

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

STUDY GUIDE



TOPIC:

**Child Labour in Mining
and Global Supply Chains**





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Introduction to the Committee

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) is the UN agency mandated to protect the rights and well-being of every child, everywhere. It was founded in 1946 as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund to provide relief to children and mothers affected by World War II. In 1953, UNICEF became a permanent part of the UN system under its current name, though it retained its original acronym. Today, UNICEF operates in more than 190 countries and territories, focusing on health, education, nutrition, child protection, water and sanitation, and emergency relief (UNICEF, 2025a).

UNICEF plays a central role in advancing the Convention on the Rights of the Child, advocating for child-focused laws and policies, and helping governments integrate child rights into their national agendas. It also provides direct assistance to children in humanitarian crises, supports governments in building stronger protection systems, and partners with civil society, businesses, and international organizations to promote child well-being and inclusion (UNICEF, 2025b).

Despite progress, millions of children remain excluded from opportunity and protection. Even in regions with strong economies, such as Europe and Central Asia, disadvantaged children, including refugees, migrants, children with disabilities, and those from minority groups, face systemic barriers to education, healthcare, and inclusion. UNICEF's mission emphasizes reaching these most vulnerable populations, recognizing that only by doing so can the world fully realize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNICEF, 2025a).

Notable actions of UNICEF over the decades highlight its unique mandate. From providing emergency relief in conflicts such as Sudan, Lebanon, and the Rohingya refugee crisis, to championing global frameworks against child labour and exploitation, UNICEF has consistently worked to protect children's rights to survive, thrive, and reach their full potential (UNICEF, 2025b). This DNA of prioritizing every child, regardless of who they are or where they live, shapes its global influence today.



Background of the topic

Key Concepts

- **Child Labour.** Work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, and is harmful to their physical and mental development. It includes tasks that are dangerous, exploitative, or interfere with schooling.
- **Forced Labour.** Situations where individuals are coerced to work through violence, threats, debt bondage, or intimidation. When children are subjected to forced labour, it constitutes one of the **worst forms of child labour**.
- **Global Supply Chain.** The interconnected system of organizations, people, and processes involved in producing and delivering goods. From raw material extraction to consumer products, global supply chains often cross multiple borders and include complex subcontracting arrangements.
- **Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM).** Labour-intensive, low-tech mining carried out by individuals, families, or small groups, often without legal permits or oversight. ASM is frequently linked to child labour due to its informal nature.
- **Hazardous Work.** Any work likely to harm health, safety, or morals. For children, this includes underground mining, handling toxic substances, operating dangerous machinery, and working long hours in extreme conditions.
- **Human Trafficking.** The recruitment, transport, or harbouring of people through coercion or deception for the purpose of exploitation. Child trafficking for labour exploitation in mines is considered a severe violation of rights.
- **Conflict Minerals (3TG).** Tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold, extracted in conflict-affected areas and used to finance armed groups. Child labour is common in the mining of these minerals.



- Bonded Labour (Debt Bondage). Children or families forced to work to repay debts, often under exploitative conditions where repayment is impossible. Recognized as one of the worst forms of child labour.
- Informal Economy. Economic activities outside formal regulation. Mining in the informal economy often relies on child labour due to lack of oversight.
- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). A company's commitment to sustainable and ethical practices. In this context, CSR requires businesses to ensure child labour is absent from their operations and supply chains.
- Fair Trade. A trading system based on fairness, transparency, and respect. Fair Trade certification sets standards that exclude child labour and promote safe working conditions.
- Supply Chain Due Diligence & Auditing. Processes companies use to identify, prevent, and address human rights abuses. This includes risk assessments, on-site inspections, and independent audits to monitor compliance with international labour standards.
- Transparency & Ethical Sourcing. Practices by which companies disclose sourcing information and ensure that raw materials are produced without child exploitation.



Historical Background

Child labour in mining is not a new phenomenon. Since antiquity, children have contributed to family economies in subsistence and resource-extraction societies. In ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Rome, children carried loads, panned for minerals, and worked in unsafe conditions. In pre-colonial Africa, children assisted their families in gold and salt mining, though these activities were largely seasonal and community-based.

The colonial era (16th–20th centuries) dramatically worsened exploitation. European empires such as Britain, Belgium, France, and Portugal established forced labour systems in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the Belgian Congo, for example, children were forced into brutal mining and rubber extraction systems that led to widespread deaths and abuses. These extractive economies supplied raw materials for European industrialization and laid the groundwork for today's global supply chains.

During the Industrial Revolution, demand for coal, iron, and other minerals surged. In Britain and the United States, thousands of children—some as young as five—laboured in coal mines under extremely hazardous conditions. Public outcry led to early reforms such as the Mines and Collieries Act of 1842, but enforcement was limited, and economic necessity kept many children in mines well into the 20th century.

In the post-colonial era, newly independent nations inherited mining-based economies. In countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Ghana, children continued to work in mines due to poverty, lack of education, and weak enforcement of labour laws. Structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s further eroded formal protections, pushing many families into informal or artisanal mining.

With globalization, demand for minerals such as cobalt, gold, tin, tungsten, and mica grew dramatically, particularly for electronics, automotive, and fashion industries. These sectors relied on global supply chains that often obscured the origins of raw materials. Investigations in the 21st century revealed widespread use of child labour in cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), mica mines in India, tin mining in Indonesia, and gold mining in West Africa.



Major Developments Leading to the Current Situation

Child labour in mining remains closely tied to global supply chains for modern technologies.

- **2016 – Amnesty International Report:** Exposed that major companies (Apple, Samsung, Microsoft, Sony) sourced cobalt from mines in the DRC where children as young as seven worked in dangerous conditions (Amnesty International, 2016).
- **2019 – Follow-Up Findings:** Amnesty found that despite public commitments, companies had made only marginal progress in achieving transparency and traceability in their cobalt supply chains (Amnesty International, 2019).
- **2019 – Landmark Lawsuit:** International Rights Advocates (IRA) filed a lawsuit in the U.S. against Apple, Google, Dell, Microsoft, and Tesla on behalf of Congolese families, alleging they knowingly profited from child labour in cobalt mines. Although dismissed on jurisdictional grounds, it set a precedent for corporate accountability (International Rights Advocates, 2019).
- **2021 – EU Conflict Minerals Regulation:** The European Union introduced mandatory due diligence rules for importers of tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold, requiring adherence to OECD guidelines. However, cobalt—central to lithium-ion batteries—was notably excluded (European Commission, 2021).
- **2023 – HRW & Afreewatch Investigation:** Report revealed ongoing child labour in cobalt supply chains linked to major multinational corporations, reigniting calls for stricter regulation and independent audits (Human Rights Watch & Afreewatch, 2023).

Despite corporate pledges, no major company has fully eliminated child labour from its mineral supply chains. Supply chain opacity, weak enforcement, and economic necessity continue to entrench the problem. Advocates argue that addressing root causes such as poverty, lack of education, and weak governance is essential, otherwise, bans risk pushing child labour further underground.



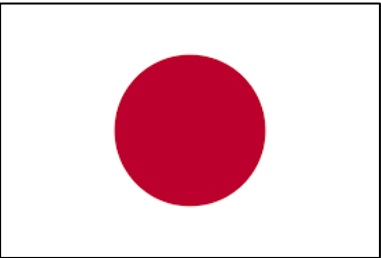
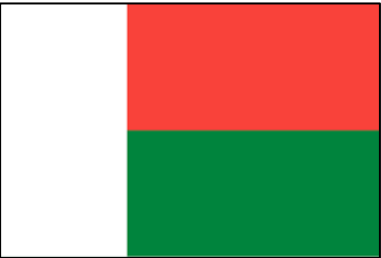
Key Stakeholders and Positions

Flag	Position
United States of America 	The U.S. maintains a proactive stance against child labour in mining and global supply chains. In June 2023, a bill was introduced in Congress to ban imports of cobalt and lithium mined with child labour in the DRC, while also proposing sanctions on foreign entities enabling such practices. The U.S. continues to link corporate responsibility with trade regulation, reflecting its broader commitment to human rights in supply chains.
French Republic 	France champions corporate accountability through its 2017 <i>Duty of Vigilance Law</i>, which requires companies with more than 5,000 employees to implement vigilance plans identifying risks of human rights abuses and environmental harms. Companies that fail to comply are liable for remedial action, making France a leader in binding corporate responsibility measures within the EU.
China 	China plays a central role as the largest controller of cobalt mines in the DRC. Reports from Amnesty International and others have linked Chinese companies to exploitative practices, including child labour and environmental harm. While Beijing has invested heavily in mining infrastructure, it emphasizes sovereignty and resists binding international labour standards, leading to ongoing criticism over lack of transparency.

Russian Federation 	Russia officially maintains strong legal prohibitions against child labour and aligns with international norms. However, enforcement gaps, regional disparities, and lack of transparency raise concerns about the effectiveness of these protections. Although the state recognizes the issue, practical monitoring remains limited.
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 	The UK addresses child labour primarily through the <i>Modern Slavery Act (2015)</i>, requiring companies to report efforts to eliminate exploitation from their supply chains. In 2025, debates around amendments to the Great British Energy Bill reflected growing concerns about supply chains linked to forced labour, especially in regions such as Xinjiang. Critics note, however, that enforcement of existing laws remains weak.
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) 	The DRC supplies more than half of the world's cobalt but faces ongoing criticism for widespread child labour in its mining sector. Children as young as seven work in hazardous and abusive conditions, often subject to violence and intimidation. Although laws prohibit such practices, poverty, corruption, and weak enforcement continue to make the DRC the global epicentre of this issue.
South Sudan 	South Sudan provides limited data or official positions on child labour in mining, reflecting the country's broader struggles with conflict and economic instability. Weak governance structures and ongoing humanitarian crises hinder effective regulation, leaving children vulnerable to exploitation in resource-extraction activities.

Brazil 	Brazil has ratified international conventions and implemented domestic legislation to combat child labour. Despite these commitments, child labour remains in remote and informal gold-mining regions, particularly in the Amazon. Poverty and illegal mining networks undermine enforcement, though social programs aim to reduce reliance on child labour.
Zimbabwe 	Zimbabwe has laws prohibiting child labour, but enforcement is inconsistent. Children continue to be engaged in artisanal and small-scale mining due to poverty and lack of educational opportunities. Weak monitoring mechanisms and economic hardships perpetuate the problem, despite official commitments to reform.
Nigeria 	Nigeria prohibits child labour and mandates basic education, yet illegal and informal mining remains widespread. Corruption among regulatory officials hampers enforcement. The government has recently launched a “corps of mining marshals” to curb illegal mining, though the effectiveness of this measure remains uncertain.
Ghana 	Ghana has partnered with international organizations to combat child labour in gold mining, focusing on education and livelihood alternatives. While progress has been made, illegal small-scale mining (galamsey) still employs children under hazardous conditions, reflecting persistent enforcement challenges.

Philippines 	Child labour in small-scale gold mining remains a major concern in the Philippines, with children exposed to mercury poisoning and hazardous underwater mining. Government programs such as the SHIELD initiative and integration of child labour awareness into the 4Ps social program aim to address the issue. However, enforcement in remote areas remains weak due to poverty and lack of oversight.
Zambia 	Zambia has ratified international conventions and adopted national legislation against child labour. Despite official efforts, children remain engaged in informal and hazardous mining, particularly in unregulated sectors, showing the gap between policy and practice.
Sierra Leone 	Sierra Leone made progress in 2023 by passing the <i>Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act</i>, reinforcing access to education as a preventive measure against child labour. However, the government still lacks a comprehensive policy to address the worst forms of child labour in mining, and enforcement of penalties remains minimal.
Netherlands 	The Netherlands introduced the <i>Child Labour Due Diligence Act (2019)</i>, obliging companies to verify that child labour is not present in their supply chains. Companies failing to comply face financial penalties. The law reflects the Netherlands' leadership in advancing EU-wide supply chain accountability.

Germany 	Germany's <i>Supply Chain Due Diligence Act (2021)</i> requires companies with more than 1,000 employees to assess risks, take preventive action, and report on human rights compliance in supply chains. This law positions Germany as a strong proponent of binding corporate responsibility within the EU.
Japan 	Japan has limited binding regulations on supply chains, though companies like Mitsubishi have faced scrutiny from Amnesty International for inadequate due diligence. Japan relies largely on voluntary corporate responsibility, though pressure is growing for stronger legal frameworks.
Madagascar 	Madagascar faces widespread child labour in the mica industry, with estimates of over 10,000 children involved in hazardous conditions. International partnerships, including with Pact and the U.S. Department of Labor, have sought to reduce child labour in the Anôsy region, but poverty continues to drive children into mining.
Italy 	Italy supports international conventions against child labour and has worked with NGOs to provide alternative livelihoods in countries such as the DRC. Its stance emphasizes international cooperation and development aid to tackle child exploitation in mining supply chains.

South Korea 	South Korea has limited domestic mining but plays a major role as a consumer in global supply chains. Major corporations like Samsung and LG face scrutiny over mineral sourcing. While Seoul promotes adherence to international labour standards, it lacks robust national legislation on child labour in supply chains.
Spain 	Spain has largely eliminated domestic child labour, but historical ties to mining highlight its progress. Today, concerns focus on Spanish companies' involvement in global supply chains that may still source minerals linked to child labour abroad.
South Africa 	South Africa recognizes the risks of child labour in artisanal and small-scale mining, particularly in rural and impoverished areas. While the country has ratified ILO Conventions 138 and 182 and developed a National Action Plan to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, enforcement remains inconsistent due to poverty, inequality, and reliance on informal mining for livelihoods. The government collaborates with ILO and UNICEF on awareness campaigns, but economic pressures continue to drive children into hazardous work.
Switzerland 	Switzerland's <i>Conflict Minerals and Child Labour Due Diligence Legislation (2022)</i> requires companies to evaluate risks in their supply chains, implement policies, and report annually. Although some argue its standards fall short of global best practices, it reflects Switzerland's recognition of its role as a global commodities hub.

Indonesia 	Indonesia continues to struggle with child labour in mining and agriculture. In 2024, it introduced national guidelines for companies to address child labour in supply chains, supported by government and civil society. Nonetheless, limited inspection capacity and poverty in remote regions hinder effective enforcement.
India 	India has enacted laws such as the Mines Act (1952) and Child Labour Act (1986) prohibiting child labour in hazardous mining. Despite these frameworks, enforcement remains limited, particularly in informal mica mining, where poverty drives children into dangerous work.
Bolivia 	Bolivia has one of the highest child labour rates in Latin America, with thousands of children working in tin, silver, and zinc mines. Although national laws prohibit hazardous child labour and the government has ratified ILO Convention 182, enforcement remains weak. Poverty and long-standing traditions of family-based mining make reform difficult, and child labour persists in cooperative and small-scale mining sectors.
Thailand 	Thailand has made progress in addressing child labour through increased prosecutions, migrant worker registration schemes, and digital labour protection initiatives. However, children remain vulnerable in informal sectors, including small-scale mining, where oversight is limited. The government has strengthened regional cooperation and public awareness, but gaps in legal protection and insufficient data collection hinder effective solutions.

Peru 	Peru struggles with child labour in artisanal and small-scale gold mining, particularly in the Amazon and Andean regions. Children face hazardous conditions, including mercury exposure and long hours underground. Although Peru has enacted laws banning child labour and participates in ILO initiatives, weak enforcement and the economic importance of informal mining perpetuate the issue. Efforts by NGOs to provide education and alternative livelihoods have had limited reach.
Uganda 	Uganda continues to grapple with child labour in artisanal gold mining and sand mining, often in unregulated, rural communities. While the government has ratified ILO conventions and passed the <i>Children's Act (2016)</i> strengthening protections, enforcement is weak due to limited resources and corruption. Poverty and lack of access to education drive families to involve children in mining activities.
Kenya 	Kenya has made commitments to eliminate child labour, ratifying international conventions and enacting domestic laws such as the <i>Employment Act (2007)</i>, which prohibits hazardous child labour. Nevertheless, children continue to work in gold and gemstone mining in rural areas, often outside government oversight. Poverty, informal mining practices, and weak monitoring contribute to ongoing violations, though Kenya collaborates with international organizations to strengthen its response.

Previous UN Actions and Resolutions

Eliminating child labour in mining and global supply chains has long been a priority for the United Nations and its agencies. Multiple conventions, resolutions, and collaborative initiatives aim to protect children from exploitation, regulate corporate responsibility, and promote sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable communities. While some progress has been made, weak enforcement and persistent poverty continue to undermine these efforts.

International Conventions and UN Frameworks

- **ILO Convention No. 138 (1973)** on the Minimum Age for Employment and **ILO Convention No. 182 (1999)** on the Worst Forms of Child Labour remain the most widely ratified labour standards in the world, setting the foundation for global action.
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989)** obligates states to protect children from economic exploitation and hazardous work, providing the legal backbone for UNICEF's child protection mandate.
- **General Assembly Resolution 55/56 (2000)**: Urged governments and international organizations to strengthen cooperation in eliminating the worst forms of child labour, with particular attention to mining and hazardous industries.
- **Human Rights Council Resolution 35/14 (2017)**: Called upon states to implement the *UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* to address child labour and exploitation in global supply chains.
- **General Assembly Resolution 73/327 (2019)**: Focused on the implementation of the SDGs, urging accelerated action to eliminate child labour by 2025, with SDG Target 8.7 explicitly committing to its eradication.
- **Alliance 8.7 (2016)**: A global partnership established under the UN framework to accelerate progress toward SDG 8.7, prioritizing high-risk sectors like mining.

National and Regional Legislation

Several member states have developed binding frameworks to regulate supply chains:

- **United States – Dodd-Frank Act (2010):** Requires disclosure of conflict mineral sourcing (3TG). New proposals aim to extend this to cobalt and lithium.
- **United Kingdom – Modern Slavery Act (2015):** Mandates corporate reporting on efforts to eliminate slavery and child labour in supply chains.
- **European Union – Conflict Minerals Regulation (2021):** Requires EU importers of tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold to conduct due diligence aligned with OECD guidance.
- **France – Duty of Vigilance Law (2017):** Obligates large French companies to publish vigilance plans identifying risks of human rights abuses.
- **Germany – Supply Chain Due Diligence Act (2021):** Requires large companies to assess and address risks of child labour across supply chains.
- **Netherlands – Child Labour Due Diligence Law (2019):** Compels companies to verify that child labour is absent from their supply chains, with penalties for non-compliance.

UNICEF and UN-Led Initiatives

UNICEF has promoted comprehensive, child-centred approaches to eliminating child labour, focusing on prevention, remediation, and corporate engagement:

- Supporting governments to align national legislation with ILO and CRC standards.
- Expanding access to quality education and social protection to reduce families' reliance on child labour.
- Working with companies to embed child rights due diligence in supply chains in line with the *OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Mineral Supply Chains*.
- Leading community-based programs that address gender, poverty, and behaviour change as underlying causes of child labour (UNICEF, 2021).

Field-Level Interventions: The COTECCO Initiative

The COTECCO project in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a flagship example of UN-backed intervention. It helped establish an Interministerial Commission on Child Labour in Artisanal Mining and created a Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System (CLMRS) in Lualaba and Haut-Katanga provinces. As of March 2024, more than 5,300 children were identified in the database, which has since been transferred to the Ministry of Mines (UNICEF, 2018).

Remaining Challenges

- **Enforcement Gaps:** Many laws exist on paper but lack consistent monitoring or sanctions.
- **Corporate Compliance:** Multinational companies often adopt CSR policies but fail to achieve full traceability in mineral supply chains.
- **Economic Drivers:** Poverty and lack of alternatives push families to rely on children's income.
- **Informality:** Artisanal and small-scale mining remains largely unregulated, limiting the reach of international frameworks.

Current Challenges and Debates

Eliminating child labour in mining and global supply chains is not a single-policy fix. It sits at the intersection of poverty, weak governance, informal economies, education gaps, and surging global demand for critical minerals. Below are the principal obstacles, the competing perspectives on solutions, and the broader implications for human rights, security, and development.

Core Obstacles

Poverty and Economic Disparities

Poverty is the strongest predictor of child labour in mining. In contexts where families struggle to meet basic needs, children's earnings become a survival strategy, entrenching a cycle of generational poverty: early entry into hazardous work → school dropout → low adult earnings → renewed child labour in the next generation (Pact, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2011). Underinvestment in education reinforces this cycle; for example, low public spending on schooling in mining regions limits access and quality, keeping families dependent on informal work (UNICEF, 2023).

Lack of Access to Quality Education

Where schools are absent, fee-based, far away, or poor in quality, families choose mines over classrooms. Learning poverty is stark: in some areas, basic reading proficiency among 10-year-olds is extremely low, pushing children toward immediate income and away from long-term opportunity (Floodlight, 2024).

Weak Enforcement and Fragmented Regulation

Most affected countries prohibit hazardous child labour on paper, but laws are under-enforced due to limited budgets, understaffed inspectorates, corruption, and vast informal zones (e.g., Nigeria's unregistered lithium sites; Mali's fragmented governance; DRC's remote ASM hubs). Coordination among ministries (mines, education, labour) is often poor, and reliable child-labour data systems are rare, impeding targeted action (AP, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2011).



Informal and Artisanal Mining (ASM)

ASM employs **millions globally** and dominates the labour force in parts of the sector. Its **informal, dispersed, low-tech** nature evades oversight and safety standards. Children frequently handle mercury in gold mining or work underground without protection, with well-documented risks of **irreversible neurological harm** and fatal accidents (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Because ASM is a key livelihood in marginalized regions, crackdowns without alternatives can backfire.

Global Demand for Minerals

The transition to digital and green economies has spiked demand for cobalt, lithium, coltan, 3TG, and rare earths, intensifying extraction in high-risk contexts. Opaque, multi-tiered supply chains diffuse accountability; manufacturers sit several steps from mines and often lack traceability to the point of extraction. Even well-intentioned corporate audits struggle to penetrate the earliest, most informal tiers (Amnesty International, 2021; AP, 2025; IEA data referenced in text). Recent litigation illustrates how current legal doctrines can make redress difficult when harm is deemed “indirect.”

Competing Perspectives on Solutions

- **Human Rights & NGO Lens — Structural Reform and Community Development.** NGOs and the ILO advocate attacking **root causes**: expand access to quality education, social protection, and alternative livelihoods; mobilize **child-labour-free zones** with communities and local government; and mandate corporate due diligence with independent monitoring. Certifications (e.g., Fairtrade Gold) help but face scale and fraud challenges in informal settings (Human Rights Watch, 2021).
- **Government Lens — Sovereignty, Capacity, and Political Economy.** Producer-country governments balance child protection with reliance on mining revenues and local livelihoods. Officials often prefer **development-first** approaches over punitive trade measures, citing capacity constraints and the risk of deterring investment. Enforcement gaps persist where inspectorates are thin, corruption is present, or conflict complicates access (AP, 2025).





- **Corporate/Industry Lens — Responsible Sourcing and Tools.** Major buyers (electronics, automotive) publicize CSR programs, supplier audits, and emerging tools (e.g., blockchain traceability). Some report dropping non-compliant suppliers and expanding third-party verification. Critics counter that efforts remain **inconsistent and first-tier focused**, with limited visibility into ASM and upstream intermediaries; voluntary standards alone rarely eliminate risk.
- **Consumer Lens — Awareness vs. Action.** Ethical consumerism is growing, but **information asymmetries** and skepticism blunt impact; only a minority consistently change purchasing behaviour. Clearer labelling, interoperable traceability, and public education can help, but systemic change cannot rest on consumers alone.
- **International Legal/Policy Lens — Binding Due Diligence.** Momentum is building for **mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence** (e.g., EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence; Germany's Lieferkettengesetz). Proponents argue that binding rules level the playing field; critics highlight enforcement challenges and the need to avoid **de-risking** that simply abandons vulnerable communities instead of improving conditions.

Broader Implications

- **Human Rights and the Integrity of Global Norms.** Hazardous child labour violates the CRC and ILO 182; widespread impunity erodes confidence in international norms and embeds inequality (ILO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023).
- **International Security and Conflict Minerals.** Illicit mining revenues can finance **armed groups and criminal networks**, prolonging conflict and cross-border trafficking. In such settings, children face compound risks as labourers, trafficked persons, or recruits, undermining peacebuilding (Global Witness, 2022; UNSC, 2020).
- **Economic Development: Growth vs. Human Capital.** Mining can be a revenue lifeline, but reliance on child labour **depresses human capital**, constraining productivity and long-run GDP growth. Informal extraction also **bleeds fiscal revenue** via illicit trade and corruption, starving education and health budgets and locking communities into low-skill equilibria (IMF, 2023; NRGI, 2023; World Bank, 2022).



Case Studies

Afghanistan: Child Labour in Coal Mining

In Afghanistan's Baghlan province, coal mining heavily relies on child labour. At just 12 years old, Mansour spends his weekdays not in school but working long hours underground. Equipped with nothing more than a headlamp and worn rubber shoes, he leads donkeys burdened with sacks of coal from dawn until dusk through collapsing tunnels. Older boys mine coal with pickaxes and shovels, while Mansour ensures the coal is transported down the mountain to be bagged and loaded onto trucks destined for neighboring countries.

Children in these mines earn between \$3 and \$8 per day, depending on their assigned tasks—digging, reinforcing brittle tunnel walls with makeshift wood supports, or loading coal onto trucks. None of them receive protective gear, and their labour directly supports their families' survival. The conditions they face—coal dust inhalation, physical exhaustion, and the constant risk of collapse—pose severe threats to their health, safety, and education (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023).

Venezuela: Gold Extraction in the Orinoco Mining Arc

In Venezuela, reports indicate that children as young as nine work in gold mines located **in the Orinoco Mining Arc, a resource-rich but heavily militarized region**. Because of their smaller size and lighter weight, children are often used to descend into fragile, unsupported caves to extract ore. They are also tasked with lowering adults into shafts and operating heavy machinery such as electric hammers and gas extractors—jobs that are hazardous even for adults.

Children work 10 to 15 hours a day in perilous conditions without access to basic safety equipment, sanitation, or adequate hydration. The risks are manifold: mercury poisoning, malaria, gang violence, and fatal accidents. Many mining operations are controlled by sindicatos (local gangs) and armed groups such as FARC and ELN, who impose taxes and exercise strict territorial control through violence and intimidation. Shootouts between rival gangs, armed groups, and state forces have left children both as victims and bystanders in the struggle for control of lucrative gold mines (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, n.d.).



Democratic Republic of the Congo: Cobalt for the Green Economy

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) supplies over 70% of the world's cobalt, a mineral critical for rechargeable batteries used in smartphones, laptops, and electric vehicles. Much of this production comes from artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), where children as young as seven dig for cobalt using rudimentary tools, often in narrow tunnels prone to collapse. Without protective equipment, they are exposed to toxic dust that causes severe lung damage and long-term health risks.

According to Amnesty International (2016, 2019), children in these mines typically earn \$1–\$2 per day, carrying heavy sacks of ore or sorting materials for sale to intermediaries. Many of the minerals extracted under these conditions enter opaque supply chains and are eventually used by some of the world's largest technology and automotive companies. Despite public commitments to ethical sourcing, repeated investigations show that corporations struggle to trace cobalt back to its origin and ensure it is free of child labour.

The DRC case starkly illustrates the link between local exploitation and global consumption. Children in impoverished Congolese communities pay the price for the world's growing demand for renewable energy and digital technologies, making the issue not only a humanitarian concern but also a challenge for corporate accountability and sustainable development (Amnesty International, 2016).



Possible Solutions and Future Perspectives

Government and Policy Solutions

Governments must strengthen child labour legislation, ensure effective enforcement, and address corruption in mining regions. In countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), building stronger institutions to monitor and regulate artisanal mining is critical. Policies should not only prohibit child labour but also provide realistic alternatives: investment in economic diversification, rural development, and social protection systems can reduce family dependence on children's income. Governments that ratify and implement ILO Conventions No. 138 and 182, alongside national action plans, can create the legal foundation for sustainable reform (World Vision Action, 2012).

Corporate Responsibility and Supply Chains

Corporations must accept full accountability for their supply chains by conducting rigorous due diligence in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and OECD Due Diligence Guidance. Rather than disengaging from high-risk regions, companies should invest in improving local conditions through partnerships with NGOs, governments, and communities. This includes funding schools, healthcare, and child protection services, while also creating remediation programs for children withdrawn from mining. Transparent reporting, independent audits, and industry-wide codes of conduct can help close the gap between corporate commitments and realities on the ground (World Vision Action, 2012).

Education and Community Development

Long-term solutions require free, quality education for all children in mining regions, supported by adequate public investment. Education not only prevents children from being forced into labour but also equips them with skills for safer, better-paid work in the future. Parallel to this, parents and caregivers need training and access to sustainable livelihoods—such as agriculture, small businesses, or vocational trades—so they are not reliant on children's earnings. Public awareness campaigns are equally essential, informing communities about the health and developmental dangers of child labour while promoting the value of schooling (World Vision Action, 2012).



International Cooperation

Child labour in mining is a global problem that demands global solutions. International bodies such as the ILO and UN set legal frameworks, but enforcement depends on cross-border collaboration. Countries can strengthen supply chain monitoring through emerging technologies like AI and blockchain, making sourcing more transparent and traceable. Trade agreements, sanctions, and import bans on minerals linked to child labour add economic pressure on companies to comply with ethical standards. Meanwhile, organizations like UNICEF and the World Bank provide funding for education, vocational training, and community development programs that help break cycles of poverty. Ultimately, only coordinated action among governments, corporations, and civil society will achieve the global eradication of child labour (ILO, 2019).



Guiding Questions

Root Causes and Impacts

- What are the primary causes of child labour in mining and supply chains in your country?
- What are the social, physical, and psychological consequences of child labour in mining on children's development?

National and International Responses

- What actions has your country already taken to address this issue?
- What solutions or policies does your country propose to reduce or eliminate child labour in mining and global supply chains?
- What role should governments play in regulating supply chains, both domestically and internationally?

Corporate Responsibility and Consumer Nations

- What responsibilities do consumer nations have in ensuring that cobalt and other minerals are ethically sourced?
- Are international companies adequately auditing and tracing their supply chains, particularly in high-risk sectors like cobalt mining?
- How can public pressure, activism, and media coverage influence companies to address child labour?

Sustainability and Alternatives

- What sustainable alternatives or economic programs could be introduced to reduce child labour in mining communities, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?
- How can partnerships between companies, governments, and NGOs improve traceability and eliminate child labour?



Global Power Dynamics and Ethics

- How do power imbalances between wealthy consumer nations and resource-rich developing countries affect supply chain ethics?
- To what extent are developed countries outsourcing human rights abuses to poorer nations through global supply chains?



Suggested Readings and Resources

- **PACE Consortium. (2022). Value Chains.**
<https://valuechains.pace-consortium.org>
 An interactive resource explaining how global value chains function, highlighting complexity and risks such as child labour and human rights abuses.
- **Wired. (2024, November 22). The World's Biggest Maker of EVs Has the Worst Appraisal of Human Rights.**
<https://www.wired.com/story/the-worlds-biggest-maker-of-evs-has-the-worst-appraisal-of-human-rights/>
 A journalistic report examining the electric vehicle industry's human rights record, with a focus on sourcing minerals like cobalt.
- **International Labour Organization. (2019). Child Labour in Hazardous Work: A Framework for Action.**
https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@ilo-manila/documents/publication/wcms_720743.pdf
 A framework by the ILO outlining strategies to combat child labour in dangerous sectors such as mining, with policy recommendations for governments.
- **UNICEF Netherlands. (n.d.). Child Labour in Global Supply Chains.**
<https://www.unicef.nl/files/Child%20Labour%20in%20Global%20Supply%20Chains.pdf>
 A comprehensive report on how supply chains contribute to child labour and the roles of states, businesses, and NGOs in addressing it.
- **Amnesty International. (2016). This is What We Die For: Human Rights Abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Power the Global Trade in Cobalt.**
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/3183/2016/en/>
 A groundbreaking investigation exposing the widespread use of child labour in cobalt mining in the DRC and its links to global electronics companies.
- **Human Rights Watch. (2023). "The Hidden Cost of Cobalt": Child Labour and Rights Abuses in the Democratic Republic of Congo.**
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/07/12/hidden-cost-cobalt/child-labor-and-rights->

abuses-democratic-republic-congo

A detailed report on child exploitation in DRC's cobalt sector, including first-hand testimonies and policy recommendations.

- **OECD. (2017). OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas.**

<https://www.oecd.org/daf/inv/mne/OECD-Due-Diligence-Guidance-Minerals-Edition3.pdf>

An international standard providing practical guidance for companies to respect human rights and avoid contributing to conflict through mineral sourcing.

- **Global Witness. (2022). Conflict Minerals: The Cost of Clean Energy.**

<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/>

An advocacy report exploring how the rush for clean energy minerals risks fuelling child labour, conflict, and corruption in mining communities.

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<https://floodlightglobal.com/children-in-the-mines-the-devastating-cycle-of-child-labor-in-the-drc-and-its-impact-on-education-and-economic-mobility>

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