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Salt, white gold that condemns to death
Multinationals in the hunt for Latin American lithium

Latin America: from the daily plate of food to new geo-strategic challenges; from consumption and production in vertiginous increase of salt to the excessive angurria of transnationals and political groups of power for the control of lithium in the most important world reserve of that mineral. Salt and lithium go hand in hand, and the excesses of their consumption threaten not only human beings (and their daily health), but also the Earth, their own life and survival.

The planet consumes twice the medically recommended salt. Thousands of people could already be sentenced to death for this excessive ingestion. An issue that goes beyond the simple culinary recipe and confronts the ethical and just climate transition.

In correct doses, salt is an essential nutrient seasoning. In excess, it potentiates the risk of heart disease, stroke and premature death.

The global average consumption of salt is 10.8 grams per day, an amount that exceeds the acceptable 5 grams (a little less than a teaspoon). That is, 200% higher than what a balanced diet accepts. This excess threatens the lives of 7 million people over the next seven years. Such is the number of those who will surely die due to myocardial infarctions or strokes.

Most people consume twice the 5 grams of salt daily recommended by the WHO. Photo Emmy Smith- Unsplash.

This dramatic reality, exposed in a recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO), conspires against the commitments made by the international community toreduce sodium consumption by 30% by 2025.

The main source of sodium is table salt (sodium chloride), but it is also found in other substances used to flavor foods.

The WHO points out that unhealthy diets are one of the leading causes of illness and death in the world and warns that more and more evidence is emerging of the close correlation between high sodium intake and the increased risk of various conditions, such as gastric cancer, obesity, osteoporosis and kidney diseases. The slow awareness – and concrete decisions – on the part of governments does not correspond to the seriousness of the problem. Conclusion that emerges from this report, according to which only 5% of nations have established mandatory health protection policies, which includes the reduction of sodium consumption. Almost three out of four countries in the world lack comprehensive indicators to ensure control measures. To date, only 9 have appropriate state regulation measures. Among them, four Latin Americans: Brazil, Mexico, Chile and Uruguay. The other five are Spain, Lithuania, Malaysia, the Czech Republic and Saudi Arabia.

Aim against salt

According to WHO, a comprehensive approach to sodium reduction for the prevention of noncommunicable diseases must incorporate two pillars. On the one hand, the adoption of mandatory measures and, on the other, public policies for the acquisition of low-salt food for the kitchens and canteens of public institutions, such as hospitals, schools, state workplaces and nursing homes. It also proposes expanding everything already done to educate consumers, such as placing conspicuous labels on food packaging. In this way, consumers will be able to inform themselves properly and opt for products with lower sodium content. Finally, it suggests the creation or expansion of communication campaigns that promote changes in individual behavior to reduce sodium consumption.

On the other hand, and in order to apply a more effective pedagogical vision, WHO has recently designed a global scoring map with respect to sodium consumption. It has also strengthened its collaboration with the non-profit organization Resolve to save lives, which has just published a global food database, with information on the nutrients of packaged products that are distributed in 25 countries.

Salt, a national

priority and monopolyTo ensure this excessive consumption of salt, a constant increase in its production and global marketing is essential.

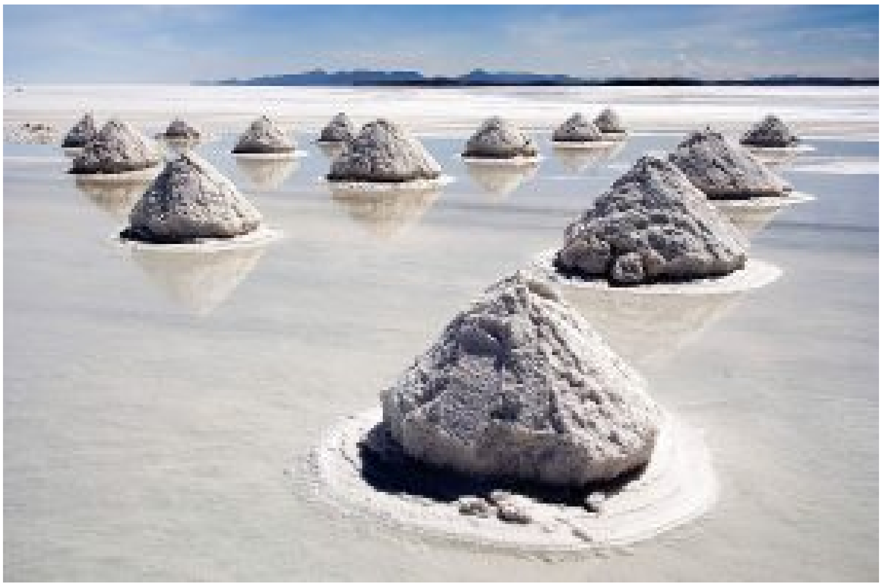
Switzerland, a paradise for transnationals and an open space for a predominant philosophy that promotes the liberalization of markets, has never renounced its monopoly on the commercialization of salt, a sector that the State has controlled for 450 years. An interesting 2018 analysis of the Swiss daily Le Temps comments that it is "one of the last public monopolies in Switzerland" and that "in the era of globalized trade, Switzerland retains a particularity: the salt tax."

This article also stresses that, although the Swiss government rejected the popular initiative for food sovereignty as protectionist, it has nevertheless "maintained one of the last public monopolies in Switzerland: salt". It is in the hands of the joint-stock company Salines Suisse SA, formed in 2014 from the merger of Salines du Rhin and Saline vaudoise de Bex. Its shareholders are the 26 Swiss cantons (provinces or states) and one of its neighbours, the Principality of Liechtenstein. These shareholders have exclusive rights to produce and market salt in the country under a 1973 inter-cantonal agreement. Salines Suisse produces about 650 thousand tons of salt annually, with very high sales in recent years. The high demand for salt during the winters of 2020 and 2021 broke several sales records – about 630,000 tons, an all-time high for the company. The 370,000 tons of salt destined for the de-icing of roads were the most significant in Swiss history. The corresponding net profits were also juicy.

Salt is not only used for consumption at the family table, but also for thawing snowy roads in the Alpine winter (main market), industry and the pharmaceutical sector, of strategic importance for the country's economy. Salines Suisse acknowledges on its official website that "the Basel chemical industry was able to develop thanks to the Rhine River salt factory" and maintains that most of the salt used in commerce and industry comes in the form of acids and alkaline solutions, although many everyday products, such as soap, They also contain salt. And he adds that "in Switzerland, the industry transforms about 100,000 tons every year into a wide range of products." From glass – and packaging in general – to laundry detergent, many products contain salt tag.

When salt rhymes with lithium

Sixteen of the 18 largest salt flats in the world are located in South America. The largest, Uyuni, in Bolivia, covers more than 10,000 km². It is followed by Atacama, in Chile, and Coipasa (between Chile and Bolivia). The Arizaro is the largest in Argentina, with 1,600 km², along with those of Hombre Muerto, Pipanaco and Antofalla, to name the first of the list of South Americans. Only the Salinas Etosha, in Namibia (second in extension worldwide, with 4,800 km²) and the Bonneville Salt Flat, in the United States (with 260 km²), escape the regional supremacy of the south.



Salt piles in the Salar de Uyuni. Photo Luca Galuzzi wikipedia.

Significantly, South American salt flats also represent 58% of the world's reserves of lithium, a mineral increasingly essential for the development of numerous "clean" technologies (ecologically speaking), which seek to partially replace fossil fuels. Lithium plays a fundamental role in the production of cell phones, batteries, computers and electric cars. The South American reserve is more than double that of China, so far the second in importance, and 6 times larger than that of Australia, third on the list.

Lithium Triangle in South America

A very comprehensive analysis entitled "The governance of lithium and copper in the Andean countries", published in 2020 by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), puts its finger on the sore spot by thoroughly analyzing the strategic importance of lithium and the challenges it poses to South American countries in terms of its extraction and commercialization. The study points out that this mineral "is causing an increase in extractive pressure in the Andean countries, where copper and lithium abound, and driving the expansion of the extractive frontier, something that has broad social, economic and environmental consequences in these territories." In short, this mining industry, under the pretext of replacing fossil fuels – and thus combating global warming – undermines local and regional interests in ensuring an ethical and just energy transition.

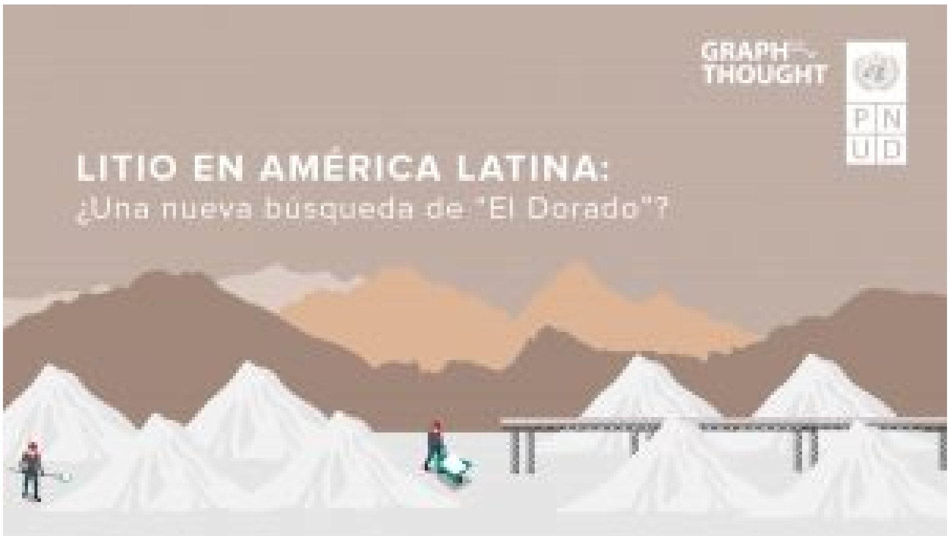
Report on the extraction and commercial projection of the mineral in Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Mexico and Brazil.

Deciphering the panorama of who controls the production of South American lithium allows us to decipher the great transnational interests that are at stake taking into account that, according to the International Energy Agency, the demand for the mineral will increase 42 times between now and 2040, particularly for the manufacture of electric car batteries.

At the beginning of last year, the Latin American Strategic Center for Geopolitics (CELAG), published a report *on* the legal, economic and geopolitical situation of lithium in the region, countries that have lithium deposits: Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Mexico and Brazil.

According to CELAG, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Peru control more than 67% of the world's lithium resources. These are mainly concentrated in Bolivia (21 million tonnes (MoT), Argentina (18.3 MoT) and Chile (9.6 MoT).

As for the large companies that lead the world production of Lithium, CELAG lists the Chinese Jiangxi Gangfeng Lithium and Tianqi Lithium (with shares in SQM, with presence in Chile and Mexico); the North American Albemarle (operates in Chile) and FMC Corporation, and the Chemical and Mining Society of Chile (SQM or Soquimich). The report also indicates that Tianqi is gaining ground and operates alongside Albemarle's largest mine, Greenbushes in Australia. SQM, Gangfeng and Albermale are joined by Jemse, Orocobre, Toyota Tsuyo and Livent in Argentina. In Brazil, Sigma, AMG, CBL, and in Bolivia, TBA-Boacheng and ASI Systema.



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Sergio Ferrari, from Bern, Switzerland for La Pluma, April 17, 2023

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