

**International Relations Global Bachelor's Degree  
Bachelor's Thesis**

**The Impact of Natural Resource Exploitation on  
Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo**

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## **Abstract and Keywords**

### **Abstract**

This study examines the link between natural resource exploitation and conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country rich in minerals yet plagued by instability. Despite its wealth in cobalt, gold, and coltan among others, it remains one of the world's poorest nations, with resources exacerbating rather than alleviating conflict. This work investigates how armed groups, government corruption, state forces, and external actors, such as neighboring countries and multinational companies, sustain violence by controlling and profiting from resources. It also evaluates the effectiveness of international regulations like the Kimberley Process in addressing conflict minerals. The study highlights the role of weak governance, corruption, and exploitation in perpetuating a war economy, underscoring the resource curse phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Natural Resource Exploitation, Conflict, Resource Curse, Corruption

### **Resumen**

Este estudio analiza la relación entre la explotación de recursos naturales y el conflicto en la República Democrática del Congo, un país rico en minerales pero afectado por la inestabilidad. A pesar de su riqueza en cobalto, oro y coltán entre otros, sigue siendo una de las naciones más pobres, con recursos que alimentan el conflicto en lugar de mitigarlo. Se investiga cómo los grupos armados, la corrupción gubernamental, las fuerzas del Estado y actores externos, como países vecinos y empresas multinacionales, sostienen la violencia al controlar y beneficiarse de los recursos. Además, se evalúa la efectividad de regulaciones internacionales como el Proceso Kimberley en el comercio de minerales en conflicto. El estudio subraya el papel de la corrupción y el gobierno débil en la perpetuación de una economía de guerra y la maldición de los recursos.

**Palabras clave:** Explotación de recursos naturales, Conflicto, Maldición de los recursos, Corrupción.

## Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ADF	The Allied Democratic Forces
AFDL	Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire
ASM	Artisanal Small-Scale Mining
CAHRAs	Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas
CEEC	Centre of Evaluation, Expertise and Certification
CMOC	China Molybdenum Company
CNPAV	Le Congo n'est pas à vendre
CODECO	Coopérative pour le développement du Congo
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EU	European Union
FARDC	Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
FDLR	Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda
FNL	National Forces of Liberation
IGF	General Inspectorate of Finances
ITSCI	The International Tin Supply Chain Initiative
KCC	Kamoto Copper Company
KP	Kimberley Process
LSM	Large-Scale Industrial Mining
M23	The March 23 Movement
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P-DDRCS	Programme de Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relèvement Communautaire et Stabilisation
RCD	Congolese Rally for Democracy
RDF	Rwanda Defense Force
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VDP	Voluntary Defense of the People
3Ts	Tin, Tungsten, and Tantalum

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# Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the largest country in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), is renowned for its vast natural wealth (World Bank, 2024). With an estimated \$24 trillion in untapped mineral reserves, including vast deposits of diamonds, gold, cobalt, copper, coltan, and the 3TS (tin, tungsten and tantalum), essential for industries such as energy, the DRC is often regarded as one of the wealthiest nations globally in terms of resource potential (The European Union Generalised Scheme of Preferences, n.d.). Yet, paradoxically, the DRC is ranked among the five poorest countries in the world, with approximately 73.5% of its population living on less than \$2.15 per day in 2024 (World Bank, 2024). Additionally, the DRC is among the 11 countries categorized with a high or extreme conflict level, indicating it is one of the most conflict-affected nations globally (ACLED, 2024).

The following table provides an overview of mineral resources in the DRC:

**Table 1**

Minerals	Value (USD)	Congolese production	Congolese reserves
Cobalt	\$21,550 per ton <sup>1</sup>	170,000 mt <sup>2</sup>	6 million mt <sup>3</sup>
Coltan	\$48 per kg <sup>4</sup>	700 mt <sup>5</sup>	not available
Gold	\$2,880.8 per troy ounce <sup>6</sup>	43,000 kg <sup>7</sup>	750 mt <sup>8</sup>
Diamonds	Less than 0.5 carats: \$2,190 <sup>9</sup>	10 million carats <sup>10</sup>	700 million carats <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Trading economics (n.d.)

<sup>2</sup> Jaganmohan, Madhumitha (2024)

<sup>3</sup> Jaganmohan, Madhumitha (2024)

<sup>4</sup> Aradi, Gloria (2024)

<sup>5</sup> Ojewale, Oluwole (2022)

<sup>6</sup> Trading economics (n.d.)

<sup>7</sup> CEIC (2022)

<sup>8</sup> African Minerals Development Centre (n.d.)

<sup>9</sup> Diamond SE (2024)

<sup>10</sup> Dokua Sasu, Doris (2024)

<sup>11</sup> African Minerals Development Centre (n.d.)

Copper	\$9.81 per kg <sup>12</sup>	2.5 million mt <sup>13</sup>	65% of reserves worldwide <sup>14</sup>
Tantalum	\$190 per kg <sup>15</sup>	980 mt <sup>16</sup>	not available
Tin	\$31,74 per kg <sup>17</sup>	25,000 mt <sup>18</sup>	120,000 mt <sup>19</sup>
Tungsten	\$48,38 per kg <sup>20</sup>	418 mt <sup>21</sup>	not available

In addition to the mineral wealth, the DRC's forests also play a significant yet underreported role in the country's conflict economy. Charcoal and timber are also among the natural resources that are routinely smuggled out of the country, often contributing to the financing of armed groups and exacerbating local instability. Charcoal production is particularly widespread, as it serves as an essential energy source for many rural and urban households across the country. Similarly, timber, particularly from the DRC's vast rainforests, finds its way to international markets through illicit networks, bypassing legal regulations and environmental controls (Van Uhm et al. 2022).

In the DRC, mining activities are broadly divided into two categories: large-scale industrial mining (LSM) and artisanal small-scale mining (ASM), each associated with distinct challenges. The LSM sector involves major mining operations run by both national and international companies. However, the governance of this sector is marred by issues such as tax evasion, lack of transparency, and weak regulation. In contrast, the ASM sector is primarily composed of informal and small-scale operations. ASM is often linked to the financing of conflict, smuggling, and exploitative labor practices, including child and forced labor. The conditions in these mines are typically hazardous, with workers exposed to dangerous practices that harm both their health and the environment (BGR, n.d.). There are almost 3,000

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<sup>12</sup> Markets Insider (2025)

<sup>13</sup> Jagamohan, Madhumitha (2024)

<sup>14</sup> Ecofin Agency (2024)

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Geological Survey (2024)

<sup>16</sup> Jagamohan, Madhumitha (2024)

<sup>17</sup> Markets Insider (2025)

<sup>18</sup> Dokua Sasu, Doris (2025)

<sup>19</sup> Dokua Sasu, Doris (2025)

<sup>20</sup> Shanghai Metal Market (2025)

<sup>21</sup> Dokua Sasu, Doris (2025)

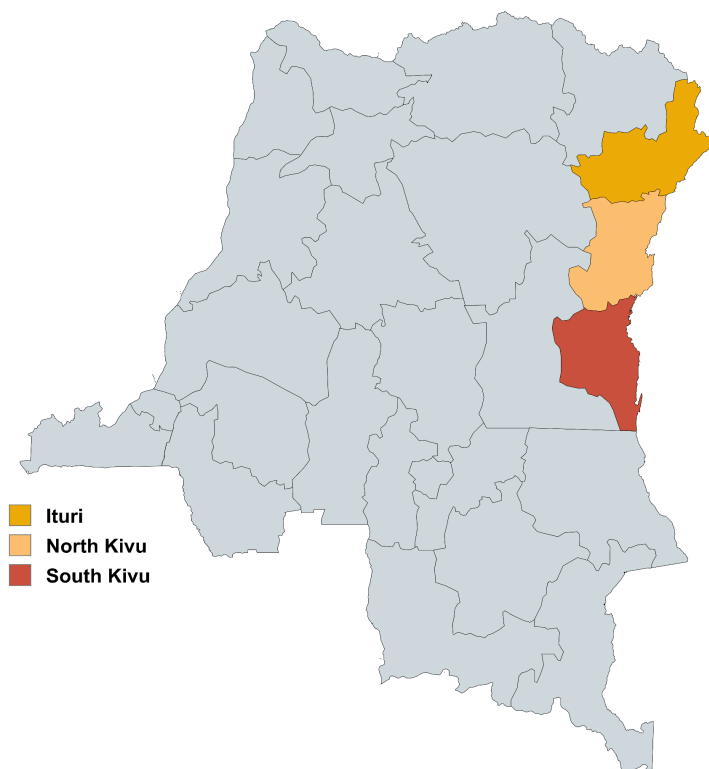
artisanal small-scale mines in eastern DRC alone, employing almost 428,000 artisanal miners (Delve, n.d.).

The ongoing conflict in the DRC, which has persisted since the 1990s, primarily affects the eastern regions of the country. These areas, which share borders with South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania, have become hotspots of violence, marked by the constant struggle for control over the region's rich mineral resources (Amnesty International, 2024). Ituri, North and South Kivu, in particular, have long been battlegrounds for competing armed groups, each seeking to exploit these resources for their own gain. The scale of the violence and the international stakes in the region make the situation in eastern DRC a significant point of reflection in discussions on conflict.

For visual insight into the geographical region we are referring to, let us take a look at the following map:

**Figure 1**

Ituri, North and South Kivu



Source: author's own elaboration

The stark contrast between natural abundance and conflict raises fundamental questions about the relationship between resource wealth and national prosperity. The correlation between natural resources and conflict is not unique to the DRC but reflects a broader global pattern observed since the 1990s. Countries rich in resources like oil, diamonds, and minerals, such as Angola, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, have experienced prolonged conflicts often fueled by competition for these valuable commodities. The trade in diamonds, particularly so-called 'blood diamonds,' serves as a poignant example of how resource wealth can be weaponized. As defined by the United Nations, blood diamonds are those mined in areas restrained by rebel forces and sold to fund military action against a country's legitimate government (Britannica, 2025).

In the case of the DRC, it is not just diamonds that have fueled the conflict. Cobalt, copper and coltan among the other minerals previously mentioned are major factors in the DRC's resource-driven violence. Just as blood diamonds were mined in rebel-controlled areas and smuggled to fund armed groups in Sierra Leone, in the DRC, these minerals from conflict zones are extracted and traded illicitly to finance violent campaigns. The proceeds from these sales are used to purchase weapons, prolonging the cycle of conflict. This underscores the broader impact of natural resources in sustaining and deepening instability and violence in the DRC, entrenching both national and regional conflicts.

Therefore, the case of the DRC stands out as one of the most devastating examples, with its mineral wealth playing a central role in sustaining cycles of violence. The DRC's wars have led to the deaths of over six million people since the 1990s, either directly from violence or indirectly through displacement, with much of the violence financed by profits from resource exploitation (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). This dynamic has cemented the DRC as a focal point in discussions on the resource-conflict nexus.

Thus, while one might assume that such vast resources could propel the DRC toward development, they have instead fueled a prolonged cycle of violence and



instability, commonly referred to as the ‘resource curse’ or the ‘paradox of plenty’.<sup>22</sup> This phenomenon, as described by scholars, illustrates how the overabundance of valuable commodities often exacerbates political instability and drives conflict (Natural Resource Governance Institute, 2015). Thus, despite its immense resource wealth, the DRC has become synonymous with conflict and instability, its potential undermined by the very resources that should have been a source of prosperity.

The relationship between natural resources and conflict in the DRC is deeply intertwined with the actions of armed groups, the country’s government, neighboring countries, third countries and foreign companies.

Armed groups such as The March 23 Movement (M23), The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) and the Coopérative pour le développement du Congo (CODECO) play a significant role. These groups seize control of mineral-rich territories, using profits from resources to sustain their operations. Armed groups in the DRC have clashed with one another, government forces, and other actors involved over control of land and resources. These conflicts led to over 2.4 million people being internally displaced between January and June 2024 (Uebersax, 2024). These dynamics, particularly the involvement of armed groups in resource exploitation and their clashes over control of mineral-rich territories, will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 5, which delves into the mechanisms by which natural resources fuel conflict in the DRC.

The involvement of the government and its national army, the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), in the resource-conflict nexus is equally significant. While tasked with maintaining stability and combating insurgencies, the government has been implicated in the exploitation of the DRC’s resources. Moreover, it has been involved in the mismanagement and embezzlement of mining revenues. Despite the government’s stated efforts to regulate and stabilize the sector, corruption, inefficiency, and predatory behavior by government officials and military personnel have exacerbated the crisis. This gross mismanagement deprives the country of vital resources that could have been used for essential public services

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<sup>22</sup> See Theoretical Framework for an in-depth explanation.

and national stability. This dual role of government forces, as both enforcers of state authority and contributors to resource exploitation, adds another layer of complexity to the DRC's resource-driven conflicts, which will be examined in detail in Chapter 6.

Additionally, in Chapter 7, the involvement of neighboring countries will be discussed. Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi have been central to the conflicts in the DRC with their implication in the illicit trade of the country's minerals, either through direct involvement or by supporting armed groups that control mining areas (Amnesty International, 2024). This cross-border smuggling and external interference not only fuel resource-driven disputes but also undermine efforts to stabilize the region.

Finally, in Chapter 8, the role of multinational companies and third countries in the conflict will be explored. These actors, through their business dealings and investments in the DRC's mining sector, have often turned a blind eye to the illicit trade of conflict minerals. By sourcing minerals from conflict zones, these companies support the continuation of violence in the region. This practice allows armed groups to integrate conflict minerals into legitimate global supply chains.

The combination of all the previously discussed criteria leads one to believe that the relationship between natural resources and conflict is significant enough to be studied in more detail. The aim of this thesis is to determine what exactly is the role of each actor in the conflict.

## **The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

This research topic relates to the SDGs in various significant ways:

- **Goal 1. No Poverty**

The persistent exploitation of natural resources in the DRC has done little to alleviate poverty among the population. Despite the country's mineral wealth, poverty rates remain among the highest globally. The profits derived from mining rarely reach local communities, perpetuating cycles of deprivation.

- **Goal 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth**

Much of the DRC's mineral sector relies on informal and artisanal mining. Working conditions in these sites are often exploitative and unsafe, with little to no labour protections. The absence of formal employment structures undermines any sustainable form of economic development.

- **Goal 10. Reduced Inequalities**

Resource extraction has primarily benefited political elites, foreign companies, and armed groups. This has widened existing socio-economic disparities within the country. Inequality between provinces, particularly those rich in minerals and those without, has also increased.

- **Goal 16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**

Conflict over control of mineral-rich territories has undermined peacebuilding efforts in the DRC. The lack of strong and transparent institutions to regulate the sector facilitates corruption, fuels impunity, and weakens the state's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens.

The DRC's case underscores the central contradiction of the 2030 Agenda: natural resource wealth alone does not guarantee progress towards sustainable development. Without effective governance and institutional accountability, these goals remain out of reach.

# 1. Theoretical Framework

The relationship between natural resources and armed conflict has been extensively examined in academic literature. Scholars have sought to explain why resource-rich countries, such as the DRC, frequently experience prolonged and devastating conflicts. This chapter explores various theoretical perspectives that link natural resource abundance to violence and conflict. The analysis is framed around key debates in the literature, including the resource curse theory, the theory of failed states and new wars, and the greed versus grievance model.

The resource curse theory, also known as the paradox of plenty, refers to the phenomenon whereby countries rich in natural resources often struggle with economic stagnation, weak democratic institutions, high levels of corruption, and consequently, a higher likelihood of instability. This theory, first introduced by Sachs and Warner (1995), explains how instead of driving development, resource wealth and overreliance on extractive sectors can incentivize rent-seeking behavior and mismanagement, as seen in the DRC. In fact, they also assert that resource-rich countries often experience slower economic growth than those with fewer natural resources. In the case of the DRC, despite its vast mineral reserves, this wealth has not translated into economic progress but has instead experienced persistent instability and conflict. Therefore, this paradox is particularly pronounced, as mineral wealth has become a driver of instability rather than a catalyst for development.

Ross (2003) expands on this idea, stating the type of resource also matters. ‘Highly’ lootable resources, that is, those that are easy to extract and smuggle, such as gold, are particularly problematic in conflict zones and likely to fuel conflict because they provide accessible financing mechanisms for rebel groups. This is evident in the DRC, where rebel factions rely on illicit mineral trade to finance their operations through mineral exploitation, prolonging violence and complicating peace efforts.

The theory of new wars, as articulated by Mary Kaldor, provides another useful lens through which to examine the conflict in the DRC. According to Kaldor, new wars are characterized by their decentralization, with the conflict primarily driven by non-state actors such as armed groups and militias rather than state forces (Nelson, 2017).

These wars are fundamentally about the control of resources, whether they be minerals, land, or other forms of wealth, rather than traditional political objectives. In the DRC, armed groups like the M23, along with various militias, engage in conflicts not only for political reasons but to gain access to the country's abundant mineral wealth. The absence of state control and the ability of these groups to exploit the DRC's natural resources highlights the relevance of Kaldor's argument that these modern conflicts are driven by economic incentives and operate in a context where there is minimal accountability.

In parallel, the theory of failed states is also highly relevant to understand the dynamics of conflict in the DRC, as it offers insights into the institutional and governance weaknesses that contribute to the persistence of violence. A failed state is one that fails to perform the two essential functions of the state: projecting authority over its territory and protecting its national boundaries. In such a state, the government's ability to provide basic public services, maintain order, or regulate its resources is severely weakened (Barma, 2025). The DRC exemplifies this phenomenon, as its institutions, including the executive, judiciary, and military, struggle with corruption, inefficiency, and lack of professional independence. The government has little control over vast regions of the country, particularly in the eastern provinces, where armed groups and militias often operate unchecked. As such, the DRC's status as a failed state plays a central role in the continuation of violence, as it exacerbates the conditions for armed groups to thrive, not only in terms of territorial control but also in exploiting natural resources.

Another key debate in the literature centers on whether conflicts are driven by economic motivations or socio political injustices. Collier and Hoeffler (2000) argue that the availability of natural resources play a significant role in fueling conflict through two key mechanisms: greed and grievance. In this model, the greed perspective refers to the economic incentives and motives of rebels seeking to control lucrative resources for financial gain. In contrast, the grievance perspective highlights political exclusion, marginalization, ethnic tensions, and social injustices as the root causes of rebellion. While both dimensions can coexist, in the case of the DRC, greed plays a particularly prominent role. Rebel groups and corrupt officials

exploit mineral wealth, not as a means of national development but as a continuous source of profit.

Collier and Hoeffler (2000) further emphasize that resource wealth creates unique funding opportunities for armed groups because natural resources are both highly profitable and geographically fixed. Unlike manufacturing industries, which can relocate or shut down in response to conflict, resource extraction companies continue operating in unstable conditions, making it easier for rebels to extort payments while businesses remain profitable. As a result, states which are heavily dependent on resource exports face a greater risk of conflict, as these resources become both the motive and the means for rebellion. This dynamic contributes to the fact that conflict is no longer a temporary disruption but a self-perpetuating system. In such environments, various actors, including government officials, and foreign entities, profit from ongoing violence. In the DRC, this is evident in the illicit trade of its minerals, which are smuggled through neighboring countries and integrated into global supply chains. The sustained profitability of these activities weakens incentives for peace, as many actors benefit from the status quo rather than from conflict resolution.

Furthermore, in states with weak institutions, heavy reliance on natural resources can contribute to economic decline, which in turn fosters corruption and poor governance. This sets off a cycle where economic stagnation leads to poverty, and in some cases, fuels the outbreak of armed conflict. While war undeniably harms economic development, the key issue is that weak economic growth and institutional fragility also increase the likelihood of violent conflict (Kruiper, 2014).

The literature highlights how different actors play interconnected roles in conflicts over natural resources (Pronczuk & Banchereau, 2025). Neighbouring countries often back armed groups to access valuable commodities, and foreign states may intervene directly or secure resource deals that heighten local tensions. National governments, through corruption or poor management, can intensify grievances by failing to distribute resource wealth or enforce control. Meanwhile, state forces may repress opposition or become complicit in illegal resource exploitation, adding to the cycle of violence.

## 2. Methodology

The approach to this research has been to explore how natural resource exploitation has contributed to armed conflict in the DRC by gathering qualitative data, mostly from secondary sources. These sources include publicly available data from international online news magazines, academic papers, books, reports from international organizations, NGOs, and think tanks.

This data will primarily come from literature that examines the resource curse, conflict economies and the geopolitical factors that influence the relationship between resource wealth and violence. As such, this work will focus on case studies of specific regions in eastern DRC, where the exploitation of natural resources has been directly linked to armed conflict. These will allow a deeper understanding of how armed groups use control over mining areas to finance their insurgencies. In doing so, the main goal has been to identify a broader theme or pattern that would help us answer the question of how the exploitation of these resources has exacerbated violence and fueled instability.

The limitations of this research stem from the use of secondary sources and the absence of primary field data. In-person field research in the DRC is impractical due to both security concerns and logistical barriers, which means all data must be obtained from remote sources. This also limits the study's ability to gather first hand interviews or primary data from local populations.

Furthermore, obtaining official data on the extent of mineral extraction and smuggling in the DRC has been particularly challenging. Much of the mining occurs in informal sectors, and large portions of the resources are smuggled out of the country or sold on the black market, and official government data on these activities is limited or unreliable due to corruption and lack of transparency. Therefore, the study will rely on data that may not fully capture the scope of informal mining or the smuggling networks that contribute to the ongoing conflict.

Another significant limitation of this research lies in the disparity of available information regarding the various armed groups involved in the DRC conflict. While

there is a relatively extensive body of literature and data on the M23, especially concerning its role in resource exploitation and its external support, other armed groups such as CODECO are less documented. This uneven distribution of information makes it difficult to comprehensively assess the activities and impact of these groups in relation to natural resource exploitation and conflict. Consequently, the analysis may be skewed towards the more well-documented groups, which presents a challenge in offering a complete and balanced perspective on the role of all armed groups in the conflict.

Despite these limitations, the findings will contribute to the broader understanding of how natural resource exploitation continues to exacerbate conflict in the DRC, providing valuable insights into the resource-conflict nexus.



### **3. History of conflict in the DRC**

The DRC has experienced a long history of conflict, shaped by a complex interplay of colonial exploitation, political instability, ethnic divisions, and competition over its vast natural resources for more than 30 years (Lawal, 2024).

#### **3.1 Belgian Colonization, Exploitation and Independence (1885-1965)**

The roots of modern conflict in the DRC can be traced back to its colonial era, beginning with the establishment of the Congo Free State as property of King Leopold II in 1885 (Britannica, 2025). Unlike traditional European colonies governed by state administrations, the Congo was ruled by Leopold's private domain, where he implemented a system of exploitation to extract natural resources, particularly rubber, palm oil and ivory. Under this regime, millions of Congolese endured forced labor, mutilations, and mass killings, illustrating the use of coercion and violence as a means to control the region (Hochschild, 1998). International condemnation and evidence of atrocities eventually pressured Belgium to take over the territory in 1908, renaming it the Belgian Congo (Britannica, 2025).

Although Belgian governance formally replaced Leopold's personal rule, the exploitative nature of the system persisted. The colonial administration maintained a highly unequal structure, extracting high volumes of mineral wealth while depriving the local population of access to education, administrative roles, or political power. Essentially, this exclusively served colonial interests, leaving the majority of Congolese unable to benefit from the country's abundant resources (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, n.d.). After mass demonstrations and protests, the Congo gained independence in 1960 (Kleitsa, 2024). However, the country was unprepared for self-rule with only a small fraction of Congolese having received higher education, and no effective political or administrative institutions being established. This lack of preparation, coupled with unresolved tensions over resources and power, set the stage for the immediate destabilization of the newly independent state.

Therefore, the DRC's journey to independence was marked by both triumph and tragedy. At the front of this moment stood Patrice Lumumba, leader of the Congolese

National Movement, who emerged as a central figure and became the country's first elected Prime Minister. This symbolized the aspirations of a newly liberated nation striving to break free from the chains of colonial oppression. However, Lumumba's vision of a unified and independent Congo that controlled its own resources and political future, threatened the interests of both Belgium and other Western powers, which feared the growing influence of the Soviet Union in Africa. Within months of taking office, Lumumba was overthrown, imprisoned, and ultimately assassinated in 1961. His death marked the beginning of a turbulent era for the Congo, as the promise of independence was overshadowed by political instability, foreign interference, and struggles over the country's natural wealth (Kleitsa, 2024).

### **3.2 Mobutu's Dictatorship and the Decline of Zaire (1965–1997)**

Following the chaos after Lumumba's assassination, Joseph Mobutu emerged as the dominant force in Congolese politics. Seizing power in a coup in 1965, Mobutu established an authoritarian regime that lasted for over 30 years, characterized by a combination of extreme corruption and repression. He renamed the country Zaire as part of a broader campaign of 'authenticity,' which sought to erase colonial influences by removing European names and symbols (Howe, 1972). This included promoting African traditions. While Mobutu emphasized nationalism and independence, his regime heavily relied on Western support.

During the Cold War, Mobutu positioned Zaire as an ally of the West, providing them with access to the country's vast natural resources, including copper, cobalt, and diamonds. In return, he received billions of dollars in aid, much of which was embezzled. This enriched his inner circle while impoverishing the Congolese people, leaving the country's infrastructure in disrepair and its institutions weakened.

By the late 1970s, Mobutu's regime began to face challenges. The economy, strained by mismanagement, faltered, and political dissent grew. Mobutu faced armed insurrections, including two major invasions of the mineral-rich Shaba region (formerly Katanga) in 1977 and 1978, led by the Congolese National Liberation Front (Cordell & Payanzo, 2025). These uprisings, fueled by resentment over economic

inequality and Mobutu's autocratic rule, were only overturned through foreign intervention from countries such as France and Morocco.

As economic conditions worsened and anti-Mobutu sentiment intensified, his government increasingly relied on patronage, repression, and the plundering of state resources to maintain power. The collapse of the Cold War in the early 1990s marked a turning point for Mobutu, as his Western allies began to demand democratic reforms and cut financial support. Attempts to co-opt the opposition, such as forming a transitional government, failed to put an end to growing demands for change.

The situation further deteriorated in the mid-1990s with the fallout of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Over 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed, which also triggered a mass exodus of Hutu refugees and génocidaires into eastern Zaire. This influx of refugees exacerbated tensions in the region and drew Mobutu into the crisis. Initially, he sought to use the crisis to rebuild relationships with Western powers by offering logistical and military support to their interventions. However, the refugee camps in eastern Zaire became hubs for armed groups, further destabilizing the country.

### **3.3 The First Congo War (1996-1997)**

The First Congo War emerged as a direct consequence of regional instability, decades of internal mismanagement under Mobutu's regime and the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. After the genocide, the arrival of groups into eastern Zaire, such as the exiled Rwandan Armed Forces, destabilized the region. Armed factions used refugee camps in Zaire as bases to attack Rwanda and intimidate local populations. This exacerbated pre-existing ethnic tensions, particularly against Zairian Tutsis, who became targets of violence encouraged by Mobutu. In response, local militias, known as the Mai-Mai, began organizing for self-defense (Cordell & Payanzo, 2025).

The tipping point came in 1996, when the Zairian Tutsis, with backing from the Rwandan and Ugandan governments, launched an uprising against the Hutu

extremists in eastern Zaire. This rebellion quickly escalated into a larger conflict as Rwanda and Uganda, eager to neutralize the threat posed by Hutu militants in Zaire, allied with Laurent-Désiré Kabila, a long-time political opponent of Mobutu (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, n.d.). Together, they formed the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL), which rapidly gained traction, with increasing widespread discontent with Mobutu's rule and the inability of his government to maintain order. By the end of 1996, Kabila's forces seized control of key cities in eastern Zaire, including Bukavu and Goma.

The rebellion's momentum continued into 1997, with major cities like Kisangani and Lubumbashi falling to the AFDL in quick succession. Mobutu's regime offered little resistance, and this same year, Mobutu fled into exile, marking the collapse of one of Africa's longest-standing dictatorships. His departure left Zaire, renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in economic ruin and on the brink of further conflict, with Kabila assuming the presidency (Zapata, 2011).

While the First Congo War ousted Mobutu, it did not resolve the underlying ethnic and regional tensions or address the country's weakened institutions. The power vacuum left by Mobutu's fall and competing interests in the Congo's vast natural resources set the stage for the Second Congo War, which would erupt just over a year later.

### **3.4 The Second Congo War (1998-2003)**

The Second Congo War is often referred to as 'Africa's World War' (Moulton, 2021). It erupted following escalating tensions under the leadership of Kabila. After Kabila assumed power and ousted Mobutu in the First Congo War, initial optimism gave way to growing disillusionment as he consolidated power, restricted political freedoms, and expelled foreign troops, particularly from Rwanda and Uganda, who had helped him rise to power. This move angered his former allies and contributed to the outbreak of a new conflict (Estensen, 2024).

In August 1998, rebellion flared up in the DRC's eastern provinces, backed by Rwanda and Uganda. The rebellion gained traction quickly, with the creation of the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), a coalition of rebel forces supported by these two nations. The rebels made significant advances and gained control of much of the eastern DRC by the end of 1998. In response, Kabila rallied support from regional allies, including Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, which sent troops to help defend his government. This transformed the conflict into a continental war, with armies from multiple African nations fighting on Congolese soil (Estensen, 2024).

Efforts to end the conflict began in 1999 with the Lusaka Peace Accord, which proposed a ceasefire and the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces (Wiese & Cordell, 2025). However, the agreement was poorly enforced, and fighting persisted as rival factions and foreign allies continued to clash. Tensions even arose between Rwanda and Uganda, both initially allied with the RCD, as they vied for influence and resources in the eastern DRC. The war also drew in local and ethnic tensions, further complicating the situation. One of the most volatile regions was Ituri in eastern Congo, where long standing conflicts between the Hema and Lendu ethnic groups turned violent, fueled by the involvement of rebel factions (Lawal, 2025). Compounding this instability were the DRC's abundant natural resources, which attracted armed groups and neighboring countries eager to exploit them. The war effectively became a struggle not only for political control but also for economic gains from the country's mineral wealth.

In January 2001, Kabila was assassinated by one of his bodyguards, and his son, Joseph Kabila, succeeded him with the aim of de-escalating the conflict. Joseph Kabila worked to rebuild international trust and pushed for peace negotiations, which eventually gained traction. In 2002, a breakthrough occurred with the signing of the Luanda Agreement. This accord established a Joint Pacification Committee for Ituri, involving the Parties, local communities, and key political, military, and social groups in the Bunia area. It also included agreements on defense collaboration, border patrols, and military training. Additionally, the Parties agreed to revive the Joint Ministerial Commission to enhance cooperation in trade, infrastructure, transport, communications, and cultural exchange (African Transnational Justice Hub, n.d.).

By April 2003, a transitional constitution was ratified, and a power-sharing government was formed, with Joseph Kabila as president. This government included representatives from various rebel groups and political factions, aiming to foster unity and stabilize the country. The FARDC was also created, incorporating ex-militia fighters. The national army is responsible for internal security and countering insurgencies. However, its forces have faced allegations of serious human rights abuses, including sexual violence and extrajudicial killings (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025).

Although the formal end of the war came in 2003, its effects lingered for years. The eastern regions of the DRC have remained unstable, plagued by violence and continued exploitation of resources by armed groups. This conflict highlights the complexities of regional geopolitics and the devastating impact of resource-driven warfare in the DRC.

## 4. Role of armed groups in the conflict

The conflict in the DRC cannot be understood without examining the actions of armed groups. The country's security landscape, particularly in the mineral-rich eastern provinces, has been shaped by a complex web of militias and rebel factions. These actors are not only central to the violence but are also deeply intertwined with the control and exploitation of natural resources, fueling a war economy that perpetuates instability. This chapter explores the strategies, motivations, and influence of armed groups, shedding light on how their actions continue to drive the conflict and undermine prospects for peace in the DRC.

With nearly 3,000 mining sites scattered across its territory, eastern DRC holds immense mineral wealth (Delve, n.d.). This concentration of valuable resources has made the region a hotspot for violent competition, attracting the presence of more than 120 armed groups that seek to control extraction sites and trade routes (Aljazeera, 2024).

It is worth mentioning that armed groups often vie for control over artisanal mining sites due to the substantial economic benefits these areas offer and its informal nature, which lacks stringent regulatory oversight. This informality allows armed groups to operate with relative impunity, facilitating smuggling and illicit trade. For instance, gold, as a highly lovable mineral, being more portable and valuable, is often smuggled across borders with ease, making it an attractive target for armed factions (Ross, 2003). Moreover, remote mining areas tend to have limited state presence, which enables armed groups to establish governance and extract rents without significant resistance (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022).

These militias are also key players in the broader dynamics of the conflict, often engaging in territorial disputes to secure access to the high-value minerals. The result is a persistent cycle of ongoing violence and conflict. Many of these armed groups have been implicated in severe human rights violations, including mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement, crimes that, in some instances,

constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, n.d.).

Significantly, the low cost of acquiring weapons has become a key factor driving armed groups to engage in violent activities, particularly in resource-rich areas. In regions like Butembo (North Kivu), an AK-47 can be obtained for as little as \$50, and a box of 1,000 cartridges costs around \$250 (Hervé, 2023). Thus, acquiring an AK-47 is less difficult than obtaining a 12-gauge shotgun intended for hunting purposes. This makes it significantly cheaper for armed groups to seize control of villages or mining sites by force rather than navigating the formal mining regulations. The combination of readily available arms and the lack of state oversight creates an environment where violence and resource extraction are deeply interconnected, enabling armed groups to exploit valuable resources with minimal interference.

Control over mining sites is just one aspect of how these actors extract value from the mineral trade. Armed groups also employ indirect methods, such as setting up roadblocks along mineral transport routes. These checkpoints allow for the taxation of mineral flows without requiring permanent presence at the mines themselves. This indirect interference illustrates that armed actors can benefit from the mining economy even without physically occupying the extraction zones (International Peace Information Service, 2019).

The following table provides an overview of the major armed groups operating in the conflict:

**Table 2**

<b>Armed Group</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Regions in which they operate</b>
M23	More than 8,000 <sup>23</sup>	Goma and Walikale (North Kivu), Bukavu (South Kivu)
ADF	Around 1,500 <sup>24</sup>	Beni (North Kivu), parts of

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<sup>23</sup> Mureithi, Carlos (2025)

<sup>24</sup> National Counterterrorism Center (2022)



		Ituri (Bunia), and the Virunga National Park
CODECO	Around 2,000 <sup>25</sup>	Djugu and Mahagi (Ituri)
FDLR	From 1,000 to 1,500 <sup>26</sup>	Libero and Rutshuru (North Kivu) and the Virunga National Park

## 4.1 The M23 Rebellion

The M23 rebel group is one of the most powerful organized rebel groups currently active in the DRC. Originally established in 2012 by former members of the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP), the M23 emerged in response to the DRC government's failure to implement the 2009 peace agreement. The group initially aimed to defend the rights of the Tutsi ethnic minority, particularly from Hutu-aligned militias such as the FDLR, while accusing the central government of marginalizing Rwandophone communities. The M23's original objectives included securing land control for the Tutsi community and eliminating rival armed groups. Over time, however, the group's demands evolved into a broader national political agenda, now challenging the Kinshasa regime. This shift is reflected in its alliance with the Alliance Fleuve Congo (AFC), the political wing of the M23 (IPSIS, 2025).

In recent years, the M23's focus has also shifted toward seizing strategic territory and controlling resources. After nearly a decade of dormancy following its 2013 defeat, the M23 relaunched its insurgency in late 2021. By 2022-2023, the group had captured significant parts of North Kivu province, including border towns like Bunagana (on the Ugandan border), and advanced toward Goma, the provincial capital. In a dramatic escalation, the M23 captured Goma in January 2025, marking the first time the city had fallen since the Congo Wars of the 1990s. Weeks later, the M23 extended its control to Bukavu in South Kivu and even advanced westward to

<sup>25</sup> Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights (2021)

<sup>26</sup> IPSIS (2025)

seize the mining hub of Walikale,<sup>27</sup> signaling the worst escalation in a decade (Mureithi, 2025).

The M23's resurgence is widely attributed to external support, particularly from Rwanda,<sup>28</sup> which has been accused of funding, arming, and even directly backing the M23, including military support from the Rwanda Defense Force (RDF). During the 2024–2025 offensive, Rwanda deployed 3,000–4,000 troops in support of the M23's campaign (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). Rwanda is alleged to use the M23 as a proxy to secure a foothold in the mineral-rich Kivu region, an accusation further supported by the M23's seizure of areas like Rubaya, a coltan-rich mining area. While the Rwandan government denies these claims, the logistical support, training, and supply routes that pass through Rwandan territory suggest otherwise.

The group's control over Rubaya has significantly enhanced its financial and territorial leverage. In April 2024, the group seized the region and established a parallel administration, issuing permits and collecting taxes from miners and traders. To incentivize continued labor, they doubled miners' wages and enforced strict regulations on mineral transactions. This organized control enabled the M23 to monopolize coltan exports, generating an estimated \$800,000 in monthly revenue (Toulemonde, 2025).

The minerals extracted from Rubaya are transported through various routes within the DRC and into Rwanda, where they are often smuggled and falsely labeled as conflict-free, entering global supply chains for electronics. Despite international traceability systems like ITSCI, corruption persists, allowing these illicit practices to continue (Toulemonde, 2025).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Walikale is known for its rich deposits of tin and significant goldmines. The rebels' capture of the town marks the furthest west they have advanced since their offensive began in January. The takeover also disrupts a major road linking four eastern provinces and brings rebels closer to Kisangani, the country's fourth-largest city.

<sup>28</sup> See Rwanda's involvement in the conflict in Chapter 7

<sup>29</sup> ITSCI is a non-profit program focused on traceability and due diligence in the upstream supply chain for tin, tantalum and tungsten minerals.

Consequently, the M23's objectives now prioritize territorial control, occupation, and domination of the local economy, particularly mineral supply chains in the areas it controls.

Initially, the group operated checkpoints and taxed smuggled minerals. However, as its territorial control expanded, the M23 began engaging in coltan production, further consolidating its influence in other mineral-rich areas like Masisi and Kalehe (North Kivu) (IPSIS, 2025). By early 2025, the M23 controlled approximately 7,800 km<sup>2</sup> in eastern DRC, representing its largest territorial footprint since its formation. The group's governance structures reflect a calculated effort to solidify power through both military force and administrative control. The M23 has established parallel administrations in the areas it occupies, appointing loyal administrators to mimic state functions and assert control (IPSIS, 2025). Economically, the group enforces taxation and controls key trade routes, particularly in mineral-rich regions, to fund its operations.

Although the DRC government briefly attempted to counter this by imposing an 'entry tax' on goods coming from M23-held areas, this policy was later retracted due to public backlash (Ilunga, 2025). Additionally, the M23 regulates civilian movement within its territories, further consolidating its control and facilitating resource extraction.

## **5.2 Other armed groups**

In addition to the M23, there are other armed groups that play pivotal roles in the conflict and have deeply entrenched themselves in the exploitation and trafficking of natural resources, using the region's porous borders, weak state authority, and environmental wealth to sustain their operations. Among the most prominent actors are the ADF and the FDLR, which have transitioned from ideologically driven insurgents to economically motivated armed networks. These armed groups, along with the M23, are all sanctioned under UN Security Council Resolution 1533 (2004) (Brooke-Holland, 2025).

Both the FDLR and the ADF are foreign-origin armed groups operating in the DRC, with the former emerging from Rwandan Hutu militias after the 1994 genocide and the latter originating in Uganda as a rebel movement opposed to the Ugandan government.

Over time, their interest in returning to their countries of origin has diminished, replaced by the opportunities to profit from DRC's abundant resources, particularly within protected areas like the Virunga National Park. As such, these groups have discovered that access to minerals and other commodities provides enough to survive, finance operations, and even enrich themselves (Hervé, 2023).

The ADF, for instance, has exploited mining squares in the northern part of Virunga National Park along the Semuliki River. Its presence in the park allows the group to tap into the local black market economy, conduct business under the radar, and use the income to resist government offensives. Moreover, the group's presence in the strategic region of Rwenzori facilitates access to trade and concealment. Operating along the Eringeti–Beni–Bunia corridor (North Kivu), the ADF has exploited the terrains and local tensions to sustain itself, forming connections with local and foreign militias. (Nantulya, 2019).

Similarly, the FDLR has shifted its economic focus away from direct control of major mining sites, especially after losing significant territory in North and South Kivu due to military campaigns and internal fragmentation. Today, the group derives most of its income from taxing charcoal and timber supply chains, particularly in Rutshuru territory where it reportedly controls around 10% of Virunga National Park. Charcoal alone represents a market worth between \$40 and \$50 million annually in North Kivu (Hervé, 2023). Moreover, the group has also been known for interfering with artisanal mining in the Lubero territory of North Kivu. Profits have been known to be shared between FDLR, FARDC, and local Mai-Mai groups. In 2014, it was estimated that illegal fishing and charcoal production each generated approximately US\$32 million and US\$35 million annually (News of Rwanda, 2014).

Lastly, CODECO is another armed group operating in eastern DRC. It claims to defend the Lendu ethnic community but has gained notoriety for its violent

campaigns centered around land and resource control (Reuters, 2025). The group is particularly active in Ituri province, where it has repeatedly targeted areas known for their mineral wealth, especially gold (Aljazeera, 2024). In 2024, the militia carried out deadly assaults on artisanal mining zones, including an attack on a Chinese-linked mining operation, digging for gold. These actions reflect a broader pattern in which CODECO seeks to assert territorial dominance while profiting from the region's natural resources.

In terms of the relationships between these armed groups, the M23 and FDLR are generally considered enemies, as they represent opposing ethnic and political interests. The ADF, on the other hand, although it operates independently, has at times formed tactical alliances with various militias, including some factions of the FDLR, due to shared economic interests. However, the ADF also competes with the FDLR in areas like Virunga National Park and the Semuliki River, where both groups vie for control of mining sites. CODECO has historically fought against the Hema ethnic group, and does not have direct ties with the M23 or FDLR. Despite this, as its operations are primarily centered around securing gold mining territories, this puts it at odds with both the M23 and the FDLR, as these groups also seek control over similar resources. Overall, while these groups sometimes form temporary alliances due to shared interests in resource extraction, they are generally rivals.

Therefore, though initially rooted in ethnic rhetorics, these groups' activities are increasingly driven by economic incentives linked to the exploitation of valuable land and minerals. Whether through direct management of mining sites, taxation at roadblocks, or illicit cross-border trade, these groups have developed sustainable revenue models that allow them to finance their operations, expand territorial control, and resist state authority.

## **5. The role of the Government and National Army in the conflict**

The DRC's protracted war is sustained not only by rebel factions but by deep-seated state dysfunction. Under Presidents Joseph Kabila (2001–2019) and Félix Tshisekedi (2019–present), endemic corruption and predatory practices within the central government and the national army (FARDC) have helped perpetuate violence. A vast nexus of patronage, illicit resource deals, and impunity allows both officials and soldiers to benefit from conflict rather than containing it. In effect, the state itself has become a principal actor in the war economy. This chapter examines how the Kabila and Tshisekedi administrations have enabled resource-driven conflict in the country.

### **5.1 State corruption and Resource Exploitation**

The governance system in the DRC has long been plagued by corruption, weak infrastructure, and lack of effective state control. This environment has allowed state officials to engage directly in the exploitation of the country's vast natural resources, facilitating illegal trade and profiting from these illicit activities. The government's clientelist and kleptocratic practices have created power dynamics where those in positions of authority prioritize their own enrichment, often at the expense of public resources. In this context, mining operations have become heavily intertwined with corruption. Rather than offering support or mediating conflicts, state agents often serve as tax collectors, taking a cut from miners without offering services in return (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022).

Therefore, in many cases, the state's interference in mining activities is viewed as predatory. This widespread exploitation of state power in mining areas fosters a climate of insecurity and violence. As a result, the mining sector becomes not only a source of wealth but also as a tool for sustaining conflict and financing armed groups.

During Kabila's presidency, mining concessions and state contracts were granted with little regard for transparency or revenue-sharing, deepening the corruption within state-run institutions, particularly in the management of natural resources. An

example is Gécamines, the state-owned mining company, which has been at the center of several corruption scandals. Between 2012 and 2020, over \$300 million was embezzled from Gécamines, with an additional \$400 million in tax advances and loans that were never deposited into the national treasury. These funds, which were intended to support public services and national development, were misappropriated, depriving the Congolese population of vital resources. The General Inspectorate of Finances (IGF) revealed that under the leadership of Albert Yuma, a close ally of Kabila, Gécamines was deeply involved in these financial misdeeds and embezzlements. In short, public patrimony was used as the personal domain of state officials, with Kabila's corrupt rule enriching a small elite while leaving vast regions of the country under the control of local warlords and foreign interests (Skrdlik, 2022).

Additionally, while the DRC government sought to consolidate its power in the lucrative mining sector in Katanga,<sup>30</sup> it largely abandoned the eastern provinces of Ituri and South and North Kivu. In these areas, the government relinquished authority, allowing paramilitary groups and the national army to dominate the region. This strategy resulted in the government ceding control over mineral trade in these regions, intervening only when the escalated conflict in Kivu threatened broader national stability. Therefore, while the state maintained control over the rich mining resources in the south, it effectively abdicated control of eastern resources, leaving them to be exploited by armed groups and military factions (Kennes & Wilén, 2024). In practice, provincial officials and military leaders carved up mining operations among themselves or handed control to favored investors, while regulations were rarely enforced or nonexistent (Holland, 2021).

When Tshisekedi assumed office in 2019, he inherited this kleptocratic legacy marked by 'corruption, authoritarianism and entrenched clientelism' (De Deus Pereira & Weeden, 2025). For the first two years, he shared power with Kabila's coalition and implemented a few reforms, but he later launched a series of anti-corruption measures. In 2021, he ordered a ban on new mining permits until the national registry could be audited to stop the squandering of mining assets by unnamed officials (Holland, 2021). Furthermore, Tshisekedi introduced a new

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<sup>30</sup> This region was in the southeastern part of the DRC, bordering Zambia to the south and Angola to the west.

demobilization program, the Programme de Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relèvement Communautaire et Stabilisation (P-DDRCS), with the aim of dismantling armed groups, integrating former combatants into civilian life and into the formal military. This program merged previous DDR programs, which had largely been unsuccessful because of ongoing security threats, manipulation by political elites, lack of financial resources, and a lack of incentives or social integration strategies for ex-combatants (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022). However, the new program has faced several challenges too, including high turnover in leadership, unpaid salaries for implementers, allegations of embezzlement, inadequate resources, and a low number of reintegrated combatants (Gobbers, 2025).

Moreover, in 2021, Tshisekedi declared a state of siege in North Kivu and Ituri, replacing civilian governors with military officials and limiting certain civil liberties, aiming to suppress rebellious forces and restore stability. However, this measure has been widely criticized for exacerbating the violence rather than alleviating it (IPSIS, 2025). The FARDC's effectiveness remained largely unchanged, with some indicators of violence actually increasing. The military crackdown failed to dismantle armed groups, raising doubts about the strategy's ability to bring lasting peace to the region.

Despite these efforts, corruption remains entrenched, and Tshisekedi's administration has been criticized for committing similar transgressions as those attributed to Kabila's regime (De Deus Pereira & Weeden, 2025). For instance, in 2024, provincial authorities in South Kivu uncovered hundreds of illegal mining operations, primarily run by Chinese entities<sup>31</sup>. Despite the arrest of seventeen Chinese individuals for illicit gold exploitation, they were unexpectedly released following instructions from officials in Kinshasa, raising concerns about the central government's involvement in protecting these illegal activities (Matabaro Tom, n.d.).

It is also important to highlight that, for many years, the Congolese government has struggled with weak and limited territorial control, particularly in rural areas. Despite Tshisekedi's campaign promise to reform the judicial system, these reforms have yet

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 8 for an in-depth explanation of China's involvement in DRC mining operations.



to reach most of the country's rural regions, and in the few urban areas where the judicial infrastructure exists, it remains inefficient and biased (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). The country's administrative structures are largely ineffective, hindered by corruption, a lack of professionalism, and deep-seated ethnic divisions. There is also a lack of coordination between local and national governments, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. This failure to establish a functional state apparatus has significantly impaired the country's democratic and economic progress, allowing both state and non-state actors to exploit natural resources and perpetuate an environment where illegal mining thrives.

In an attempt to address corruption and transparency, newly elected Governor Purusi of South Kivu revealed the presence of numerous illegal mining operations within the province linked to foreign actors like China (Matabaro Tom, n.d.). Despite these efforts, concerns persist about the feasibility of these endeavours without substantial backing and support from the central government and without the establishment of a comprehensive regulatory system to ensure transparency throughout the mining supply chain.

In other words, senior officials quietly protect the profiteers, and promises to discipline mining firms have largely remained on paper, as no high-profile prosecutions followed the audit findings, and contracts are being amended rather than cancelled. Thus, even under Tshisekedi the mineral sector continues to enrich insiders.

## **5.2 The FARDC and the War Economy**

The FARDC's involvement in the DRC's war is far from limited to their role as peacekeepers. Rather, many FARDC units act like armed rent-seekers, exploiting the country's natural resources and artisanal mines for personal gain and transporting minerals such as gold illegally. According to the US Government Accountability Office (2022), government officials and the FARDC are among the primary contributors to corruption in the DRC, benefiting from illegal taxes and mining activities to a greater extent than even the armed groups themselves.

These soldiers are often involved in extortion, setting up illegal roadblocks. Moreover, FARDC units are known to collaborate with state agents to enforce illegal taxes on miners. In the Penekusu area of South Kivu, for instance, the local head of the mining division was working with military personnel from nearby Maniema to extort traders (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022).<sup>32</sup> These illicit activities extend to collecting bribes from civilians and miners alike, with some traders working with FARDC military officers to bypass export taxes and custom checks entirely. The soldiers seize the minerals and help them pass through customs by using their influence. In exchange, the traders offer them wine (Hervé, 2023). Additionally, these units tend to operate as private security around mining sites, where they impose charges on informal miners who operate under the supervision of the military (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022). Thus, FARDC units enable smuggling networks that undermine state control, and in practice, such actions rarely result in accountability. Corruption is met with little to no repercussions. For instance, in provinces where gold is a major export, those caught smuggling often avoid imprisonment by simply paying fines (US Government Accountability Office, 2022). These cases are frequently treated as opportunities for quick financial gain rather than serious legal violations, reinforcing a system where impunity prevails.

Notably, the composition of the FARDC itself reflects this blurring of lines. Many militia leaders were simply co-opted into the army during demobilization programs (often losing official rank but not their networks). Most combatants of the major armed groups and many rebel commanders are former FARDC troops, and vice versa (US Government Accountability Office, 2022).

In the gold-rich areas of Walikale in North Kivu, the FARDC has frequently taken sides in the ongoing battles between rival armed factions, rather than maintaining neutrality or pursuing peace. This is evident in the way FARDC officers supported the "Bwira" faction of the Nduma Défense du Congo after its split, using them as a proxy force against the competing "Guidon" faction, which was also fighting for control of coltan resources (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022). These actions reveal the

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<sup>32</sup> Maniema is a province located on the west of South Kivu.

fragmented nature of the military, which often operates like an independent actor, engaging in resource-driven struggles with armed groups.

Thus, the presence of armed groups in eastern DRC plays a significant role in sustaining the state's military economic activities. The continued existence of these groups provides a justification for the deployment of FARDC units, allowing them to operate and generate income. In many cases, the military and armed groups coexist, and their cooperation often involves sharing the revenues from mining operations or sometimes reaching agreements that allow for the shared control of mining zones. For example, in 2014, the FARDC and the FDLR armed group earned over \$650,000 annually from the sale of charcoal in one region, further highlighting the deep-rooted corruption and the blurred lines between state and non-state actors (US Government Accountability Office, 2022).

Furthermore, there have been more reports of links between the FDLR militia and the FARDC, with the government army allegedly supplying the militia with ammunition, uniforms, and boots. According to testimonies from militia members, FARDC troops provided them with weapons and logistical support, facilitating their operations. One commander from the Mai-Mai Kabidon militia also reported that the FARDC supplied their group with ammunition and coordinated their movement to the front line in Kiwanja (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Communication devices were reportedly used to ensure coordination between the FARDC and militias, further indicating a troubling level of collaboration.

In addition, in 2022, the Congolese army, in cooperation with various Congolese militias and the FDLR, fought against the Rwandan-backed M23 rebels in North Kivu. However, the structural issues within the FARDC continued to undermine its ability to effectively counter the M23's expansion (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The army's failure has been attributed to problems like a fragmented chain of command, corruption, unsuccessful reforms, and a lack of motivation among troops (IPSIS, 2025). This situation follows the Congolese practice of using irregular militias as proxies, which allows the security forces to obscure their complicity in the conflict. This practice only empowers militias and contributes to the cycle of violence.

This collaboration complicates the relationship between state and non-state actors, blurring the lines between legitimate state control and illicit activities (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022). The result is a dangerous situation where minerals and weapons flow through the same channels, perpetuating the cycle of violence and fueling the ongoing conflict in the region. This unregulated and intertwined relationship between the military and armed groups hinders efforts to stabilize the area and formalize the mining sector.

The paradox lies in the government's simultaneous launch of the P-DDRCS program previously mentioned, which aims to demobilize fighters and restore community stability, while also expanding militia involvement through programs like the Voluntary Defense of the People (VDP) (Gobbers, 2025). This initiative, which enlists militias as formal auxiliaries, is a dangerous balancing act, as arming and funding these groups only exacerbates the conflict. These contradictions highlight the difficulties in the government's approach to peace and security, as the military's reliance on militias and the integration of known combatants into official forces complicate efforts to restore stability. Instead of promoting security, these proxy alliances often lead to a situation where the FARDC is fighting alongside irregulars, further blurring the lines of accountability.

Essentially, this situation raises significant concerns about the effectiveness of Tshisekedi's government and its efforts to address the growing violence in the eastern part of the country. The fact that military units coexist with militias and negotiate a share of the profits from mining undermines the government's ability to restore order. These practices create a 'climate of predation' that perpetuates corruption and smuggling, ultimately enabling the financing of conflict (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022).

Notably, mining actors in the DRC often see state forces mainly as tax collectors, offering little in return, such as technical assistance or support in conflict resolution. As a result, many mining stakeholders have become increasingly alienated from the state and have sought alternative, often non-official, means to resolve disputes and protect their claims. In some cases, miners turn to military or police personnel to settle conflicts with rival parties, bypassing official state channels. For example, at a

gold mine in Haut-Uele,<sup>33</sup> police officers were reported to have guarded the site, preventing other state services from overseeing the operations of a Chinese company (Matthysen & Gobbers, 2022). In other instances, miners have turned to armed groups to shield them from what they perceive as the predatory actions of state officials. In effect, the very institutions tasked with regulating mining are coping poorly; corrupted by clientelism and nepotism, they fail to enforce licenses or ensure transparency.

The continued involvement of military personnel in resource trafficking, combined with the ineffective implementation of mining regulations, sustains the climate of predation that has fueled conflict for years. Until the FARDC can address these structural issues and curb its own involvement in illegal activities, the role of the military in the DRC's conflict and resource exploitation will remain a central obstacle to peace and stability. Furthermore, Tshisekedi's security policies (martial law and new DDR programs), have not stabilized the east. On the contrary, they have often entrenched the status quo, as granting the army free rein under martial law only legitimized proxy forces. These strategic failures mean that conflict drivers, that is, mining disputes, remain unresolved, while the means of war (weapons, taxes, and militias) continue to flourish.

In short, the Congolese government and its armed forces have become a driving force of conflict rather than a solution against it, helping sustain the war economy in the eastern region of the country.

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<sup>33</sup> Haut-Uele is a province located in the northeast of the DRC.

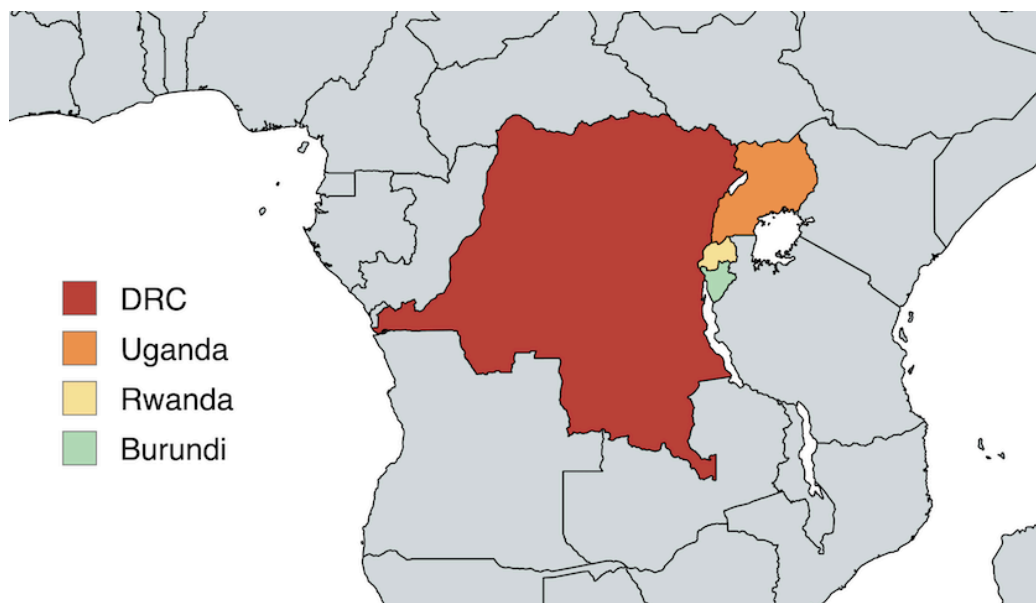
## 6. Role of neighboring countries in the conflict

The involvement of neighbouring states in the DRC conflict has been pivotal in perpetuating instability in the region. The DRC shares borders with nine countries: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. However, this research will primarily focus on the roles of Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda (which border the east of the country). These countries have played significant political, economic and military roles, with their participation in the exploitation of Congolese resources contributing directly to the continuation of violence and conflict.

For visual insight into the regions we are referring to, let us take a look at the following map:

**Figure 2**

Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda



Source: author's own elaboration

The legacy of the Second Congo War firmly established the pattern of regional involvement in the DRC's resource exploitation. During the war, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, and other African states deployed troops to Congolese territory. While they

claimed these interventions were for security purposes<sup>34</sup> or to support local allies, their presence often served to further destabilize the region and foster economic interests linked to resource extraction (UN, 2001). According to the organization, illegal exploitation of resources by these three countries was manifested in various ways, such as confiscation, extraction, forced monopolies, and price manipulation. The scale of these activities grew to the point where the conflict in the DRC became highly profitable.

The first phase of the conflict saw widespread looting of valuable resources such as minerals, coffee, timber, and livestock from territories controlled by the military forces of these countries. These resources were either smuggled into these countries or exported internationally, benefiting both state actors and private businesses. These illicit activities became so profitable that the war itself essentially turned into a lucrative business. By the war's end in 2003, the formal withdrawal of foreign troops did not entirely dismantle these exploitation networks. Instead, they evolved, with neighboring countries shifting to more covert means (such as proxy militias like the M23) to maintain access to Congo's resources (UN, 2001).

## **6.1 Rwanda's involvement**

Rwanda remains entangled in the conflict often under the pretext of protecting its national security as a measure to prevent the conflict from reaching its territory. As an example, the presence of the FDLR has been cited by the country as a rationale for intervention. However, critics argue that its intervention is part of a broader strategy to exploit the DRC's mineral wealth.

Despite Rwanda's denial, the country has been accused by the DRC and the UN of being a key supporter of the M23 rebel group. The weight of evidence, including satellite images, captured military equipment and eyewitness accounts have led the DRC government and international observers to accuse Rwanda of a covert invasion by proxy (Wandera, 2025). The country has supported the M23 through the provision of funding, troops (as many as 4,000), weapons, logistical support, and even commanding the militia. This has allowed the M23 to seize control of valuable mining

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<sup>34</sup> Such as Rwanda's pursuit of Hutu militias responsible for the 1994 genocide, or Uganda's fight against Ugandan rebels based in the DRC.

areas such as Rubaya, with the group reportedly sending around 120 tonnes of coltan to Rwanda every month (Zane, 2025). The operation consists of transporting the minerals in convoys of up to five vehicles, making regular trips from Rubaya to Rwanda. Thus, the M23 controls the mining, trade, and transport of these minerals for Rwanda (Wandera, 2025).

These resources are often funneled into Rwanda's official supply chain, where they are either labeled as Rwandan origin or mixed with Rwanda's legitimate exports before being sold on international markets. This covert system of mineral laundering not only undermines the DRC's sovereignty over its own natural wealth but also fuels a conflict economy that sustains the armed groups and militias in the region (Makal, 2025).

Rwanda's role in the illicit mineral trade is further facilitated by its favorable trade regulations. Unlike the DRC, Rwanda does not impose taxes on mineral imports, and the country's legislation allows for the recognition of imported goods as Rwandan if they undergo processing with at least 30% added value. This policy has made Rwanda the preferred route for illegally mined minerals, particularly coltan. Moreover, in 2021, the price of coltan in Rwanda (between 52 and 65 USD/kg) was significantly higher than in the DRC (between 35 and 52.5 USD/kg, reflecting the added value after processing, while the majority of the coltan exported by Rwanda is believed to come from the DRC, marking it as fraudulent trade (Hervé, 2023).

On that account, Rwanda's official exports of gold have also suspiciously exceeded what its own mines produce. The country's minerals account for only 3% of its GDP (Dent, 2025). However, in 2022, the country's gold exports reached \$654 million, that is, more than double the value of its total exports. However, much of this gold does not originate in Rwanda as the country has no significant gold mines, but is instead mined in the DRC. In 2014, Congolese gold accounted for just 1% of Rwanda's exports, but by 2020, it had surged to 47% (Stearns, n.d.). This rise reflects the growing role of Congolese resources for Rwanda, especially since the outbreak of the M23 rebellion. Thus, the flow of gold, most of it illicitly sourced from the DRC, has become a cornerstone of Rwanda's economy.



The European Union has become increasingly concerned about Rwanda's role in these illicit activities, urging in February 2025 that the EU suspend its raw materials partnership with Rwanda until the country halts its interference in the DRC, particularly regarding the export of minerals sourced from areas controlled by the M23 (Makal, 2025).

## **6.2 Uganda's involvement**

Uganda's involvement in the DRC conflict has evolved from military occupation to complex economic interactions in the trade of these mineral resources. In the 1990s, Uganda justified its military presence in eastern DRC as a response to threats posed by Ugandan rebel groups operating within Congolese borders. However, much like Rwanda, Uganda's presence also had significant economic motivations. Ugandan forces controlled gold mines and competed with Rwanda for dominance over key trading hubs, such as Kisangani, which was a key center for the diamond trade in the region. This competition over resources and strategic locations highlighted Uganda's economic interests in the conflict, as its military operations were closely linked to the illicit exploitation of Congolese wealth (Raeymaekers, 2002).

This economic exploitation did not go unnoticed on the international stage. In 2005, the International Court of Justice ruled that Uganda had violated international law by occupying parts of the DRC and unlawfully exploiting its resources. The court's findings were significant, and in 2022, Uganda was ordered to pay reparations amounting to \$325 million to the DRC for the damage caused by the looting of Congolese natural wealth during the war. Despite the formal legal conclusions, Uganda's role in the region continues to be marked by the illegal smuggling of Congolese minerals, particularly gold, which remains an important source of revenue for Uganda's economy.

While the relationship between Kinshasa and Kampala has generally improved in recent years, particularly in the context of counterterrorism operations, Uganda's role in the region remains complex. The country has presented itself as a key security partner for the DRC government, especially in combating the ADF.<sup>35</sup> This

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<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that this armed group, as mentioned in Chapter 5 has origins in Uganda.

cooperation has intensified with joint military operations, such as Operation Shujaa, which began in 2021 (Ford & Karr, 2025). The operation aimed to counter the ADF's operations across both Uganda and the DRC's eastern provinces. However, Uganda was accused of using Operation Shujaa to gain access to DRC resources such as gold and timber. This has been exemplified by the country's focus on repairing key cross-border roads to connect gold-producing areas in Ituri and North Kivu to the Ugandan border. Moreover, Ugandan soldiers have been deployed under this operation to protect these roads and oil sites from attacks from armed groups like CODECO.

Thus, Uganda appears to be playing a double game. Even as it partners with Kinshasa against the ADF, Uganda has maintained ties to the Rwandan-backed M23 rebel movement. The UN has highlighted Uganda's close ties with this rebel group, noting that it has allowed the group to operate from its territory since the M23's resurgence. Likewise, the leader of M23's political wing, is known to regularly visit Uganda, strengthening the group's connections there. Uganda officially denies aiding M23, and DRC's government, needing Uganda's help against ADF, has been muted on this issue (Ford & Karr, 2025).

On that account, it could be argued that Uganda's strategy and involvement with the M23 is used to counterbalance Rwandan influence. By doing so, it avoids a scenario where Rwanda alone dominates eastern Congo's resource trade. This inclination to cooperate with certain militias is essentially a way to protect its economic interests. Therefore, while Uganda has cooperated with the DRC on security matters, its involvement in gold smuggling and partnership with rebel groups adds another layer of complexity to the relationship, undermining the DRC's sovereignty over its own resources and contributing to ongoing instability in the region.

Furthermore, Uganda's gold refinery expansion has outpaced the development of its own gold production, which raises concerns about the origins of the gold being processed. In 2021, a UN report revealed that armed groups in eastern DRC controlled gold mines, with much of the gold being trafficked into Uganda via established routes in the Ituri province. Uganda's Central Bank reported a dramatic increase in gold exports, generating nearly \$2 billion in revenue, with some

estimates indicating a tenfold rise in gold exports in a single year (Dent, 2025). This suggests that a significant portion of Uganda's gold comes from illicit sources in the DRC, with armed groups profiting from this exploitation.

Additionally, in November 2020, Dott Services, a Ugandan company with links to the country's current President, Museveni, entered into a partnership with the Congolese state-owned mining firm Sakima to develop valuable mining sites in Maniema province, which are rich in tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold. The agreement also included the establishment of a processing facility for these minerals. Shortly after this, in June 2021, Rwanda signed its own set of mining contracts with Congo, securing the rights to refine gold produced by Sakima through a company named Dither Ltd., which has close ties to Rwandan President Kagame (Stearns, n.d.). These business deals highlight the growing competition between Uganda and Rwanda for control over the lucrative mineral resources in the DRC. Such agreements, while appearing as legitimate investments, often blur the lines with illicit practices, as both countries have long-standing networks of influence in the region.

### **6.3 Burundi's involvement**

Burundi has been less prominent than Rwanda or Uganda in discussions of Congo's resource war, but it too has played a role. Similarly to these countries, during the 1990s, Burundi's Tutsi-led government sent troops into parts of South Kivu to fight Burundian Hutu rebel groups that were using Congolese territory as a rear base. In doing so, the country took control of border zones.

While its primary motive was securing its border against the National Forces of Liberation (FNL) and other Burundian insurgents, opportunistic resource exploitation followed as mentioned in previous pages. It was revealed that Burundi, despite lacking significant mineral production, became an exporter of gold and diamonds after its army occupied Congolese territory during the war which suggested the smuggling of Congolese resources. Additionally, an IMF report from that period highlighted unusual exports of these minerals from Burundi, indicating its involvement in the looting of Congo's wealth during the Second Congo War like its neighbour countries (UN, 2001).

Burundi now plays a significant role as a transit hub in the illicit minerals trade, particularly in gold smuggling. Gold mined in South Kivu is often smuggled through Burundi due to the country's lower export taxes and less stringent oversight compared to the DRC. This allows traffickers to bypass Congolese state controls and sell the gold as if it originated from Burundi. From there, the gold is typically exported to international markets, including Dubai, a major global gold trading center, where it enters without certification of being conflict-free (Palix, 2025).

All in all, these neighboring countries have used the instability in the DRC as an opportunity to gain access to valuable resources such as gold, coltan, and diamonds, which are either smuggled or extracted through covert operations. The competition over control of resources, coupled with the complex web of alliances and rivalries between armed groups, continues to destabilize the region and undermine the DRC's sovereignty over its natural wealth. Thus, the war in eastern DRC can be seen as fundamentally economic, driven by a competition over access to wealth.

## **7. Role of companies and third countries in the conflict**

Although the country holds vast reserves of valuable minerals, the wealth generated from their extraction largely bypasses local populations. Instead, much of the sector is dominated by external actors whose involvement has often deepened instability, fostered corruption, and fueled violence. Chapter 8 explores how foreign companies and third countries have contributed to the continuation of conflict in the DRC.

### **7.1 International Regulations and Due Diligence Mechanisms**

International regulations have emerged over the past two decades to regulate trade in conflict minerals and illicit resources. These include sector-specific regulations, like the Kimberley Process (KP) for Diamonds, domestic laws, such as the Dodd-Frank Act, EU regulations, and voluntary guidelines like the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals. In theory, these aim to break the link between armed groups and resource revenues, protect communities, and promote transparent supply chains. In practice, however, each framework has critical gaps.

The Kimberley Process, established by the UN, was introduced as a global initiative to curb the trade in conflict diamonds, requiring governments to certify that rough diamonds are conflict free to prevent them from entering global markets. However, its scope is narrowly defined, as it only focuses on rebel groups that use diamonds to fund their activities. It does not deal with violence or abuses carried out by governments or other armed groups that are not officially called rebels. This limited mandate has led to serious shortcomings in implementation.

Moreover, it has no dedicated funding to help countries address the problems that lead to non-compliance. As a result, embargoes imposed under the scheme have had little tangible impact and have instead driven the trade underground, encouraging illicit networks and black markets to thrive (IPSIS, 2024). That being so, embargoes mostly aim to ease concerns among international buyers, while offering little real support to communities that rely on diamond mining or continue to suffer from conflict.

The DRC has been a participant in the KP since 2003, aiming to eliminate the trade in conflict diamonds. The country's participation in the KP has led to a rise in officially declared diamond exports, but its ability to control and monitor the trade internally remains deeply flawed, as it continues to be a challenge to track the diamonds since they are mined until they are exported. Although the Centre of Evaluation, Expertise and Certification (CEEC)<sup>36</sup> is responsible for certifying exports, most diamonds cannot be traced back to their point of origin, undermining the credibility of the entire process. Smuggling hasn't ended, with diamonds both leaving the country illegally and entering from neighboring states.

Essentially, there have been efforts to improve oversight, such as the creation of the Small Scale Mining Assistance and Support Service to regulate small-scale mining. This mechanism, however, has had minimal reach, as the agency functions poorly in much of the territory (Global Witness, 2006). Consequently, the lack of robust internal controls, coupled with the KP's limited enforcement capacity, has left major gaps in accountability and continues to expose local communities to the economic and social consequences of an unregulated diamond trade.

Another regulation which attempts to control the trade of conflict minerals in the DRC is The Dodd-Frank Act in Section 1502. The Act, passed in 2010, targeted the trade of four specific minerals, the 3Ts and gold, and was introduced with the aim of reducing financial flows to armed groups operating in and around the DRC. It requires publicly traded companies in the United States to investigate whether these minerals are present in their products and, if so, to report whether they originated from the DRC or neighboring states (Source Intelligence, 2023). The assumption behind the legislation was that forcing companies to disclose their supply chains and adopt due diligence measures would curb the illicit exploitation of these resources, which has long fueled violence in the region.

Despite its intentions, Section 1502 has sparked considerable debate, especially regarding its unintended consequences. Instead of cleaning up supply chains, many companies chose to disengage entirely from sourcing minerals in the DRC to avoid

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<sup>36</sup> The CEEC is the government agency which is responsible for implementing the KP in the DRC.

reputational or regulatory risk. This response effectively created a de facto embargo, undermining legitimate artisanal mining operations and driving possibly up to two million Congolese miners out of work in the eastern region of the country (Seay, 2012).

This disruption not only failed to reduce the level of conflict or its occurrence, but it also altered its dynamics. Armed groups shifted their focus away from the now-riskier 3T mines to small-scale gold mining sites, which are harder to monitor due to the ease of smuggling gold compared to bulkier minerals (US Government Accountability Office, 2024). In some areas, this led to increased violence and looting, as groups competed for control over new resource hubs (Stoop & al. 2018). Ultimately, this legislation imposed significant compliance costs on U.S. firms while doing little to improve security or livelihoods on the ground. It became a cautionary example of well-meaning foreign regulation that overlooks the complex local realities it seeks to influence.

Similarly, the EU Regulation 2017/821, effective in 2021, obliges EU importers of the 3Ts and gold to perform due diligence on DRC region ores. It was designed to promote responsible sourcing by requiring companies to trace their supply chains down to the smelter level and avoid sourcing from conflict-affected or high-risk areas. Despite its intentions, its actual impact has been modest. Implementation has revealed serious limitations, as many importers still cannot fully trace where their raw materials come from, and reporting across the European Union remains opaque, with no public access to supply chain disclosures. This undermines the core objective of transparency. Gold, in particular, continues to be a major loophole, with smuggling networks thriving and armed groups in eastern Congo still profiting from its illicit trade (Hoex et al., 2023). Additionally, the regulation's narrow focus on just a few minerals leaves others, such as cobalt, entirely outside its scope, and enforcement relies largely on voluntary compliance, lacking any meaningful penalties or corrective mechanisms.

To guide companies, the EU developed a list of conflict-affected and high-risk areas (CAHRAs). While this list is meant to support risk assessment, it can have unintended consequences. Companies may choose to avoid sourcing from entire

regions simply because they appear on the list, even when those areas could benefit from responsible trade. The list itself is non-exhaustive, which means firms are still expected to perform due diligence even when sourcing from countries not included. Civil society organizations from the DRC, have raised concerns that the list unfairly penalizes mineral-producing countries while giving transit hubs like Rwanda and Uganda a free pass (Hoex et al., 2023). This creates incentives for smugglers to route Congolese minerals through neighboring countries, where they are rebranded with false origins and enter global supply chains unchecked. Thus, the uneven application of due diligence, combined with a lack of oversight over refiners and exporters, continues to allow conflict-linked resources to circulate under the radar.

Complementing these laws is the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals. Endorsed by governments, it provides a five-step framework that companies can follow to make their mineral sourcing conflict-free (OECD, 2016). This framework includes establishing policies, identifying risks and managing them. However, it is strictly voluntary and non-binding, so its uptake has been inconsistent. While 53% of firms reported conflict-minerals policies or audits, an increased effort is required to properly detect and address potential risks, as reporting tends to be superficial and focuses on reacting rather than preventing (Zamora, 2022). Some major manufacturers, like Apple in 2023, have taken the guidance more seriously and cut ties with non-compliant suppliers,<sup>37</sup> but such cases are exceptions. In general, the OECD framework offers a step-by-step checklist, but there is no enforcement body, and companies can opt in or out. Arguably, it enables a checkbox mentality rather than genuine reform in the field.

In summary, all of these regulations suffer from common shortcomings. They are limited in scope, as they only cover certain minerals, rely on self-reporting by companies, and lack strong international enforcement. Generally, they do not address fundamental causes of conflict, such as weak governance, arms flows, or smuggling networks and the result is that trade is done in a way that simply evades the rules.

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<sup>37</sup> See section 8.3 Western Multinationals and Corporate Complicity for an in-depth explanation of Apple's involvement in the DRC.



## 7.2 China's Strategic Involvement in the DRC

China has become the most influential foreign actor in the DRC's mining sector, eclipsing traditional Western players in both scale and scope. Over the last ten years, Chinese companies, many supported by Beijing's backed financial institutions, have secured a dominant position in key extractive industries. Currently, they control 15 out of the 17 cobalt mining operations across the country (Uren, 2021), and account for over 70% of the DRC's copper production, underpinned by investments exceeding US\$20 billion (Caixin Global, 2024).

This expansion has been driven through a combination of high-profile acquisitions and strategic joint ventures, including the Tenke Fungurume mine and the Sicomines project. While these ventures are presented as part of China's broader development strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative, a growing number of critics argue that the benefits have remained concentrated among Chinese corporations and a select group of Congolese elites, with limited impact on institutional development or public infrastructure. Moreover, a significant number of these operations are reportedly non-compliant with Congolese mining codes, functioning without proper legal oversight or adherence to regulatory frameworks (Matabaro Tom, n.d.).

Thus, the strategic partnership between Beijing and Kinshasa has long attracted international attention, particularly in the lead-up to the end of Kabila's presidency in 2019. Allegations emerged that funds from Chinese-backed infrastructure investments, intended as repayment for mineral concessions, had been redirected to benefit Kabila and his inner circle, raising concerns over corruption and misuse of development financing (Center for Preventive Action, 2025).

A key example of this is the Sicomines project, initially valued at US\$9 billion and structured as a minerals-for-infrastructure exchange. Under the original terms, a consortium of Chinese state-owned enterprises such as Sinohydro and the China Railway Engineering Corporation were promised access to copper and cobalt extracted at the Sicomines site in Kolwezi, and in exchange, these companies committed to financing large-scale infrastructure projects, including roads, hospitals, and schools, in return for long-term access to copper and cobalt deposits. However,

independent audits and investigative reports have revealed that the Chinese partners failed to deliver on a substantial portion of their obligations, with \$685 million in infrastructure funds remaining unaccounted for. A 2023 assessment by the DRC's IGF further confirmed that only US\$822 million had been spent on infrastructure since 2008, significantly below the promised US\$3 billion (Livingstone, 2024). Thus, less than a third of the promised infrastructure was paid off. At the same time, mining activities continued without interruption, and the original valuation of the mining concessions was reportedly far below market standards.

More recently, President Félix Tshisekedi has attempted to revise these earlier agreements. In 2024, he announced that a renegotiated version of the Sicomines deal would bring US\$7 billion into the Congolese treasury, with a stated aim to fund major infrastructure works, including roads and public services (Livingstone, 2024). Parallel to this, the Congolese government also moved to resolve a separate dispute with China Molybdenum Company (CMOC), which operates the Tenke Fungurume copper-cobalt mine. CMOC agreed to pay \$2 billion to the Congolese state, settling a disagreement over undeclared mineral reserves and reflecting broader efforts to rebalance foreign contracts in line with national interests (Center for Preventive Action, 2025).

Meanwhile, China's growing footprint in the DRC has extended beyond economic influence into the country's internal conflict dynamics, especially in the mineral-rich eastern provinces. In areas like South Kivu, more than a hundred small-scale Chinese-run mining operations are active, many of them functioning without legal authorization or compliance with Congolese labor and environmental regulations. These sites are often located in territories affected by ongoing insurgencies, making them vulnerable to extortion by armed groups and dependent on military protection. The Congolese army has been repeatedly deployed to safeguard Chinese mining infrastructure, highlighting the entanglement of economic assets and state security operations (Center for Preventive Action, 2025). Furthermore, Chinese involvement extends to military cooperation. The DRC government has reportedly used Chinese-made drones and weaponry in operations against the M23 rebel group, while Uganda has also sourced arms from China for its interventions on Congolese soil.

Furthermore, in South Kivu's Mwenga territory, six Chinese mining and logging companies have been linked to serious human rights and environmental violations, including land grabs, forced evictions, and pollution affecting the Wamuzimu chiefdom (Fian International, 2024). Despite calls from local civil society for accountability, enforcement remains weak. In early 2025, three Chinese nationals were arrested in eastern DRC carrying 10 gold bars and \$400,000 in cash, exposing a broader illicit economy and money laundering network that operates alongside official mining contracts, often enabled by regulatory failures (Matabaro Tom, n.d.).

These issues have been a focus of domestic civil society groups. The coalition *Le Congo n'est pas à vendre* (CNPAV), which advocates for transparency and anti-corruption in the extractive sector, estimates that the state has suffered major financial losses due to favorable tax regimes and undervalued contracts granted to Chinese firms. According to the group, the DRC lost approximately \$132 million in 2024 alone due to the terms of revised agreements that remain tilted in favor of Chinese investors. Additionally, they report that ongoing tax exemptions extended to Chinese mining companies result in an annual loss of at least US\$100 million to the national treasury (AllAfrica, 2025). These concerns underline the growing debate around whether Chinese engagement has served the broader public interest or primarily reinforced a pattern of elite capture and extractive dependency.

After all, China's involvement in the DRC is deeply embedded in both the economy and the conflict dynamics of the country. From elite deals in Kinshasa to illicit operations in war-torn provinces, Chinese interests are shaping the future of Congo's mineral wealth. While some infrastructure has materialized, the broader picture is one of exploitation, opaque governance, and growing geopolitical rivalry, as initiatives like the U.S.- and EU-backed Lobito Corridor aim to reroute mineral exports through alternative channels to curb China's influence (Matabaro Tom, n.d.).

### **7.3 Western Multinationals and Corporate Complicity**

In parallel with China's dominance, Western multinational corporations have long played a significant role in the DRC's mineral economy. These companies are among the largest end-users of Congolese resources such as tantalum, tin, and

cobalt. American technology companies like Apple, depend on tantalum and tin for manufacturing smartphones and computers. Much of this sourcing is indirect, carried out through smelters, refiners, and intermediaries, which makes the origin of the materials harder to trace and enables supply chain opacity.

In 2024, the Congolese government filed complaints in France and Belgium against subsidiaries of Apple, alleging that the company used conflict-linked minerals sourced from regions affected by violence. In its 2023 conflict minerals report to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Apple stated that none of the smelters or refiners in its supply chain were found to be financing armed groups. However, Congolese authorities argue that artisanal tin, tungsten, and tantalum mined in rebel-held areas ultimately ended up in Apple products. It is important to note that although Apple denies any wrongdoing and maintains that it does not source raw minerals directly, it ended its relationship with 12 suppliers and smelters from both the DRC and Rwanda, after audits revealed they failed to meet the company's sourcing requirements (Rolley, 2024). These events underscore the tensions between corporate due diligence frameworks and realities on the ground, where verification is often limited.

Another notable example is Glencore, a Swiss-based natural resource company. Glencore owns several assets in the DRC, including the Mutanda mine<sup>38</sup> and a controlling stake in the Kamoto Copper Company (KCC), both of which are major sources of copper and cobalt. In 2019, a landslide at one of KCC's concessions killed 43 artisanal miners who had entered the site illegally. The incident prompted a government-ordered military operation to remove around 2,000 unauthorized miners from the area. Although Glencore was not directly responsible for the landslide, critics argue that the company's lack of formal engagement with artisanal mining communities contributed to the security vacuum that led to the tragedy (Al Jazeera, 2019).

In 2009, Glencore also partnered with Dan Gertler, an Israeli businessman known for his close ties to the Kabila regime and for being implicated in a series of controversial mining deals. Though Glencore claimed to have conducted proper due diligence, Gertler had already been pointed out in UN and parliamentary reports for

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<sup>38</sup> The Mutamba mine is located in Lualaba Province, in the southeastern part of the country.

allegedly facilitating arms-for-minerals exchanges and monopolizing diamond exports (Public Eye, n.d.). As a result, in 2022, Glencore agreed to pay US\$180 million to the Congolese state to settle corruption claims (Thomas, 2022). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the company admitted to conspiring to pay approximately US\$27.5 million to third parties, intending part of those payments to be used as bribes to secure business advantages in the DRC.

Beyond these high-profile cases, the broader problem lies in the lack of supply chain transparency and profits are prioritized over ethics. While many Western companies release annual conflict-free reports, independent assessments raise doubts about the depth of their due diligence. Additionally, only about half of the surveyed firms publicly disclosed due diligence reports on conflict minerals (Zamora, 2022). Many fail to map their supply chains beyond the first tier, allowing minerals of uncertain origin to enter formal markets. For instance, large volumes of coltan labeled as Rwandan are actually sourced from the DRC (Global Witness, 2025). In the EU, despite legal obligations under due diligence regulations, many importers cannot identify the exact source of their minerals (Hoex et al., 2023). Consequently, even audited refiners might unknowingly process ores mixed with materials smuggled out of the DRC. Companies often rely on third-party auditing programs, such as those under the Responsible Minerals Initiative, which have been criticized as superficial and insufficiently rigorous.

On that account, while Western firms may not directly manage mining operations in the DRC, their reliance on complex and opaque supply chains has made them complicit in a system that helps sustain conflict and corruption. Even with stronger regulatory frameworks, enforcement remains inconsistent, and corporate due diligence falls short of the standards it claims to uphold. The ongoing tension between commercial interests, reputational risk, and ethical responsibility makes Western multinationals a central part of the conflict minerals equation in the DRC.

## Conclusions

The study of the DRC's resource-driven conflict reveals a complex interaction between various actors, each playing distinct yet intertwined roles. It could be argued that the most powerful actors are the armed groups, which thrive in the absence of strong state authority, using resource control to fund their operations. The groups' ability to capture and hold territories enhances their financial and territorial leverage. Moreover, the wealth generated from these mining operations has allowed the groups to expand their influence, entrenching themselves in the conflict and securing their status as dominant forces in the region.

The control that armed groups have over mineral-rich territories in the DRC places them in a dominant position, making other actors, including government forces, foreign companies, and neighboring states, heavily dependent on them. These armed groups hold the key to access the country's mineral wealth, which is essential for sustaining both local and international trade networks. Since armed groups control these crucial mining areas, they can dictate the terms under which other actors, whether domestic or foreign, can profit from the resources extracted. This gives the armed groups significant leverage, as they control not only the mineral deposits but also the trade routes through which these resources are transported.

Moreover, the armed groups have the ability to integrate conflict minerals, that is, those extracted from areas under their control, into global supply chains, often through illicit channels. By allowing or restricting access to these mining areas, they effectively determine who profits from the minerals. These groups can tax the mining operations, enforce extraction quotas, and even dictate the conditions under which foreign companies can operate. As a result, the entire conflict economy becomes dependent on their willingness to facilitate or obstruct access to the resources they control.

This situation reinforces the cycle of conflict, as it sustains the power and economic independence of the armed groups. Since these groups are essential to the extraction and trade of minerals, other actors, including the DRC government, multinational companies, and neighboring countries, find themselves compelled to

negotiate with or support these armed groups to ensure continued access to the valuable resources. In turn, the groups profit from these interactions, perpetuating the conflict economy and ensuring that their role as a central actor in the DRC's resource-driven violence remains unchallenged. Without the cooperation of these armed groups, the flow of minerals into global markets would be severely hindered, making them indispensable players in both the local and international exploitation of the DRC's mineral wealth.

The differing impacts on the DRC population are significant. Armed groups and militias directly exploit local communities, subjecting them to violence, forced labor in dangerous conditions with little compensation, and displacement. The government has failed to provide the necessary security to protect its citizens, as corruption has created a system where local and national officials prioritize personal gain over the welfare of the population. Neighboring countries, though often justifying their interventions on security grounds, primarily exploit the DRC's resources, contributing to instability and exploiting local communities, as they often support mining operations controlled by armed groups. Lastly, multinational corporations often source these materials from regions controlled by armed groups, indirectly supporting the conflict, undermining peace efforts despite regulatory frameworks designed to prevent such practices.

For policymakers, these findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that goes beyond external regulations and addresses the deep-rooted governance issues within the DRC. Any attempt to end the conflict must tackle corruption, strengthen the state's capacity to control its territory, and disrupt the economic incentives that fuel violence. Moreover, international actors, including neighboring countries and multinational corporations, must be held accountable for their roles in sustaining the conflict.

Consequently, apart from addressing the factors that shape the conflict, future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of international regulations, such as the Dodd-Frank Act and the Kimberley Process, in curbing the trade of conflict minerals, and exploring more efficient ways to curb the exploitation of the DRC's resources. Additionally, a deeper investigation into the interplay between state

and non-state actors, particularly how the FARDC's involvement in resource extraction complicates efforts for peace, would provide valuable insights into policy reform for lasting stability. Breaking this cycle requires far more than technical reforms or foreign audits. It demands the political transformation of the Congolese state, genuine regional cooperation, and a reconfiguration of international trade regimes that currently enable resource laundering. Without addressing these underlying structural issues, the DRC's minerals will continue to finance violence rather than prosperity.



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