

## PRESS RELEASE

World Environment Day, the 5<sup>th</sup> June

## «Connect yourself for justice» reveals the blood story hidden behind our mobile phones

It denounces the social and environmental abuses committed both in the manufacturing process and in the daily use of these devices

*Madrid, 5<sup>th</sup> June 2019.* - Have you ever wondered what is the reality behind an everyday object like your smartphone? Did you know that producing one kilo of coltan, a mineral indispensable in the fabrication of mobile phones, does it cost the lives of two people in the Democratic Republic of Congo?

To denounce the social and environmental abuses that are committed both in the manufacturing process and in the daily use of our mobiles is the objective that the entities that promote the campaign "If you take care of the Planet, you fight against poverty" and the initiative «Connect yourself for justice» - Caritas, CEDIS, CONFER, Justicia y Paz, Manos Unidas and REDES (Network of Entities for the Solidary Development) - propose on the occasion of the celebration of the World Environment Day on 5th June.

In the last decade, mobile phones have come to dominate our daily lives. Their sale has increased exponentially worldwide, especially the so-called smartphones. If almost nobody had a smartphone in 2007, by 2019 they are everywhere. In fact, almost two out of every three people between the ages of 18 and 35 own one worldwide, and more than 7 billion of these devices have been manufactured in just 10 years, that is to say approximately the same number than inhabitants there are on the planet.

And while these next-generation phones may be smart, sleek, neat, fast (adjectives to describe the English term of "smart"), they need physical elements to manufacture or operate. Just as their production requires various materials (plastic, glass, ceramics) and raw materials (metals, such as aluminium and iron, and minerals, such as rare earths), the "cloud" where digital information is stored would not exist without the places on the planet where the supercomputers that maintain it are located.

### SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS

In addition to the economic price, mobiles have significant social and environmental costs. A standard mobile contains between 500 and 1,000 different components. The extraction and processing of these components generates about 75 kg of waste per phone. Some of these components are expensive and scarce resources, and they are related to social and environmental abuses. The environmental impact of smartphone production is so high that to offset greenhouse gas emissions we would have to use each device between 33 and 89 years. However, in Europe about 40% of the existing mobile phones are renewed every year, which means about 18 million mobile phones only in Spain.

Although the life of a device is about 10 years (battery doesn't consider) the average time of use is between one and a half and two and a half years. There seems to be little concern about the long-term impacts of the disposal of this technological waste. This is a evident global problem in exports of used electronic equipment to third countries, especially to Asia and Africa, which are not prepared to manage this waste.

### DIGITAL DIVIDE

«Connect yourself for justice» also emphasizes the digital divide that the smartphone brings with it, as it becomes another indicator of social differentiation. The most serious moral problem caused by the new

communication technologies is the unequal access to information that currently exists. This fact stimulates the emergence of a new class, that of the information-rich, capable of accessing mobile internet networks without geographical or economic limitations.

The so-called digital divide is mainly in African countries, where even if you have mobile phones, you are still far from gaining majority access to the network through them. Currently (March 2019) only 35.9% of African citizens have access to the Internet, compared to 86.6% for Europeans and 89.1% for North American residents. Unless something is done in this respect, the growing gap between sub-connected and hyper-digitalised countries will be wider, aggravating the inequalities that already exist.

The digitization level may even influence the ability of countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and to address challenges such as hunger, disease and climate change. Therefore, more effort is needed to support countries to push themselves in the integration into the digital economy.

Along with the constant introduction of new functions that make our daily lives easier and faster, which reinforces our dependence on this technology, it is worth highlighting the exposure to advertising pressure, fashions and aesthetic changes to which we are subjected. More and more accessories for these phones are emerging, encouraging a dynamic of extracting the raw materials needed for their production, which have mineral components, extracted from areas rich in natural resources. This excessive demand leads to a decline in working and safety conditions in the places of origin, and to the environmental deterioration of these places.

Another problem is the created by the change in personal relationships and the increase of the addictions provoked by its use. In fact, internet and mobile phones use in a compulsive, repetitive and long way is currently considered as an addiction, as it supposes a disability to control or to stop its consumption. In addition it has serious consequences over health and social, familiar, scholar and working life. We have to consider also the power that we give through our consumption to great technological enterprises such as Apple, Amazon, Google, Micorsoft, Samsung, Huawei, Tencent, Taobao, etc.

### THE DRC, GHANA AND AMAZONIA CASES

The social and environmental effects of digital technology production linked to smartphones have names and surnames. «Connect yourself for justice» puts the focus on three specific geographical points: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana and the Amazonia.

The community of Manguredjipa, in the territory of Lubero in the province of North Kivu, of D.R. Congo, a very rich in natural resources country, is in the "eye of the hurricane" for being a region that produces cobalt, copper, uranium, gold, diamonds, cassiterite and coltan. The exploitation and smuggling of the last one is due to the huge international demand on electronic products, especially on mobile technology, where it is essential tantalum which is extracted from the aforementioned coltan. 80% of the world's reserves of this mineral are found in eastern Congo and the coltan exploitation is linked to the violation of human rights, the destruction of the environment and the financing of conflicts that exist in the region. It is estimated that the extraction of every kilo of coltan costs the life of two people in the Congo.

Agbogbloshie is a neighbourhood in Accra, the capital of Ghana, where some 40,000 people live under conditions of extreme poverty. For a decade now, that urban area is also one of the largest in the world cemeteries for electronic waste from Europe and North America. This place is considered one of the most contaminated places on the African continent, mainly by metals like lead, beryllium, cadmium or mercury. A UN study in 2014 showed that in Agbogbloshie the concentration of lead in the soil exceeds the maximum tolerance level by a thousand times. Entire families, including children, work 12 hours per day at this dump, a job in which they earn more than two euros per day, which is twice the minimum wage in the country. The United Nations has included Agbogbloshie in the list of the world's most dangerous places to live.

The Amazonia is another scenario where the environmental effects of mining extraction related to new technologies are suffered. This activity has caused enormous damage to the indigenous population and

the environmental destruction both in Brazil and Venezuela, especially in the region of the Orinoco, Mucajai, Parima and Catrimani rivers.

Gold is also present in mobile phones. During the gold mining boom, about 20% of the Yanomami population died from disease, hunger, violence and other impacts generated by illegal mining. Due to the lack of control over this activity, the indigenous territories face serious dangers of destruction, water contamination, accumulation of non-biodegradable solid waste, affecting not only the environment but also the way of life of these indigenous communities.

### SIGNS OF HOPE

The entry into force throughout the European Union in January 2021 of the Regulation on minerals in conflict zones opens a window of hope, as it aims to help control the trade of tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold (3TG) metals. The Regulation tries to guarantee that European importers of 3TG meet the international standards for responsible sourcing set by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development as well as 3TG smelters and refineries around the world. Other contributions of the Regulation aim to break the link between conflict and illegal exploitation of minerals, to help ending exploitation and abuse of local communities, including those working in mines, and to promote local development. It would be desirable that this mandatory regulation to be extended to other raw materials and to the entire supply chain.

The initial framework is the OECD Due Diligence Guide (2011), which sets out a series of recommendations for companies to commit to voluntary self-diagnosis of the origin of the minerals they use and to publish this information in their annual reports or websites.

Acting on a personal and community basis

The entities Caritas, CEDIS, CONFER, Justice and Peace, Manos Unidas and REDES (Network of Entities for the Solidarity Development) invite on the World Environment Day Environment to act in personal and community key to promote transformative measures, that go through an austere, rational and sustainable use of these devices.

A good start is to observe the point of the Green Decalogue "Overcome the technocratic model" launched as part of the campaign "If you care for the planet, you fight against poverty". We can also listen to the words of Francisco in *Laudato Si'*: "Yet we can once more broaden our vision. We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral".

**#ConnectMobilePoverty**

More information: [www.enlazateporlajusticia.org/en](http://www.enlazateporlajusticia.org/en)