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OPINION

DRC: Conflict minerals movement at a crossroads

Have good intentions and wrong assumptions led to bad results in the struggle against the Congo's “conflict minerals”?

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Men dig for minerals at the Mudere mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo [AFP]

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When we think of the Democratic Republic of Congo today, we may think of bloody resource wars where

women are being raped by armed groups trying to gain access to, and control of, the country's minerals. If we do so, it's largely because of the work of numerous NGOs, advocacy organisations, and activists who have been campaigning for several years to reduce sexual violence and conflict in eastern Congo by "cleaning up" the region's mineral trade.

The most significant policy result of this work to date, Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Act, was passed by the US Congress and signed into law in July 2010. It requires companies registered on the US stock market to report on an annual basis whether minerals sourced from the eastern DRC or neighbouring countries are financing conflict. This has in turn led to recent announcements by electronics giants including Apple and Intel that more of their products will be conflict-free in the future.

However, a coalition of around 70 Congo and Congolese experts has written an open letter warning that, in the Congo itself, the movement risks "contributing to, rather than alleviating, the very conflicts they set out to address". While not calling to keep transparency and regulation at the lowest level, the letter urges governments, companies, and other stakeholders to carefully rethink and increase their engagement on the issue.

More than four years after the signing of the Dodd-Frank Act, the coalition argues, "only a small fraction of the hundreds of mining sites in the eastern DRC have been reached by traceability or certification efforts". As a result, the majority of mine sites remain "beyond the pale, forced into either illegality or collapse as certain international buyers have responded to the legislation by going 'Congo-free'".

Damaging consequences

This, the letter continues, has had a number of damaging consequences. Many Congolese miners have lost their jobs, with some joining armed groups as a way to earn a quick buck in the absence of alternative employment opportunities. At the same time, the region's black market in minerals has been strengthened, playing into the hands of the very mafia and rebel networks the campaign was attempting to starve of mineral revenue in the first place.

The letter also argues that due to the several month delay between when a mine site is audited and when it's declared "conflict-free", the declaration is far from reliable given the dynamic and fluid movement of armed groups (or their civilian clothed friends and family) in and out of mine sites.

The coalition voices concern that the narrow focus on a technical approach to cleaning up the mineral trade as a means to reduce violence and help end conflict is diverting scarce human and financial resources away from finding a political solution, as well as from resolving other, arguably more important, causes of violence and conflict in the region. Indeed, the letter claims that only a small minority of the country's conflicts are linked to minerals, highlighting the relative unimportance of "conflict minerals" in relation to other issues, such as land conflict, identity, and political contest.

The letter closes with several recommendations, including the need for improved consultation with Congolese stakeholders, as well as a widening of the policy lens to ensure that "legislation passed by national governments and steps such as those outlined by Apple or Intel [are] grounded in a more holistic approach that is better tailored to local realities".

The "conflict minerals" approach appears to be at a critical juncture, facing two possible futures. If the required improvements recommended in the letter are undertaken, a reliable, viable system ensuring more ethical products are produced and consumed and leading to improvements in the daily lives of the Congolese is possible. Alternatively, the movement risks descending into "greenwashing" of the worst kind, whereby multinationals and others improve their public image, while in the Congo - the country on which this image is founded - no solutions are found, just new problems created. New problems, that the international community will respond to with yet another wave of external intervention into the Congo.

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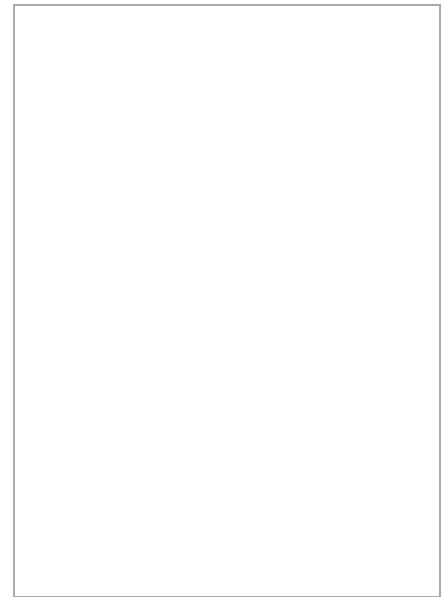
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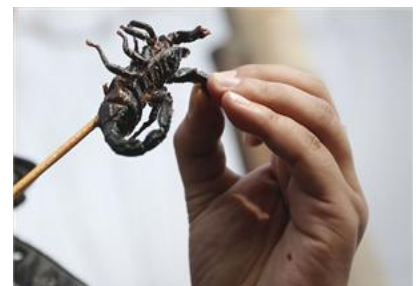
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