



How our smartphones connect us with The Congo

Many cell phones and other electronic devices require the mineral coltan to be made. Every lithium-ion battery, used to recharge our smartphones, laptops, tablets and electric vehicles contain cobalt. In 2021, The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was the world's largest coltan producer at 700 tonnes. 80% of the world's Cobalt is found in the Congo, totalling \$4.4 billion in exports. The metal is used in commercial, industrial and military applications.

Whilst DRC's 2017 mining code penalises the use of child labour, 40000 child miners extract coltan. Children wash and dig coltan and cobalt in quite dangerous conditions. Many children are forced to drop out of school to work in hazardous environments, and they face harassment sexual abuse and ill health. People are being forcibly evicted, threatened or intimidated out of their homes or misled into consenting to inadequate settlements. Millions of people are killed, raped and displaced due to mining.

In September 2023, a report by the DRC based organisation Initiative pour la Bonne Gouvernance et les Droits Humains found gendered impacts including sexual assault, arson and beatings, as part of the human rights violations. Cobalt is very toxic with birth defects, cancers, skin rashes and thyroid disease on the rise. There are 15000-20000 tunnels, which are 30-50 metres deep, across the mining provinces hand dug by miners without support or ventilation shafts. Tunnels collapse and those under are buried alive. Whilst the Cobalt industry totals \$4.4 billion, the average income for a Congolese person is \$449 a year, less than half the price of an iPhone. The DRC has lost over 8.6% of its tree cover since 2000. Coltan extraction is identified as a major driver of this deforestation.

In 2022, the ICJ ordered Uganda to pay the DRC \$325 million for its damage in the DRC including \$225 million for damages to persons including loss of life, serious bodily injury, sexual violence, deployment of child soldiers and population displacement. Five of the world's largest tech companies, Apple, Dell, Google, Microsoft and Tesla are being sued in a federal class-action lawsuit filed in in 2019 for "knowingly benefiting from and aiding and abetting the cruel and brutal use of young children in the DRC to mine Cobalt". Other phone companies such as Samsung and Huawei also buy at least some of their cobalt from the DRC. Yet none of these companies claim they support the inhumane conditions in the Congo, however, neither are they taking sufficient measures to alleviate these conditions.

No party, whether the Congolese government, foreign mining companies, battery manufacturers or mega tech corporations accept responsibility for the conditions in the Congo. The battery packs in electric vehicles require up to ten kilograms of refined cobalt each, more than one thousand times the amount required for a smartphone battery. As a result, demand for cobalt is expected to grow by almost 500 percent from 2018 to 2050 and there is no known place on earth to find that amount of cobalt other than the DRC.

Each smartphone that we hold, the device that you're reading this from and the device that this post was made on, was created from the exploitation of the Congolese people and Congolese

children. While you may feel detached living on the other side of the world, our actions directly contribute to the perpetuation of violence in The Congo.

What can I do?

Engage in the circular economy of phones

Be aware

Buy technology as a necessity & use devices for as long as you can.

Buy refurbished phones

Try to repair your phone before buying a new one

Recycle your broken phone for [parts extraction](#).

Look past the illusion of clean, shiny technology and face the ugly reality of cobalt and coltan mining in the DRC.