changes and limited state capacity have made financing and project development more difficult, while permitting bottlenecks, water use restrictions, and unclear environmental and social requirements continue to delay projects, and benefit sharing with communities remains undefined.
- Fully implementing the 2023 Mining Law and enacting new associated regulations can help attract investment, strengthen environmental safeguards, and secure benefit sharing for impacted communities. At the international level, closer North American cooperation via the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) and the US–Mexico Action Plan on Critical Minerals could help support the sector's development.

This task force report reflects the authors' understanding of key points made in the course of the roundtables. It does not necessarily represent the views of the Center on Global Energy Policy. The piece may be subject to further revision.

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The authors would like to thank María Fernanda Ballesteros, Talia Contreras, and Mateo Rojas for their contributions to the roundtables and subsequent meetings, as well as to this task force report.



Introduction

In early 2026, the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University SIPA held a roundtable and several hybrid closed-door meetings in Mexico City on Mexico's mining sector. The sessions, held under the Chatham House Rule, brought together a diverse group of stakeholders from the public and private sectors and civil society to address governance, local community engagement, and benefit-sharing mechanisms.

This task force report synthesizes the content of the discussions. After providing key policy and regulatory background on Mexico's mining sector and summarizing the main themes raised in each session, it identifies key takeaways and actionable policy recommendations from the dialogue.

Background

Mexico is the world's largest producer of silver and among the top 10 producers of copper, gold, zinc, fluorspar, and several other minerals. Many of these minerals are essential to the global energy transition,¹ and demand for those used in power grids, batteries, turbines, and electronics is expected to grow dramatically through 2050.² Mexico is also an important supplier of critical minerals to the United States. It produces 8 of the 60 minerals that the United States considers critical³ and is among the leading suppliers of several minerals for which the United States is import-reliant. Beyond current production, Mexico holds significant reserves of nickel, antimony, and lithium-clay that could support battery manufacturing and electric vehicle supply chains.⁴ Mining accounts for about 2 percent of Mexico's GDP.⁵

Mexico's integrated supply chains, logistics, and trade relationships with North America provide opportunities for the country's mining and manufacturing sectors to expand production of critical minerals, including through improved processing and refining, particularly in the automotive and power transmission equipment industries. Mexico currently has a particularly unique opportunity to capitalize on investments in critical minerals projects, including not only production but also potentially refining, processing, and equipment manufacturing, in the context of the ongoing United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) review process.⁶ In February 2026, Mexico and the United States also signed the US–Mexico Action Plan on Critical Minerals, which includes measures to strengthen cooperation on geological mapping, supply chain disruptions and crisis response, stockpiling, and the promotion and evaluation of investments, financial instruments, and incentives.⁷ However, the action plan does not address the negative impacts and benefit-sharing implications that increased mining activity could have for neighboring local communities, including Indigenous communities.



Despite these opportunities, a set of policy changes stemming from the 2023 Mining Law has increased uncertainty about greenfield mining projects for mining companies, investors, state and local governments, and local communities. According to the Mexican government, the 2023 Mining Law was intended to address long-standing concerns related to environmental impacts, social division, access to water, and limited consultation and benefit-sharing mechanisms for mining communities and territories.⁸

This uncertainty extends to whether and how the new legal and regulatory framework will enable the distribution of benefits to communities. Although Mexico's mining regulations do not explicitly establish a "benefit-sharing" mechanism, they do include principles and provisions on the distribution of revenues derived from the extraction of mineral resources. The 2023 Mining Law stipulates that the state has a duty to protect the rights of communities in mining activities, including through Free, Prior, and Informed Consultation (FPIC) on "projects that affect their territories."

However, unlike Canada or Chile, Mexico does not provide direct royalty distributions to local communities and has only limited and unclear benefit-sharing arrangements in place.⁹ It also lacks community mining funds, direct profit-sharing mechanisms, or conditional land-transfer schemes. However, the 2023 Mining Law does require mining companies to negotiate with local communities located in concession territories over access to, use of, and exploitation of community lands and financial compensation.

Amid these challenges, new mining projects in Mexico and the sector's growth more broadly are currently in a holding pattern.

Summary of Roundtable and Meetings

During the roundtable and subsequent meetings, participants discussed core challenges to mining governance in Mexico, including those related to project development and benefit sharing with local and Indigenous communities. Participants agreed on the need for clearer transitional rules following the 2023 Mining Law, which restructured how concessions, water permits, tailings siting, and social and environmental obligations are managed. They also emphasized the need for stronger institutional capacity and more transparent mechanisms for distributing benefits to communities, which can help improve well-being, reduce local division, and bolster investor certainty.

Mining Concessions and Investor Uncertainty About the Current Legal Framework

Participants shared concern about how mining concessions are assigned under the current legal framework. As they discussed, under Mexico's pre-2023 mining regime, the Ministry of Economy (Secretaría de Economía, SE) granted concession titles directly to companies on a first-come, first-

served basis. Concessionaires would then obtain a title, carry out exploration, and progress toward development and financing under long concession terms, historically set at 50 years and subject to renewal. The 2023 Mining Law established a new mining regime under which the SE must conduct a competitive tendering process for granting concessions, rather than granting them directly. Companies that obtain concessions are eligible to begin operations under concession terms of only 30 years (down from 50 under the previous regime) with the option of a 25-year renewal (rather than 50).¹⁰ However, participants observed that the Mexican government has yet to commence any bidding processes under the new legal framework, which they agree has created an impasse for project developers. Some participants went even further to suggest that there is a de facto moratorium on issuing mining concessions under the 2023 legal framework, effectively halting all new project development.

Participants argued that this combination of shorter horizons, more demanding preconditions, and unresolved transitional arrangements has made it harder for mining projects to secure financing, weakening the industry and shifting attention away from benefit-sharing considerations. As evidence of increased regulatory risk, participants cited the 2024 Fraser Institute's Mining Investment Attractiveness Index, in which Mexico ranked 49 out of 82 jurisdictions.¹¹

Some participants suggested that the 2023 Mining Law cannot even be fully implemented since the SE has not launched any tendering process for new concessions. Additionally, participants pointed out that mining companies have initiated over 600 amparo cases, which are legal proceedings intended to protect individuals or companies from unconstitutional laws or acts of authority, on the basis that some articles of the 2023 Mining Law are unconstitutional. Most participants agreed that the mining industry in Mexico is facing acute legal uncertainty that discourages investment.

The New Exploration Regime and Institutional Capacity Constraints

One issue that participants identified as a top concern is the Mexican government's exclusive right to conduct mining exploration through the Mexican Geological Survey (Servicio Geológico Mexicano, SGM), the federal agency responsible for generating and compiling geological and mining data under the 2023 Mining Law.¹² Participants noted that the SGM lacks the budget, technical expertise, and operational capacity to conduct exploration activities at such a scale, significantly limiting mining exploration in Mexico.

Further, participants expressed concern about projects that were already actively exploring prior to the 2023 Mining Law and are now faced with a transitional regime. For such projects, prolonged delays could eat into their concession term and threaten viability.

Participants also raised concerns about the law's elimination of the mineral exploration tax



deduction, which, in their view, has caused a reduction in exploration activity and a shift of investment to competing countries. Participants emphasized that mining exploration in Mexico requires major investment with no guarantee of return. As they pointed out, only 100 out of every 1,000 projects that begin this stage advance to the viable prospect phase, and only one becomes an operating mine.

Some participants suggested that the only way to fully address these issues is to amend the 2023 Mining Law, though most saw this prospect as highly unlikely. Several participants noted that yet-to-be-published provisions for the 2023 legal framework could at least help address some of its gaps.

Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms

Participants agreed that while the 2023 Mining Law requires mining companies to set aside at least 5 percent of their profits to local and Indigenous communities that live on plots of land subject to mining concessions, it does not specify how these payments should be carried out, nor who will receive and manage them.¹³ However, most participants agreed that once all of this is clarified, the funding could be a significant source of support for local infrastructure and development projects.

Participants also warned that unclear distribution criteria and limited transparency could lead to disillusionment and division, especially if neighboring communities receive different levels of benefits. Some participants noted that certain mining companies already dedicate between 3.5 and 5 percent of their profits to educational, health, sport and fitness, or cultural projects intended to benefit neighboring communities.

Some participants suggested that the now-defunct *Fondo para el Desarrollo Regional Sustentable de Estados y Municipios Mineros* (Mining Fund) was a useful mechanism for transferring mining benefits to state and local governments with active mining operations, particularly for infrastructure and environmental projects. Originally established in 2014, the fund was centralized in 2020 by the federal government, which shifted resources away from local infrastructure, including schools, health centers, and parks, and toward national programs. Participants agreed that this reorientation upset states, municipalities, civil society, and industry actors who had expected local investment. According to participants, it also prompted administrative disputes and legal challenges related to transparency and local participation.

Participants proposed drawing on innovative public-private partnership models, such as Peru's *Obras por Impuestos* (Works for Taxes) program, to channel investment into community infrastructure transparently. Under these models, companies finance public works, such as schools, clinics, and roads, in exchange for state tax credits or other fiscal offsets. The program accelerates public investment by mobilizing private capital while still retaining public control over project selection and

execution. Participants suggested this model could be adapted to Mexico’s legal environment.

Social Impact Assessments

The 2023 Mining Law mandated social impact assessments (*Evaluación de Impacto Social*, EVIS), which participants considered a step in the right direction. However, participants also noted that the law does not specify when the EVIS should take place. The law requires the EVIS to be submitted to the government when a concession is granted, but most participants agreed it is not feasible for companies to conduct an EVIS before receiving a concession because they would lack sufficient information regarding the type of deposit, the mining technique involved, and therefore the project’s potential impacts.

Participants proposed that the government should clarify the framework for conducting an EVIS, perhaps drawing on models already used in other sectors in Mexico, such as electricity infrastructure. Some participants suggested that certain mining companies could voluntarily establish social baselines and other instruments for assessing the social impacts of mining operations.

Permitting, FPIC, and Water Governance

Roundtable participants identified permitting as another issue that has major impacts on both operating and potential mining projects. As some participants observed, over 200 permit applications across Mexico remain pending. Among the different permit types that are currently on hold is Mexico’s main environmental authorization, the *Manifestación de Impacto Ambiental* (Environmental Impact Statement, MIA), issued by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources. According to participants, more than 50 MIAs are still under review, which they attribute to insufficient departmental resources. Similar to the EVIS case, they see administrative ambiguity and lengthy agency response times as adding to the uncertainty around mining project development.

Notably, the FPIC—though also a new element mandated under the 2023 legal framework—received less attention and discussion time in the conversations. According to some participants, one reason for this is that the Mexican government has not yet required an FPIC as of April 2026, since it is intended to be completed before a concession is granted for a given project. However, the tendering mechanisms for new mining concessions have not yet been defined, and therefore, no concessions have been awarded under the new regime. Some participants proposed that FPIC consultations should instead be required after projects receive a concession, as is the case in other countries.

Some participants raised concerns about the 2023 reforms to water governance in Mexico, especially the increased centralization of authority under the federal water regulator (*Comisión Nacional del Agua*, CONAGUA). However, there were a range of views on whether and how this new legal framework could lead to more effective regulation of water use in the mining industry and on its



local community impacts. Specific provisions mentioned by participants include new permitting for the use of residual water and limitations on the disposal of mining waste and tailings. However, some participants argued that while these changes are well-intentioned, they may be difficult to implement and enforce. As they pointed out, CONAGUA is overburdened, many mining operations are geographically remote, and there are tensions related to water access management and community water use protection between federal, local, and municipal water regulations and enforcement.

Key Takeaways

Across the roundtable and subsequent meetings, participants generally agreed that mining exploration and production in Mexico face tremendous uncertainty and economic risk, significantly constraining project development, output of critical minerals, and associated economic benefits for local communities.

Participants also agreed that, while minimizing environmental impacts and adopting international best practices are important objectives, there is also a need for greater legal certainty, stronger governance, and effective benefit-sharing mechanisms.

Other key takeaways from the discussion include the following:

- **Mexico’s legal and regulatory framework for mining has put new projects at a standstill.**

As participants noted, not a single new concession has been granted in Mexico since 2023. While no official moratorium exists in the legal framework, participants agreed that current policies have created a de facto moratorium on new mining projects.

Participants identified two main factors underlying this standstill: the Mexican state’s exclusive right to conduct mining exploration and the fact that the new framework for granting mining concessions has not yet been implemented.

In terms of exploration, participants expressed concern about the 2023 Mining Law’s ambiguities and gaps, particularly the law’s specification that a “secondary law” (*reglamento*) will eventually provide implementation guidance for exploration through the SGM. As of May 2026, no secondary law has been passed. According to participants, this has left mining exploration exclusively in the hands of the Mexican state, which is too fiscally constrained to pursue it, while sidelining significant funding that mining companies would otherwise be willing to invest.

Regarding new mining concessions, participants had reservations about the Mexican government’s failure to launch a tender process through which mining companies can bid for concessions. As they pointed out, no official communication has been issued regarding the preliminary steps required to

establish this process. Participants also had reservations about the implications of a de facto halt in mining exploration and new concessions for mining output in the years ahead. They suggested that continued uncertainty may divert private investment to other jurisdictions that produce the same minerals as Mexico.

- **A clear regulatory framework for benefit sharing and financial compensation mechanisms for affected communities is needed.**

Currently, operating projects face uncertainties beyond the ongoing stalemate in mining exploration and concession processes. In the view of participants, these include a lack of detail on how the 5 percent of profit compensation mandated in the 2023 Mining Law for “Indigenous people, Afro-Mexican communities or any settlement” within mining operation areas will be distributed.¹⁴ Participants also discussed the need for clear and transparent rules for managing funds that involve mining companies, community representatives, and local governments.

Participants agreed that the elimination of the Mining Fund in 2020 represented a major setback, as it had been a relatively effective instrument designed to benefit affected communities. Roundtable participants agreed that the introduction of a mechanism similar to the defunct Mining Fund could provide additional support to communities and local governments. Some participants suggested that a transparent benefit-sharing mechanism would help mining companies build trust with local communities while strengthening accountability mechanisms for them.

- **Bottlenecks and uncertainty in environmental, social impact, and water permitting processes persist.**

Participants expressed concern about how certain permits are processed, including the MIA, the EVIS, and water use permits, each of which is administered by a different federal agency. They agreed that the length of these processes and, in some cases, the lack of a response from the respective agency effectively amount to a rejection, at least for the time being, further increasing risk and uncertainty for project developers and investors.

Notably, the FPIC, though a new element introduced under the 2023 legal framework, received less attention during the discussions. As of May 2026, given that no new mining concessions have been awarded under the new legal framework, there is no practical example of FPIC implementation. Participants suggested that the government clarify FPIC implementation and mandate it only after projects receive a concession, as is the case in other countries.



Policy Recommendations

The roundtable and closed-door meetings produced the following recommendations to the Mexican government to improve permitting and negotiation processes among the state, companies, and local communities in Mexico. If implemented, these policies could also facilitate more transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms and increase the production of copper, silver, fluor spar, and other key raw material inputs for the energy transition.

- Develop a national mining policy that provides long-term legal certainty, strengthens pollution, energy, and water use safeguards, and ensures effective governance of economic benefit sharing with local communities. To be effective, this policy must privilege investment in and production of minerals critical to the energy transition and strategic sectors, in accordance with international best practices, while guaranteeing that neighboring communities, including Indigenous communities, can receive and manage economic benefits and have their rights protected.
- Build an efficient legal, fiscal, and administrative framework for the mining industry, adopting international best practices. This will require secondary legislation, rules, and regulations for implementing the 2023 Mining Law, particularly the tendering process for awarding mining concessions.
- Create a benefit-sharing regulatory and institutional framework involving mining companies, representatives of all levels of government, and local communities affected by mining operations, establishing guidelines and minimum standards for negotiations and financial compensation.
- Create permanent, transparent, and multisectoral mechanisms for dialogue on mining governance and benefit sharing that include all key stakeholders, including local communities, mining companies, and policymakers. The now-defunct Mining Fund, which allocated financial benefits from mining operations to communities in a relatively transparent and inclusive manner by regularly publishing information on funds received and the projects and activities financed with those resources, could serve as a model to be adapted and improved.
- Create clear mechanisms to strengthen mining exploration capacity and facilitate collaboration between companies and the SGM, whose budgetary limitations may constrain mining exploration in Mexico.
- Enhance federal agencies to strengthen and streamline instruments for environmental and social impact assessment, including social management plans, water usage and disposal, tailings and waste management, and mining closure plans.

- Create transparent and structured legal mechanisms for the FPIC and consultations with Indigenous and local communities, to be conducted by the Mexican government following the exploration phase of mining projects. These mechanisms should guarantee that communities receive technical, legal, and environmental information in a timely and accessible manner.
- Expedite environmental and land-use permitting processes to reduce uncertainty and delays while still upholding high environmental standards.
- Formulate a critical minerals plan that promotes production and supply chain integration, adheres to international best practices and regulations on environmental and social safeguards, and establishes transparent and effective benefit-sharing mechanisms. The implementation of the US–Mexico Action Plan on Critical Minerals could provide an opportunity to further strengthen governance standards across minerals supply chains.

Notes

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