

Time to talk

IN JUNE, I attended the first European Minerals Conference in Madrid, held to discuss the development of mineral resources and minerals policy across the European Union (EU). The theme of the event was fitting to this issue of *MEM* as it is focused on policy and legislative developments.

At present there is no overriding EU policy on mineral resource development, although a range of legislation (such as the Water Framework Directive) has an impact on mining projects. In the past few years, however, European governments have begun to realise the importance of securing their supply of mined resources.

In 2008, the European Commission (EC) launched the 'Raw Materials Initiative (RMI) – Meeting Our Critical Needs for Growth and Jobs' – in order to develop a strategy for developing the European minerals industry. Over the past two years, the work of the RMI has centred on preparing a communication and detailing its proposals, which will be submitted to the EC at the end of this year.

It was the work of the RMI that was discussed by representatives from the European Commission, European Parliament, national governments and industry at the European Minerals Conference.

Europe now accepts that it has taken a rather lacklustre approach to developing its domestic mineral resources, and that imminent limitations to supply could have critical economic effects.

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In stark figures, the EU consumes 30% of global metallic mineral production, but produces only 3% of it, relying heavily on imports from Africa, Latin America and elsewhere.

While representatives from the EU recently met with their counterparts from the African Union to discuss co-operation that could be mutually beneficial, they also realise that better exploration and exploitation of indigenous resources could be a prudent policy.

While there is still little consensus about the best direction to take, it is reassuring to see that crucial members of the EU are now, finally, at least talking about developing domestic mineral policy after so many years of neglect.

Much of the discussion at the European Minerals Conference felt like posturing and rhetoric (phrases such as “we need to raise standards throughout the industry” were common), yet there is certainly the sense that things are starting to move forward, and talking about the issues is always the first step to action.

However, with the number of governments involved – there are now 27 member states – it will be difficult to form a consensus.

Differences of opinion were apparent at the conference. One delegate felt that there was an international power vacuum, and that improved co-ordination of national policies, particularly where there are cross-border implications, would be beneficial. Others disagreed though, suggesting the best national system would be useless if it was jeopardised by European legislation.



One thing is clear, however: as Euromines director Corina Hebestreit says, now that the problems have been identified there is a need for a “common language” across Europe.

While an overriding EU policy is unlikely to be enforced due to the complex and diverse nature of member states, dialogue on the exchange of best practice and policy between national governments can only be encouraged.

This year's European Minerals Conference was certainly the start, fostering discussion and debate at the highest level, and while some issues were not officially on the agenda (the proposed ban on cyanide use, for example) they were being talked about on the sidelines.

The time for taking is almost at an end, so here's hoping that next year's event will see some of the ideas discussed in June being put into action.

Katherine Welch

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