

Coltan and Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

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June 10, 2024

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ABSTRACT:

Coltan is a vital mineral found in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and its substrate, tantalum, is used for its rechargeable qualities in cell phones and electric batteries. It is important to stress the crucial role coltan plays in manufacturing cell phones, electric vehicles, and batteries. Such attention to coltan's importance emphasizes how much this valuable mineral shapes the future. Although the value and demand for coltan have increased at an insurmountable rate in the past decade, the Congo remains one of the poorest nations in the world. By examining the costs of coltan mining in the Congo and comparing it to the vast wealth coltan makes for multinational corporations, we can see how corporate greed and government corruption prevent the Congo from thriving economically. This paper seeks to open the public's eyes to labor issues and conflict caused by coltan mining in eastern DRC. A country's vast amount of natural resources implies revenue and wealth, but that is not the case for DRC. Some nations with rich natural resources, such as coltan and diamonds, are among the poorest. These countries are so profoundly impoverished because of conflicts, wars, government mismanagement and corruption, corporate greed, and unethical choices. I will examine the paradox of impoverishment in nations with abundant resources and potential wealth, focusing on the role of large Western corporations in the exploitation of natural resources in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

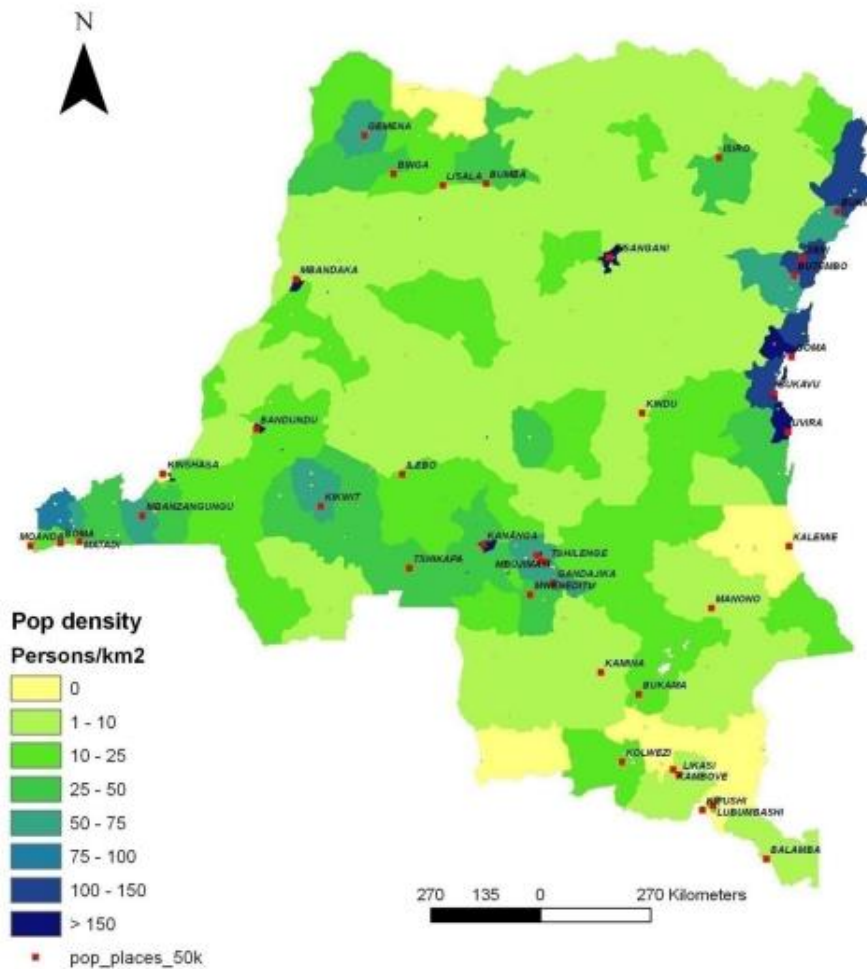
INTRO TO THE CONGO:

I must begin by giving a brief overview of the Congo. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is located in Central Africa, and compared to other countries in Africa, it is the second largest. Due to the large land mass and population, the DRC holds a large sum of influence. The Congo is about a quarter the size of the United States and the size of the entirety of Western Europe ('Overview', World Bank). The country's vastness proves to be beneficial as various natural resources are woven into the landscape. Before colonization, the inhabitants of the Congo were hunter-gatherers who used the country's natural resources to create and sustain their communities. Some of these communities, such as the Kuba, Luba, and Kongo, have reached the status of kingdoms and empires. The latter had hosted Portuguese explorers in 1482, which heralded European colonization of Africa and the Belgian claim of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Belgians eventually initiated the systematic commercial exploitation of Congo's natural resources. There is not much recorded knowledge on whether these resources were contested. However, if there was conflict over natural resources, this was mostly internal and didn't disrupt the country's foundation.

A report by the CIA estimated that the total population of the DRC in 2023 was around 111.8 million people (The World Factbook, CIA). The richness of the Congo does not end with its numerous natural resources but is found in its population as well. Since it is one of the largest countries in Africa, there are many diverse and complex cultures. There are "more than 200 African ethnic groups...the four largest groups [being] Mongo, Luba, Kongo, and the Mangbetu-Azande" (The World Factbook, CIA). These ethnic groups are spread across the country, and each

contributes to the fabric of society through their specific languages, food, and customs. The various inhabitants from different backgrounds work to create a well-rounded and vibrant social environment. Similarly, the range of occupations of Congolese citizens is extensive, with some training to be nurses, others to be salesmen and entrepreneurs, and more recently, many people have left their original occupations to pursue a career in mining in hopes of reaping the wealth and benefits of what it could offer.

Map 4. Population density in the DRC



(Ulimwengu et al. 13)

This map highlighting population density in the DRC shows that the eastern region of the Congo has the highest population density. The Congo participates in international trade, and some of their top exports include copper, cobalt, crude oil, and coltan (Democratic Republic of the Congo - Market Overview). As stated earlier, the Congo exports valuable resources and minerals to the international market. Such resources have been highly sought after and coveted since the years of exploration and colonization. In 2021, Congolese exports shipped worldwide to countries such as China, the United Arab Emirates, Switzerland, and Belgium, totaling \$16.1 billion (Democratic Republic of the Congo - Market Overview).

That being said, the Congo's expansive territory and diverse population should theoretically give the country immense political and economic advantage over other nation-states. However, the Congo stands as not only one of the poorest countries in Africa but is "among the five poorest nations in the world...[and] in 2022, nearly 62% of Congolese, around 60 million people, lived on less than \$2.15 a day" ('Overview', World Bank). Furthermore, the intense poverty of the Congo leaves Congolese citizens struggling to provide for their families and reach prosperous goals of attaining higher education or career paths. Many search for job opportunities to help pay for the necessities of life, no matter the conditions of the job; others have left the country to seek a better life elsewhere. The complex and trying circumstances of sustaining life became a cause of many frustrations and a fertile ground for conflicts and violence. Likewise, the quality of life measures to be one of the lowest in the world. Young Congolese citizens struggle to maintain hope for their future, as educational and career opportunities are few and far between. As stated in a report by the World Bank, the "DRC's Human Capital Index is 0.37, which is below the SSA [Sub-Saharan

Africa] average of 0.4" ('Overview', World Bank). The below-average Human Capital Index in the Congo reduces the potential of Congolese children. The reality of these numbers brings us to the fact that Congolese citizens entering adulthood suffer because of the lack of quality education and health conditions they experienced in their childhood. The work that an average citizen of the DRC puts into sustaining their life is substantially more laborious and intense than that of citizens of countries with a higher HCI. It is a sobering image to picture, but this actuality proves to develop the question I am trying to answer in this paper: what has prohibited the Congo from garnering the wealth of their natural resources and utilizing them to harness the full potential to benefit their country and citizens?

THE ABUNDANT RICH RESOURCES:

There is so much hidden and untapped potential in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The country has an overwhelming amount of natural resources, such as fertile land and minerals like coltan, copper, and cobalt, over 60% of which is found in the Congo. These natural minerals are used in modern-day devices and technology. Not only does the DRC thrive in minerals and metals, but it also carries rich ecological biodiversity in its rainforest, which is the world's second-largest, after the Brazilian Amazon, and with abundant fauna and flora ('Overview,' World Bank). Despite all that, "in the minds of most Americans and Europeans, the continent of Africa has long been ...looked at either as a source of natural resources ripe for extraction or a place of poverty and violence requiring massive amounts of aid" (Ray, 'American Diplomacy'). Indeed, such resources have suffered decades of exploitation that occurred during colonialism, which left the Congo hemorrhaging its resources.

It is important to note that the Congo "is considered the world's richest country in terms of wealth in natural resources...the raw mineral deposits remain untapped and are worth an estimated \$24 trillion" (GSP Hub.eu/Country-info/DRC, 2022).

Looking at the map below, it is evident that there is a range of natural resources and mineral deposits across the Congo's topography. Precious gemstones such as diamonds are found in the central part of the DRC, whereas copper and cobalt are found in the south. Regarding coltan, most deposits are found in the eastern region of the country near cities such as Goma, Kasongo, Kabalo, and Kamina. They are resources that are very high in demand and value. These minerals are highly sought after because they are incorporated into the production of valuable commodities used in everyday life, such as smartphones, computers, and televisions.

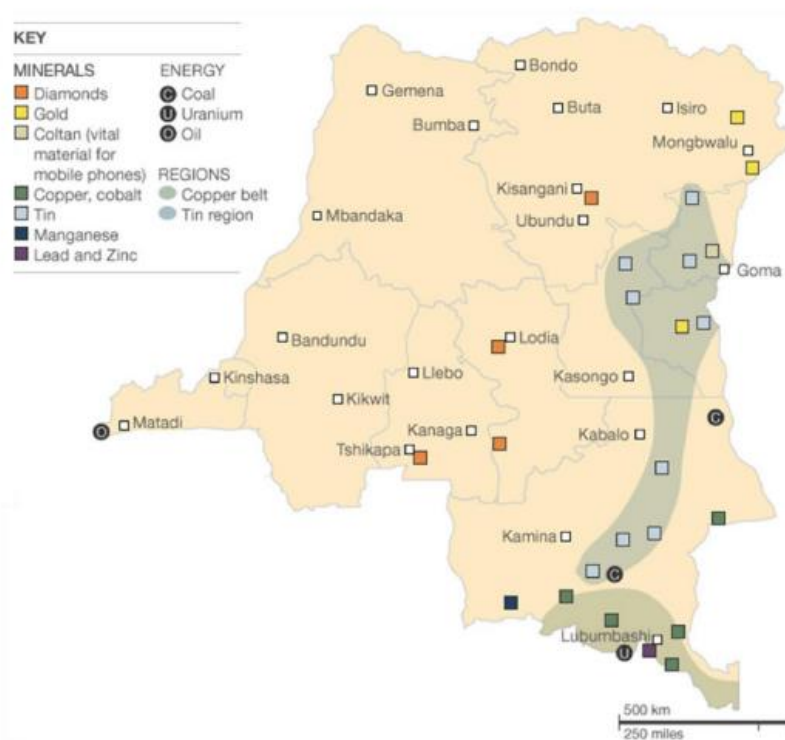


FIGURE 8: MINERAL DEPOSITS IN THE DRC
 (SOURCE: UN)

(Usanov et al. 32)

Furthermore, Africa proves to be the epicenter of raw materials needed for the making of groundbreaking new technologies. The continent is expected to drive the future of electric cars, mobile devices, computers, and other modern technological advancements. It can often surprise those with little knowledge about the Congo or African countries. Especially in establishing momentum for the modernization of the world, the DRC holds many valuable resources. The country itself must take political and economic strides to harness the majority of the wealth of these resources for its own country and people. As the world is modernizing and adapting to a society increasingly dependent on technology, demand for coltan has increased. Various new technologies, such as electric vehicles, smartphones, laptops, and upcoming smart devices like Apple's 'Apple Vision Pro,' have entered the global market. This product is a headset similar to the Meta Quest virtual reality headset. With it, the user can "browse the web in Safari, create a to-do list in Notes, chat in Messages, and seamlessly move between them with a glance" (Apple, 'Apple Vision Pro').

The modernization of our world and the formidable creativity of new products produced by multinational corporations have led to the inevitable increase in demand for precious minerals such as coltan. The space for coltan in the global market will only continue to expand, as "it is expected that demand for this mineral will continue to grow by 10 percent to 20 percent per annum" (Lalji, 2007). On the other hand, the creativity of technological inventions has led to an acceleration of demand for coltan, but this is not reflected in the economy of the Congo. By explaining the current economic situation and further analyzing the relationship between coltan and its effect on conflict in the Congo, I can develop the dichotomy between the country's rich resources and its deeply impoverished economy.

ABUNDANT RESOURCES AND IMPOVERISHED POPULATION:

To best understand the juxtaposition of the vast wealth of the country's natural resources and the deeply impoverished people that live within the nation, it is necessary to highlight the current conditions of the DRC's economy and the role that mining plays. The DRC's real GDP reached an estimate of 6.8% in 2023, with "the mining sector [being] the main driver of growth" ('Overview,' World Bank). Many job opportunities for Congolese citizens somehow connect back to the mining, processing, or selling of precious minerals found within the territorial bounds of the Congo. Often, many will leave their initial careers to pursue a job in mining because they believe it will bring financial prosperity. The World Bank stated that the "DRC's mining sector could, within ten years, contribute 20-25 percent of GDP and one-third of total tax receipts" (Growth with Governance in the Mining Sector, 4). These findings from the World Bank further emphasize the immense potential for the DRC to grow economically. Additionally, if the Congo were to capitalize on the profits earned from harvesting and distributing coltan and other valuable minerals, it would have more power and influence in the global domain. The benefits seem straightforward, but looking at recent events and trends, the natural resources of the Congo prove to be more of a curse than a blessing.

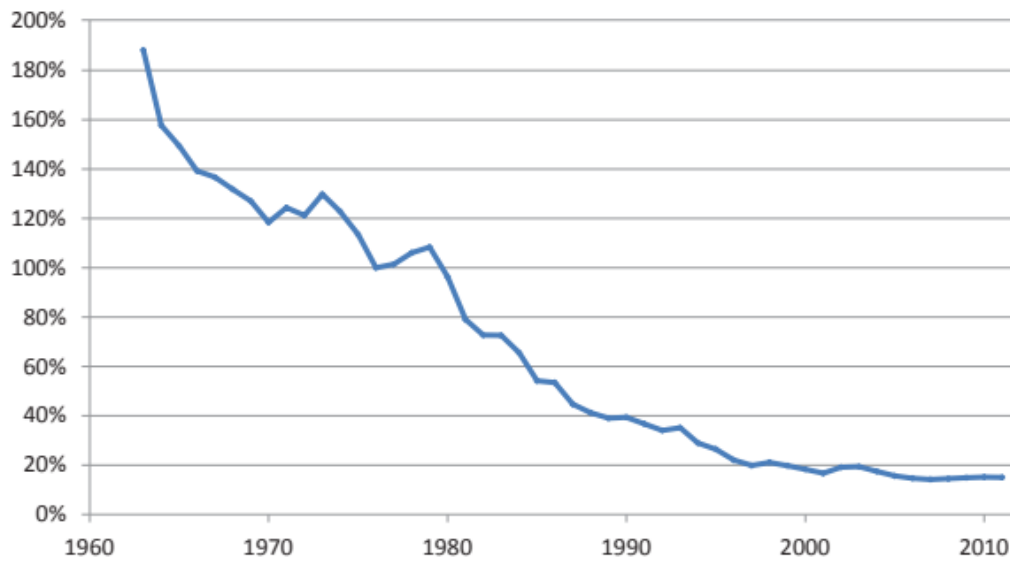


FIGURE 7: GNI PER CAPITA IN DRC CONGO AS A PERCENTAGE OF GNI PER CAPITA IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA (BASED ON WORLD DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS AND AUTHORS' CALCULATIONS)

(Usanov et al. 30)

From measurements and comparisons in a case study by The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, the graph above demonstrates that the gross national income (GNI) for the DRC compared to the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa has gradually decreased over the past 50 years. Thus, this graph shows the depravity of the Congolese economy and further proves the low quality of life experienced by most in the DRC. The sobering reality of a collapsing economy in the Congo further emphasizes how the DRC has failed to utilize the wealth of its natural resources to bring its country to prosper.

A LONG HISTORY OF ABUSIVE EXPLOITATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES:

The far-reaching impact of colonialism in Africa has led to the continuation of exploitation of Congolese natural resources and people. After the Enlightenment of the 16th and 17th centuries, “Europeans had a growing sense that theirs was a superior and powerful civilization” (Keim 46). Numerous discoveries and the emergence of new ideas allowed the West to discover that the world was much bigger than they had known, which motivated them to seek out efforts to explore it. As Western explorers and leaders traveled to new countries, their elevated sense of superiority prompted their greed and taste for power. This heightened sense of superiority and influence motivated Western powers to overthrow governments around the world and establish their own systems of ruling power. Beginning in the late 1800s, the Western hemisphere sought to expand their rule. The act of establishing colonial rule in foreign countries became the new norm because of the economic and political power it brought.

Furthermore, “as the West’s knowledge of Africa grew through exploration and trade, including the slave trade, Westerners increasingly painted Africa and Africans in negative terms...increasingly associated with physical features such as color and not just culture” (Keim, 43). Increased knowledge of Africa led the West to develop feelings of superiority over African leaders and citizens. Their ideas of culture and lifestyle differed from those they found in many African countries. For example, the majority of Westerners during this time period believed “the symbol of progress was machinery, with each new invention symbolizing ever greater progress—the clock, steam engine, locomotive, lightbulb, telephone, automobile, airplane, radio, rocket, television, and computer. Africans in the nineteenth century did not have trains or steamboats. They did not even have wheelbarrows or plows” (Keim, 64). Thus, deep racism began to take

root and continued as exploration and colonialism spread through the continent. What began as an uneducated group of Western explorers developing ideas and opinions about African people transformed into an idealist society drowning in racism. Overall, the European powers thus saw Africans as inferior to their culture and race, which helped them to justify the exploitation of African people and resources for years to come.

There had been conflict in the Congo for decades before colonialism, with the rise and fall of new kingdoms and leaders such as the Kingdom of Kongo which exercised its ruling power around the Congo River from the 14th century to around the 19th century (The World Factbook, CIA). Similarly, wars and competition between neighboring kingdoms had affected the stability of everyday life as time progressed. “Meanwhile, to the south and east, the Kingdoms of Luba and Lunda, respectively, were also notable political groupings in the territory and ruled from the 16th and 17th centuries to the 19th century” (The World Factbook, CIA). However, this conflict was internal and within the bounds of Africa until around the late 1800s when European powers invaded Congolese territory and sought to establish a ruling power of their own.

King Leopold II of Belgium ruled the Congo as his dominion from 1885, after the Berlin Congo Conference legitimized his claim to the territory, to 1908. During this period, the country was forced to endure the systematic exploitation of its natural resources, especially ivory and rubber (Marull). As seen in the early years of colonial rule, the resources of the Congo that were highly sought after began to be exploited. Ivory and rubber were important to global economies because of their durability and popularity at the time. The ruling of European powers over the Congo, also known as the Congo Free State during this time, disrupted the current economic and political system previously in place. For example, the old systems and ways of governance in the

Congo that had sustained the country were replaced by those of King Leopold II, who thought his culture's standards and systems were superior to the Congo's believed primitivism. However, it is necessary to emphasize the complete violence and brutality that the Belgian colonial administration used to wield control "over the native population by imposing a regime of terror, and there were frequent mass killings and mutilations" (Marull). During these years of European colonial rule in the Congo, racism and the effects of exploitation deeply marked the country and its people. King Leopold II and his staff set out to rule this vast territory, which he called the Free State of the Congo, and its population, which he subjugated and disposed of any way he wanted. The dehumanized population was subjected to forced and brutal labor, harsh punishment including severing limbs resulting in many deaths, and denounced by Joseph Conrad both as a journalist and a novelist in *The Heart of Darkness*. As stated earlier, it was a common Western perspective that Africa was only valuable for its natural resources, and the people that lived there were primitive and less than others. Thus, patterns of racism and exploitation developed because colonizers saw their actions as justified. Concerning natural resources, the Western perspective was that since many African countries didn't have many refined and modern technologies, then they were not well-equipped to take care of or use the natural resources found in their territories, and thus, these resources were going to waste. The idea that African primitivism requires Western colonial rule and governance fueled the efforts of King Leopold II to change and alter the systems and habits that were initially in place in the Congo. Consequently, a European-style government and the system were put into place.

The French language has left its imprint because of Belgium's influence and remains Congo's national language today. Racist ideologies developed, and such ideas expanded to the population of the rest of Europe. Furthermore, the Congolese depended on Belgian customs and

King Leopold II's rule, so when they finally achieved independence in 1960, the Congo was in a chaotic state. These years following the declared independence of the DRC were coupled with instability and conflict, with the government and local societies trying to find their footing post-colonial rule. This specific aspect of colonialism in the Congo, therefore, explains how the pattern of exploitation has put a barrier against the DRC's efforts to modernize, expand, and prosper both economically and politically. When a country has been shaped by an entirely different culture's lifestyle, political systems, and economic systems, it has to re-adjust once independent from that country, which leaves a gap for instability and uncertainty.

The dehumanization of Congolese people is tied to the working conditions of coltan mines in the DRC. The low wages and harsh conditions further continued the exploitation that occurred during the years that the Congolese spent under the rule of King Leopold II and the systems of the Belgian political norms & culture. Author and journalist Saddath Kara puts it best as he describes in his newest novel *Cobalt Red* regarding the weight of colonialism on the Congo, "the ongoing exploitation of the poorest people of the Congo by the rich and powerful invalidates the purported moral foundation of contemporary civilization and drags humanity back to a time when the people of Africa were valued only by their replacement cost" (Kara, 2023: 3). Thus, looking at the current situation with the low wages and harsh working conditions of Congolese coltan miners, it is evident that the patterns of racism from colonial rule and viewing Africans in terms of their "replacement cost," as stated by Saddath Kara, have resurfaced and still affect the DRC today.

THE CONDITIONS OF MINING COLTAN:

In relation to the immense wealth held in the mineral itself, the conditions of mining coltan are harsh and unforgiving. From the lack of safety regulations to the intense physical labor that goes into mining and transporting coltan ore, Congolese citizens appear to be enslaved to the conditions of coltan mining.

To fully understand the trivial conditions of laboring in the mines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is necessary to illustrate the typical work setting. The coltan mines of the DRC consist of a large dug-out dirt pit with various holes where miners go underground without the correct protection or safety gear and use handmade explosives to expose the metallic ores. Likewise, these underground shafts are built without wooden or metal support beams. Thus, the stability of the shafts is uncertain, and one wrong explosion could trigger a cave-in, which could cause numerous deaths.

There are many of these shafts across the dirt plateau, where hundreds of Congolese citizens work from sunrise to sunset. Many Congolese workers will accompany their whole family and allow their children to work the more menial and smaller tasks of sorting the ores once mined. All in all, “of the 255,000 Congolese mining...40,000 are children, some as young as six years...[earning] less than \$2 per day while using their own tools, primarily their hands” (The DRC Mining Industry | Wilson Center).

The job itself is hazardous and labor-intensive. Many workers wear casual clothing such as t-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. At boiling points of the day, miners will work shirtless and take their shoes off. As stated earlier, the mining tools are minimal and include metal pickaxes and rebars while sifting, sorting, and carrying all the mined ores with their bare hands. The danger of such conditions is apparent because if one thing goes wrong, then it could result in imminent injury or even death.

Such harsh working conditions are acknowledged by Congolese workers. Still, many are indifferent and continue to work because sustaining their family is their only choice, no matter how difficult the conditions or menial pay. Thus, there lies a dividing predicament: if coltan mines are shut down because of the danger of the work itself, then thousands are left without a job, further exacerbating the issue of poverty in the DRC and worsening the standard of living.

Once the raw ore is mined, it is brought to local Congolese workshops, where it is ground into a fine, brown powder and sifted into small bags. Then, it is usually exported to countries such as China and India. Then, these countries ship the fine powder to the factories to be processed and then sent to factories of large multinational corporations (MNCs), where it is placed into products such as cell phones, laptops, and other modern technologies. It is also important to note that brokers and intermediaries process the transition of coltan from the hands of the miners to those next in the supply chain.

It's hard to say that the Congo has escaped the patterns of exploitation rooted in the country. The exploitation began with Congolese rubber in the late 1880s at the hands of Belgian rulers and continues through the current-day exploitation of Congolese minerals such as coltan at the hands of multinational corporations. Another quote from *Cobalt Red* ties these ideas together:

“throughout much of history, mining operations relied on the exploitation of slaves and poor laborers to excavate ore from dirt...forced to dig in hazardous conditions with little regard to their safety and for little to no compensation. Today, these laborers...toil in a shadowy substrate of the global mining industry” (Kara, 7).

THE ISSUE OF ILLEGAL SMUGGLING:

However, one of the most detrimental aspects of transporting coltan is its illegal smuggling over the borders of the Congo into neighboring countries. Smuggling shifts the potential profit of coltan from the Congo government into the hands of those outside its borders; therefore, this step in the process becomes muddy. The motivation that drives these smugglers is greed and power. These smugglers are, in essence, sabotaging their own country and ridding it of its wealth. Because of its proximity to the DRC and the absence of taxation on mineral imports, “Rwanda is the preferred route for the illicit trade in these minerals, primarily coltan...[with] 90% of the coltan exported by Rwanda [coming] from fraudulent exports from the Congo” (Vulotwa Hervé). The price paid for mined coltan and other precious minerals is lower in the DRC than in Rwanda. More specifically, “the ore was trading in the DRC between 35 and 52.5 USD/kg in 2021, while in Rwanda the price was between 52 and 65 USD/lb (0.5 kg) in the same year” (Vulotwa Hervé). That being said, miners have more incentive and drive to illegally smuggle their mined ores across the Congo’s borders to countries such as Rwanda, where more money is paid for their hard work. It is straightforward to understand the motivation for this smuggling since living conditions in the DRC are of such low quality, and Congolese miners want to provide for their families. Although efforts to illegally smuggle Congolese minerals

across the country's borders exist, the Congolese government has also put measures in place to fight against this crime.

All in all, this phenomenon further propels the DRC into a pattern of labor exploitation and loss of profit, which prevents earned income from the coltan itself from going into the people's hands and directly benefiting them. Illegal smuggling of coltan is a real problem in the Congo and is one of the reasons why the country has difficulty reaping the evident wealth of its natural resources. Trials such as smuggling prohibit the Congolese economy from thriving. All in all, many of the issues the country is currently facing stem from the beginning of Western exploitation in the Congo, which traces back to the early years of colonialism and slavery.

FACTORS THAT LEAD TO THE CURRENT CONFLICT:

In recent decades, “since 1996, conflict in eastern DRC has led to approximately six million deaths” (Global Conflict Tracker | CFR). It stems from the impact of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, after the mass killing of the Tutsis by the Hutus and the subsequent retaliation of the former against the latter. The genocide affected both the Tutsis and the Hutus ethnicities and spread into eastern DRC. To flee further violence and trauma, “nearly two million Hutu refugees crossed the Congolese border, mostly settling in refugee camps in the North Kivu and South Kivu provinces” (Global Conflict Tracker | CFR). Through these migrations of refugees into the Congo's borders, violence and discrimination between Hutu extremists and Tutsi militias continued. Therefore, such effects and the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide led to the First Congo War that began in 1996 and concluded around a year later in 1997. During this year, certain Hutu rebel groups “seeking to return to power in Rwanda, use[d] the refugee camps as

bases from which to step up incursions into Rwanda throughout 1995 and 1996” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This sparked the government of Rwanda to mobilize its troops to attack these militias in the Congo. Overall, the conflict was intense, heavy-handed, and brutal. In 1997, at the end of the First Congo War, “Laurent-Désiré Kabila overthrew Mobutu and became the new president” (Policy Priorities for Poverty Reduction, 13). Laurent Kabila was positioned to lead the DRC into another period of change and transition. Many saw this change as fueling the corruption and lack of integrity in the mining sector of the Congo.

Regarding affairs with surrounding countries and groups, Kabila instituted a system of bartering, which influenced local rebel groups to do the same. More specifically, acts of “plundering, looting and racketeering and the constitution of criminal cartels are becoming commonplace in occupied territories” (Krishnan, 60). These patterns of corruption have led to a systemic order of affairs in coltan trading and exporting.

Numerous factors can increase the risk of conflict. These factors are discussed in “a comprehensive review of empirical political science literature by J. Dixon (2009)” which include “a large population, large territory, ethnic heterogeneity and declining living standards, high infant mortality rate, [and] a large number of conflicts in neighboring states” (Usanov et al. 33). Looking at the DRC and analyzing their current and past economic and political circumstances, it is evident that all of these factors are currently present in the country. As I previously discussed, not only does the Congo contain a large population within a large territory, but much evidence proves the sobering reality of its harsh living conditions, high infant mortality rate, and the ever-present conflict in its neighboring countries such as Rwanda, South Sudan, and Uganda.

The DRC could not stop nor contain the spread of the conflict from Rwanda onto its territory. The atrocity and suffering from the killing fueled the hatred for years, keeping the entire eastern region of the DRC in both instability and insecurity. Another example of a conflict that occurred during independence from colonial rule is the Second Congo War of 1998-1999. In this specific conflict, multiple countries were pinning Burundi, Uganda, and Rwanda on one side and Zimbabwe, Angola, and Chad on the other. The former sought to unseat President Laurent Kabila, while the latter sought to protect him (Lalji, 2007). The heightened conflict of the Second Congo War involved multiple countries and groups and the external pressures and violence from Hutu and Tutsi groups in Rwanda only added fuel to an already blazing fire.

The constant political change leaves the Congolese people having to adjust, thus creating room for resentment towards the government to take root because of its inability to maintain order and security and keep its citizens secure. This inability of the Congolese government to secure its territory and people paved the way for numerous rebel groups to emerge. They regularly perpetrated, and still do, numerous atrocities from rapes, murder, kidnapping and mutilations. While unchallenged, rebel groups illicitly exploited coltan and other minerals to benefit themselves and finance warfare. They opened the door for external linkages with foreign entities equally interested in the minerals. The increasing demand for coltan and its critical use in a growing number of devices needed in everyday modern life explains both the interest of external entities and the zeal of rebel groups in the conflict in eastern Congo.

The impact of this specific war was immense, with over 3 million Congolese deaths and the even more harrowing fact that “nearly half of the dead were children under five years of age” (Policy Priorities for Poverty Reduction, 14). Furthermore, the fabric of Congolese society was extensively damaged since the aftermath of the war ruined infrastructure, such as schools,

hospitals, and housing, in local communities. These conditions have impacted negatively the quality of life in eastern Congo, reduced life expectancy, and rendered insecurity endemic.

REBEL GROUPS, NATURAL RESOURCES, AND THE CONFLICT IN EASTERN DRC:

Despite the presence of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) for over 20 years, brought to keep the peace by standing between the regular army and the rebels, the latter continued to instill violence. These rebel groups seek to seize control of various towns and areas through the use of physical and sexual violence, as mentioned. The existence of many rebel groups has led to increased violence as they vied for access and control of mining territory. The most successful has been the March 23 Movement (M23). This group formed around 2013 with efforts to gain power in areas of the Congo, with the support of some Rwandan military leaders. In this specific year, M23 used violence and brutal killings to intimidate and place fear into the communities they harmed to seize control.

The regional conflict between the Congo and Rwanda has been fueled and sustained by the extraction and exportation of coltan via the Ruanda, which has become the world's largest exporter, through illegal smuggling of the mineral across the countries' borders. In November 2021, the "March 23 Movement (M23) militant group carried out lightning strikes on military positions of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) in the villages of Chanzu and Runyonyi in North Kivu Province" (African Center for Strategic Studies). However, much effort was invested in stopping the violent and traumatizing events of the M23 rebellion group

through the "Congolese military, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), and the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) consisting of Tanzanian, Malawian, and South African troops" (Africa Center for Strategic Studies). The actions done to countless Congolese citizens and villages are vile and disturbing and work as intimidation tactics to bring these groups under their control through fear.

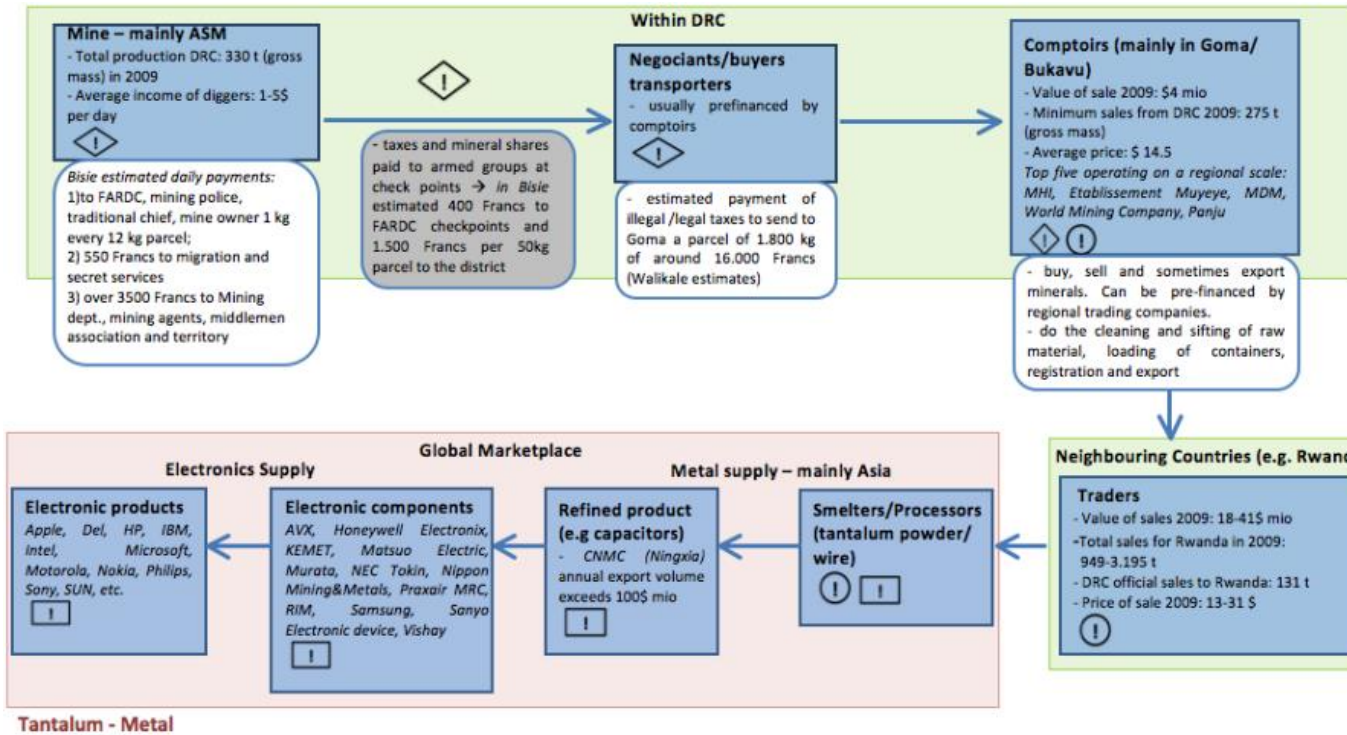
Despite their efforts, rebels have taken over the mining industry in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and established their power through the use of violence with guns and other weapons. Similarly, they threaten those who try to mine for coltan in the areas where they have claimed as their own. The competition between the rebel groups, the Congo government, and average Congolese citizens is an ongoing conflict that has persisted since the early 2000s.

The recurrent and endemic conflicts and the illegal exploitation and smuggling of natural resources by rebel groups have kept the DRC government and its people from needing revenues. It is well explained by a statement released from the United Nations, "the exploitation of resources was carried out in a systematic and systemic fashion, taking the forms of confiscation, extraction, forced monopoly and price-fixing" (Security Council Condemns Illegal | UN Press). The strategic and organized efforts of local rebel groups in the DRC developed a system of direct exploitation of Congolese communities. It is a sickening idea to think that first, the people of the Congo were brutally harmed, killed, and exploited by a European power, but now it is their own local people who are continuing the cycle of injustice.

THE ROLE OF MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS:

The revenues of corporations that use the crucial mineral of coltan in their products have steadily increased, while the Democratic Republic of Congo remains impoverished. In 2023, Samsung brought in \$67.8 trillion in consolidated revenue, and Apple brought in \$89.5 billion for its fiscal 2023 fourth quarter (Apple and Samsung Newsroom). The DRC allows MNCs to increase wealth while remaining poor. This imbalanced equation needs to be addressed. It needs to be addressed by both the concerned government and the exploiting MNCs. The former must assert its ownership privilege, and the latter must apply ethical business practices in its quest for profit.

Coltan refining and trading in the global marketplace is often muddied with the illegal smuggling of powdered coltan across neighboring countries, most frequently Rwanda. This route is hard to trace and define, prohibiting structuring a clear and concise trade process. The blur and lack of transparency in the process and transportation of coltan create a lack of responsibility for these corporations to live up to.



(Bleischwitz et. al 8)

One of the aspects of selling coltan is that minerals containing tantalum are not traded with open transparency and set guidelines. Furthermore, the technology has yet to catch up to the coltan sector in trading. Thus, “any estimation of the total amount of coltan produced in the DRC and traded internationally is limited by data availability, comparability and reliability as well as by difficulties of tracing illegal trade in Eastern Congo” (Bleischwitz et al. 9). The specific numbers and data of coltan trading are merely estimates and don’t accurately reflect the economic situation in the DRC. The graph above demonstrates how the coltan supply chain has multiple moving parts. It is evident how difficult tracking and recording can be lost or neglected because of the lengthy and complicated process. Large multinational corporations in the global market continuously seek the cheapest resources and supplies to create their products.

In some cases, these supplies come from the exploitation of poorer countries whose inhabitants are working on meager wages to pay their life expenses. In other words, many MNCs

seek to continuously ignore and deny the harsh conditions at the bottom of the supply chain.

They are thus working to “defend an international free trade system that unfortunately resembles the times of colonialism” (The DRC Mining Industry | Wilson Center).

RECENT MNCs INITIATIVES:

There have been recent initiatives and efforts by some multinational corporations to show their support for more reasonable and safe conditions and rules in the DRC mining industry.

Some MNCs currently fighting for change include the "BMW Group, BASF, Samsung SDI, and Samsung Electronics" (The DRC Mining Industry | Wilson Center). Together, these companies organized the Cobalt for Development in 2019 "to analyze how the workers' lives, work environment, and communities can be improved...[and] solicit local input to ensure sustainability and enhance local ownership" (The DRC Mining Industry | Wilson Center).

Another example of an MNC taking initiative/efforts to improve the conditions of mineral mining in the Congo and increase awareness is Tesla Inc. The company committed to joining the Fair Cobalt Alliance in 2020, recognizing that it needs to accept more accountability as its productions and sales expand to other countries, such as Europe and China. Not only will this initiative work to "improve workers' conditions and cease child labor in DRC...mines" but will also "seek to reassure customers [Tesla is] adhering to appropriate safety regulations" (The DRC Mining Industry | Wilson Center). It is very encouraging to see numerous multinational corporations stepping up to the plate and promoting Congolese citizens' fair and reasonable working conditions. The increased efforts by MNCs to ensure improved quality of life for those at the bottom of the supply chain can only continue to produce needed change for working protection, safety, and fairer wages.

The large multinational corporations that consistently exploit and take advantage of the DRC ignore the harsh realities of the mining conditions for the technological products that make them so much profit. It's a sobering picture, but from the age of colonialism to the present day, the exploitation of the people and natural resources of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has not ceased. It continues and will not end until all relevant actors, the DRC government, the MNCs, investors, consumers, and the international community develop a new awareness and intervene.

One of the ways in which these MNCs can prove their commitment to bettering the working conditions in the DRC is through increased accountability and transparency so that there is less room for exploitation. It would also reassure consumers, many of whom have grown sensitive and started demanding accountability.

THE CONGOLESE GOVERNMENT:

Regarding the Congolese government, one avenue they can take to make lasting change in the country is to commit to fighting corruption. Although this is easier said than done, experiences in other countries show that with appropriate public policy measures, calibrated laws, and zero tolerance in their implementation, it can be done. We use the case of the U.S. Federal government when they passed the "Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act" which forces "certain companies to disclose their use of conflict minerals...if those minerals are 'necessary to the functionality or production of a product' manufactured by those companies" (SEC). The Congolese government should also consider creating policies and

legislative reform for their people to follow. Overall, the legitimacy of the Congolese government should be better supported and solidified so that such legislation would be respected and followed by local communities and the rebel groups that are so deeply entrenched in illegal smuggling and bartering.

Another possibility for funneling the revenue of coltan back into the country of DRC is to establish and create opportunities for factories to be built in the Congo so that more of the profit of coltan will directly impact the local economies and communities. Doing so transitions the power from the enormously wealthy and powerful multinational corporations to the Congolese government, which can then establish and ensure better living conditions and more skilled jobs. The thousands of displaced refugees and those impacted by the conflict of coltan can then develop skills making cell phones and computers, which can then be translated to the countless other jobs in the technology sector, where our world is transitioning. This can be done by encouraging the Congo to establish its factories and processing plants to create cell phones so that a more significant portion of the profit from coltan will return to the country. This is another idea that would generate more jobs for the Congolese people.

Along with these plants, there should be increased tracking, which could be done by establishing a headquarters office where the local miners would weigh, record, and keep track of their measurements. This would also promote transparency and accountability at the regional level.

In fact, the Congo's capital Kinshasa has the resources and metropolitan environment for skilled jobs to flourish because it is "the DRC's most populous city and its political and economic capital...a vibrant economic hub; most foreign companies operating in the DRC maintain a presence in Kinshasa..." (Democratic Republic of the Congo - Market Overview).

That being said, there are multiple options and paths for the Congolese government to pursue to incorporate the processes of coltan processing into their economy and society.

THE CONSUMERS:

It's challenging for us as consumers and the population at large to comprehend the other side of the supply chain where these products began and the laborious and intense work that goes into extracting raw materials from the products we use. Therefore, our responsibility as consumers is to expand our knowledge of how coltan is mined and why exploiting Congolese citizens matters. Our position of power allows us to be a voice for those who do not have a position to have their voices heard. The workers of the coltan mines in the DRC try to communicate their frustrations about low wages and harsh working conditions, but change is rarely made, and these comments are not listened to. It is necessary to become informed consumers. We can use our voices to influence societal and governmental change and pass policies that work to develop a traceable and more transparent supply chain. It is also vital to increase public knowledge and attention to the realities of coltan mining. Similarly, there needs to be an awareness and overall education for consumers to learn about the reality of how their phones are being made. It is important to know what the lower level looks like so that consumers can use their voice to promote change and influence the MNCs to contribute to better working conditions and wages.

CONCLUSION:

All in all, significant changes need to be made to prop up and support the bottom of the supply chain instead of exploiting their labor for the sake of modern technology. Each party involved in coltan mining and trading is responsible for stepping up and making change. The numerous multinational corporations that grossly benefit from the exploitation of Congolese coltan miners need to implement policies in their companies that allow for greater transparency and accountability. The Congolese government should make changes to enact a zero-tolerance policy, committing to prevent illegal smuggling of coltan out of the country and into neighboring countries such as Rwanda. Furthermore, they should funnel the profit back into their country by trying to relocate the production of smartphones and devices into local towns and the capital, Kinshasa, to increase the number of jobs. Finally, one of the most critical tasks we have as consumers is to expand and deepen our awareness and education regarding the mining and production of coltan in the Congo and how it affects the level of conflict in the area. Similarly, we are responsible for using our voices and speaking up for those at the bottom of the supply chain, laboring to harvest the precious minerals used in the smart devices we use daily. We should not back away from ignorance or lack of concern, but rather place ourselves in the shoes of those not directly benefiting from the abundant and available wealth in their country.

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