

Forum: ECOSOC

Issue 2: The question of regulating child labor in cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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The question of regulating child labor in cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Videos

- [CBS News Investigation: Children Mining Cobalt in the DRC](#)
- [CBS News: Boy Describes the Struggle of Mining Cobalt in the DRC](#)
- [DW Documentary: Illegal Cobalt Mining in the Congo](#)
- [Amnesty International: This is What We Die For](#)

Articles

- [Amnesty International: This is What We Die For \(Full Report\)](#)
- [ILO: Universal Protection Against the Worst Forms of Child Labour](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor: Forced Labor in Cobalt Mining in the DRC](#)
- [Humanium: The Current State of Child Labour in Cobalt Mines in the DRC](#)
- [Wilson Center: The DRC Mining Industry, Child Labor and Formalization](#)
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- [IIED: Formalising Artisanal Cobalt Mining in the DRC](#)

Key Terms

Child Labor: work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and mental development. It includes work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous to children, or that interferes with their schooling (International Labour Organization).

Cobalt: a metal used mainly in the rechargeable lithium-ion batteries that power smartphones, laptops, and electric vehicles. The Democratic Republic of the Congo holds more than half of the world's cobalt reserves and produces around 70 percent of the global supply (U.S. Geological Survey, 2022).

Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM): a largely manual form of mining in which workers use basic hand tools rather than heavy machinery. In the DRC, artisanal mining produces a portion of the country's cobalt and is where most child labor takes place (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023).

Worst Forms of Child Labour: as defined by ILO Convention No. 182, this includes work which, by its nature or the conditions in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children. Children in mining are widely recognised as falling under this category (International Labour Organization, 1999).

Entreprise Générale du Cobalt (EGC): a state-owned company created by government decree in 2019, and a subsidiary of the national mining company Gécamines. It was given a monopoly to buy, process, and market all artisanal cobalt produced in the DRC, with the stated goal of cleaning up the sector and removing child labor (IIED, 2023).

ARECOMS: the Authority for the Regulation and Control of Strategic Mineral Substances' Markets, a DRC state body created in 2019 that regulates and controls the production and export of strategic minerals such as cobalt (IIED, 2023).

Due Diligence: the process by which companies identify, prevent, and account for human rights risks in their supply chains, including checking whether the cobalt in their products was mined using child labor (Amnesty International, 2016).

Overview

Cobalt is a key component in the rechargeable lithium-ion batteries found in smartphones, laptops and electric vehicles. Demand for it keeps climbing as the world moves toward clean energy and electric transport. The D.R.C. holds more than half of the world's cobalt reserves and produces around 70 percent of global supply. That resource has come at a steep human cost. Thousands of children are working in hazardous conditions in Congolese cobalt mines, many sacrificing both their health and their education for extremely low wages.

Child labour in the cobalt industry primarily occurs in Artisanal and Small-Scale (ASM) mines, where people use basic tools and do not wear protective gear. A well known UNICEF estimate puts the figure at approximately forty thousand children working in mines in the south of the D.R.C., with some being as young as seven years old. They perform functions similar to those of adults such as; digging in tunnels, washing minerals and hauling large quantities of material. These children are exposed to harmful cobalt dust. Exposure to

cobalt dust can result in long-lasting breathing issues as well as other health issues. Most of the children receive between one and two dollars a day for their hard labor. Working in cobalt mines is recognized globally as one of the most severe types of child labor.

Children go to work in mines because of extreme poverty. As household costs rise and there are few job opportunities available for adults, many families rely on income received by their children to purchase food, clothing and tuition fees. According to research conducted by IMPACT, a non-profit organization based in Canada, families in southern D.R.C. now rely on income from child labor. When mothers find themselves unable to earn sufficient income, children will fill-in to assist them.

Schools are expensive and insufficiently located making it even more difficult for families to select education over employment.

In 2016, a report titled "This Is What We Die For" was released by Amnesty International and the organization Afreewatch. The report tracked cobalt from ASM mines where children were employed into the supply chains of several top international tech and car firms including Apple, Samsung and Sony. The study found that none of these organizations checked whether the cobalt contained within their product originated from ASM mines employing minors. In 2019, International Rights Advocates filed a class-action lawsuit in the USA against Apple Inc., Google's parent firm Alphabet Inc., Microsoft Corp., Dell Technologies and Tesla, Inc. on behalf of Congolese families who lost children or suffered injuries from working in cobalt mines. The suit was ultimately dismissed by an appeal court in the USA, in March 2024.

Although the D.R.C. has ratified the ILO Conventions #138 (Minimum Age Convention) and #182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour), the country still fails to enforce its own laws regarding child labor. Despite having laws specifically prohibiting minors from working in mines (child protection law - 2009 and revised Mining Code - 2018), the country struggles with poverty, corruption, poor regulatory oversight and lack of birth certificates which severely hinders implementation of these regulations. According to reports from the U.S. Department of Labor, the D.R.C. has made only minimal progress in eradicating the worst forms of child labor.

The Government of the D.R.C. took measures to regulate the artisanal sector in 2019 by creating the Entreprise Générale du Cobalt (EGC) and regulating body ARECOMS. Under this new arrangement the EGC has a monopoly on purchasing, processing and marketing all artisanal cobalt produced in the D.R.C. The government promised to remove child labor, improve safety and provide better tracking for cobalt used in this manner. To date, however, progress has been slow and inconsistent. In February 2025 the government temporarily banned all cobalt exports citing extremely low prices and an excess of production. Rather than reinstating exportation, in October 2025, the government established a quota program intended to remain effective until 2027. Organizations such as the ILO have also developed

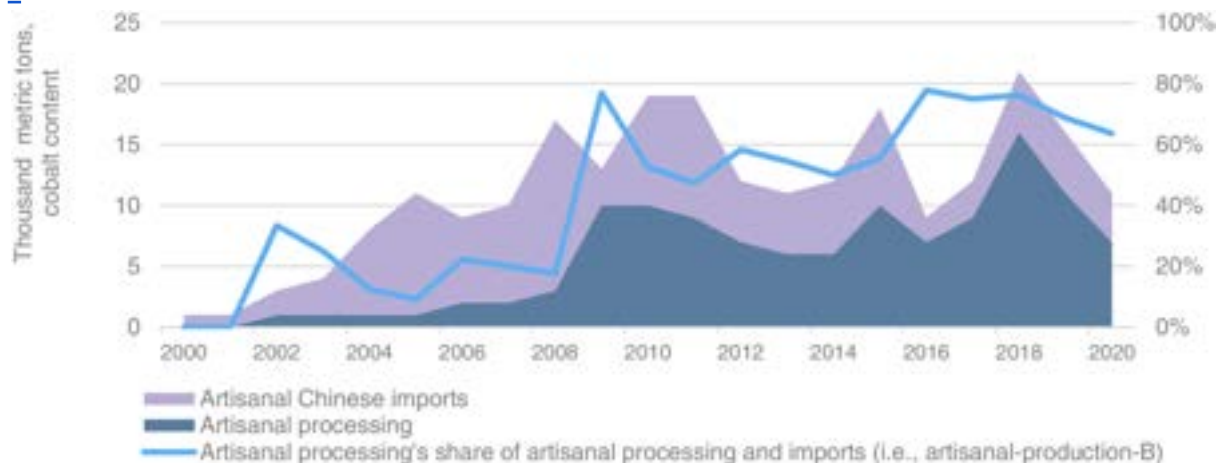
programs designed to eliminate children from mines such as COTECCO and its successor GALAB (announced in 2024 and funded by U.S. Department of Labor). Both of these aim for a future in which no children are working in mines.

A primary obstacle moving forward will be that previous attempts to simply eliminate child labor have failed and may even drive child labor further underground. Any sustainable resolution will require addressing poverty which forces families to send children to mine sites; enforcing regulations related to child labor; increasing transparency in the cobalt supply chain; and ensuring accountability among companies for the conditions under which their materials are produced.

Statistics & Infographics



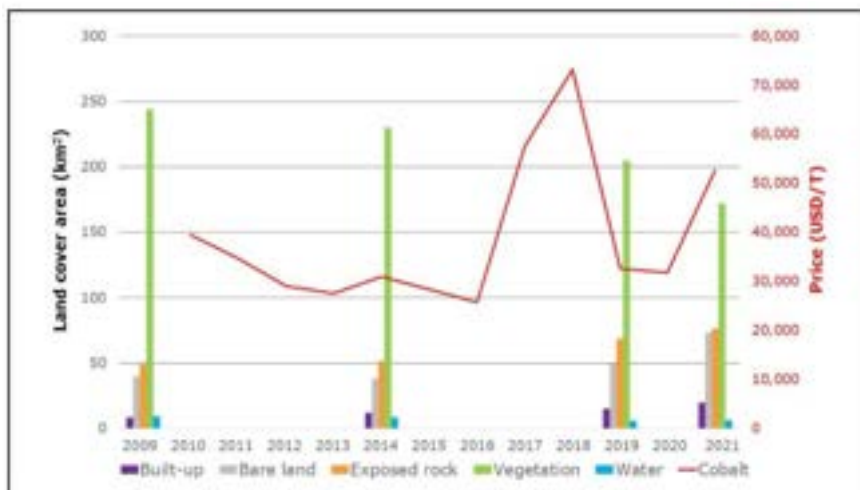
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Timeline

1999	The ILO adopts the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No. 182, which requires governments to take immediate action to prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labor, including hazardous work in mining.
2009	The DRC passes Law No. 09/001 on the protection of children, which bans the employment of children under 18 in mines.
2016	Amnesty International and Afreewatch publish This is What We Die For, the first major report tracing cobalt from artisanal mines using child labor into the supply chains of major global brands.
2018	The DRC revises its Mining Code, adding provisions that criminalise the employment of children in mining activities.
2019	International Rights Advocates files a class action lawsuit in the United States against Apple, Alphabet, Microsoft, Dell, and Tesla over the deaths and injuries of child cobalt miners. The same year, the DRC creates the Entreprise Générale du Cobalt and the regulator ARECOMS to formalise the artisanal cobalt sector.
2024	A United States appeals court dismisses the lawsuit against the five technology companies, ruling they could not be held liable. The ILO launches the GALAB project to combat child labor in the cobalt sector.
2025	The DRC suspends cobalt exports in February to address low prices, then replaces the ban with a quota system in October that is set to run through 2027.

Major Parties

The Democratic Republic of the Congo - the country at the centre of this issue. It holds the world's largest cobalt reserves and has passed laws banning child labor in mining. However, it struggles to enforce them because of poverty, corruption, and weak oversight. It created the EGC and ARECOMS to try to control the artisanal sector.

China - Chinese companies dominate the DRC's cobalt industry, owning or financing most of the country's large cobalt mines and refining the majority of the world's cobalt. China's rechargeable battery industry accounts for a large share of global cobalt demand.

The United States - home to many of the technology and car companies linked to Congolese cobalt, and to the lawsuit filed against five major firms. The U.S. Department of Labor funds projects such as COTECCO and GALAB aimed at ending child labor in the sector.

Technology and Car Companies - firms such as Apple, Microsoft, Dell, and Tesla rely on cobalt for their batteries. They have faced pressure to carry out proper due diligence and to make sure their supply chains are free of child labor.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) - the UN agency responsible for labor standards. It sets the conventions that define and prohibit child labor and runs projects on the ground in the DRC to remove children from mines and support their education.

UNICEF - the UN children's agency, which has produced widely cited estimates of child labor in Congolese mines and works with partners to return former child miners to school and to develop tools to prevent child labor in the cobalt supply chain.

NGOs and Civil Society - organisations such as Amnesty International, Afreewatch, IMPACT, and International Rights Advocates, which investigate conditions in the mines, raise awareness, and push companies and governments to act.

Possible Solutions

The Economic and Social Council at RCMUN 2026 should develop a plan of action which protects the interests of all children, but recognizes that the underlying causes of many of these issues are based in poverty. In addition to banning child labor, evidence shows that implementing harsh bans (without providing alternative means of income) will likely only drive the practice underground, or leave families without an essential source of income to provide for themselves.

Therefore, members of the council should consider ways to strengthen law enforcement of current laws. For example, increasing funding and improving training for labor inspectors and supporting birth registrations; thereby allowing the age of children to be accurately identified.

Additionally, the council may want to explore developing some of the economic solutions to the problem that have been studied. For instance, programs to provide unconditional cash transfers to families; removing school fees and other additional educational expenses (such as uniforms, etc.) for students; and programs to increase adults' incomes and/or opportunities for women's employment; thereby decreasing the dependency of households on income from their children.

From a supply chain perspective, members of the council should continue discussing ideas to enhance tracking of cobalt from mines to products; as well as creating incentives/mandates for companies to perform adequate human rights due diligence. Supporting efforts to formalize the informal artisanal mining industry through organizations such as the EGC (where it provides safer working conditions and greater oversight); however, cautioning against eliminating legitimate job options for miners.

Committee Objective

The goal of the Economic and Social Council at RCMUN 2026 is to foster productive discussion about the regulation of child labor in cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. By noting major parties, possible outcomes and effects, and impact of this issue, the committee hopes to develop long-lasting solutions that all nations can benefit and agree upon. Bearing in mind all parties and their motives, the committee should strive for a fruitful debate working towards a common solution. To fulfill this goal, nations should examine existing laws and treaties, while working towards new strategies, laws, and codes of conduct for the future, all to create a viable solution for the issue of a cobalt sector free of child labor.

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