

Background Guide

UN Environmental Program

Topic: Conflict Minerals



I. Introduction to the Committee

The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) is the leading global authority on the environment. Founded in 1972, the UNEP's mission is to inspire, inform, and enable nations and peoples to improve their quality of life, but without compromising future generations. To do this, the UNEP has worked with governments, civil society, the private sector, and numerous United Nations entities to address environmental issues. Later, it was established as a subsidiary organ of the United Nations Environment Assembly in May 1985. UNEP's headquarters are located in Nairobi, Kenya.

As the leading global environmental authority, the UNEP's primary role is to coordinate environmental activities, promote sustainable development, and guide the international community in addressing environmental challenges. The organization's work is focused on helping countries transition to a low-carbon and resource-efficient economy, safeguarding ecosystems, strengthening environmental law, and providing evidence to inform policy decisions. The organization has several divisions including: Communication, Corporate Services, Industry and Economy, Ecosystems, Governance Affairs, Law, Policy and Program, and Early Warning and Assessment.

The UNEP reviews global, regional, and national environmental conditions and trends and plays an important role in the development of national and international norms, policies, and laws. Finally, the UNEP works with institutions to encourage the wise and legal management of the environment so that institutions have the resources and knowledge to make informed policy and legal decisions.

As a subsidiary organ of the United Nations Environmental Assembly, the UNEP works closely with the assembly to provide information and ideas. This includes contributing to the preparation of the agenda of the assembly governing body, providing advice to the assembly, preparing decisions for adoption, arranging thematic and/or programmatic debates, promoting effective ways to facilitate participation of the non-resident members of the committee, and performing any other functions delegated by the UN Environmental Assembly.

II. Statement of the Problem

In politically unstable areas, armed groups often use forced labor to mine minerals. They then sell those minerals to fund their activities, for example, to buy weapons. These so-called conflict minerals, such as tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold, can be found in a lot of the products we use today. Conflict minerals are resources that are mined and used to influence and finance armed conflict, human rights abuses, and violence.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is Africa's second-biggest land mass and is rich in many of these conflict minerals. For example, the country is rich in minerals like lithium and cobalt (UNEP, 2022). In recent years, the demand for minerals has caused environmental damage and started violent conflict and is contributing to much of the country's humanitarian crisis (UNEP, 2022). The DRC has around 3.5 million metric tonnes of cobalt reserves (UNEP, 2022). Minerals such as cobalt and copper are critical to the electrification of energy and transport, which is used in electrical vehicle batteries, solar panels, and wind turbines. The DRC is at the center of the decarbonization transition; however, this massive exploitation of resources also has profound negative consequences, such as the destruction of critical ecosystems and pollution. The governance of the extractive resources also increases inequality. Along with that, cycles of violence have occurred in the DRC over past decades, and natural resources play a role in these cycles (UNEP, 2022). Mining plays a substantial role in the financing of armed groups. Extracting resources also puts a lot of pressure on the country's biodiversity, with poaching, pollution, deforestation, and soil erosion threatening biodiversity (UNEP, 2022).

It is clear that the exploitation of natural resources and related environmental stresses can become significant drivers of violence. The United Nations Environment Program suggests that in the last 60 years, at least 40 percent of all intrastate conflicts have a link to natural resources (Peacekeeping). Since 1990, at least 18 violent conflicts have been fueled by the exploitation of natural resources, whether high-value resources like timber, diamonds, gold, minerals and oil, or scarce ones like fertile land and water (Peacekeeping). For example, certain minerals, especially tantalum, have been linked with funding killings, violence, rape, and other human rights abuses (Business).

III. History/Past UN Action

Conflict minerals have been a more salient issue in the context of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) than any other country. A 20-year conflict between armed groups and the state has resulted in mass murder, rape and other human rights violations. More than 3 million people have been killed in the conflict.

In November of 2009, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1896. The Security Council requested the Group of Experts on the DRC to produce recommendations "for guidelines for the exercise of due diligence" by the importers, processing industries and consumers of mineral products regarding the purchase, sourcing, acquisition and processing of mineral products from the DRC, "drawing inter alia on their reports and taking advantage of work done in other forum" (UNSC). Later, in November 2010, resolution 1952 was unanimously adopted. The Security Council supported taking forward the Group of Experts' recommendations on the guidelines for due diligence (UNSC).

In response to the violence, United States Congress passed the Dodd-Frank Act in 2010 (U.S., 2012). Section 1502 of the bill requires companies to audit their supply chains and disclose whether they have purchased conflict minerals mined in the DRC (U.S., 2012). The goal of Section 1502 is to eliminate demand for conflict minerals by increasing transparency. In 2012, the SEC adopted rules to uphold the Conflict Minerals law by requiring companies to disclose the use of conflict minerals to the agency (U.S., 2012).

In May of 2017, the EU Development Committee issued its own conflict minerals legislation just like the United States. It mandated that companies disclose or eliminate the presence of conflict minerals in their supplies (European Commission).

Latest Developments

The UNEP has been working with the DRC's government to develop a national plan for the extraction of minerals like cobalt. The plan would focus on minimizing the environmental impact of mining. The organization is also exploring whether local and international institutions can help resolve conflict around mineral extraction, including through processes like revenue sharing and dispute resolution.

Beyond the DRC, the UNEP is currently analyzing how the dynamics of mineral extraction unfold in other countries with large deposits of critical minerals, including Brazil, Madagascar, Myanmar, Central African Republic and Kazakhstan (UNEP). Exploitation of mineral resources has the potential to be an opportunity to increase prosperity, but at the same time, presents profound risks to local communities and ecosystems.

For your research, consider the following questions:

1. What is the definition of a conflict mineral?
2. What are some examples of countries where conflict minerals are abundant?
3. Is the country you are representing viewed as a source, transit, and/or destination for conflict minerals?
4. What, if any, international rules and laws regulate the extraction, ethical sourcing, and import/export of conflict minerals?
5. What role does the private sector and governments have in addressing this issue?

IV. Problems a Resolution Should Address

A resolution by the UNEP should address a response to the nexus between state and non-state violence and conflict minerals, especially in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A UNEP

resolution should also address other countries' legislation and encourage companies to reduce or remove all conflict minerals from their supply chain.

Helpful Sources

UN Environmental Program: <https://www.unep.org/>

United Nations Peacekeeping, conflict with natural resources:
<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/conflict-and-natural-resources>

UNEP, DRC and conflict minerals: <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/can-democratic-republic-congos-mineral-resources-provide-pathway-peace>

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