**Committee:** Human Rights Council (HRC)

**Issue:** Addressing Forced Child Labor in Mining-Driven Economies

**Student Officer:** Joana Nikolova

**Position:** Main Chair


**PERSONAL INTRODUCTION**

Dear Delegates,

My name is Joana Nikolova, I am in 12th grade at the Anatolia IB programme, and I am beyond excited to be serving as the main chair of the Human Rights Council at this year’s conference. First of all, huge congratulations for being selected for this committee! Me, along with my co-chairs, hope to provide you with a conference filled with passionate debates and some great memories.

 This year, we will be diving into one of the most critical and overlooked human rights issues of our time: “Addressing Forced Child Labor in Mining-Driven Economies”. That is why your ideas and perspectives matter so much, and the study guide below is here to hopefully give you a strong head start. I tried my best to provide you insights into all main areas, but feel free to dive even deeper.

As for me, MUN has been one of the most important parts of my school life. I have had the chance to represent many different countries, in many different committees, in many different conferences. Along the way I have learned that diplomacy is not just about speaking, but also it is about listening and adapting. My goal as your chair is to make sure that you have the space to do so. Therefore, you can always reach out to me if you have questions about the topic, research tips or procedure. My email is 20228009@student.anatolia.edu.gr.

 Cannot wait to meet you all and see what you bring to the table. Let’s make this committee one to remember.

All the best,

Joana Nikolova

**TOPIC INTRODUCTION**

 Every year millions of children around the world are forced to work in dangerous and harmful conditions, especially in the mining industry. Today, forced child labor in mining severely violates basic human rights. It occurs in mining-driven economies mostly in low-income regions where regulations are weak and families face extreme poverty. Children work in hazardous environments extracting minerals which are essential for modern technologies.

 The problem is widespread in African countries, for example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where informal mining provides income for many individuals, while at the same time those companies are also exploiting children. Due to technological advancements and the recent shift to green energy, the demand for minerals has increased all over the world. This puts an additional strain on the mining industry as a whole, which unfortunately also raises the risk of child labor.

 Forced child labor in mining exposes children to physical harm, such as accidents and long-term health problems due to exposure to toxic elements. It also deprives them of access to education or a normal childhood, which in turn creates a long cycle of poverty and exploitation.

 In many mining regions families live far below the poverty line, and parents often struggle to afford basic needs. With little to no access to income, they see mining as one of the few ways to survive and take care of their own, even if it means including their children to increase their earnings. Sometimes, families also borrow money from mine operators or companies, and to repay these debts, they are forced to work under exploitative conditions. This is a form of modern slavery known as debt bondage, and it often drags whole families down with it, sometimes even for generations to come.

 In addition, companies often lack transparency and accountability in mineral supply chains which makes it harder to monitor and eliminate forced child labor. Although international laws and other initiatives exist, enforcing them proves to be a big challenge in many communities. Unfortunately, this results in yet another case of the wealthy taking advantage of the economically disadvantaged populations.

 Taking all of these factors into account, it is clear that this issue cannot be ignored. Urgent action is required from governments and international organizations to ensure the protection of children and promote ethical and socially sustainable mining practices. In this study guide, the topic will be analyzed in detail, so as to hopefully make this a feasible and achievable goal.

**DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

**Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM)**

Informal mining by individuals or small groups using basic tools, that often lack safety rules and frequently involve child labor. It is especially widespread in developing countries and is responsible for a significant portion of child labor in mining due to lack of regulation and oversight.

**Cobalt**

A metal used mainly in rechargeable batteries. It is commonly mined in the DRC, where child labor is frequently reported in its extraction.

**Coltan**

A mineral used to make tantalum, which is essential for capacitors in electronic vehicles like phones and gaming consoles.

**Debt Bondage**

A form of modern slavery where families (including children) work to pay off loans, often under unfair or impossible terms. This creates intergenerational labor cycles where children are forced to work alongside their parents, often without ever escaping debt.

**Exploitation**

The act of treating someone unfairly to benefit from their work. In mining, this can include paying extremely low wages, using deception or forcing individuals to work in hazardous conditions.

**Forced Child Labor**

When children are made to work through threats or economic pressure, often in unsafe and exploitative conditions.

**Mica**

A shiny mineral used in makeup and paints for its heat resistance and sparkle. It is often mined by hand in unsafe conditions in countries like India and Madagascar.

**Mining-Driven Economies**

Countries or regions that heavily rely on mining for income.

**Mining Sector**

The industry involved in extracting valuable minerals or other materials from the earth. It includes both formal and informal operations.

**Rare Earth Metals/Elements (REEs)**

A group of 17 naturally accusing elements that are essential for making electronics, batteries, wind turbines and more.

**Supply Chain**

The complete process of making and delivering a product, from getting raw materials to selling what they create. In mining this consists of extraction, processing and exporting the minerals.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

**Informal Mining Sector**

A significant portion of mineral extraction in affected countries occurs within the informal sector, commonly referred to as Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM). These operations are typically small and independently run, meaning that they lack formal oversight or regulation. The informal nature of ASM makes it difficult for governments or international organizations to monitor working conditions and enforce labor laws. This lack of governance often results in unsafe and exploitative environments.

**Growing Global Demand for Minerals**

The global shift toward digital technologies and green energy solutions has increased the need for certain materials. These include cobalt, coltan, mica, and REEs because they are critical components in batteries, electronics, renewable energy technologies and electric vehicles. This demand puts a lot of pressure on mining-driven economies (especially in low-income countries) to supply these resources both quickly and cheaply. This pressure often leads to unethical labor practices, including the increased use of child labor to reduce operational costs.

According to Amnesty International, more than one million children are currently engaged in mining worldwide. This shows just how much consumerism has affected the supply chain[[1]](#footnote-0).



Figure 1: Global Mining Supply Chain

**How Children Become Involved in Mining**

Several socio-economic factors contribute to the entrapment of children in mining activities, often leaving them with little to no choice but to work. They main ones are as follows:

**Economic Hardship and Education Barriers[[2]](#footnote-1)**

Many families in mining regions face extreme poverty and limited access to quality education. When schooling is unaffordable or just unavailable, children are pushed into the workforce to support their families very early on. In such environments, mining often becomes the only viable source of income for children and their relatives. Going to school is often seen as a waste of resources and time, because it prolongs the time it takes for younger family members to join the workforce.

Denying children access to schooling not only robs them of their childhood, but it also traps them in a cycle of poverty and exploitation. Without education, these children have very little chances of escaping hazardous labor in the future, making the problem go on forever.

**Debt Bondage[[3]](#footnote-2)**

In some cases, families become indebted to mining operators or middlemen through loans that must be repaid through labor. This exploitative practice traps families in cycles of poverty and forced labor, sometimes lasting generations.

The way this works is that low-ranking representatives of the ASM companies scout families that they would consider high-risk. This means with children and few resources. They then offer money to the parents, giving them impossible terms to pay back, which the parents realize too late due to their desperate situation and lack of knowing better. In order to pay back the money, the representatives then suggest that the rest of the family also work to pay off the loan or, in other words, the children.

**Health Hazards and Working Conditions**

Children working in mining face several physical risks and health problems due to inadequate safety measures and exposure to harmful substances. These problems also often occur due to the fact that children do not yet have the experience and knowledge to take care of themselves properly, since they lack supervision.

**Toxic Materials**

Young miners are regularly exposed to toxic chemicals such as mercury and cobalt dust. This constant exposure can cause respiratory diseases, neurological damage, and other chronic health issues. Without protective equipment, the risk of poisoning and long-term illness is extremely high.

**Physical Strain and Injuries**

The work children perform is also physically demanding and dangerous. They often dig unstable tunnels, carry extremely heavy loads, and operate dangerous tools. These tasks can lead to fatal accidents or musculoskeletal disorders. What this means is that due to the strenuous work child laborers have to do from an early age, their bones do not develop properly, leading to deformities that make life even harder for them.

**MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED**

**Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

The DRC is one of the most critical cases when it comes to forced child labor in mining. It is estimated that over 40,000 children work in mines across the DRC, many of them extracting cobalt[[4]](#footnote-3). Children are often forced into labor due to poverty, with some even in hazardous hand-dug tunnels. These tunnels, known as "artisanal shafts” can reach depths of up to 20 meters and frequently collapse. This traps and kills miners, including children who are often the ones sent in narrowest spaces[[5]](#footnote-4). The informal mining sector dominates the cobalt industry, and weak enforcement of labor laws allows this exploitation to continue. Despite international pressure, very little progress has been made to protect these children.

**India**

India is one of the largest producers of mica, a mineral commonly used in cosmetics and electronics[[6]](#footnote-5). In many rural regions, children work in informal and illegal mines. Families struggling with poverty often rely on income from their children’s labor. Due to poor regulation and the hidden nature of informal mining, companies frequently deny responsibility. International campaigns have tried to raise awareness, but many children remain trapped in a cycle of exploitation.

**Burkina Faso**

In Burkina Faso, gold mining is a major source of income, especially in ASM. Children as young as six are reported to be working in dangerous conditions. Armed groups in the Sahel region have also been known to control mining areas, further worsening child exploitation. The government has passed laws to protect children, but enforcement is extremely limited due to the informal nature of the mining sector and ongoing conflict in the region.

**China**

China is the world’s largest producer of minerals, but its role in forced child labor mostly lies in its global supply chains. While child labor in China is less documented in recent years, Chinese companies are heavily involved in mining operations in Africa and other developing regions. These companies have been criticized for turning a blind eye to human rights abuses, including the use of child labor. Despite being a member of the UN and a member of the ILO, China has yet to implement transparent supply chain standards.

**United States of America (USA)**

The USA is not a major site of child labor in mining, but it plays a significant role as a consumer of minerals sourced from high-risk countries. Tech companies based in the US have been criticized for sourcing materials linked to child labor, especially cobalt and mica. However, the US government has responded with several initiatives, including the Dodd-Frank Act[[7]](#footnote-6), which requires companies to report on the origin of such materials. Still, critics argue that enforcement is weak and that more must be done to hold the companies accountable.[[8]](#footnote-7)

**France**

France has taken a leading role within the EU in pushing for ethical supply chains and corporate accountability. In 2017, it passed the “Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law”, which requires large French companies to identify and prevent human rights abuses, including forced child labor[[9]](#footnote-8) France has also supported EU-wide legislation to ban the import of products linked to forced labor. While enforcement of these policies is still evolving, France remains one of the most proactive European countries on this issue.

**International Labor Organization (ILO)**

The ILO has been at the forefront of efforts to eliminate child labor worldwide. It created the “Minimum Age Convention” and the “Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention”, both of which aim to protect children from hazardous work like mining. It also runs the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC), which works with governments to develop policies and provide education alternatives. For example, it has supported programs in the DRC and Burkina Faso that remove children from mines and reintegrate them in education centers or even schools, while raising community awareness about the dangers of child labor[[10]](#footnote-9). Despite limited resources, the ILO plays a crucial role in setting standards and raising awareness globally.

**UNICEF**

UNICEF works to protect children from exploitation, including forced labor in the mining industry. It focuses on providing access to education and healthcare for children living in mining regions. UNICEF also collaborates with local governments and NGOs to develop programs that address the root causes of child labor such as poverty and lack of education. In conflict zones, it also provides humanitarian support for displaced children vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation[[11]](#footnote-10). This includes emergency aid, protection programs and efforts to reunite children with other families. This greatly reduces the risk of them getting entangled in the webs of ASM.

**BLOCS EXPECTED**

**Bloc 1**

The first bloc consists of countries that strongly oppose the use of child labor in mining, such as EU countries, the USA, Canada and NGOs. Their goal is to establish international regulations that promote transparency in mineral supply chains and protect children’s rights. They focus mainly on introducing sanctions against companies benefitting from unethical practices and encouraging the creation of legal frameworks that ensure ethical sourcing of raw materials.

**Bloc 2**

In the second bloc, there are countries that are either economically dependent on mining or benefit from importing cheap raw materials. This includes countries like the DRC, Burkina Faso, Bolivia and Myanmar but also China, India, and Brazil. Their goal is to preserve access to global mineral markets with minimal interference. The main focus is on protecting local economies and avoiding international trade restrictions that could disrupt their high-revenue industries.

**TIMELINE OF EVENTS**

| **Date** | **Description of event** |
| --- | --- |
| June 17, 1999 | ILO adopts Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, calling for the immediate elimination of hazardous work, including mining.  |
| August 29, 2006 | First major UN warning issued regarding the use of child labor in artisanal gold mining across West Africa, after research was conducted. This was all later published in a report, documenting the prevalence of child labor in the mining sector. |
| January 2016 | Amnesty International publishes a groundbreaking report exposing child labor in cobalt mines in the DRC, linking it to global tech companies.  |
| February 2022 | The EU proposes the Corporate Due Diligence Directive, aiming to hold companies accountable for human rights abuses in their supply chains.  |

**RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS**

**ILO Convention 138 (1973): Minimum Age Convention[[12]](#footnote-11)**

This convention established the minimum age for employment, aiming to abolish child labor and ensure that children are not engaged in work that may hinder their education or development. It set 15 as the general minimum age, with flexibility for developing countries to set it at 14 under certain conditions. This treaty forms the foundation for global labor standards.

**UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)[[13]](#footnote-12)**

Adopted by the UN General Assembly, this treaty guarantees a broad range of rights to children, including protection from work that is harmful or exploitative. The UNCRC emphasizes that children should grow up in an environment of happiness, love and understanding.

**ILO Convention 182 (1999): Worst Forms of Child Labor[[14]](#footnote-13)**

This international treaty focuses on the elimination of the worst forms of child labor, including slavery, trafficking and hazardous work. It calls for urgent measures to prohibit and eliminate child labor that jeopardizes health and safety. It remains one of the fastest ever approved conventions in ILO history.

**UNHRC Resolution 40/11 (2019): Human Rights and Hazardous Substances and Wastes[[15]](#footnote-14)**

Passed by the UNHRC, this resolution addresses the negative impacts of toxic substances and waste on human rights. It highlights the need to protect vulnerable groups, especially children, from hazardous exposure. It also encourages transparency and accountability within global supply chains.

**PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE**

**Child Labor Reduction Programs**

UNICEF and ILO have introduced multiple global frameworks and programs aimed at eliminating child labor. These include the ILO-UNICEF Frameworks for Action on Eliminating Child Labor (2023-2025)[[16]](#footnote-15), which emphasizes strengthening national policies, improving data collection and ensuring that social protection reaches vulnerable families. These initiatives have shown localized success, especially when paired with educational outreach and poverty reduction. However, impact is often limited by insufficient funding and weak enforcement in rural areas.

**School and Income Campaigns**

Several international and non-governmental organizations have launched programs that increase access to education and provide financial support or alternative sources of income for families that rely on child labor. These programs can lead to reduced child labor rates in specific communities by tackling the root causes. Nevertheless, their reach is very limited, especially in ASM communities where infrastructure and schooling options are scarce.

**Corporate Due Diligence Initiatives**

A growing number of multinational corporations have begun publishing audits and supply chain reports to trace the origins of raw materials. These due diligence frameworks include third-party certifications and supply chain mapping, and have increased transparency. They have also pressured companies to adopt ethical sourcing practices. Unfortunately, many audits rely on the companies self-reporting, which can lead to underreporting or greenwashing, which means that they lie to satisfy their critics.

**National Legislation and Regulations**

Countries such as the US have introduced legal measures requiring companies to disclose whether their raw materials come from conflict zones. The most prominent of which is the Dodd-Frank Act[[17]](#footnote-16), which mandates disclosure on conflict minerals. While these laws represent a step forward in accountability, they are often poorly enforced and exclude informal mining sectors, which is actually where the majority of child labor takes place. Additionally, such legislation can unintentionally inspire companies to abandon entire regions, pushing local miners into even worse conditions.

**POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

**Strengthening Corporate Due Diligence**

It is essential for states and corporations to incur stricter oversight across the entire supply chain. Countries can require companies to conduct mandatory due diligence to identify child labor in all levels of mining operations. International frameworks that already exist can be used as a template, but they should be updated so as to be more enforceable. Such measures would limit the ability of companies to profit from child labor in the informal sector.

**Local Education Incentives**

Governments and NGOs should offer financial incentives to families that send their children to school instead of work. Thai could include free school meals, supplies or even conditional cash transfers. These types of programs not only promote school attendance but also ease the financial burden on families. In the long term, access to education can break the cycle of poverty and reduce the possibility of children entering hazardous work environments.

**Formalizing the Informal Sector**

Many cases of child labor occur in unregulated and informal operations. States should implement programs that encourage or require small-scale miners to register and comply with national labor laws. Providing legal recognition, training and financial support should help transition these operations into the formal sector. Once formalized, such operations would be subject to inspections and held accountable for illegal practices such as child labor. Additionally, local governments would be able to tax them, increasing their funding, which can be beneficial for tackling all sort of issues, not just the one at hand.

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