

Modern-day Slavery in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Structural Inequality, Armed Conflict, and Global Supply Chains

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Introduction

Modern-day slavery in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) originates from colonial-era systems of extraction that created enduring institutional patterns rather than serving as historical precedent alone. Under Leopold II, the Congo Free State operated as a resource extraction regime based on slavery and forced labour. Civilians were compelled to harvest rubber and resources under threat of violence. Historians, such as Hochschild and Vansina “estimate that 10 million people, approximately half of the population of Congo, died between 1880 and 1920” (Montero & Lowes, 2019). This level of colonial violence had structural implications as it entrenched coercive labour systems, weakened governance structures, and embedded an economy organised around external demand. Current forced labour, disease, and population decline are linked to these extraction policies, which established economic structures reliant on coercion, resource dependence, and external markets.

Post-independence instability and fragmented institutions did not end extraction-based labour relations but reproduced them under conditions of weak governance. Armed conflict, displacement, and informal economies reshaped labour systems in eastern and southern regions. Artisanal mining became a primary livelihood where formal employment was limited. Extracting cobalt, coltan, and gold is integrated into global supply chains supporting electronics, batteries, and manufacturing, but within informal systems that lack regulation and protection.

Modern slavery in the DRC involves coercive labour relations tied to economic survival, armed group control, and global markets. Labour coercion occurs without formal ownership but includes restrictions on exit, economic dependency, and exposure to violence. Armed groups, intermediaries, and authorities regulate access to mining sites, impose labour obligations and taxes, and control recruitment processes. Child labour and forced recruitment into armed groups are part of these systems.

This policy brief argues that labour coercion persists because weak governance, armed control, and global supply chain demand reinforce each other. Inequality and conflict create conditions where individuals depend on coercive labour for survival, while global demand for minerals sustains these systems economically. The brief examines labour control, economic dependency, and recruitment mechanisms in mining and conflict regions, and suggests policy interventions to change these conditions.

Background and Context of the Modern-Day Slavery in Congo

The labour exploitation structure in the Democratic Republic of Congo reflects a continuous institutional pattern linking colonial extraction to present-day governance. Belgian racist colonial policies prioritised mineral extraction by maximising output while minimising labour costs, with forced labour as a central mechanism. This established institutions that privileged economic extraction over labour protection and normalised coercive labour relations as part of the production process.

After independence in 1960, political instability did not transform these structures but weakened the state's capacity to regulate them. Fragmented governance and limited enforcement created conditions in which control over mineral-rich regions could be captured by non-state actors. In the eastern provinces, armed groups seized mining areas and began organising production systems that relied on controlling both territory and labour.

The Second Congo War (1998–2003) intensified this process by embedding mineral extraction within systems of armed governance. Armed groups control mining sites, transport routes, and access to labour, using taxation, coercion, and restricted mobility to sustain production. Labour coercion operates through the regulation of entry and exit, debt dependency, and exposure to violence, rather than formal ownership.

Artisanal mining expanded in this context as a labour-intensive, unregulated sector. It involves informal extraction outside formal state oversight, employing roughly one to two million workers directly, with many more indirectly. Its structure makes coercion harder to regulate because labour is dispersed, contracts are absent, and authority is exercised through local actors and intermediaries rather than formal institutions. Economic hardship, displacement, and limited employment alternatives increase dependence on these systems, reducing workers' ability to exit.

Global demand for cobalt and coltan surged after 2010, especially for batteries and electronics. The DRC produces supplies "more than 70% of 'mined' cobalt to date" (World Bank, 2021, 5). This demand not only intensifies existing exploitation but also reshapes labour relations by increasing competition over access to mining sites and strengthening the role of intermediaries who organise and control labour.

State capacity varies by region, and enforcement remains inconsistent. Control over labour and mineral production often lies with armed groups, local authorities, or intermediaries. These interacting factors sustain labour systems marked by coercion, dependency, and minimal regulatory oversight.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design based on document analysis and thematic analysis of secondary sources published between 2000 and 2025. The temporal scope captures contemporary labour systems and institutional developments in mineral extraction sectors. The analysis focuses on the structural mechanisms that shape coercive labour relations.

Sources include institutional reports, such as those from the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation. These reports provide information on labour participation, armed group activity, displacement, and child recruitment. Additional sources include publications from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. These sources document labour organisation, mining governance, and mineral supply chain structures.

The academic literature provides analyses of conflict economies, informal labour systems, and global supply chain integration. International organisations such as the World Bank and OECD provide economic and institutional data on mineral production and labour markets. Governmental and institutional datasets provide information on mineral reserves, production levels, and labour distribution.

Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring institutional and economic patterns across sources. Coding focuses on three analytical categories aligned with the research question. The first category examines structural inequality, including poverty, displacement, and dependence on informal labour. The second category examines conflict governance, including territorial control, labour taxation, forced recruitment, and the involvement of child soldiers. The third category examines global supply chain integration, including mineral demand, intermediary trade networks, and production linkages.

Comparative analysis is used to identify patterns across different institutional sources and geographic regions. Cross-source comparison allows identification of consistent structural relationships. This approach distinguishes between local variation and broader structural mechanisms.

All sources used in this study are publicly available institutional reports, academic publications, and verified secondary materials. This ensures transparency and replicability. However, reliance on institutional and advocacy reporting in a conflict-affected setting may introduce limitations such as uneven geographic coverage and constraints on data verification. These factors may affect the completeness of available evidence, particularly in areas with limited access. The methodology addresses this by using cross-source comparison to identify consistent patterns and reduce reliance on single-source claims. The methodology provides a structural framework for analysing labour organisation, coercion, and economic governance within mineral extraction systems.

Section 1: Structural inequality and labour coercion in mining

Structural inequality sustains modern slavery in the Democratic Republic of Congo by shaping labour vulnerability, restricting economic options, and reinforcing dependency on informal extraction systems. In this context, modern slavery refers to labour relations where individuals cannot realistically refuse or exit work due to a combination of economic dependency, restricted alternatives, and exposure to coercive pressures. Labour coercion operates not through formal ownership but through structural conditions that limit worker autonomy and exit options, including poverty, displacement, institutional fragmentation, and unequal access to resources. These factors create labour environments where hazardous and exploitative mining becomes economically necessary rather than a free choice. However, poverty alone does not constitute slavery. Labour relations become coercive when economic necessity is combined with mechanisms that restrict exit, such as debt, control over market access, or exposure to violence.

Poverty is a major driver of labour vulnerability in mining regions. The Democratic Republic of the Congo ranks among “the five poorest countries globally”; according to older “World Bank Data, around 62-65% live below national poverty lines” (IWOFF, 2025). Limited formal employment, especially in conflict-affected eastern provinces, makes artisanal mining one of the few sources of income. Entry barriers are low, requiring minimal education, certification, or capital, thereby increasing labour supply but reducing workers’ bargaining power. Workers participate mainly out of economic necessity, not for stable conditions. Poverty creates the conditions for labour supply, but coercion emerges when workers are unable to access alternative livelihoods or exit exploitative arrangements.

Artisanal cobalt mining operates within deeply unequal economic structures that constrain workers’ autonomy and reinforce dependency. Many miners lack independent access to capital, tools, or formal markets, forcing them into arrangements with intermediaries who finance production and control mineral sales. As Amnesty International notes, “some miners also have a business arrangement with an investor, who funds the digging of the tunnel and manages the sale of the product” (Amnesty International, 2016, 5). Repayment obligations trap workers in mining, as they have to continue repaying loans or to maintain access to equipment. While formally free, their ability to leave is constrained by financial obligations and lack of alternatives. Debt, market exclusion, and intermediary control function as coercive mechanisms, and in combination they restrict exit and sustain dependency even without direct ownership. These conditions approach modern slavery when workers cannot realistically leave without losing access to income, tools, or safety.

Displacement and conflict-related instability significantly increase labour vulnerability in eastern DRC and reinforce coercive labour systems. The country is currently “the largest internal displacement crisis in Africa, with 5.8 million people internally displaced, mainly in the east of the country” (UNHCR, 2023). In February alone, “nearly 300,000 people fled across Rutshuru and Masisi

territories in North Kivu Province,” (ibid.,2023) with over 800,000 displaced since March last year. Such large-scale and repeated displacement destroys livelihoods, disrupts agricultural production, and overwhelms already limited humanitarian resources. In the absence of stable income, displaced households are frequently pushed toward informal survival economies, including mining, where regulatory oversight is weak and exploitative labour arrangements are common. Conflict-induced displacement serves as a structural driver of labour precarity rather than a temporary humanitarian emergency, underscoring the need for policies addressing labour coercion to also consider livelihood support and resettlement protection.

Child labour is a significant aspect of structural inequality, but must be distinguished from slavery as a category. Children work in excavation, transport, and sorting, facing hazards and health risks. According to the International Labour Organization, children “as young as seven” (ILO, 2019, 2) work in extremely hazardous conditions. They participate in “extraction, transportation and processing stages of mining” (ibid., 2). This constitutes hazardous child labour, which becomes a form of coercion when children are unable to refuse participation due to household dependency and lack of access to education. Their involvement reflects structural poverty and limited alternatives rather than isolated individual choice.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), limited institutional capacity exacerbates coercive labour dynamics within the mining sector. While labour laws formally prohibit hazardous child labour and regulate working conditions, enforcement in practice remains weak. At the present day, inspectors often “do not have adequate funding, staff, facilities... to conduct inspections” (Amnesty International, 2016, 36). This reflects a combination of underfunding, territorial inaccessibility in conflict zones, and weak administrative reach, which together limit the state’s ability to regulate labour practices. This capacity gap allows informal systems of control, including those managed by intermediaries and armed actors, to persist.

In conclusion, modern slavery in the Democratic Republic of Congo operates through interconnected structural mechanisms rather than isolated conditions. Poverty expands the labour supply, but coercion arises from restricted exit options. Debt and intermediary control create economic dependency, displacement removes alternative livelihoods, and weak institutional enforcement allows these systems to persist. Structural inequality sustains labour coercion by limiting autonomy and embedding workers within systems they cannot easily leave.

Section 2: Armed groups, coercion, and control over labour

Armed groups exert control over labour in mining regions, reinforcing coercive labour practices through territorial dominance. Militias and armed factions recruit both adults and children to

extract minerals, transport ores, and guard sites, leveraging physical force and threats to maintain control. As documented by Human Rights Watch, “armed groups and often abusive security forces continue to... carry out... recruitment of children” in conflict-affected eastern Congo (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This form of coercion operates through direct violence and enforced compliance, in contrast to the structural mechanisms outlined in Section 1, which are based on economic dependency and restricted alternatives. However, these forms of coercion interact, as populations affected by poverty and displacement are more exposed to forced recruitment and labour under armed supervision. Armed actors restrict movement, regulate access to mining sites, and limit alternative livelihoods, reducing the ability of individuals to exit.

The use of child soldiers in artisanal mining operations reflects the integration of armed coercion into labour systems. Children are recruited into armed groups and assigned to mineral extraction, transport, and logistical support. Child participation in mining under armed group supervision increases exposure to physical hazards, long working hours, and a lack of access to education. This constitutes coercive labour, in which participation is not voluntary, and exit is restricted. These practices are concentrated in conflict-affected eastern regions where armed groups maintain territorial control, rather than being uniform across all mining areas.

Armed groups also consolidate economic control through informal taxation and regulation of trade routes. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, “M23 demanded a tax of 15% of the sales price” from traders transporting coltan across borders, demonstrating how armed factions exert control over miners and local traders (Global Witness, 2025). This system compels continued participation in mining and trade under threat of punishment or violence. It indicates that armed actors operate not only through coercion but also through structured economic systems that regulate production, circulation, and market access. These systems create dependency by limiting workers' and traders' ability to operate outside armed-controlled networks.

The interaction between armed groups and weak institutional enforcement sustains coercive labour systems. National labour laws exist, but enforcement is limited in conflict-affected regions. Informal power structures, including militia authority and local governance arrangements, regulate access to mining and the organisation of labour. These parallel systems operate outside formal legal frameworks, reducing oversight and enabling coercive practices to persist. Armed control reinforces the structural constraints identified in Section 1 by combining economic dependency with direct control over territory and labour.

Section 3: Global demand, supply chains, and structural exploitation

International demand for cobalt, coltan, and other minerals links local coercive labour practices to global supply chains. Multinational corporations rely on these resources for electronics, batteries, and industrial applications. Leverage within the supply chain is unevenly distributed. Local traders and intermediaries control initial mineral purchases, exporters consolidate and formalise trade flows, refiners process raw materials, and manufacturers and lead firms shape demand and pricing. Mining operations in the DRC often allow exploitative practices to persist while maintaining the appearance of legal compliance at later stages of the supply chain. Global economic incentives reinforce informal labour arrangements and reduce pressure for reform at the extraction level, where oversight is weakest.

Traceability in mineral supply chains is constrained by informal networks and opaque intermediaries. Minerals are often purchased by local traders, consolidated in regional hubs, and sold to exporters without consistent documentation of labour conditions. This system conceals coerced labour while integrating products into international markets, creating structural reinforcement of modern slavery. Consumers and corporations rarely observe the conditions under which minerals are extracted. At the same time, stricter traceability requirements can produce exclusionary effects. Informal miners who cannot meet certification standards may be excluded from formal markets and pushed further into unregulated supply chains, where oversight is lower and vulnerability to coercion increases.

Efforts to improve transparency, such as the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains, have achieved partial compliance among multinational companies. As noted by the OECD itself, “competition for mineral inputs can disincentivise buyers from scrutinising the origin of their mineral purchases” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2026). Limitations in these frameworks reflect a combination of weak enforcement, market competition, and limited local implementation capacity. Due diligence mechanisms often rely on self-reporting and do not fully account for informal production systems or the influence of armed groups. As a result, compliance can remain procedural rather than substantive, allowing exploitative conditions to persist at the extraction level.

Exporters and intermediaries often consolidate power over labour through economic leverage. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s artisanal mining sector, “men and women working in unlicensed Congolese artisanal mines ... are reported to be subjected to forced labour, including debt bondage” (ILO, 2016, 37). Labour coercion is embedded within global economic structures and functions independently of formal legal ownership. The system relies on the interaction of poverty, insecurity, and global demand to maintain exploitable labour conditions, while concentrating control over pricing, market access, and terms of exchange in the hands of intermediaries and exporters.

Children represent a critical component of supply chain-linked exploitation. Child labour is integrated into mineral extraction and transport, particularly in conflict-affected provinces. Children are preferred due to their mobility, lack of bargaining power, and ability to perform hazardous tasks. This reinforces intergenerational vulnerability and creates long-term structural dependence on informal labour networks, linking local labour exploitation directly to global production systems.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing modern-day slavery in the Democratic Republic of Congo requires interventions that respond to structural, economic, and security conditions. Based on analysis of artisanal mining practices, armed group influence, and child recruitment, the following three policy interventions are proposed. Their effectiveness depends on sequencing, local security conditions, and coordination between state institutions, international actors, and local communities.

1. Community-Based Mineral Cooperatives with Direct Export Channels

Establish legally recognised artisanal mining cooperatives that connect local miners directly to international buyers. Cooperatives should implement internal oversight mechanisms to monitor labour practices and provide transparent reporting on production and pricing. By reducing dependency, cooperatives can increase miners' economic autonomy while maintaining formal documentation of labour conditions. However, their effectiveness depends on minimum security conditions, access to transport routes, and the ability to prevent interference by armed actors. In conflict-affected areas, cooperatives are more likely to succeed where there is partial territorial stability or external monitoring by international organisations. Where these conditions are absent, cooperatives risk capture by local elites or armed groups, limiting their impact. Pilot initiatives in Katanga province indicate that such cooperatives could reduce coercive control under relatively stable conditions.

2. Integrated Child Protection and Education Hubs in Mining Zones

Develop mobile and permanent educational centres near mining areas to provide schooling and vocational training for children and adolescents at risk of being taken into slavery. Centres should include family support programs and adult skills development to reduce household reliance on child labour. Funding and administration would require coordination between international organisations, national ministries, and local NGOs. In insecure or militia-controlled areas, mobile delivery models and partnerships with community organisations are necessary to maintain access and reduce risk. These centres can also function as reporting points for human rights violations, linking local monitoring to national and international protection mechanisms. Their effectiveness depends on sustained funding, local acceptance, and the ability to operate without direct interference from armed groups.

3. Conflict-Sensitive Local Governance and Armed Group Mediation

Strengthen provincial governance structures to monitor and regulate mining activity while engaging armed groups in conditional security arrangements. Establish provincial mining oversight committees that include civil society representatives and local leaders. These committees should collect and integrate monitoring data on labour, child protection, and mineral extraction into national reporting systems. Conditional arrangements may include agreements that allow monitoring actors access in exchange for economic or political incentives. However, this approach carries risks. Engagement with armed groups may unintentionally legitimise their authority or reinforce their control over territory and labour. Its effectiveness depends on clear limits, external oversight, and alignment with broader disarmament and governance strategies. In areas with active conflict, this intervention is likely to be gradual and contingent on wider security developments.

Priority Recommendation for Immediate Implementation

The establishment of Community-Based Mineral Cooperatives is recommended as the most immediate and feasible intervention under specific conditions. Where minimum security and market access exist, cooperatives can provide miners with formalised market access and transparent oversight. This can reduce the influence of armed groups, improve working conditions, and limit child labour by increasing household income stability. However, implementation should be sequenced, beginning in relatively stable regions before expansion into higher-risk areas. This approach enables testing, adaptation, and scaling based on local conditions, making it more responsive to the economic and security environments in DRC mining regions.

Conclusion

Modern slavery in the Democratic Republic of Congo is sustained through interconnected mechanisms linking colonial institutional legacies, structural inequality, armed governance, and global supply chain demand. Colonial extraction under Belgian rule established a governance model based on coercive labour, weak labour protections, and resource extraction oriented toward external markets. These institutional arrangements weakened long-term regulatory capacity and normalised systems in which labour is treated as an input to mineral production rather than a protected category. This legacy persists in fragmented governance structures and limited enforcement capacity in mining regions.

Structural inequality continues to produce labour vulnerability by limiting access to formal employment and alternative livelihoods. Coercion emerges when this vulnerability is combined with mechanisms that restrict exit, including debt relations, intermediary control over mineral sales, and

dependence on informal mining economies. These mechanisms reduce labour autonomy by limiting the ability to refuse or leave mining work.

Armed groups reinforce these constraints through territorial control, forced recruitment, taxation systems, and regulation of access to mining sites. These mechanisms operate through direct coercion but are most effective in contexts where structural vulnerability already exists, creating layered restrictions on movement, labour choice, and economic participation.

Global supply chains sustain these conditions by absorbing mineral production without fully integrating labour conditions at the point of extraction. Demand for cobalt and coltan strengthens intermediary control over production and trade, while limited traceability and uneven enforcement of due diligence allow coercively produced minerals to enter formal markets. This reduces pressure for structural change at the extraction level.

These mechanisms operate in combination. Colonial institutions shaped an extraction-based governance model, structural inequality maintains labour supply under constrained conditions, armed actors control access to labour and territory, and global markets provide continuous demand. Coercive labour persists where these mechanisms align to restrict exit and sustain production under informal and violent governance structures.

Policy responses must target these interacting mechanisms. Supply chain regulation should focus on intermediaries where control over mineral flows and labour conditions is concentrated. Livelihood interventions should reduce dependence on mining economies, particularly in displacement-affected regions. Governance reforms should prioritise strengthening enforcement capacity in accessible mining areas while recognising limits in conflict zones. Without addressing the interaction between historical institutional legacies, structural inequality, armed control, and global demand, coercive labour systems are likely to persist.

Modern slavery in the DRC is best understood as a system of constrained labour choice produced through overlapping mechanisms of economic dependency, territorial control, and global market integration. Effective policy requires disrupting these mechanisms simultaneously rather than addressing individual symptoms in isolation.

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