

**Position Paper presented by Patrick Alley, co-founder Global Witness, author of Very Bad People & Terrible Humans.**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) remains one of the most resource-rich yet conflict-ridden countries in the world, and the humanitarian situation is dire. Decades of instability, exacerbated by the presence of armed groups, state corruption, and the exploitation of natural resources, have left millions displaced and living in extreme poverty. Many of the country’s most vulnerable communities reside in areas rich in critical minerals such as cobalt and copper—minerals crucial for the global energy transition.

However, instead of benefiting from this wealth, these communities are often subject to forced displacement, violence, and exploitative labour conditions, including child labour. Women and children, in particular, bear the brunt of these abuses, as they face gender-based violence, health hazards from toxic mining practices, and exclusion from decision-making processes. The lack of consultation and consent in mining projects has only deepened these injustices, stripping communities of their rights while enabling multinational corporations to profit at their expense.

The geopolitical situation in the DRC is deeply intertwined with mineral wealth. Armed groups—such as M23—continue to destabilize the eastern regions, leveraging illicit mineral trade to finance operations and perpetuate violence. The involvement of Rwanda has further complicated the conflict, as government backed militias such as the M23 seek to control lucrative mining areas.

At the same time, global powers—including the EU, China, and the U.S.—are racing to secure critical minerals for their own energy transitions, often turning a blind eye to the environmental and human rights violations in supply chains. Without stronger enforcement of regulations, corporate and state actors will continue prioritising profit over people, exacerbating the very inequalities that fuel conflict.

To achieve a sustainable resolution, governance reforms must be at the centre of any solution. A just energy transition requires mandatory due diligence regulations that hold corporations accountable for human rights abuses and environmental destruction. Mining companies must adhere to regulations and follow best practice standards, with transparency and traceability mechanisms as well as accountability procedures, ensuring that mineral wealth benefits local populations rather than fuelling conflict.

Additionally, community consultation must become a non-negotiable principle in all mining projects to guarantee that communities have a genuine say in decisions affecting their land and livelihoods.

The Netherlands and the EU have a crucial role to play in driving these reforms. By pushing back against the weakening of the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), proper enforcement of the Conflict Minerals Regulation, and enforcing stricter supply chain due diligence under the Critical Raw Materials Act, they can push corporations to adopt responsible sourcing practices.

Furthermore, the Netherlands and the EU should support local civil society organisations advocating for community rights and anti-corruption efforts in the DRC, ensuring that mineral wealth contributes to peace and development rather than perpetuating violence.

**GW position on DRC minerals**

* The EU’s strategic partnership approach aiming at securing its steady supply of critical raw materials provides finance for producer countries through the Global Gateway, the EU’s version of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.
* In February the EU agreed on a [partnership](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_822) on “sustainable raw materials value chains” with Rwanda.
* After having [plundered](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-) 3T (tin, tantalum, tungsten) minerals directly in DRC during the second Congo war, Rwanda has [profited](https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/118/80/pdf/n2411880.pdf?token=k6anYM9yfh37BtGBln&fe=true) from taxing smuggled minerals which are often connected to conflict ever since.
* The strategic partnership is being negotiated at a time when the Rwandan army has [invaded](https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/118/80/pdf/n2411880.pdf?token=k6anYM9yfh37BtGBln&fe=true) DRC and supports the armed group M23 which controls much of the smuggling from some of the largest coltan mines in the world.
* The European Commission proposes “[traceability](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ne/ip_24_822) … at the core of the EU-Rwanda critical raw materials partnership” supposedly as a countermeasure to the risk of sourcing conflict minerals, yet [Global Witness](https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/natural-resource-governance/itsci-laundromat/) has shown that the dominant traceability system for 3T minerals in Rwanda has laundered huge volumes of smuggled conflict minerals since it has been set up.

**Topline Recommendations**

* The Netherlands has suspended aid to Rwanda but should consider bringing in further reaching sanctions against individuals involved with the violence in DRC.
* The Netherlands should conduct an internal audit of the functioning of the national ‘competent authority’ in change of enforcing the EU’s Conflict Minerals Regulation, to ensure they are properly screening for conflict minerals from DRC.
* The Netherlands was [against a deal](https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2024/11/Kristof-Titeca_Policy_Brief_363_vFinal.pdf?type=pdf) to send European money to finance the Rwandan army fighting in Mozambique – it would be good if they could lean on their EU partners to follow their lead.

**Global Witness position on Critical Minerals**

* There has been a surge in demand for critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, and copper spurred on by the energy transition and rising consumer demand.
* Mining has a long history of environmental destruction, human rights abuses, and exploitation. Unscrupulous corporations and investors are targeting resource-rich countries to maximize profits, often at the expense of local communities and ecosystems.
* The transition to clean energy must be fair, equitable, and safe for all. Communities affected by mining must be protected from environmental degradation, social injustices, and governance failures.
* Resource-rich countries and their citizens should benefit from mineral extraction rather than bear its costs. Investments in critical minerals must be made equitably and in a way that respects local communities.

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