



## Research Report

UNICEF

Combatting the use of child labor in  
mines in the Democratic Republic of  
Congo.

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## Introduction

Over the last ten years, the market of rechargeable batteries grew fast in the world, and cobalt has proved to be one of the crucial elements that are needed to operate smartphones, electric vehicles, and many modern-day energy solutions. In a country that has still to face political instability, abject poverty, and an entirely insufficient way of managing its mining industry, more than three-quarters of the world's cobalt supply is found in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As a result, the industrial and artisanal mining has both spread rapidly. These mines employ tens of thousands of people, many of whom are children. They work so much time in a risky environment and dig small, unsupported tunnels without proper equipment, medical attention, and fair payment. The decaying economic situation leaves very few choices to the families of many. Mining is the final option despite making them prone to all forms of toxic chemicals, tunnel collapses, and permanent health problems.

This has become a serious humanitarian crisis and many abuses that come along with cobalt mining are well documented. It is not at all rare to find children as young as seven year old working underground and having to deal with exhaustion, abuse, and constant threat. In such areas, women face additional serious threats. They can be forcibly recruited into work, put under pressure or maltreatment by armed gangs that dominate mining roads, or they can be at a risk of increased gender-based violence. In the mining society, it is normal that the people in the mining community do not have access to clean water, sanitation, education, and quality healthcare. The result of these shortcomings is that the families are reduced to poverty trap cycles, making each new generation susceptible to dangerous labour. The lack of responsibility in the cobalt supply chain is another factor that further worsens the problem as there are many abuse practices that go unpunished.

These facts represent a clear indication that serious international measures are required. Billions of miners, human rights groups, different non-governmental organisations, and the United Nations are already taking actions to help communities they are dealing with,

improve working conditions, and promote ethical practices by companies when procuring cobalt. Better surveillance, alternative livelihood, and better local government are the key elements that can lead to long-term change. A concerted international action may help the global community in its fight to safeguard the rights, dignity, and safety of the lives of the people who, in one way or another, have their lives influenced by cobalt mining in the DRC.

## Definitions of Key Terms

Child labour:

The employment of children in an industry or business, especially when illegal or considered exploitative.

Cobalt:

A chemical element (Co) used in the production of batteries, cars, electric vehicles and other electronics. Highly valued for its energy storing capacities.

## General overview

The problem is the systematic and widespread exploitation of children on the artisanal and small scale cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that is a significant case of violation of the fundamental human rights.

This in turn has led to the demand of cobalt on the world market, a highly valuable commodity in lithium-ion cables in electronic and electric vehicles, being a result of the high demand of cobalt on the global market, which has inadvertently led to a nexus of poverty and child labour in the DRC which houses about seventy per cent of the global cobalt reserves. It is reported that between forty thousand children, as young as six or seven years old are put to work in these mines, especially in the provinces of Lualaba and Haut Katanga.

The most perverted kind of child labour is subjected to these children who are taught dangerous duties like digging, commuting heavy load of ore up to fifty kilograms, and washing cobalt, at times by using bare hands and no protective clothing, earning less than two dollars a day. This demanding work subject them to life-threatening conditions such as imminent danger of a tunnel collapse and land slides which have led to loss of lives of many. Furthermore, the children are constantly subjected to cobalt dust and heavy metals, and in the long-term perspective, the health conditions of such people cause serious and dangerous cases in respiration, spinal defects, and other fatal physical conditions.

The origins of this exploitation lie deep in utter poverty and lack of protective measures. The majority of families in the mining society rely on the little money earned by their children to use in the survival of the family especially in buying of food. This situation is further escalated by the absence of affordable yet quality education and the children have no other alternative choice but to go into the mines to survive. In addition to abject poverty, there are a number of complementary system failures that contribute towards the severity of the crisis. The major problem is that there are no economic alternatives: a non-institutionalised mining industry is, in most cases, the best paid source of cash-on-demand in the area. The hard work to end child labour is often hampered by lack of equivalent, immediate and less hazardous ways of earning livelihood, since they have to enforce the parents to depend on the earnings of their children, particularly of the mothers who are often reduced to the lowest-paid jobs in the mines. To make this worse, security and militia networks are also a severe danger. Besides economic considerations, there are reported cases of child traffic, abduction, and forced labour by militia networks whereby the money being realized is utilizing to fund these non-state armed forces hence creating a state of violence between extraction of the resources and the non-state armed wars. Lastly, implementation of legal frameworks has been weak: despite the fact that the DRC is a member of the agreements on child labour, and that there are national commissions like CISTEMA that have been set up to address child labour in the country, the implementation is not stringent and effectual. The designated Artisanal Mining Zones (ZEAs) system has not been very successful in containing and formalising mining as the system has thousands of children working in de facto, highly hazardous and unregulated locations.

Such human-rights abuses impact directly on the rights of the children to life, health, development and education. The worst ones include a mix of physical trauma with extreme mental agonies, anxiety, as well as a massive loss of a stable childhood and future. When exposed to cobalt dust often enough to cause hard metal lung disease, a potentially lethal respiratory disease, and long-term exposure to heavy-metal may negatively impact the development of the nervous system, virtualizing such children to live impaired lives.

One of the key factors contributing to this sustained crisis is the absence of transparency and due diligence of human rights over the entire global cobalt supply chain which then allows multinational companies to take advantage of this exploitation. The greatest veil is done locally as in a small entry where cobalt mined by children are blended with the lawfully acquired materials at the informal trading counters before it enters the global market. The cycle of exploitation continues through a constant demand of cheaply exploited mined cobalt.

To combat this systematic violation, one will have to look beyond the general calls to action and insist on the specific, action-oriented intervention that will lead to the focus on root causes. One of the most debilitating gaps, which was frequently absent from the research, is the general absence of mandatory civil registration: with no civil documentation and birth certification of children in artisanal mining communities, protection services cannot see them, and their access to education remains informal. Identity, which is tied directly to the enforceable child rights, must be the first step and coordinated programme to provide universal birth registration. On top of this, specialised health and psychosocial care is needed. Outside the simple first aid, the immediate health effect of chronic poisonous exposure requires the development of specialised mobile health clinics within the mining areas which would examine and manage cobalt-related diseases, respiratory and spinal illnesses, and would also combine nutritional programmes and psychosocial assistance to manage the collective bodily trauma and mental anguish endured by the children. The international community should invest in development and implementation of supply-chain

transparency and digital traceability systems at the very first point of sale (the trading counters) in order to ensure that the illegally mined cobalt does not mix with the legitimate one. This should be matched by stringent, independent, and third party control to make sure that there is no child-mined ore that gets into the formalised supply chain. Lastly, accelerated programmes like Catch-up clubs should be increased to offer a realistic means of exit. The intensive learning models are also very essential to the older children who have lost years of schooling enabling them to reacquire literacy rapidly and through-out the process to free them of school and proceed with vocational education. At the same time, the investments should be targeted at empowering women economically in non-mining sectors to decrease the dependence of the family on the low income of children.



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International Labour Organisation, Staff. "ILO Launches GALAB project in Democratic Republic of the Congo to address child labour in cobalt mining sector." ILO, 20 Nov. 2024, [ILO Launches GALAB project in Democratic Republic of the Congo to address child labour in cobalt mining sector | International Labour Organization](#)

## Major parties involved

International Labour Organization (ILO):

This is a specialized agency of the United Nations focused on promoting rights at work and achieving decent work for all. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) cobalt sector, they lead the **GALAB Project** to strengthen labor law enforcement, train government mining inspectors, and improve accountability within the supply chain. Their primary goal is to formalize artisanal mining and eliminate the worst forms of child labor through institutional and private sector partnerships, including developing the country's Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System (CLMRS).

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF):

This is a United Nations agency dedicated to advocating for the protection of children's rights, meeting their basic needs, and expanding their opportunities. In the DRC's cobalt mining areas, UNICEF focuses on tackling the root causes of child labor by strengthening local social services. This involves securing funding (such as through the Global Battery Alliance) to ensure children receive quality education, access social protection programs,

and receive the services needed to be permanently removed from the mines and reintegrated into their communities.

## Timeline of Key Events

1996 - The First Congo War begins (1996-1997). The associated violence and widespread economic chaos accelerate the trend of millions of people relying on informal, artisanal mining (ASM) activities as the only viable livelihood necessity.

2000 - The modern era of rapid cobalt demand begins, driven by the emergence of lithium-ion batteries for consumer electronics (mobile phones, laptops).

2002 - The DRC government implements a new Mining Code, attempting to formalize and regulate artisanal mining by creating designated artisanal mining zones (ZEAs).

2005 - Chinese investment in DRC's industrial mining sector dramatically accelerates, consolidating control over the processing and refining of cobalt.

2014 - UNICEF releases estimates suggesting that approximately 40,000 children are involved in mining in the southern part of the country, highlighting the scale of the child labor crisis.

2016 - A major report by Amnesty International exposes the link between child labor in artisanal cobalt mines and the supply chains of multinational technology and automotive companies, sparking widespread international media and consumer scrutiny.

2018 - The DRC government announces a national commitment to eliminate child exploitation in the mining sector by 2025, in response to growing pressure.



2019 - The African Development Bank launches the PABEA-Cobalt project, one of the first major externally funded initiatives focused on providing welfare support and alternative livelihoods to children and young people in mining communities.

2023 - New research emphasizes that extreme poverty and rising living costs are the primary drivers forcing families and children into the mines, underscoring the need for social protection and livelihood programs.

## Previous attempts to solve the issue:

1. The government of Democratic Republic of Congo focuses on legal and commercial regulation. The initial moves which were made in the sector were formalising the sector through the creation of Artisanal Exploitation Zones (ZEAs) such as the Mining Code of 2002. This was followed by the Revised Mining Code of 2018 that made cobalt a strategic mineral and committed the national elimination of child labour by 2025. On the business side, the state was established in 2019 through the General Cobalt Enterprise (EGC) that serves to administer the purchase and sale of all artisanal cobalt in an ethical manner. Also, the government established CISTEMA to ensure that these national child-labour eradication goals are implemented by different ministries.
2. The Global Industry Response focuses on due diligence in the supply chains which is led by major technology and automotive producers. Organisations have extensive sourcing policies that tend to follow the guidelines of the Responsible Minerals Initiative (RMI). The stakeholders in the industry use traceability systems and blockchain projects to prove the ethical origin of cobalt at the mining location. Notably, organisations require the establishment of Child labour monitoring and remediation systems (CLMRS) at the high-risk sites whereby the child labour is identified, safely removed and provided with exhaustive educational and economic support to both the children and families.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and other non governmental organisations focus on creating local capacity within the communities and government systems to institute and maintain effective remediation systems and therefore help in creating the non existence of child employment as a long lasting community norm.

## Possible solutions

1. Enforce a guaranteed minimum price for artisanal cobalt to ensure adult miners earn enough to support their families without relying on child labor.
2. Legislate a "Cobalt Social Premium" on all international purchases, funding a transparent, independent education and remediation fund to support children and families.
3. Support the DRC in permanently securing and closing uncertified, illegal mines, while demanding industry adhere to a strict "No-Buy" policy for all non-compliant sites.

## Further Readings

1. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/118822/html/>
2. <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/due-diligence-guidance-for-responsible-business-conduct/responsible-mineral-supply-chains.html>
3. <https://www.responsiblebusiness.org/news/rmi-gri-toolkit/>
4. <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/final-report-group-experts-democratic-republic-congo-s2024432-enarruzh>

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