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Informal Mining and Financing of War in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has experienced prolonged violence, resulting in the loss of over 12 million lives and widespread displacement. Numerous studies have highlighted the central role of natural resources in fuelling and prolonging conflict in the region. This paper argues that informal mining is a key mechanism through which armed groups sustain violence in the DRC by generating unregulated income and maintaining control over resource-rich territories. The study further contends that targeted reforms and peace-oriented interventions in the informal mining sector could play a transformative role in promoting stability and sustainable peace. Drawing on secondary qualitative data, including audio recordings, YouTube videos, televised news reports and a wide range of online articles, the research captures the voices of miners, affected communities, government representatives, international organisations, and policy experts. The findings demonstrate how informal mining networks both finance conflict and provide livelihood, thereby presenting a dual challenge and opportunity for peacebuilding in the DRC.

Keywords: Artisanal mining, Financing, War, Democratic Republic of Congo, Resource curse

1 Introduction

Natural resources such as oil, timber, water, and minerals are essential sources of income and livelihoods. However, history has shown frequent links between natural resources and conflicts (Humphreys, 2005; Koubi et al., 2014). A possible reason for this is that where government institutions are weak, abundant natural resources can lead to conflicts over control of the resources and to corruption. Valuable natural resources like oil, diamonds, or minerals often become the focus of intense competition among political elites, rebel groups, and local communities, particularly in countries with ethnic divisions like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Under these conditions, armed groups may fight for control of mines, oil fields, or trade routes, as these are funding their operations. It is an incentive for rebel groups to seize control.

In the DRC, various militias have fought for decades over control of mineral-rich territories to sustain their operations and external powers have sought to secure access to critical materials. When natural resources are poorly shared or ineffectively managed, they can lead to strains and tensions that escalate into conflicts or intensify pre-existing conflict dynamics (Majavu, 2010). When certain groups benefit from resource wealth while others are excluded, it breeds resentment and social unrest. There are many reasons to believe that the relationship between minerals and conflicts is complex and multifaceted, involving various economic, social, and environmental factors (Hunter, 2019). Mineral wealth can play a significant role in exacerbating conflict when armed groups, political elites, or corrupt leaders fight over control of valuable minerals, gold, diamonds, or the tantalum containing mineral coltan. Mineral wealth can be a double-edged sword. In resource-rich but institutionally weak states, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), poorly governed resource sectors have historically financed armed groups, prolonged violence, and thereby weakened state legitimacy (Autesserre, 2010). In contrast, where governance structures are strong, transparent, and inclusive, mineral revenues can play a transformative role. They can fund

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critical public goods such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare thereby reducing poverty, addressing grievances, and fostering stability. The difference lies in institutional quality. Good governance ensures that resources are managed for the public benefit rather than for elite enrichment or militia financing. This is evident in countries like Botswana, where prudent management of diamond wealth has contributed to sustained economic growth and political stability. Thus, the potential for natural resources to drive peace depends heavily on how well they are governed and the extent to which institutions promote accountability, inclusiveness, and equitable distribution.

World-wide, countries rich in natural resources tend to experience slower economic growth than resource-poor countries, they have less democracy and worse development outcomes due to governance issues, corruption, and conflicts over resource control (Berman et al., 2017). This relationship between natural resource wealth and conflict is central to the theory of the "resource curse", initially put forward by Paul Collier (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004) who demonstrated a strong connection between mineral wealth and the likelihood of conflict. In particular, countries with abundant oil, minerals, or precious metals are more likely to experience armed conflict, sluggish economic growth, diminished democratic governance, and worse development outcomes than their resource-poor counterparts.

However, it is important to distinguish between the two types of mining that shape the conflict dynamics in the DRC: small-scale "informal" mining, and large-scale mining by international companies. While historically, the DRC's mining sector was dominated by large-scale operations under Belgian rule, this changed during the post-independence period. In 1981, a significant policy shift occurred in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then Zaire) under President Mobutu Sese Seko. The government reversed parts of its earlier policy of "Zairianisation" (the nationalization of foreign-owned businesses and mining operations that had begun in the 1970s). This period had been marked by economic mismanagement, corruption and political instability, which undermined investor confidence. As a result, many large international mining companies scaled back or completely withdrew their operations.

The withdrawal of the mining companies left a vacuum that was increasingly filled by small-scale, artisanal miners, setting the stage for the informal mining economy that has since become central to both the livelihoods of local communities and the conflict dynamics in the DRC. Conflict related to mining and involvement of armed groups in extractive activities significantly escalated following the First Congo War in 1996. DRC witnessed a surge in the militarization of mineral-rich areas, where armed factions, including rebel groups and foreign militias, took control of key mining sites to finance their operations. This illicit exploitation of resources such as coltan, gold, and diamond became a major driver of prolonged conflict and human rights abuses in the region (Autesserre, 2012; Global Witness, 2009).

This transition parallels the broader shift from plantation economies to subsistence-oriented peasant farming, which occurred in several African countries after independence. The move from large-scale, corporate mining to informal, small-scale mining can be seen as a shift from state-controlled, professionally managed exploitation to decentralized, often illegal mining activities that exacerbate local conflicts and empower armed groups.

As noted by Berman et al. (2017), mining operations in conflict zones can fuel armed fighting. Unequal distribution of mining revenues can foster grievances among communities, leading to tensions and conflicts. In the DRC, this inequality is particularly pronounced between the major international mining companies and the local populations engaged in informal mining. The former often control vast resources, but their operations frequently contribute little to the local economy, while informal miners are left to deal with poor working conditions, environmental degradation, and violent exploitation by armed groups.

Moreover, just as in the cases of high-value crops like opium in Afghanistan or cocaine in Colombia, the revenues generated by both formal and informal mining activities in conflict zones can make rebellion more feasible. This funding helps insurgents purchase weapons and supplies, sustain their operations, and expand territorial control. For instance, the diamond trade in Sierra Leone and the control of oil fields in Syria and Iraq highlight how natural resources can finance insurgency movements (Berman et al., 2017). Similarly, in the DRC, minerals like tin and coltan are mined and sold by militias, funding cycles of violence and instability (Global Witness, 2009).

In addition to the local actors, foreign actors are often drawn to the DRC's rich natural resources.

These foreign actors may support or oppose rebel groups for their own economic or strategic interests, further entrenching the conflict. For example, Wagner Group mercenaries in Libya have been linked to foreign economic interests tied to oil fields, similar to how foreign-backed mercenaries or corporations in the DRC may engage in resource extraction for profit or geopolitical influence. A study by Autesserre (2012) deconstructs dominant international narratives about the Congo and shows how these have justified ongoing foreign interventions and the involvement of corporate interest in the resource-rich eastern regions. Cuvelier (2013) examines the weak governance of DRC's mining sector, especially in the East, where foreign companies operate under informal agreements with armed actors to access mineral wealth. Berman et al. (2017) explore how mining in Ituri and Kivu has been shaped by armed groups and foreign firms competing for control, resulting in systemic exploitation and indirect support of conflict economies.

It is also important to examine how such resource-driven conflicts can impact peacebuilding efforts. Informal mining in the DRC does not only fuel violence, but can also play a role in peace restoration if properly managed. Policies aimed at regulating and formalizing small-scale mining, while integrating it with efforts to foster state legitimacy and provide alternative livelihoods, can contribute to reducing the conflict and promoting long-term stability. Within existing literature, Junior et al. (2022), Boutilier (2017), and others emphasize the potential of mining to foster peace and development in post-conflict settings. Mining operations, when appropriately regulated, can offer economic opportunities, such as creating jobs and stimulating local economies, thus contributing to stability. In Sierra Leone, for example, small-scale gold mining has been proposed as a means of addressing youth unemployment (Dresse et al., 2021).

This study investigates informal mining and its role in financing war in the DRC, while exploring the complex interplay between resource wealth, conflict, and peacebuilding. Through a deeper understanding of these dynamics, the paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on how natural resources can both exacerbate and mitigate conflict, with a focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo.

2 Understanding conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Understanding the conflict in the DRC requires acknowledging its multifaceted nature and the interplay of historical, economic, political, and social factors. The territory of the present-day DRC was colonized by Belgium in the late 19th century under King Leopold II who exploited the country for its resources, causing immense suffering and death among the Congolese people. Leopold used violent ways to control his subjects and he did not develop the country. The economy was mainly based on the extraction of raw minerals from the mines that were then sent to Belgium for processing and manufacturing. Otherwise, the most common exported natural resources from the Congo were palm oil, wild rubber, ivory and cotton until the 1920s (Olaopa & Ojakorotu, 2016). King Leopold II used concessionary companies to exploit the mineral resources, especially in Kasai and Katanga. These companies used drastic methods to increase production such as killings, forced labour, torture, violence and coercion (Turner, 2013, p. 148).

By the early 1900s, reports of atrocities (killings, mutilations, forced labor, village burnings) by Leopold's concessionary companies had sparked international outrage, especially from missionaries, activists, and the British press. Under this pressure, Leopold was forced to cede control. In 1908, the Belgian Parliament formally annexed the Congo, ending the Congo Free State experiment. The Belgian Congo became the collective responsibility of the Belgian state, no longer Leopold's private enterprise. Governance was centralized under a colonial governor-general and a civil administration run from Brussels. In theory, this was supposed to be more humane and regulated than Leopold's rule.

While extreme atrocities decreased after 1908, forced labour, racial segregation, paternalism and economic exploitation continued. The colonial economy was restructured to favour Belgian interests, with companies like Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK) dominating copper and cobalt extraction in Katanga, and other corporations controlling rubber, palm oil, and diamonds in Kasai.

After independence, the governance of the country was handed over to the citizens of Congo (now DRC), who had little knowledge about governance. The intention was to ensure continuous exploitation of the resources even after independence. However, almost immediately after independence, on 11th July 1960, Katanga province which is rich with gold, uranium, copper and cobalt, was declared independent under Governor Moise Tshombe who had close ties to Belgian mining companies. Congo would have lost a huge part of its mineral resources without Katanga. The secession triggered a struggle for power in the recently independent state, with Lumumba suing the UN for intervention to suppress the secessionist movement, but the UN rejected his plea. The country then faced another secession attempt in Kasai which is rich in diamonds. Lumumba then requested military assistance from the Soviet Union who airlifted Congolese troops to invade Kasai. This decision later led to Lumumba's assassination by rebels who were backed by Western powers (Brydges, 2013).

Mobutu ruled with an iron fist from 1965 to 1997, enriching himself and his allies while the country's infrastructure deteriorated. In the First Congo War 1996-1997, Mobutu was overthrown by Laurent-Désiré Kabila with the support of Rwanda and Uganda. This marked the beginning of a series of conflicts (Stearns, 2023; Venugopalan, 2016). The Second Congo War, 1998-2003, opposed a rebel movement, the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD), and the Congolese government. It involved multiple African nations and various armed groups. It was sparked by Kabila's falling out with his former allies Rwanda and Uganda. It became the deadliest conflict since World War II, causing millions of deaths, primarily from disease and starvation (Bjarnadóttir, 2017).

Despite the official end of the war in 2003, the eastern regions, particularly Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu, have remained hotspots for conflict. Various militias, including the Allied Defence Forces (ADF, a Ugandan rebel group), Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the March 23 Movement (M23), have perpetuated violence. Combatants, civil society and political elites began to operationalize ethnic identity leading to the exclusion and marginalization of others. This played a significant role in the conflict, often exacerbated by political manipulation and competition for resources (Ntung, 2019). The DRC's vast mineral wealth, including coltan, diamonds, gold and tin, has fuelled conflict as armed groups vie for control of these resources. The illicit trade of these minerals finances militias and perpetuates violence. The conflicts in Congo have not been for political reasons alone; economic factors have played a substantial role. After their 1998 conquest of the eastern DRC, the armies of Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe, with the assistance of Congolese soldiers in the DRC, spent a year looting valuable resources found in the DRC (Venugopalan, 2016:7).

3 Methodological approach

This study employed secondary qualitative data sources. These include audio and video materials shared on YouTube channels as well as TV news posted online and diverse categories of articles available online. The process of reviewing literature started with what the authors knew about civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Different strategies were used by the authors to collect and analyse secondary data. In order to achieve the research objectives, the study relied more on online material, books and journal articles that the authors found through online Google search and the University of KwaZulu-Natal library. The focus was on sources that cover the voices of those in informal mining, communities, local and international organisations, government official statements as well as experts' analysis and official reports (Table 1). Key words appropriate to the topic under study such as informal, mining, financing, war, Democratic Republic of Congo were used in a Google search.

After extensive examination of the literature, a theoretical knowledge gap was identified from this literature search. In this respect, the authors saw the need to provide a nuanced theoretical approach to the study of the role of informal mining in financing war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The study employed qualitative methods. Polit & Beck (2004) argue that qualitative research emphasises the holistic and dynamic aspects of the human experience and it endeavours to capture the objective. This technique was used to explore the role of informal mining in financing war in the Democratic Republic of Congo because it provides outstanding analysis of secondary data sources and theoretical insights that cannot be quantified. According to Bryman (2012), qualitative research aims to discover hidden ideas, gain new insights, and increase knowledge of problems that are not clearly understood.

Table 1: Indicative list of YouTube news channels reporting on mining and financing war in DRC.

Platform	Subscribers	Mining and financing war (URL)	Year	Views	Comments
BBC NEWS Africa	1.39M	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEOmI5bc3HU	2022	87,401	341
VAO Africa	202K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRycOFnNZFk	2023/2024	280,816	441
We Love Africa	599K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2xPd2_xIuM	2024	91K	510
ARTE, tv	418K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fILNxosR0Q	2024	190K	223
TRT Africa	341K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJTedufEZjM	2023	1.6K	1

Note. Subscriber, view and comment counts are shown as displayed on YouTube at the time of capture. Abbreviations: K $= 10^3$, M $= 10^6$. URLs may wrap. Data as of 17 July 2024.

In addition, thematic analysis was then used to analyse the available literature. Based on the diversity of social media platforms, data collection was conducted manually through a technique of identifying the relevant sources using keywords. Data were collected in early March 2024 and those in French were all translated into English. While ethical principles must be observed in any research undertaking involving human subjects, researchers need to seek the informed consent of the participants whose data are used. There is, however a lack of consensus regarding the ethical question of whether one must seek informed consent when using social media data, as that data is publicly available on social media platforms. Because of these concerns and potential biases, researchers' well-reasoned judgment was required when using social media as a data source. Each source of information was carefully considered as to whether it was restricted by its producer. However, no restriction applied to any of the sources used in this study. All sources were publicly available.

4 Results

This study aims to explore and examine the role of informal mining in financing war in the DRC, and also the possible contribution that informal mining can make in restoring peace to this war-ravaged nation. This section provides the findings of the study and centres around two key variables. These include, first, the role of minerals in war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and second, the possible contribution of informal mining to restoring peace in the DRC. It is worth mentioning that informal mining is analysed through the broader perspective of mining in the DRC.

4.1 *Informal mining and war financing in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)*

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a country endowed with vast natural resources including biodiversity, timber, and minerals such as coltan, cobalt, copper, diamonds, gold, and tin. These resources are essential for various global industries, including electronics and renewable energy. Despite this abundance, the DRC remains one of the poorest countries in the world, suffering from significant infrastructure deficits and an economy heavily dependent on agriculture and forestry. This paradox, of wealth in natural resources coupled with widespread poverty, is often referred to as the "resource curse" (Biayi et al., 2022).

In the DRC, control over lucrative resources like minerals has been a central driver of conflict. Various armed groups compete for control over these valuable resources, and this struggle has been exacerbated by both local and international interests. The DRC possesses the world's largest coltan reserves and significant cobalt deposits, accounting for 70% of the world's known cobalt reserves. Yet, the DRC has not reaped the benefits of these resources. As Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai stated before her passing, "When we look at the conflicts in Africa, it's always about the resources" (TRT Africa, see Table 1).

Violent conflicts tied to the exploitation of the DRC's natural resources have burdened the country for decades. Kinyua (2017) asserts that external forces have deliberately fueled conflicts by supplying armed groups with weapons, further destabilizing the country. The exploitation of minerals such as tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold has been linked to the funding of rebel groups, turning war into a profitable activity with international investors involved (Hanai, 2021). While these resources benefit armed groups and corrupt actors, they are not particularly attractive to major multinational mining companies, which focus on large-scale investments in exchange for concessions from the government.

Importantly, the DRC has seen a shift in the mining sector over the past several decades. During the Belgian colonial era, the mining industry was dominated by large, foreign-owned companies, but after independence, small-scale "informal" mining began to take over, particularly in conflict-prone regions. This shift mirrors the broader transition in many African countries from plantation economies to subsistence farming, as control over resources shifted from large corporations to local communities (Parker & Vadheim, 2017). While large companies are primarily interested in securing access to valuable mining concessions from the government, they are less inclined to engage with artisanal mining activities, which they view as too fragmented and risky.

Small-scale mining, however, remains deeply entrenched in the conflict. Armed groups control mining sites, extort local miners, and smuggle minerals across borders to fund their operations. This situation has led to the involvement of international actors who profit from the illicit mineral trade. The BBC reported on the illicit movement of gold in DRC, with revenue flowing to armed groups that destabilize the region (BBC News Africa, 2023). These armed groups smuggle minerals such as gold across borders into Uganda and other neighbouring countries (Anderson, 2023). Reports from Cuvelier and Raeymaekers (2002) and Global Witness (2005) have highlighted the complicity of European companies in the illegal coltan trade, as well as the involvement of Rwandan actors in smuggling operations.

Investigations by the UN Panel of Experts have shown that armed groups control artisanal mining sites, engaging in illegal extraction and smuggling to finance their activities (Hanai, 2021). This ongoing struggle for control has made it exceedingly difficult to manage the country's resources in ways that benefit the public (Kalombo, 2022).

Despite efforts by the international community to address these issues, the situation remains dire. Both diplomatic and military interventions have failed to stop the violence. International legal frameworks, such as the United Nations' efforts to protect natural resources during armed conflicts, have proven ineffective in preventing the exploitation of the DRC's mineral wealth (del Congo, 2020). The presence of foreign troops, such as those deployed by the United Nations Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), has been met with criticism. Some DRC residents argue that these forces, despite their peacekeeping mandate, are complicit in fueling the conflict, as they are perceived to have their own interests in the country's resources (VOA Africa, 2023).

The DRC government, which relies heavily on revenue from mineral concessions, is unlikely to profit from small-scale artisanal mining or smuggling activities. Instead, the government seeks large-scale investments from multinational companies. However, companies are reluctant to operate in conflict zones, fearing the instability that requires heavy protection. This creates a paradox: The DRC's vast resources could, in theory, be an incentive for both the government and foreign actors to eliminate armed groups and restore peace. However, peace has not materialized, and the actors benefiting from the current chaos continue to fuel the conflict.

Olanrewaju et al. (2020) argue that natural resources have historically been instruments of war and will likely continue to play this role in the future. Rebel and political groups compete with the government for control of high-value minerals, which can easily be smuggled and traded for arms (Mhandu & Mugambiwa, 2021). In the eastern DRC, areas controlled by rebels are relatively peaceful, as the rebels depend on continuous mineral production for illegal distribution (Krauser, 2020). This pattern of exploitation has become deeply entrenched in the region's political economy.

4.2 Efforts to address the resource curse in the Democratic Republic of Congo

International efforts to address this issue have often been criticized for their failure to halt the flow of illicit resources. The U.S. Government Accountability Office has reported on how armed groups profit from the production and sale of minerals to the international market (Anderson, 2023). At the same time, neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Rwanda benefit from the smuggling of the DRC's gold, as reported by Matthysen et al. (2013).

The DRC's resource wealth has paradoxically fueled conflict rather than development. The transition from colonial-era large-scale mining to small-scale, informal mining has played a critical role in shaping the conflict dynamics. While multinational corporations are not interested in small-scale artisanal mining, they are keen on securing government concessions for large-scale operations. However, they are deterred by the ongoing violence and instability. This creates a situation where both the DRC government and foreign actors have an incentive to restore peace, yet the conflict continues to rage, fuelled by the greed of armed groups, corrupt officials, and illicit trade networks.

The solution to the DRC's resource curse lies in the dismantling of these networks and the creation of stable, transparent systems that can manage the country's wealth in a way that benefits its people. Until that happens, the cycle of conflict and exploitation will persist, and the vast mineral wealth of the DRC will remain a source of contention rather than a driver of prosperity.

4.3 Role of mining and peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The term 'peacebuilding' first emerged in the 1970s through the work of Johan Galtung, who called for the creation of peacebuilding structures to promote sustainable peace (Issifu, 2016: 11). The concept of peacebuilding has different definitions across various departments, institutions, schools, agencies, and scholars (Issifu, 2015). For instance, Call and Cousens (2007) defined peacebuilding as actions undertaken by international or national actors to institutionalize peace, understood as the absence of armed conflict (negative peace). Peacebuilding refers to a process that seeks to prevent the onset, escalation, continuation, or recurrence of conflict and violence in societies. It involves a variety of activities aimed at promoting social, economic, and political development, as well as fostering a culture of peace, justice, and reconciliation (Hussain & Gbadeyan, 2024). Strategies for conflict prevention may include early warning systems, mediation, and dialogue, as well as efforts to improve governance, reduce poverty, and promote human rights (Akpan & Ekpenyong, 2020).

Several studies have indicated that mining can generate peace dividends at the local and national level and contribute to the economic growth that supports the underlying socio-economic conditions needed for peace (Eshun, 2020). Eshun further elaborates that mining involves a range of activities such as working in partnership with local communities, providing socially sensitive investments, developing relationships with employees, customers, and their families, as well as involvement in activities that promote environmental conservation and the development of sustainable livelihoods (Eshun, 2020). Mining can play a significant role in restoring peace by contributing to economic growth and reconstruction efforts. In post-conflict settings, mining can provide a source of internal revenue to spur economic development. However, it is essential to address governance weaknesses and suppress illicit mining and smuggling of minerals to ensure that mining contributes positively to peacebuilding efforts (Tjoetra et al., 2024).

The study by Paarlberg-Kvam (2021) focuses on corporate and state-level extractive actors operating on an industrial scale and provided cases of countries such as Peru, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, Liberia and, more recently, Afghanistan, where mining restores peace after war, for example, by providing new sources of income, jobs, and improved infrastructure. It even helps meet basic needs and opens the country's economy to foreign investment. Additionally, formalizing artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) can be prioritized as part of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction processes, contributing to the realization of sustainable development based on peace, justice, and strong institutions (Ankenbrand et al., 2021). It is important to consider the implications of the Business for Peace research agenda, as it may socialize businesses into contributing to peacebuilding but also elevates companies to legitimate authorities, despite their limitations as peacebuilders. There are many reasons to believe that a socially inclusive approach to mining with stronger environmental regulations and increased community participation can balance economic benefits with sustainable peacebuilding.

However, a clear distinction must be made between small-scale "informal" mining and the operations of large-scale multinational mining companies in the DRC. Historically, during Belgian colonial rule, mining in the DRC was dominated by large international companies, with extraction largely controlled by foreign actors. After independence, particularly during periods of conflict and instability, small-scale artisanal and informal mining emerged as a significant economic activity, especially in the eastern regions of the DRC.

This historical shift from major multinational companies to small-scale, informal mining in the DRC is crucial when analysing the dynamics of peacebuilding and economic recovery. While large multinational mining corporations contribute substantial revenues to the national economy, the informal mining sector though economically significant$_{\text{has}}$ often been linked with poverty, weak governance, and instability. Informal mining operations typically lack proper regulation, leading to issues such as illegal mining, environmental degradation, and the funding of armed groups.

In the DRC, as demonstrated earlier, all areas of development are affected by protracted conflict. Unemployment, poor infrastructure, revenue erosion, social disintegration, corruption, and weak governance are dominant features of the DRC's social, economic, and political landscape. Considering the importance of mining in the reconstruction process, there are many reasons to believe that, if used effectively, responsible mining can generate significant revenue and create job opportunities. A report by Statista (2024) shows how the global mining industry contributes significantly to GDP in many countries, with a total value of over $2.1 trillion in 2023. The World Bank (2022) shows how in developing nations, mining contributes 10-25% of total export earnings. Globally, mining employs over 20 million people and supports over 100 million jobs through services and supply chains (International Labour Organisation, 2003). This economic development can provide a stable livelihood for local communities, reducing poverty and decreasing the likelihood of conflicts over resources. In addition, mining projects often lead to the development of infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals. This improved infrastructure can benefit local communities and contribute to overall stability by enhancing access to essential services. Taxes and royalties from mining operations can be used to fund community development projects, education, and healthcare. Effective management of these funds can contribute to social stability and peace.

Furthermore, involving local communities in decision-making processes and ensuring they benefit from mining activities can help build trust and reduce tensions. Participatory approaches to mining can empower communities and foster cooperation between members of different communities, as most conflict is rooted in competition over control of access to minerals. Mining companies can support or facilitate conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives. By addressing grievances, promoting dialogue, and working with local and national authorities, companies can help mitigate tensions. Responsible mining practices require strong governance and transparency. Implementing and supporting initiatives for better governance can reduce corruption and promote the rule of law, contributing to a more stable and peaceful environment. Supporting and promoting legal and ethical mining practices can help combat illegal mining and related violence. By ensuring that mining activities adhere to legal standards, it is possible to reduce conflicts associated with illegal operations.

It is important to note that for these positive outcomes to be realized, mining activities must be managed responsibly, with a focus on sustainability, community welfare, and ethical practices. This means avoiding scenarios where mining exacerbates existing conflicts or leads to new forms of violence. Collaboration with local communities, government agencies, and international organizations is essential to ensure that mining contributes to peacebuilding rather than undermining it.

5 Conclusions

The aim of this study is to explore and critically examine the multifaceted role of informal mining in financing the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as well as the potential contributions informal mining could make to restoring peace in a war-torn region. By analysing the findings, it becomes clear that natural resources, particularly mining, have been central to perpetuating and intensifying the prolonged conflict in the DRC. Competition over both domestic and global demand for natural resources has led to the emergence of numerous armed groups, with natural resources especially minerals serving as their primary source of financing.

In a context marked by extreme poverty, insufficient economic opportunities, and inadequate governance, informal mining has become a critical means of self-enrichment for local communities and armed groups alike. This informal sector, often operating outside the realm of regulation, is perceived as a way for individuals and factions to gain wealth, power, and influence. Consequently, violence has been employed as a strategy to maintain control over mining operations, protect valuable resources, and enforce dominance over rival factions and local populations.

The study also highlights the role of weak governance structures in the DRC which, coupled with pervasive corruption, further exacerbates the situation. The lack of effective state control, along with the involvement of external actors driven by the desire to exploit the country's mineral wealth, has contributed to the prolongation of the conflict. This combination of local and international actors, each with their own economic and political interests, continues to fuel violence and instability.

Given this complex dynamic, it is evident that informal mining, while a critical driver of conflict, also presents an opportunity for peacebuilding efforts. The study contemplates the potential for transforming informal mining into a tool for stability and peace by instituting better regulation, creating economic opportunities that are less reliant on exploitation, and promoting more inclusive governance frameworks. However, any such transformation would require addressing the underlying issues of poverty, corruption, and external interference that currently enable the ongoing conflict.

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