



GALCON 2026

*The Global Exploitation of Children in Mining Industries:
Addressing Child Labor in the Extraction of Minerals for Technology and Energy*



**UNICEF Committee
Research Report**

Definitions

Child labour: the use of children in industry or work. “Roughly 138 million children were subjected to child labour in 2024. Over one third of them are in hazardous work that directly endangers their health and development. Children may be driven into work for various reasons. Most often, child labour occurs when families face financial challenges or uncertainty – whether due to poverty, sudden illness of a caregiver, or job loss of a primary wage earner.”¹

Mining: The process of extracting useful materials from the earth. Although mining provides many valuable minerals, it can also be harmful to people and the environment².

Artisanal and Small Scale Mining, (ASM): is the practice of mining that involves smaller machinery and requires less structure and management, usually involving individuals using basic mining tools. This is opposed to heaving mining practices that require heavier infrastructure such as tunnels, heavy machinery, group coordination, industrial drills and more.³

Child Exploitation: it occurs when an adult uses a child for financial gain, sexual gratification, labour or personal advantage, often during cruel or violent treatment that forces the child to participate in activities that can lead to physical and emotional harm potentially lasting into adulthood.⁴

Industrial revolution: “The period in which the development of machinery leads to major changes in agriculture, industry, transportation, and social conditions, especially the Industrial Revolution in England in the 18th century”⁵

Critical metals: “Critical metals are metals and non-metals that are considered vital for the economic well-being of the world's major and emerging economies, yet whose supply may be at risk due to geological scarcity, geopolitical issues, trade policy or other factors⁶.”

Sustainable Development Goals (sdg): They are 17 development goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations in 2015 as a shared global responsibility to calling for an end to poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring that by 2030 all people are in peace and enjoying prosperity⁷.

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/stories/child-labour>

² <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/mining/>

³ <https://www.igfmining.org/artisanal-and-small-scale-mining/>

⁴ [Child Exploitation | Safeguarding Network](#)

⁵ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/industrial-revolution>

⁶ <https://www.northcliffresources.com/criticalmetals>

⁷ <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

Background

Child labour in mining is the phenomenon of using minors in the extraction of minerals and valuable resources operating in mines or other spots. This involves exploitation as it forces minors to engage in very harmful and traumatizing activities that have severe effects on their physical and mental health. When children are involved in mining activities, they are exposed to harsh and dangerous conditions that deprive them of their fundamental rights such as education, health, and protection from harmful work and exploitation⁸. This counts as child exploitation and as such this phenomenon remains a significant global challenge that threatens children's fundamental rights worldwide⁹. The minerals used for this extraction tend to be high value and are critical minerals such as cobalt, tin, tungsten, and tantalum, which are used in the production of essential components for modern technologies in particular production of computers, mobile phones, medical devices, airplanes, and rechargeable batteries¹⁰. The exploitation of children, therefore, is fueled by the constant demand by outside markets for these critical and rare minerals.

This issue has roots that can be traced back to the earlier periods of industrial development. During the nineteenth century, children were widely employed in mines as work sectors expanded rapidly and labour demands increased. In other words, it was the high demand of minerals and the development of industrial capacities that opened the door to the exploitation of children in this field.¹¹ With the expansion of industrial practices along with the spread of colonial empires across the world, more children, especially within the developing world countries, found themselves caught within this exploitative profession. Many of them were pushed into mining due to horrible living conditions that forced their parents to rely on their labour to help support their families and relatives. Local socio-economic conditions also play a factor, as these mines might serve as the only labour opportunity for many in their area. Some children are put into mines under the threat of violence by local warlords who make use of the extracted minerals to make large sums of income that fund their activities.

The exploitation of child miners is particularly acute in the practice known as Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM). It is an informal economic sector in which workers use simple, non-mechanized tools to extract valuable minerals.¹² ASM has expanded primarily in regions where poverty, limited access to formal employment, and weak state regulation have pushed communities to rely on mining as a means of survival. As a result of the growing global demand for these minerals, coupled with the lack of transparency and regulatory oversight within ASM operations, children have increasingly been drawn into working in these mines where the low cost and informal nature of child labor increase their susceptibility to exploitation¹³. The ASM sector involves a wide range of mineral extraction facilities, including mines, digging fields, river beds and others and

⁸ <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text-childrens-version>

⁹ [Child labour in mining and global supply chains | International Labour Organization](#)

¹⁰ <https://www.pactworld.org/our-expertise/mining>

¹¹ <https://48298399.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/48298399/PDF%20Files/children-who-labor-handout-2.pdf>

¹² <https://www.pactworld.org/our-expertise/mining>

¹³ <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2024-12/artisanal-small-scale-mining-critical-minerals.pdf>

involves the extraction of rare earth minerals, and also materials used for luxury goods such as diamonds and gold.

Treaties and Organisations

The International Labour Organization, or ILO,

The International Labour Organisation was established in 1919 with the aim of protecting the rights of laborers and workers worldwide and to fight back against exploitative labour practices. Under its purview, it aims to also protect the rights of children who are forced into exploitative work, in addition to children who are pushed into the mining industry. The organisation members include most countries around the world who vote upon resolutions, called “conventions,” that address their issues of interest.¹⁴

ILO Conventions 138

Convention No.138 on Minimum Age (C138) set by the International Labour Organisation aims for the “effective abolition of child labour – which is work that is hazardous to children’s health, safety or morals, work that interferes with compulsory education or for which they are simply too young.”¹⁵

ILO Conventions 182

Convention No. 182 on Minimum Age (C182) set by the International Labour Organisation confirms that “all ILO member States have an obligation to respect, promote and realize the abolition of child labour.”¹⁶

Sustainable development Goals 8:

The UN Sustainable Development goals are goals set by the UN for the year 2025 which aim at addressing severe global issues and pushes countries towards finding solutions. Sustainable development goal 8, set by the United Nations, aims to “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”.¹⁷ Article 7 of this goal (8.7) strives to “take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms”.¹⁸

UN Convention on the Right of the Child 1989

“The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an important, legally binding agreement signed by 196 countries (as of 12 July 2022) which outlines the fundamental

¹⁴ <https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo>

¹⁵ https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/C138_at_a_glance_EN.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.ilo.org/international-programme-elimination-child-labour-ipecc/what-child-labour/ilo-conventions-child-labour>

¹⁷ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8>

¹⁸ <https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/decent-work-and-2030-agenda-sustainable-development/sustainable-development-goal-8-decent-work-and-economic-growth/ilo-contributions-achieve-sdg-target-87>

rights of every child, regardless of their race, religion or abilities. [...] The Convention has 54 articles that cover all aspects of a child's life and set out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The convention is universal—these rights apply to every child and the convention entitles every child to claim them. It also explains how adults and governments must work together to make sure all children can enjoy all their rights.”¹⁹

Current Situation

Although the development of international labour law and child protection frameworks led to a decline child labour within formal industries, the exploitation of children in mining did not disappear, rather it evolved and progressively shifted into less regulated and informal sectors. In recent decades the issue has escalated due to the growing global demand for minerals driven by modern technology and the global transition towards green energy. International initiatives such as the Paris Agreement (2015) and EU Green Deal (2020) have increased the demand for critical minerals including cobalt, lithium, nickel and other rare earth elements. Consequently, the growing demand of these minerals alongside with limited transparency and weak regulatory oversight in global supply chains, has increased the risk of child labour exploitation, particularly within informal mining activities such as artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM).²⁰

Recent reports from the International Labor Organization (ILO) indicate that the mining sector is one of the most dangerous labour sectors, affecting more than one million children in artisanal mining, affecting more than one million children in artisanal mining globally in 2019, and it has only increased ever since.²¹ The phenomenon of child exploitation in mines is concentrated in developing countries such as The Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, India and Myanmar. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, children are often exploited in Cobalt mines which provide the metal used in mobile phones and electric cars batteries. Despite the efforts of governments and the children's rights organizations, through raising awareness, intervention, advocacy and promotion of workers' rights, many children continue to work under unsafe conditions that often adequate legal or health protection, including within global supply chains as characterized by the lack of transparency. According to research by Save the children and Humanium, children work for long periods of time in unsafe and narrow pits. Furthermore, they are also exposed to toxic materials and landslides, which leads to serious physical harm. In addition, child exploitation is not limited to cobalt but also involves other metals called critical minerals such as mica, which is used in cosmetics and electronics. According to Terre des Hommes reports, thousands of children in India work in mica mining under dangerous conditions, which can lead to physical harm and even death.²²

As a result of the global nature of metal supply chains, the rapid increase in demand for the critical metals that are used in the new technology, and the worldwide shift into green energy, child labor in the mining sector has become a transnational challenge. The demand for these critical metals fuels actors who are invested in the development of said

¹⁹ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

²⁰ <https://www.mdpi.coChild labour in mining and global supply chains/3042-5832/1/2/14>

²¹ <https://www.ilo.org/publications/child-labour-mining-and-global-supply-chains>

²² <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2024-press-releases/catch-clubs-help-stop-child-labor-drcs-deadly-cobalt>

mining industries, even if it means the continued child exploitation in the mining sector and artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), simultaneously violating children's fundamental rights and also undermining sustainable development and the ethical standards of global production and consumption. This matter is further aggravated by the weakness of local governance, supply chain transparency, and social protection in many developing countries. Solving this problem requires international cooperation between governments, organizations, civil society and the private sector to promote economic growth and technology while protecting children's rights and dignity.

Critical Events

1800s-1900s - The Industrial Revolution started in Europe and spread to North America, fueled by new technology and the need for raw materials like coal and metals. As countries moved from farming to industry, factories and mines quickly expanded. To save money and increase output, many businesses hired children for low wages. Without labor laws, children often worked long hours in dangerous places, including mines. Since then, industrialization practices have spread across the world with child labour still present in industries, such as mining, even today.²³

1919 - After World War I, the ILO was created to make working conditions better around the world and support social justice. One of its main goals was to protect children from being exploited for work. The ILO was the first group to set international labor standards and tackle child labor through agreements and monitoring.²⁴

1989 - The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which officially recognized children's rights in international law. The CRC requires countries to protect children from being exploited for work and from dangerous jobs, especially those that could harm their education, health, or growth. This agreement became the legal basis for child protection policies around the world.²⁵

1999 - The ILO adopted Convention No. 182 to fight the worst forms of child labor and called for them to end right away. Dangerous jobs like mining are clearly listed as some of the most harmful. This convention made international law stronger by focusing on urgent action against serious child exploitation.²⁶

2015 - today – The increase in demand for green energy technology to comply with sustainable goals has pushed up the need for certain minerals that are key to the development of said technology. This has made the mining trade lucrative in certain countries, leading to more children being exploited in order to extract said minerals.²⁷

²³ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution>

²⁴ <https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo>

²⁵ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

²⁶ <https://www.ilo.org/international-programme-elimination-child-labour-ipecc/what-child-labour/ilo-conventions-child-labour>

²⁷ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

Questions to Consider

Does your country have an effective monitoring system to track and prevent child labor in the mining sector?

To what extent are laws against child exploitation enforced in your country?

Is your country a producer, importer, or exporter of minerals used in technology?

Does your country encourage the media to expose child exploitation in the mining industry?

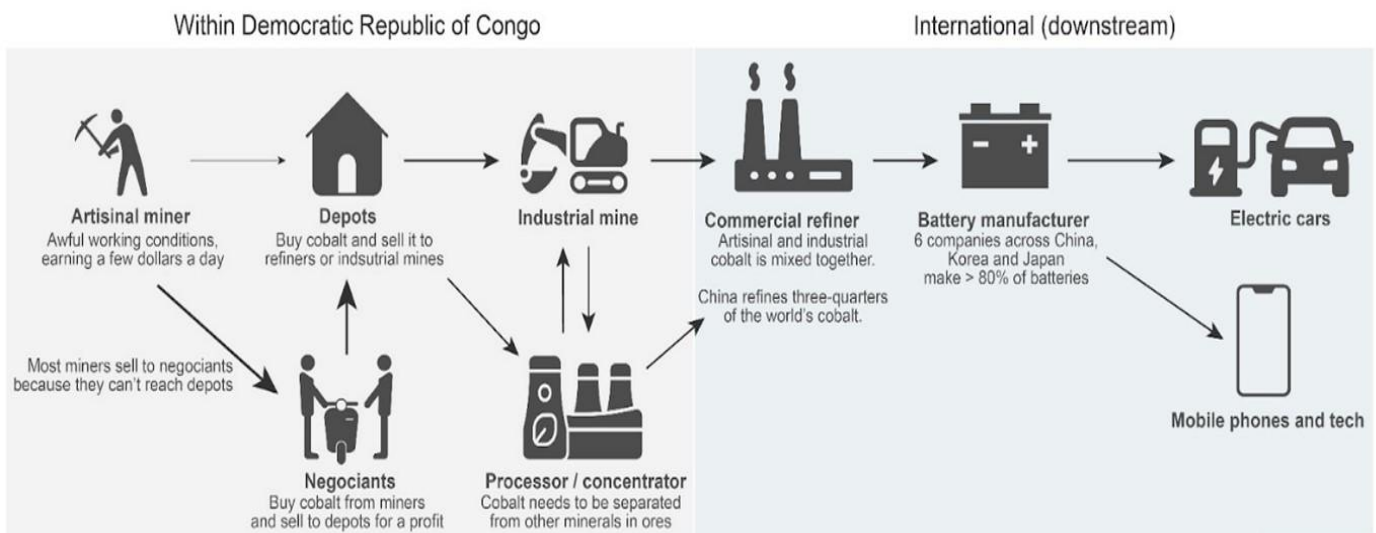
Does your country view child labor in the mining sector as a significant issue?

How much does your country prioritize children's rights over economic interests?

How can the international community stand by its obligations towards using more sustainable and green energy technology while not fueling the demand for critical minerals that lead to further exploitation of children in mining?

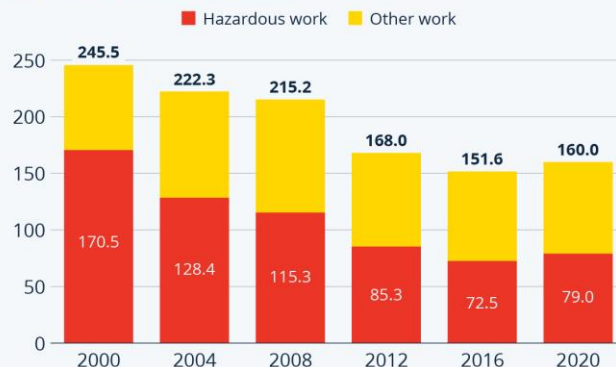
Relevant Media

Cobalt supply chain from the Democratic Republic of Congo, to international companies



Progress Against Child Labor Has Stalled

Number of children aged 5 to 17 in hazardous work worldwide, in millions



Sources: ILO | Unicef



Helpful Resources

digitallibrary.un.org

<https://data.unicef.org>

<https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/2024-global-estimates-child-labour-figures>

<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a5f34feed915d7dfb57d02f/209-213-Child-labour-in-mining.pdf>

<https://www.humanium.org/en/the-current-state-of-child-labour-in-cobalt-mines-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>

<https://endchildlabour2021.org/5-pledge-makers-against-child-labour-in-mining/>

[Child Labor in Mining - From Regulations to Field Experiences - ARM](#)

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[***Behind the Glitter: Child Labour in Mica Mining***](#)

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