

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENTS – A BLUEPRINT TO RECONCILE MINERALS EXTRACTION AND NATURE PROTECTION IN EUROPE

The European Union (EU) is confronted by a complex governance challenge in securing critical raw materials (CRM) while upholding environmental protection standards. The EU-funded CIRAN project investigates the evolving raw materials governance framework, particularly the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) and its implications for environmentally protected areas. With approximately 85% of known European CRM deposits situated beneath or adjacent to environmentally protected regions (Fig.1), and in the absence of clear decision-making protocols to balance protection with extraction needs, the CRMA implementation presents significant dilemmas for permitting authorities.

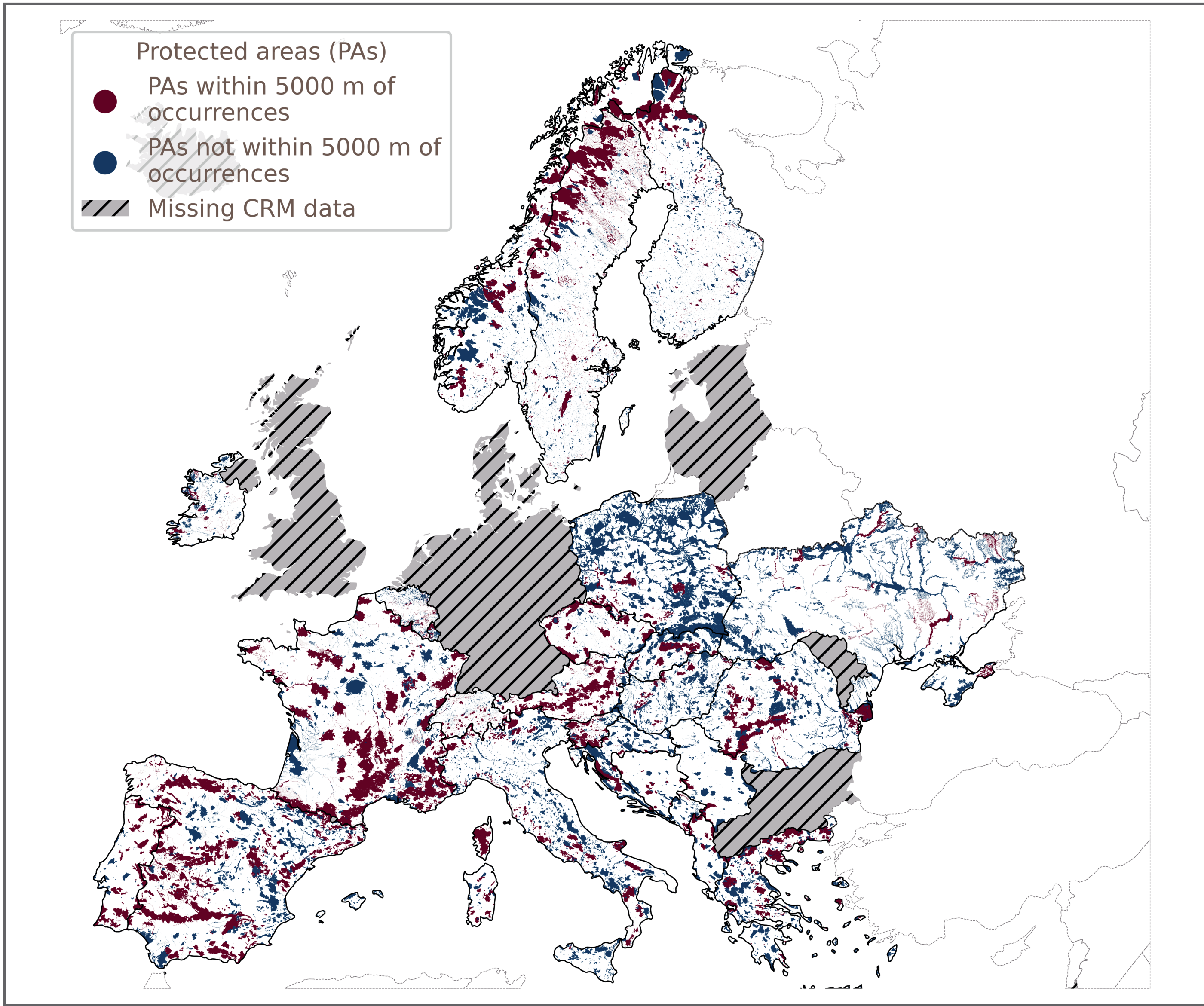
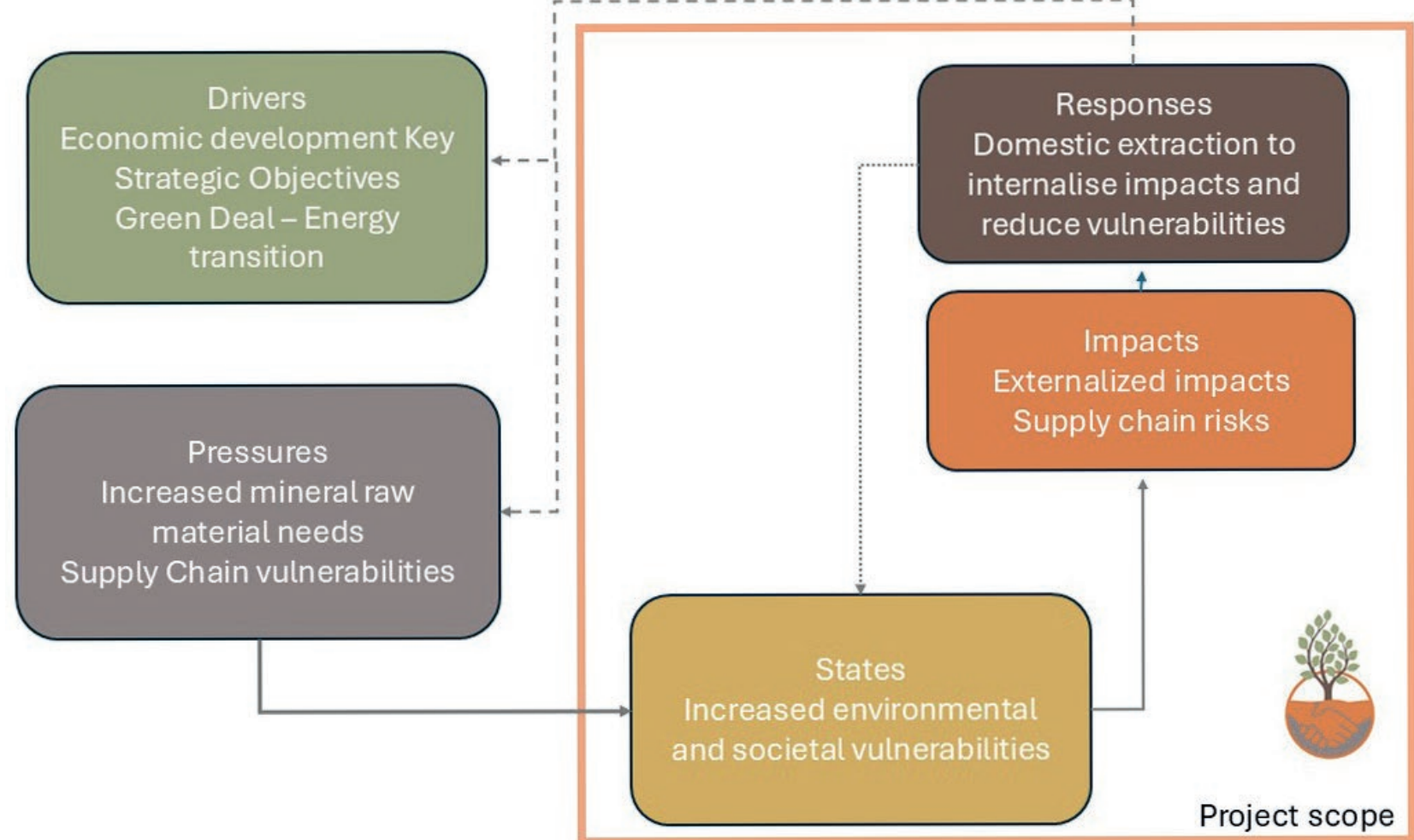


Figure 1. Map showing vicinity of Protected areas to mineral deposits (Nikolas Ovaskainen, GTK)

Our research examined a fundamental question: how might biodiversity and ecosystem protection be reconciled with securing mineral resources essential for Europe’s economic stability and quality of life?

The methodology comprised systematic analyses of mining operations in the proximity to protected areas across nine European countries. CIRAN examined successful cases of co-existence and highlighted the good practices adopted by the mining industry and by authorities and the latest technologies that allow to minimise environmental impacts along the mine life cycle. The methodology used the DPSIR (Drivers-Pressures-States-Impacts-Responses) framework to evaluate policy mechanisms, such as the EU Green Deal.



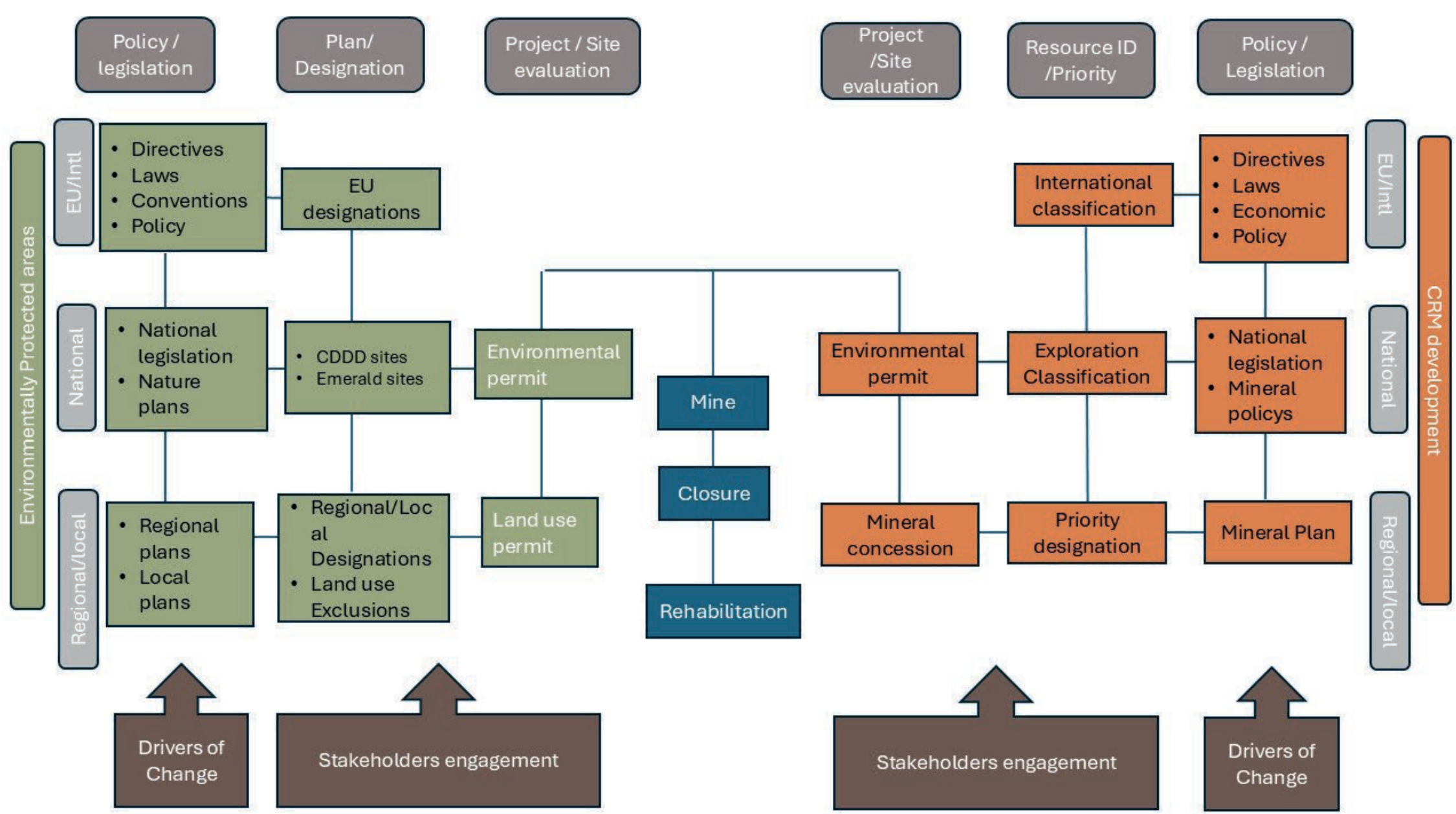
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Analyzing the Member States’ policy framework, it emerged that an effective balance of environmental protection requirements and demand for critical raw materials (CRMs) requires a structured process involving multiple inputs and engagement from various stakeholders. This approach can be visualized using a bow-tie framework that aims to guide the development of regulatory policies that strike a suitable balance between environmental protection and CRM extraction.



Key factors influencing both environmental safeguarding and CRM mining across EU, national, and regional/local levels.

Additionally, in order to understand the stakeholders’ point of views and needs, the CIRAN project conducted consultations with five different communities located near environmentally protected areas across the EU.

Our findings demonstrate that mineral extraction is both, feasible in protected areas and socially acceptable across all studied cases. While current regulatory frameworks do not categorically prohibit mining operations in protected zones, administrative impediments—notably understaffed and underqualified agencies, politically motivated regulatory interpretations, and protracted permitting procedures—engender considerable delays.

The lack of public acceptance emerged as the foremost barrier to effective CRMA implementation. Resistance typically results from perceived disconnections between EU-level policies and local interests, corresponding with broader Eurosceptic sentiments and mistrust in institutions. Successful mining projects consistently exhibited three characteristics: comprehensive environmental impact assessments, effective stakeholder engagement, and robust post-mining planning.

While the current thinking on obtaining Social Licenses to Operate (SLO) relies on informal agreements, Community Development Agreements (CDAs) emerged as a promising mechanism to address the public trust deficit and facilitate equitable distribution of burdens and benefits. These formal tripartite arrangements between governments, mining companies and communities, focused on long-term regional development and have successfully reconfigured social contracts in various contexts.

CDAs transcend traditional administrative processes by establishing shared visions with clear accountability for all parties, rendering them particularly valuable for projects in ecologically sensitive areas. Their impact on local and regional development is profound, harnessing mining operations as catalysts for sustainable territorial development. By facilitating meaningful local participation in decision-making, CDAs establish pathways for communities to obtain direct benefits from resource extraction via infrastructure development, educational opportunities, healthcare improvements, or economic diversification – according to their expressed preferences. This approach addresses the gap between local concerns and EU-level policy priorities, thereby establishing a more robust foundation for societal acceptance of CRM mining projects.



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