

Conflict Cobalt

It is one of the most sought-after minerals on earth. Solar cells, cellphones, tablets and even the production of electric vehicles rely on the extraction and production of cobalt to produce the rechargeable, lithium-ion batteries that we rely on to power our daily lives. [Cobalt](#) also plays a key role in our healthcare system detecting and imaging tumors, sterilizing medical equipment and as an alloy for [hip and joint prosthetics](#).

Estimates indicate close to [5 billion people](#) will have a mobile device by 2019. Increased demands for electric vehicles and renewable energy and requirements for cobalt production are forecast to soar in the coming years

However, the price for mining this precious mineral is a costly one.

The [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), home to the largest cobalt deposits in the world, is also home to a systemic supply of child labor. According to UNICEF, close to 40,000 children work in cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Working in dangerous conditions, where mine cave ins are not unheard of, a 24-hour shift underground earns these child miners less than \$2.00 a day, subjecting them to terrible conditions. Geneva based NGO for children's human rights, [Humanium](#), reported that children often work in conditions absent to any safety measures, subjecting child miners to physical dangers like rock slides and inhaling toxic dust. Working at depths hundreds of meters from the surface of the earth, without sufficient light or equipment and lacking safety precautions, can have far reaching and long-lasting impacts for these underage workers.

“The continuing persistence of child labor has severe negative short and long term (even inter-generational) consequences for the fulfillment of children's rights guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,” according

to Christopher Tidley, Spokesperson, UNICEF. “(This includes) denial of education, adequate health care, time for leisure and play and causes a frequent exposure to various forms of violence and abuse.”

Following the financial crises on Wall Street, President Obama signed into law the Dodd-Frank Conflict Minerals legislation. The legislation, designed to limit the sale of conflict minerals, mandated companies to disclose where their materials come from in order to prevent companies from using raw materials that come from sources which help fund armed conflict. While the legislation did not include cobalt, it did give power to the [Securities and Exchange Commission \(SEC\)](#) to disclose any payments made to governments for resource extraction.

Tech giant [Apple](#) took the lead on conflict cobalt, making a corporate commitment, ensuring that their products do not contain conflict minerals. In 2016, the company started a third-party auditing system to ensure compliance. Apple also conducted over 700 facility assessments to ensure that none of their suppliers were engaging in child labor practices.

However, not every company has been as vigilant. For over two years, human rights NGO, [Amnesty International](#) has documented the use of child labor in cobalt mines. In the report, [Time To Recharge: Corporate Action and Inaction To Tackle Abuses in the Cobalt Supply Chain](#), they found that, “Companies behind the technologies of the 'clean energy revolution' clearly want to be associated with sustainability, not human rights abuses. More are now willing to admit there are serious problems that can no longer be ignored. However, awareness and commitments have not translated into action across the global supply chain.” The report concluded that none of the 29 companies named were carrying out human rights due diligence on their cobalt supply chains in line with international standards.

Working closely with communities to raise awareness on the harm of child labor, providing a system to help protect children including social and community support to families and legal, and policy reform are just a few ways in help stop child labor practices according to Tidley.

“UNICEF continues to collaborate with the Government of the DRC to strengthen the child protection system and its various actors and services. Yet, the prevention of and response to cases of child labor on the ground is still insufficient and has not been able to fully address the root causes of the problem,” stated Tidley.

According to [Amnesty International](#), the Democratic Republic of Congo has pledged to do away with child mining by 2025.