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Distress in Disguise: Cobalt Mining in the DRC and Child Abuse

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ABSTRACT

“When I wake up every morning, I feel terrible knowing I have to come back here again; everything hurts!” – cries Richard, an eleven-year-old boy, exploited in the treacherous mines of the Democratic Republic of Congo (“DRC”). Imagine getting down a dark, seemingly endless tunnel, trying to break bread for at least one meal; this is the life of tens of thousands of children like Richard.

In the transition from conventional to clean and green energy, the world has drifted towards the usage of electrically powered machinery. This skyrocketed the demand for ‘Cobalt’, which is prominently used in modern-day lithium-ion batteries. The DRC, accounting for more than 70% of Cobalt’s global supply, attracts plundering MNCs to carry out intense mining by exploiting the natives for their cheap labour. Inside such mines, an estimated 40,000 children drain their blood to charge up the batteries of those machines. This study serves as an investigation into the continued exploitation of child labour in the mines of the DRC; also emphasising the role of international players and policies in giving a way forward to the issue. This empirical study utilises the 2024 ILO’s “GALAB” news report on Child labour in the DRC. Our analyses are guided by an international framework provided by relevant global stakeholders through books and reports. It is hoped that this study will sensitise everyone to initiate a revamp, after making them realise that one such blood battery might be powering the devices that they use on a day-to-day basis.

Keywords: Blood-battery, Children, Cobalt, DRC, Mining.

I. INTRODUCTION

SUSTAINABILITY, one of the most resonating terms in climate and environmental justice, has been recognised by the global community time and again in the 21st century. Starting from the recognition of CLIMATE CHANGE as a common concern of mankind in the General Assembly in the 1990s, all the way through the setting up of specialised bodies like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (“UNFCCC”), Intergovernmental Panel on

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Climate Change (“IPCC”) and adoption of commitments such as the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (“MDGs”) - later replaced by the Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”) in 2015. A common thread in all these unanimously adopted commitments is the acknowledgement of the need to reduce the carbon footprint by transitioning to a greener energy source, i.e., reducing the reliance upon fossil fuels. We have adopted rechargeable batteries as a pragmatic alternative, which has proved efficient. But when we dig deep into the thick of things, we find the unanswered cries from the corners of the Democratic Republic of Congo (“DRC”). One may wonder what a harmless environmental transition does to a random country found in sub-Saharan Africa. On a closer introspection, it is found that here, ‘what may seem peaceful is precarious, what may seem eco-friendly is evil, what may seem just is juvenile abuse, what may seem sustainable is sinister’. It may sound incoherent until one lifts the veil and finds the truth. The global drive towards cleaner energy skyrocketed the demand for rechargeable batteries; consequently, the demand for the mineral Cobalt, which is used as an anode in lithium-ion batteries. With DRC possessing the world’s largest Cobalt reserves, the extraction of this mineral has an immense toll on a substantial population of the country, let alone the voiceless children, affecting every aspect of their lives. This research makes a critical analysis of the pervasive child labour abuse in the DRC’s Cobalt mines, focusing on the unregulated artisanal mining carried out, and touching upon the impact of greedy Multi-National Corporations (“MNCs”), and ineffective efforts of International Organisations, ultimately the terrible reality of the tender children.

II. THE COBALT AND CONGO CONTEMPLATION

In this modern world where Electric Vehicles have replaced fossil-driven automobiles and electronic devices have taken over all facets of society, the need for batteries has become indispensable. This has raised the demand for Cobalt, a key component in batteries around the globe. Cobalt is a lustrous, hard, grey metal mainly used as a cathode material in lithium-ion batteries to enhance their electrochemical performance. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, Mineral Commodity Summaries, January 2025³, the vast majority of global resources are found in sediment-hosted stratiform copper deposits in the DRC. The survey also reveals that DRC topped the global cobalt production with 76% of world cobalt mine production, which is followed by Indonesia, which accounted for 10%. Out of the 2,90,000 metric tonnes of Cobalt produced around the world, DRC contributed to 2,20,000 metric tonnes in 2024. Almost 15-30% of Cobalt in the DRC comes from Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). All these

³ U.S. Geological Survey, 2025, Mineral commodity summaries 2025 (ver. 1.2, March 2025): U.S. Geological Survey, 212 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/mcs2025>.

might sound like a headway, but it is actually a poisoned chalice in disguise. Minig Cobalt from the DRC is intertwined with raising Child Labour and Human Rights concerns. Artisanal mining is defined as “using non-industrial tools, methods and processes” in the Mining Code of the DRC, 2018⁴. DRC, a country with a growing population, plundering unemployment and low living standards, makes it an easy pick for the greedy MNCs. This resulted in the employment of 1,50,000-2,00,000 artisanal miners in DRC, around 25% of whom are children. The MNCs prioritise economic profits and function as capitalistic entities, compensating the working conditions of the workers. Battery demand accounts for 73% of the cobalt market, Electric Vehicles support 45% of the market, followed by the portable electronics sector, accounting for 26%. As the battery demand of the sector increases, the world’s largest EV manufacturers are focused on increasing the supply chain, disregarding the risks posed by the chain. The 102-page report of Amnesty International, a global human rights organisation, reveals the shocking truth about famous EV makers on their human rights due diligence policy with respect to their cobalt supply chain. At the tail of the list were Chinese car makers BYD, Mitsubishi and Hyundai. Their disclosures were quoted to be “a massive disappointment” as they lacked transparency⁵.

III. CATASTROPHIC CHILDHOOD

At the outset, it is evident that the DRC is the largest reserve of Cobalt in the world. But to put things into perspective about the extent of dependence of the global battery production chain upon the Cobalt extraction from the DRC, there arises a need to look at the consumers of those extracts. The Congo Dongfang Mining International (“CDM”),⁶ which is a subsidiary of a Chinese-based cobalt trading company - Huayou Cobalt Company Ltd, alone supplies coal to multiple leading companies across the globe, including Sony, Apple Inc., Microsoft Corporation, HP Inc., Dell, Samsung and Volkswagen etc., A country being the largest producer of a certain mineral does not have to be a trouble to its citizen. But the case of the DRC is peculiar owing to its underdevelopment, which could be attributed to secessionist movements in the past, unstable political systems and other socio-economic factors. This made Cobalt mining the major reliance of the country, just for the sake of catering to the growing global needs. Before the advent of foreign mining companies, as in every country, the dominant niche

⁴ The Mining Code 2002 (as amended by the 2018 Law No. 18/001), African Mining Legislation Atlas (June 19, 09:05 A.M.), <https://www.a-mla.org/en/country/Democratic%20Republic%20of%20the%20Congo>.

⁵ Democratic Republic of the Congo: Industrial mining of cobalt and copper for rechargeable batteries is leading to grievous human rights abuses, Amnesty International (June. 17, 2025, 11:26 PM), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/drc-cobalt-and-copper-mining-for-batteries-leading-to-human-rights-abuses/>.

⁶ Human Rights Abuse in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Power: The Global Trade in Cobalt, Amnesty International (June 19, 08:46 A.M.), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/3183/2016/en/>.

was looked after and supervised by the State itself through its flagship mining company, Générale des Carrières et des Mines S.A., in the 1970s and 1980s – the time when the commercialisation of Cobalt saw a boost. The company, which contributed the lion's share to the state treasury, yielded to chronic mismanagement coupled with political flaccidity and went bankrupt. After two decades of continued unregulated exploitation of the region, it saw a ray of hope in the form of a governmental agency to oversee mining, a legislative code governing it and opening up for MNCs to operate. The government tried to systematise the entire extraction process by scaling up the scale of extraction by implementing mechanical technology from foreign players. This very move had a crucial impact on the entire population, which was dependent on mining for livelihood and demanded recognition of 'artisanal mining'. The 2002 Mining Code ("2002 Code") recognised the mining carried out by hand till a depth of 30 meters as artisanal mining, which should be carried out only in those regions which are exclusively allocated for the same. The insufficient allocation of territory for the artisanal chunk paved the way towards unauthorised mining in order to sustain livelihood. This juncture is of immense paramountcy since the tender children as young as seven years were forced to give up their education and take up mining to have food on their plates. Children and women were often allocated the comparatively less hazardous jobs, which involved picking up ores from the piles of dirt (tailings) accumulated from digging. Then, they are expected to wash them off in the nearby streams or water bodies to segregate the desirable mineral ores, which would then be commercially refined by the big players (MNCs). The 2002 Code clearly provides that children should not be employed in mines, which is also an obligation for the State as it is a party to the International Labour Organisation ("ILO") Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No.182). Such an ethically important guideline exists only on paper; the ground reality says, sorry, screams otherwise. The children of DRC are subjected to abuse physically, mentally and even financially in broad daylight; they are snatched off of their primary education, a basic necessity of their lives, and undergo traumatic experiences every single day. In a study conducted by Amnesty International and Afre Watch, children as young as 7 years of age were found to be employed in mines. Their words would pierce even the strong-hearted. The words of a 12-year-old girl, Mathy and a 13-year-old boy, Roger, on the heartless behaviour of the security guards in the region.

"They grabbed my friends and pushed her into a tank containing diesel oil. I was able to run away and hide, but I saw what happened. I cried. I was scared."

"They used to whip us, and sometimes they used to dunk us in dirty water."

The words of 14-year-old Paul and 13-year-old Oliver on the hazardous working conditions

were there.

“I spend 24 hours down in the tunnels. I arrived in the morning and would leave the following morning”

“I had a cough and muscle pain, and a runny nose due to the dusts here. When it rained, it was difficult, and I became sick”.

IV. TRANS-NATIONAL ENGAGEMENT TO COMBAT CHILD LABOUR

The role of international organisations in curbing the issue of child labour around the world has become inevitable in this global village. One such premier institution is the International Labour Organisation (“ILO”), an agency of the United Nations mandated to prioritise socio-economic justice of the working force by devising international labour standards. The Global Accelerator Lab, abbreviated as (“GALAB”)⁷ is a project of the ILO focused on tackling child and forced labour under the ambit of the Sustainable Development Goal (“SDG”) Target 8.7, corresponding to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate the worst forms of child labour and forced labour. This project is financed by the United States Department of Labour (“USDOL”). Under the confluence of various multi-stakeholder partnerships such as the Alliance 8.7 and various governments’ labour welfare organisations of the global nations, this project is pioneering in identifying pilot techniques and solutions to mitigate child and forced labour at the regional level in the host nations.

Apart from addressing child and forced labour in the mining sector of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (“DRC”) it addresses the same issue in the cocoa sector of Nigeria and Ivory Coast, fishing sector on lake Volta of Ghana, and 5 other nations on diversified sectors in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean. The GALAB project is the successor of the COTECCO⁸ (“Combat Child Labour in the Cobalt Supply Chain in DRC”) project, which laid the foundations to curb child labour in the Cobalt mining sector of the DRC, caused by the plundering greed of the MNCs and the tormenting poverty.

Holistic approaches to support children and families

The GALAB project aims to empower the Congolese government’s capability and increase the role of global stakeholders to achieve “zero children in the mining sector” through its activities.

⁷ The GALAB project: Intensifying action against child labour in The Democratic Republic of the Congo, International Labour organisation (June. 18, 2025, 09:45 PM), <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/The%20GALAB%20project%20in%20the%20Democratic%20Republic%20of%20the%20Congo.pdf>.

⁸ Combatting Child Labor in the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s Cobalt Industry (COTECCO), U.S. Department Of Labour (June. 18, 2025, 09:53 PM), <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/combating-child-labor-democratic-republic-congos-cobalt-industry-cotecco>.

To harmonise these activities, a Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System (“CLMRS”) has been installed, which reported in 2024 that over 6,200 children are engaged in mining in two of the southern provinces of the DRC, which accounts for 60% of the country’s Cobalt production. The UNICEF (“United Nations Children's Fund”) reports that children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 who are not enrolled in school in the two provinces make up 34.8%. The CLMRS managed by the Ministry of Employment, Labour AND Social Security (“MELSS”)⁹ works in association with the ILO to register and provide remedies for child labourers at 10 pilot sites in 2023. Additionally, to address the issue at the grassroots level, the GALAB project, along with important stakeholders like UNICEF, IMPACT Transform and the PABEA-Cobalt, provides services such as educational support to children and economic support to families to drift away from child labour. Apart from taking measures in global context the project also works at the regional level by aiding regional institutions to implement their initiatives, this also includes working with Alliance 8.7 pathfinder countries¹⁰ to curb child and forced labour by supporting trade unions to increase organisation, strengthening voice of the workers, to support the vulnerable household by extending social protection coverage and developing knowledge sharing platforms like the Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour (“RILAC”).

In order to support due diligence in mining operations and protect fundamental rights, the GALAB project is committed to cultivating strong public-private partnerships. Training private sector stakeholders on national regulations and international standards, with an emphasis on ethical business practices in the mining sector, will be one of the main initiatives. GALAB will help the DRC government mobilise more resources to bolster its efforts to combat child labour in the sector through focused advocacy and capacity-building initiatives. This ardent approach of the project has made Nteba Soumano, ILO Country Director for the DRC to depict its critical necessity by quoting,

“The GALAB project is a crucial step forward in our collective efforts to combat child labour in the DRC's cobalt supply chain. By strengthening remediation services and engaging the private sector, we can make a real difference in the lives of children and their families and contribute to a more responsible and sustainable mining sector.”¹¹

⁹ 2023 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor - Democratic Republic of Congo, U.S. Department of Labour (June 17, 2025, 10:41 PM), https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/esources/reports/childlabor/congodemocraticrepublicdrc&ved=2ahUKEwiBiMiB9_iNAXVb4zgGHSf6OegQFnoECCMQAQ&usg=AOvVaw2GCWgXspQnm2eL7T5PE3q.

¹⁰ Alliance 8.7, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, United Nations (June 18, 2025, 10:13 PM), <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/alliance-87>.

¹¹ News Release (Nov 20, 2024), ILO launches GALAB project in Democratic Republic of Congo to address child

V. MULTI-TIERED ARRAY OF APPROACHES

Apart from this flagship initiative dedicated to directly addressing this concern, numerous other projects are also underway to address this issue from various dimensions. To categorically put it down, it can be classified into a three-tiered model. Firstly, focusing on the institutions carrying out the extraction activities. This level focuses more on formalising the mining process by bringing the unaccounted artisanal miners under systematic governance. It requires collaboration with various ground-level stakeholders to implement all the programs with utmost efficacy. Secondly, the technological giants which source the extracted Cobalt are also provided with responsibility. They are required to ensure that their supply chain is based on ‘child labour-free’ products; ultimately, demanding that they supervise the extraction process to ensure compliance. Finally, the consumer base using the electronic goods must be given proper awareness about the sinister activities taking place. There is an undisputable existence of normative obligation against child labour as envisioned time and again at the international level like, ILO Convention No. 182 and 190 addressing Worst Form of Child Labour (“WFCL”) and United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (“UNCRC”) advocating on the role of State in protecting children. The past decade added a new perspective by ensuring that the corporate sector must also be provided with due responsibility, apart from their motive for commercial gains.

As we have discussed earlier, the extraction process is governed by the DRC’s 2002 Code. In addition to the same, governments of the United States of America (“USA”) and the People’s Republic of China (“PRC”) came up with their flagship initiatives to address the issue i.e., Department of Labour’s (“DOL”) ‘Comply Chain’ and Chinese Chamber of Commerce for Metal, Minerals & Chemicals’ (“CCCMC”) ‘Responsible Cobalt Initiative’. These measures act as a means to ensure compliance with both domestic and international regulations for the companies within their territory. The virtues of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are also observed by the actors involved.

Then comes the corporate sectors, established brands like BASF, BMW, Samsung SDI, Volkswagen, and Samsung Electronics, together have established bodies like Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (“DGIZ”)¹² and Global Battery Alliance

labour in the Cobalt mining sector, International Labour Organisation, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ilo-launches-galab-project-democratic-republic-congo-address-child-labour>.

¹² Joint News Release (Oct 30, 2020), “Cobalt for Development” project started trainings for mining cooperatives in Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of Congo, https://www.basf.com/dam/jcr:3ad68697-db11-3704-ae98-de7b3b8c5d37/basf/www/global/documents/en/newsandmedia/newsreleases/2020/10/P350e_Cobalt_for_Development.pdf.

(“GBA”) to ensure that they are contributing towards sustainable Cobalt mining. This is a huge step forward as it involves non-state actors taking the driver's seat in the journey towards a sustainable future. This concludes the second level, bringing us to the third and final one, focused on spreading awareness.

Art has been identified as the apt medium to ensure that the awareness about the issue at hand is brought to the masses of the population. Along with numerous NGOs portraying and documenting the realities of the grassroots, some organisations are taking additional steps to ensure that they gather public attention. This process is systematically done through Supporting Children's Rights through Education, Arts, & the Media (“SREAM”) under 8.7 Accelerator Lab Initiative of the International Labour Organisation (“ILO”) in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (“UNDP”). The documentary film titled “Cobalt Rush” was screened at the event hosted by the World Council of Peoples for the United Nations (“WCPUN”), which condensed the terrible living conditions of the Congolese miners.

VI. WAY FORWARD

For the past decade and a half, the global community has acknowledged the importance of addressing the Cobalt concern with utmost expediency and has come up with multiple initiatives focusing on the prevention of dangerous artisanal mining and the involvement of children in it. The continuing dire situation is a testament to the fact that the status quo can be remedied only with a proper multi-faceted approach focusing on the vulnerable miners of the DRC. The political instability and socio-economic conditions have forced them to be the victims here. Their struggle for livelihood forces them to take dramatic measures, which might even involve putting their own lives at stake. The quality of their lives must be lifted through the various policies that exist. Upon closer inspection, it is evident that the existing policies are not completely efficient, thanks to the hindrances in their execution of the same. It is high time for us to put the think tank on pause and focus more on realising the already envisioned objectives, which require intensive collaboration at the ground level, coupled with proper supervision.

If the extraction activities by the private actors are to persist, the indispensability of the profit motive might hinder the welfare of the people of the DRC. It might be a feasible & sustainable alternative for State entities to take up the extraction in their own hands as it was earlier. The contingencies of mismanagement and political defects might be overcome by encouraging collaborations with those stakeholders primarily dealing in Cobalt. Inviting major cobalt-consuming countries to establish a partnership with the DRC government might be the solution we are looking forward. The possibility of the same is dependent on the foreign policies of the

relevant parties; however, such a strategic collaboration would empower a least developed country like the DRC to overcome its shortcomings in the effective implementation of the existing intricate policies. Through this research, it has become evident that the need for a holistic approach to mitigate child labour doesn't end with a singular stratum but demands coordinating efforts of all the facets.

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