

 **FREE SLAVES**

2025

Armed Actors, Modern Slavery, and Cocoa Smuggling

An Investigation into the Cocoa
Sector in the Democratic
Republic of Congo

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**“WHAT IS THERE BEHIND THE CHOCOLATE THAT WE
BUY FOR OUR CHILDREN?**

**THERE ARE CHILDREN WORKING, THERE ARE MEN
AND WOMEN IN FORCED LABOR, THERE ARE ARMED
GROUPS AND SOLDIERS, THERE IS ALL THE VIOLENCE
OF THE EASTERN DRC”**



INTERVIEW,
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GLOSSARY



Child Labor - Work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that: (a) is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or (b) interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. [Convention No.138 on Minimum Age; Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour; Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989]



Cocoa Supply Chain - Network of all the individuals, organizations, resources, and technology involved in the production, processing, and sale of cocoa and cocoa-based products. Links on the cocoa chain include the producers of the cocoa, intermediaries that buy and sell cocoa, eventual exporters that export the cocoa beans abroad, the manufacturers that turn cocoa beans in coca-based products, the transporters that move and deliver cocoa-based products, retailers that sell cocoa-based products, and consumers that buy cocoa-based products.

Forced Labor - All work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily. According to the ILO, indicators of forced labor include abuse of vulnerability, deception, restriction of movement, isolation, physical and sexual violence, intimidation and threats, retention of identity documents, withholding of wages, debt bondage, abusive working and living conditions, and excessive overtime [Convention No.29 on Forced Labor; ILO Indicators of Forced Labor]

Modern Slavery - Refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power. It covers a set of specific legal concepts including forced labour, debt bondage, forced marriage, slavery and slavery-like practices, and human trafficking. [Slavery Convention, 1926; Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (Slavery Convention), 1956]



Natural Resource - Any biological, mineral, or aesthetic asset afforded by nature without human intervention that can be used for some form of benefit, whether material or immaterial. Examples of assets that can be considered natural resources include forests, surface water and groundwater, and the fertile lands or the soil and minerals within them, as well as energy resources such as petroleum, natural gas, and heated water contained within layers of rock. Any natural resource related to farming (i.e., crops and livestock) is an agricultural resource.

KEY FINDINGS

**01**

Armed groups and criminal gangs attack cocoa-growing communities and kill most farmers. Some members of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC) are also involved in raiding cocoa farms and illegally appropriating their produce.

02

Those who are not killed are either forced to abandon their cocoa farms or placed into conditions of forced labor, where they are forced to harvest cocoa for the armed actors' exclusive benefit. Children are also abducted and forced to work on cocoa farms under the armed actors' control.

03

The cocoa forcibly harvested and collected by predatory actors is smuggled into Uganda. The economic incentive for traders and exporters to operate through illicit channels is significant, especially in comparison to legal trade, where returns are lower and bureaucratic requirements higher.

04

The DRC and Uganda are failing in their commitment to address the illegal exploitation of agriculture and natural resources. The corruption and collusion prevalent among border officials, customs authorities, and armed forces on both sides of the border facilitate this reality.



INTRODUCTION



The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is exceptionally rich in agricultural and natural resources, including cobalt, copper, tantalum, petroleum, diamonds, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, uranium, coal, timber, coffee, cotton, cocoa. Those resources are key to the country's economy, as they are exported worldwide for use in electronics, jewellery manufacturing, green energy, the food industry, and many other sectors. However, the extraction of those resources has too often been controlled by armed, predatory, and corrupted actors and has been associated with a wide range of modern slavery practices.

The most common form of modern slavery associated to agricultural and natural resources in the DRC is forced labor, whereby men and women are forced to work to extract resources such as gold, diamonds, copper, and timber or to transport those resources after they have been extracted. Children, driven by household poverty and lack of access to education, are also found in situations of child labor in mines and fields.

Some children may be abducted by armed actors, others may be deceived through false promises of earning opportunities, others may be trapped in forced labor situations alongside their families.

Similarly, debt bondage is also a form of slavery widely employed by predatory actors in their attempt to exploit agricultural and natural resources in the DRC. They attract laborers with the prospect of a stable job on agricultural fields or mining sites, they advance money for the purchase of food and tools, and then they manipulate the interest rate of the loan to create a situation where laborers cannot repay their debt and cannot leave.

Finally, sexual exploitation has also been connected to the illicit exploitation of agricultural and natural resources in the DRC, as predatory actors use it as a tactic to assert control over territories and resources (e.g., creating situations of displacement) or as a tactic to attract, retain, and control workers – especially in mining areas.

However, while armed actors' use of modern slavery in the mining sector of the DRC is well documented, much less is known when it comes to agricultural production. To address this gap, this research aims to investigate the intersection between modern slavery and illicit appropriation of resources in the DRC's agricultural sector, with a special focus on cocoa. The production of cocoa, in fact, seems especially interesting to explore for several reasons.

First, cocoa plantations in the DRC are largely concentrated in the Eastern regions of the country, where the intersection between armed conflict, illicit appropriation of resources, and modern slavery is highest. Second, the DRC cocoa sector has been under constant expansion over the past two decades, making it a sector of increasing relevance to the country's economy.

Third, while cocoa used to be considered "militia-proof" because its true value is not realized until it is processed, reality on the ground calls for further and deeper investigation. In fact, it seems that armed actors in North Kivu and Ituri have been increasingly recognizing the economic value of cocoa and have been developing a considerable interest for the crop.

The evidence collected in this research will be crucial to address the current lacuna in knowledge and enhance our understanding of how exploitation of cocoa and modern slavery practices intersect in the DRC. Most importantly, however, the evidence collected in this research will help to guide interventions capable of addressing the risk of modern slavery in the DRC's cocoa sector and capable of protecting the (human and labor) rights of civilians who live in the cocoa-growing areas of the DRC's Eastern provinces.

Box 1 - The DRC at a Glance

- With an estimated population of more than 100 million, the DRC is the **fourth most populous country in Africa**.
- The DRC borders with **9 countries**: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia.
- There are over **500 tribal groups** in the DRC, and more than 240 languages.
- Due to the detrimental effect that decades of war and political instability have had on economic growth, the DRC is **one of the countries with the lowest GDP per capita**, \$653.66 in 2022.
- The DRC is exceptionally **rich in natural resources**, including cobalt, copper, tantalum, petroleum, diamonds, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, uranium, coal, timber. The DRC also has 200 million acres of **cultivable land**.





AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONFLICT IN THE EASTERN DRC



The roots of the civil conflict in the DRC date back to the 1990s, to the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. In 1994, the radical Hutu regime was in power in Rwanda and committed a genocide against 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus before being defeated by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Afterwards, at least 2 million Rwandese fled into the DRC, which was still known as Zaire until 1997 (Council on Foreign Relations 2025). Among the Hutus who left Rwanda for the Eastern DRC, some were former members of the defeated Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and of the paramilitary Interahamwe that led the 1994 genocide. In the DRC, they went on to form the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), an armed movement committed to overthrowing the Rwandan regime led by the RPF and replacing it with a Hutu government (UNSC 2014).

Rwanda regarded the presence of Hutu rebel groups in the DRC (and Congolese president Mobutu Sese Seko's tolerance of them) as an existential security threat. In 1996, Rwanda invaded the DRC, starting the First Congo War.

The invasion expanded as Uganda, Burundi, Angola, and Eritrea also joined Kigali (Council on Foreign Relations 2025). While Rwanda's actions were officially intended to dismantle the security threat posed by the DRC-based génocidaires (Rwandans accused of having been involved in the genocide of the Tutsi), other reasons also contributed to motivate the invasion. One reason was the intention to overthrow Mobutu and install in Kinshasa a puppet regime – a goal that enjoyed the support of other regional states (Kennes 2005). Another reason, which was emphasized by the UN Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo (UNSC 2001), was the interest for plundering the DRC's rich natural resources – minerals, wood, crops, and wildlife.

Backed by Kigali, Kampala, and Luanda, the armed group Alliances of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) captured Kinshasa, overthrew President Mobutu in May 1997, and installed Laurent Kabila as the DRC's president.

Box 2 - Armed Actors Active in the Eastern DRC

- **Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).** Islamist insurgent group with Ugandan roots founded in 1996. Deeply entrenched in the political and economic dynamics of the Rwenzori region, since 2019 it has split in two factions.
- **Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC).** Army of the DRC, it comprises the former Zairian armed forces, integrated rebel groups from the Second Congo War, and militias that became part of it more recently.
- **Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).** Ethnic Hutu group opposed to Tutsi influence and power, was founded in 2000 from the amalgamation of other groups of Rwandan refugees. Today, its size and strength are the subject of debate.
- **East Africa Community Regional Force (EACRF).** Multinational mission established by the East African Community (EAC) comprising troops from Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda. Deployed in the Eastern DRC from November 2022 to December 2023 to restore peace and stability.
- **Mai Mai militias.** Community-based militia groups in the Eastern DRC formed to defend local communities and territories. In North Kivu, some of the most active groups include Mai Mai Sheka, Raia Mutomboki, and Mai Mai Kirikicho.
- **March 23 Movement (M23).** Claiming to represent the Congolese Tutsi population, was formed in 2012 in response to the poor implementation of a 2009 peace treaty between the government and its predecessor, the National Congress for the Defence of the People. Backed by Rwanda, it is the most threatening armed group in the East.
- **Rwandan Defence Force (RDF).** Army of Rwanda, it succeeded the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA). The latter was the military wing of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) following the 1994 civil war. Over the years, it has deployed multiple times in the Eastern DRC. Most recently, reports have pointed to RDF troops fighting in support of the M23 group.
- **Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC).** Peacekeeping mission deployed to the Eastern DRC from December 2023 until March 2025 to assist the government restore peace and security. It comprised troops from Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania.
- **Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF).** Previously known as the National Resistance Army, it is the army of Uganda. Over the years, it has deployed multiple times in the Eastern DRC to fight armed groups believed to pose a security threat to Uganda.



- **United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).** UN peacekeeping force established by the Security Council in 1999 to monitor the peace process of the Second Congo War. A planned withdrawal from the country is currently on hold due to the volatile security situation.
- **Wazalendo.** Local resistance groups of fighters in North Kivu made up of local community fighters allied with the FARDC military and opposed to the M23.



As Kabila took power, he signed contracts with several foreign companies and businessmen, paving the way to the large-scale illicit plundering of coffee beans, livestock, and other natural resources that took place throughout 1997 (UNSC 2001, 6-7).

In July 1998, Kabila demanded that the Rwandan and Ugandan armies exit the DRC, as his credibility was being undermined by the fact that many Congolese saw him as a pawn of regional powers. He also allowed Hutu armed groups to re-organize along the Eastern border (Council on Foreign Relations 2025). On August 2, 1998, Rwandan armed forces, followed by Uganda and Burundi, invaded the DRC in what became the Second Congo War. As other countries in the region were drawn into the fighting (Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Chad were supporting Kabila's government against Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi), the conflict came to be known as "Africa's World War".

Again, a mixture of security, political, economic, and financial objectives laid behind the foreign intervention. On the one hand, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, wanted to counter the threat posed by Hutu forces in the Eastern DRC and protect their countries from insurgent groups that allegedly aimed to use the area as a basis from which to launch attacks. On the other hand, they had an interest in the rich natural resources of the DRC and – together with their Congolese allies, such as the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) – systematically exploited diamonds, gold, coltan, cassiterite, cobalt, timber, coffee, okapis, gorillas, and elephants. Private companies, political figures, military officials, and businessmen were all involved (UNSC 2001, 8-13). Significantly, many of those resources were extracted through forced labor, labor exploitation, and child labor (UNSC 2021, 13-4) – which indicates the deep roots of the patterns of slavery and plundering that will be described in this report.

A peace agreement was eventually signed in 2002 and the war officially ended on July 18, 2003, with the establishment of the Transitional Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Nonetheless, the DRC has continued to be mired in vicious cycles of violence between different rebel groups and between rebel groups and government forces. The Eastern DRC, in particular, continues to be the epicenter of the conflict. The combination of lucrative natural resources, a weak and distant central government, and the presence of more than 120 militias with mixed allegiance to predatory neighbours are among the factors that most breed instability in the Eastern regions.

Since the First Congo War in 1996, atrocities and human rights violations have also been committed in the DRC against the civilian population (UNOHCHR 2010). These include enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions, sexual violence, child labor, recruitment and use of children as soldiers, torture, and forcible displacement (UNOHCHR 2022; Save the Children 2024). Sexual violence, in particular, has been used by parties to the conflict as a weapon of war to destabilize populations, destroy communities, and displace families (Mukwege 2022; Peterman et al. 2011). Approximately 6 million people are estimated to have been killed over the years by the direct and indirect impacts of the war, including violent death, disease, and famine (World Without Genocide n.d.).

Over the course of 2023 and 2024, violence has been again on the rise, with fighting between the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) and the March 23 Movement (M23) (UNSC 2024). Clashes have been particularly intense in Bahunde, Bashali, Katsiru, and Mweso towns (Masisi territory); Bukumbo town (Rutshuru territory); Buhumba and Kibumba towns (Nyiragongo territory). The city of Goma, once captured by the M23 in November 2012, has also become a hotspot of the fighting, with rebel forces rapidly advancing towards the city and ultimately asserting their control over the urban center, where 2 million people and 1 million internally displaced people (IDPs) live (Kabumba et al.2025).

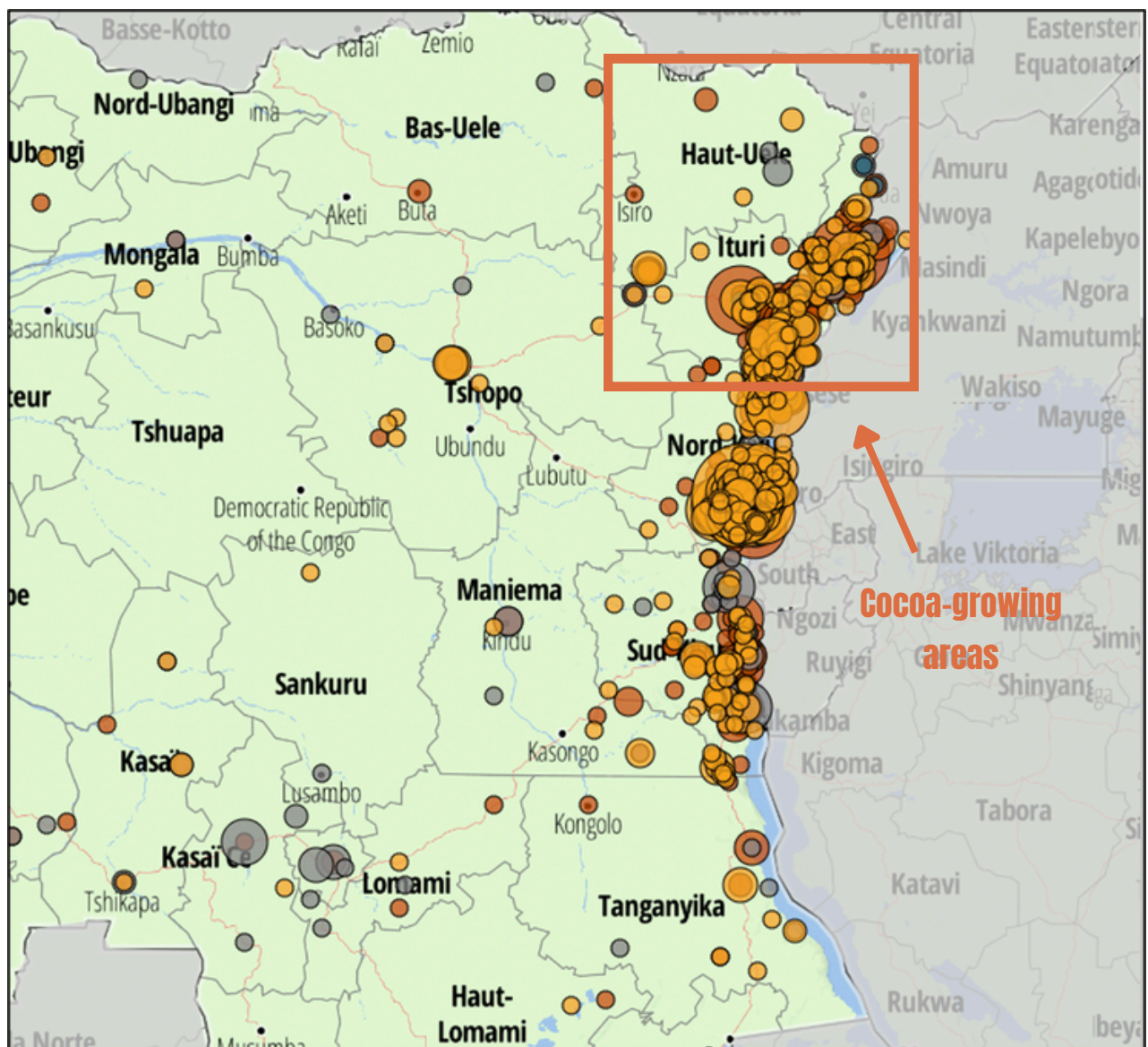
Escalating clashes between non-state armed groups and the Congolese army in the Eastern DRC have been intensifying one of the world's most alarming and most protracted humanitarian crises. Several health facilities have been destroyed and those left operational face critical shortages of medical supplies, staff, and fuel for ambulances (UNFPA 2025). The threat of infectious diseases has also multiplied (cholera, malaria, measles, meningitis, mpox and tuberculosis) and the supply of clean drinking water in major urban centers has been disrupted (WHO 2025). Malnutrition has also worsened dramatically, contributing to making people more vulnerable to diseases (WHO 2025). While all civilians are affected, the threat is especially acute for IDPs: as of September 2024, the Eastern DRC had an IDP population of 5,488,323, distributed as follows: Ituri 1,246,044; North Kivu 2,441,338; South Kivu 1,478,639; Tanganyika 322,302 (IOM, 2024).



Between January 1 and February 20, 2025, the UNHCR estimated that an additional 500,000 people became IDPs in the Eastern DRC (UNHCR 2025).



Map 1. Episodes of violence in the Eastern DRC, 2023



Source: ACLED, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/drc/>. Edited by author to identify cocoa-growing areas.



MODERN SLAVERY AND NATURAL RESOURCES IN THE EASTERN DRC



The DRC is exceptionally rich in natural resources. It has 200 million acres of cultivable land and the world's second largest rainforest. It is home to an immensely diverse wildlife, including the forest elephant, the okapi, the mountain gorilla, the forest buffalo, the chimpanzee, the bonobo, and the bongo. It counts more than 10,000 types of plants and 600 timber species. Five of the country's national parks are listed as World Heritage Sites – Garamba National Park, Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Okapi Wildlife Reserve, Salonga National Park, and Virunga National Park. The DRC is also rich in mineral resources, including cobalt, copper, tantalum, petroleum, diamonds, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, and uranium. Those resources are key to the country's economy, as they are exported worldwide for use in electronics, jewellery, manufacturing, and many other industries.

However, the extraction of the DRC's natural resources has too often been controlled by armed, predatory, and corrupted actors and has been associated with modern slavery practices – especially in the East of the country.

As has been noted, “in Eastern Congo, armed gangs enslave whole villages to dig coltan and cassiterite for our computers and phones, or to cut and burn the Virunga Forest, Africa's oldest protected park and home of the mountain gorillas, to sell as charcoal” (Bales 2021). During the most recent cycles of violence in the Eastern DRC, multiple armed groups have also engaged in the illegal extraction and the illegal taxation of timber and charcoal, which are transferred from the area and traded in regional markets (O'Leary Simpson et al 2025). In these circumstances, the profit from agricultural and natural resources has been benefiting only a few, while most of the people continue to be trapped in poverty, vulnerability, and exploitation.

Modern slavery practices connected with the DRC's natural resources take many forms. These include forced labor, debt bondage, child labor, and sexual slavery.

In mining zones, villagers are often rounded up by an armed group, beaten and assaulted, and put to work under threat of violence (Bales, 2016; Free the Slaves, 2011; U.S. Department of State, 2016).

There is no offer of payment and no freedom of movement or choice, and those who resist run the risk of extreme violence, such as rape, torture, and murder. Forced labor at mines typically entails digging minerals, hauling ore, or sorting and washing mineral ore (Bales, 2016). However, it may also involve support roles, such as guarding, porting, cleaning, cooking, delivering messages, spying, and collecting taxes at mining sites (U.S. Department of State, 2016).

There are also various findings of labor exploitation in mines. A study on the artisanal mining industry in select sites in North Kivu and South Kivu found that instances of underpayment or working for extended periods of time without payment are common (Rothenberg and Radley, 2014).

In industrial cobalt mines, for example, workers face extremely low pay, lack of contracts, small food rations, abuse, and discrimination. During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers also faced movement restrictions, with one company reportedly confining workers to its mine for three months at the pandemic's onset. As one Congolese expert noted, the "system benefits from a cheap workforce with little rights, access to information, markets, and protections" and reduces miners to "just workers and cogs in a machine, sort of like slaves." (in: Sovacool, 2021).

Box 3 - Armed Actors and Natural Resources in North Kivu and Ituri

In the Eastern provinces of North Kivu and Ituri, armed actors have been exploiting minerals, timber, charcoal, wildlife, and cash crops. According to the reports released by the United Nations Group of Experts on the DRC in 2021 and 2024, the FDLR finances itself from the **exploitation of charcoal and wooden planks in Virunga National Park** as well as from **illegal hunting, poaching, and illegal trade of wildlife products (e.g., ivory)**. Similarly, the ADF has historically benefited from the **exploitation of timber and gold mines, as well as rice, manioc, coffee, and cocoa** and from **poaching and trade in bushmeat**. The Rwanda-backed rebel group M23 also collects financial resources from **illegal logging of timber**, from **illegal mining of coltan, tin, tungsten, and tantalum**, and from **wildlife trafficking**. The rebel group has also gained control over **mineral transport routes** into Rwanda.



Practices of forced labor and labor exploitation are not confined to the mines but are observed also in the production of timber and charcoal (Dranginis 2016), even though the latter receive less international attention than gold, coltan, cobalt, and copper. Here, armed actors establish their control over production areas, force local communities to engage in logging activities, and then they either appropriate the timber and charcoal produced or they impose taxes on their transportation through their territories (O'Leary Simpson et al 2025). As such, civilians are a critical component of the illegal charcoal trade, in that armed groups recruit local people by force to engage them in the production, transportation, and sale (Dranginis 2016). In this regard, it is also important to consider the human rights violations to which local Indigenous communities, such as the pygmies, have been systematically subjected by armed, corrupted actors eager to benefit from their forests' resources. They have been exploited because regarded "as a cheap labor force destined for all manner of demeaning work", they have been harassed, persecuted, forcibly displaced, and even killed (Oakland Institute 2024).

Besides forced labor, debt bondage is also observed in situations of artisanal mining. Many workers travel to mines voluntarily with the hopes of securing a livelihood. At the mine, overseers greet labourers with the promise of a job, advancing them money, food, and tools at an unknown interest rate to get them started (Bale, 2016).

However, work will not be enough to extinguish the debt. With accumulating debt, exorbitant interest rates, and false accounting, workers lose their freedom and are forced to work excruciatingly long hours (ibid; U.S. Department of State; Free the Slaves 2013). Situations of debt bondage are also observed when a person "inherits" the debt from a deceased parent or family member (ILO 2015). Significantly, it is not only poor miners who can become subject to debt bondage, but also senior mining officials, who invest their money to begin production at mines by taking loans at high rates (Free the Slaves, 2013).

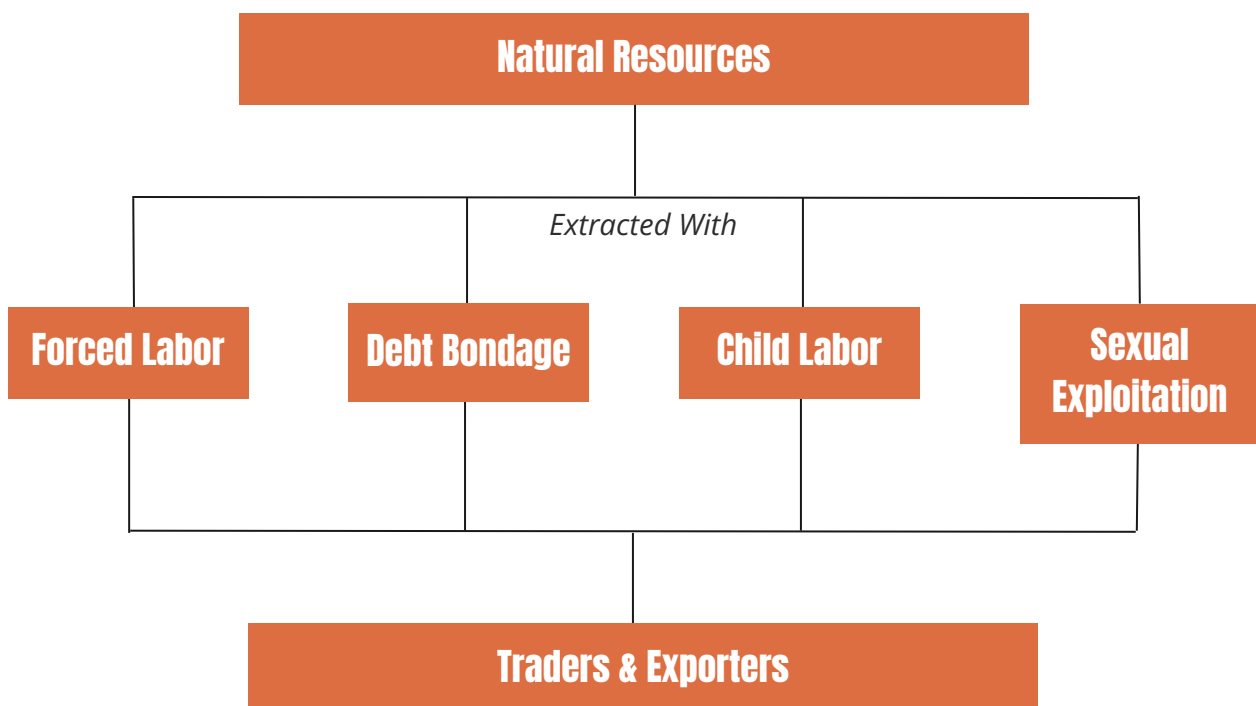
Alongside adults, children are also commonly exploited in the extraction of the DRC's natural resources. For instance, there are reports of child labour in the mining of diamonds, copper, gold, cobalt, ore, tin, cassiterite, wolframite, particularly in North and South Kivu. Children are also exploited in the smuggling of minerals, with armed actors demanding that children transport precious stones (Free the Slaves, 2013). Poverty and lack of access to schools make children particularly vulnerable to enslavement (Free the Slaves, 2011). Some children are forced to work with their families in situations of bonded labor, while other children are sent away to the mines by their parents to pay off the family's debt (ILO, 2015). Others are abducted by the armed actors or deceived through false promises of earning opportunities (Free the Slaves, 2013).



Significantly, sexual slavery is also reported in the Eastern DRC in connection with agricultural and natural resources. These violations are especially perpetrated against women and girls by armed group members, who use sexual violence as a tactic to assert control over natural resources and territory. Women and girls are often abducted from their villages by militias and are taken to serve as sexual slaves on mine sites (Bales, 2016). Once there, they are forcibly prostituted in brothels or informal camps – including in markets, bars, and bistros – surrounding the mining areas operated by loosely organized networks, gangs, and brothel operators (Bales, 2016; ILO, 2015).

Other women are lured to mining zones with false promises of financial support, ultimately turning to prostitution to meet basic needs (Bales, 2016). Cases have also been reported of women that in order to be allowed to engage in the charcoal business have been subjected to systematic sexual violence and forced marriage by the armed group members who are in control of the illegal charcoal trade (Dranginis 2016).

Figure 1. Supply chain of natural resources inside the DRC



OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY



As noted above, the use of modern slavery in the mining sector of the DRC has been well documented in recent years. Conversely, much less is known when it comes to the forms of exploitation associated with the production, transportation, and trade of agricultural resources.

Considering that agriculture accounts for 19.7% of the DRC's GDP and that the government is committed to expanding the agricultural sector further to reduce over-reliance on the extractive industry (African Development Bank 2023; U.S. Trade Administration 2024), understanding the reality of modern slavery in agriculture is crucial to ensure that the expansion of this sector occurs in the full respect of labor and human rights.

Box 4 - Cocoa Cultivation in the DRC

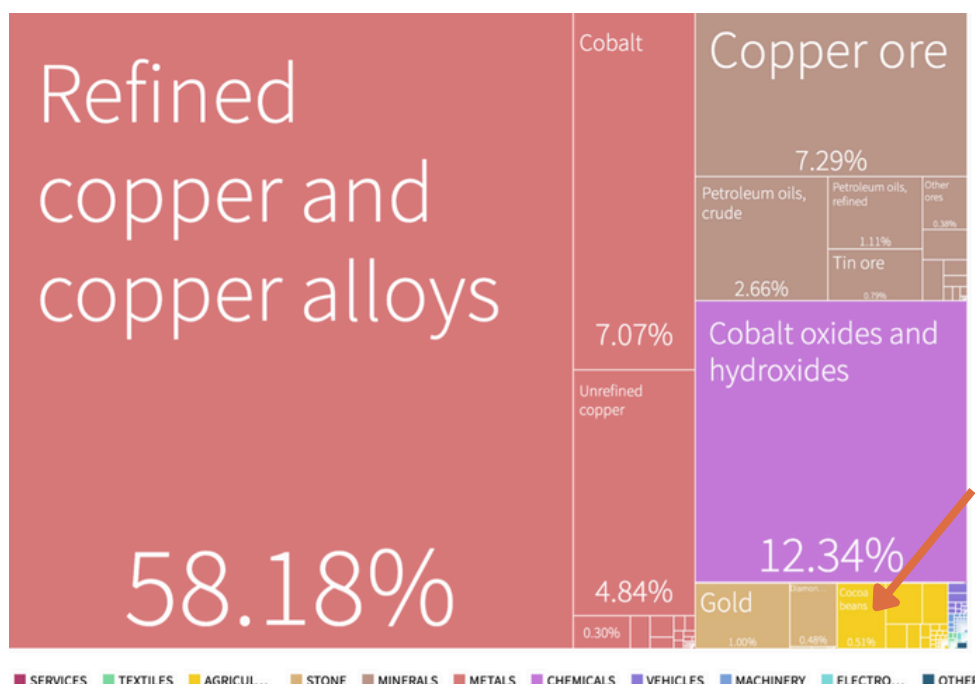
In the DRC cocoa cultivation was introduced in the late 1800s, when the country was a Belgian colony. Cocoa production declined considerably after the DRC won its independence and the colonial-era cocoa farmers left the country. Nonetheless, **in the past two decades cocoa farming in the country has been on the rise**, encouraged both by a growing global demand and by the Coffee Wilt Disease that ravaged coffee crops across sub-Saharan Africa and forced many Congolese farmers to look for alternative crops to grow. Today, cocoa production in the DRC is concentrated in the **Eastern provinces of Ituri and North Kivu**, which have an estimated **cocoa production area of 50,000 ha**. Forastero is the most widely produced variety of cocoa in the DRC.



Building on these considerations, this research aims to investigate the intersection between modern slavery and illicit appropriation of resources in the DRC's agricultural sector. While doing so, it will focus specifically on the cocoa sector. The production of cocoa, in fact, seems especially interesting to explore for several reasons. First, cocoa plantations in the DRC are largely concentrated in the Eastern regions of the country (especially Beni in North Kivu province and Bunia in Ituri province), where the intersection between armed conflict, illicit appropriation of resources, and modern slavery is highest. More than 120 militias and armed groups operate in the Eastern provinces of the DRC, where they regularly perpetrate widespread violations and abuses against the civilian population (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect 2024).

Second, the DRC cocoa sector has been under constant expansion over the past two decades, both because of a growing global demand that major producers such as Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire are struggling to meet and because of a disease among coffee plantations that forced Congolese coffee farmers to look for alternative crops (Nieburg 2017). The growth of the Congolese cocoa sector is well captured by numbers: in 2022, the DRC exported cocoa beans for a value of \$112 million, becoming the eleventh exporter of cocoa worldwide (OEC) and in 2023 it exported cocoa beans for a value of \$119 million (Growth Lab). The International Trade Administration (2024) also noted that the DRC has registered a certain "success developing cocoa and coffee for export".

Figure 2. DRC exports by sector of the economy, 2023

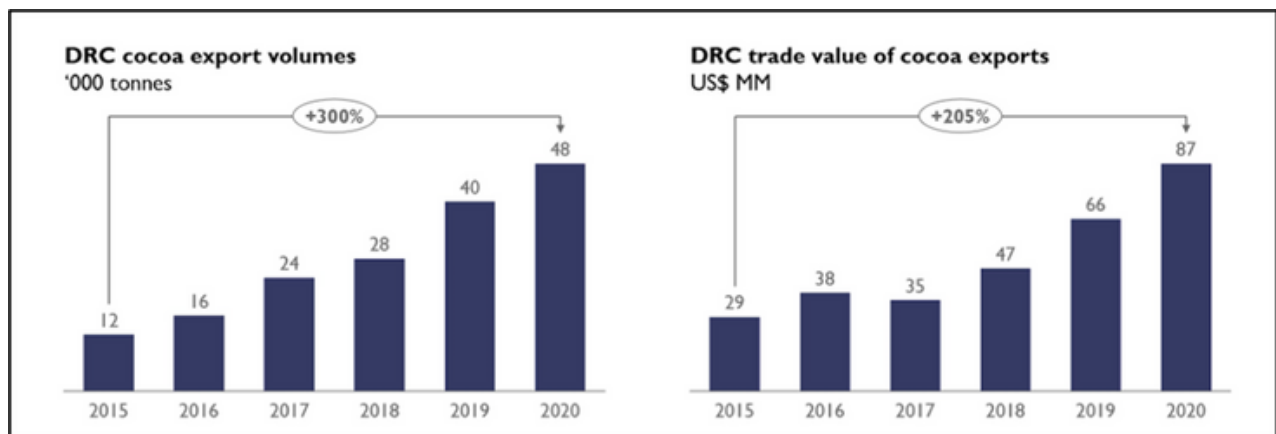


Source: Growth Lab, Atlas of Economic Complexity, Harvard University. Edited by author to highlight exports of cocoa beans. <https://atlas.hks.harvard.edu/countries/180/export-basket>.

Third, while cocoa used to be considered “militia-proof” because its true value is not realized until it is processed (much unlike gold and diamonds), (Kitchens 2017), reality on the ground suggests otherwise and calls for further and deeper investigation. Over time, in fact, armed actors active in North Kivu and Ituri have come to recognize the economic value of cocoa and have developed a considerable interest for the crop.

Presumably, this is explained by the raising global price of cocoa, which reached historical highs of nearly \$10,000 per metric ton in March 2024 (J.P. Morgan 2024). Interestingly, this seems to suggest that global commodity prices have an impact on armed actors’ behavior on the ground, in the territories where those commodities are produced.

Figure 3. DRC cocoa exports - volume and trade value, 2015-2020



Source: USAID, USAID’s investment facilitation activity in the DRC (USAID invest). An introductory guide to the cocoa sector in the DRC. https://chemonics.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/USAID-Invest_DRC-Cocoa-Sector-Guide.pdf.

To reach the proposed research objectives, a combination of desk-based research and key informant interviews was employed. First, an extensive review and analysis of existing studies – academic papers, journalistic articles, reports by non-governmental organizations – was conducted. In line with the intended objectives of this research, the focus was on modern slavery practices and illicit appropriation of resources, both in general terms and in reference to the cocoa sector in the Eastern DRC. The research was conducted using a series of key terms in English and French.

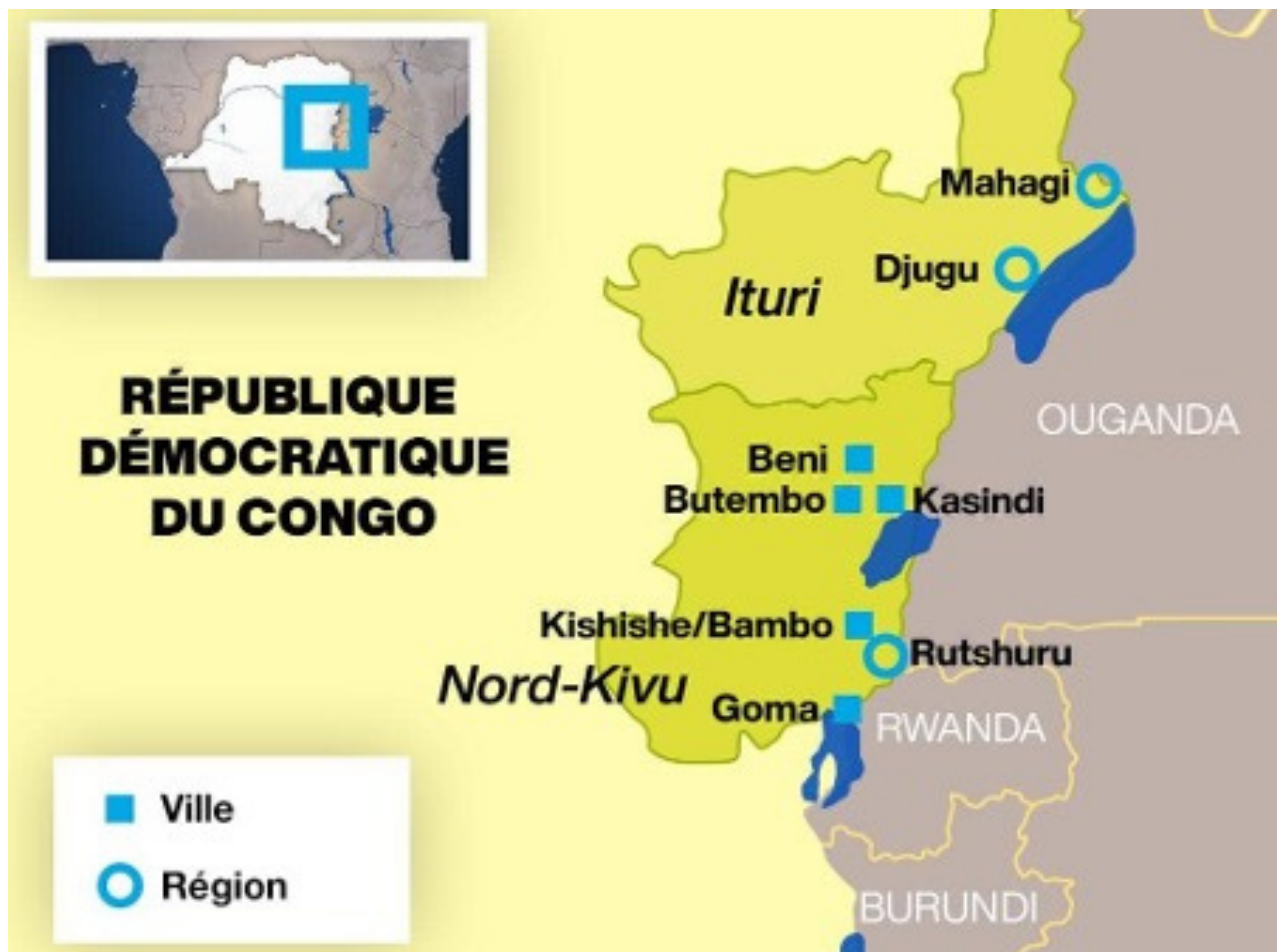
Second, in depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants to collect new, original data and validate some of the findings obtained through the desk-based research. The interviews were conducted with journalists, members of local NGOs and CSOs, scholars and researchers, government officials, representatives of MONUSCO, and businesspeople involved in the Congolese cocoa sector.

To locate participants, a mapping of relevant organizations in North Kivu and Ituri was built. While building the mapping, attention was given to include as much as possible organizations with different expertise – modern slavery, labor exploitation, armed groups, illicit appropriation of natural resources, war economies, and cross-border smuggling. To locate topical experts among scholars, journalists, and human rights activists the technique of expert sampling was employed. Additionally, interview participants were asked to connect the research team with other experts, thus relying on a snowballing technique.



Considering the security risks posed by sharing sensitive information on armed actors, human rights violations, and illicit activities – especially for those respondents who are based in the volatile regions of the Eastern DRC – the interviews have been fully anonymized to protect the safety of respondents. This decision was in line with the ethical protocol developed for this research and was duly communicated to the interviewees at the time of collecting their consent to participate and prior to conducting the interview.

Map 2. The areas studied in this report, North Kivu and Ituri



Source: <https://www.infoplus.cd/post/rdc-lancement-imminent-dun-projet-de-lue-pour-securiser-le-nord-kivu-et-lituri-des-2025-5631>. The blue squares indicate cities, the blue circles indicate regions.



FINDINGS ON THE COCOA SECTOR IN THE EASTERN DRC: ARMED ACTORS, MODERN SLAVERY, AND COCOA SMUGGLING



Cocoa is an integral part of the war economy that has developed around the natural resources of the DRC and the Great Lakes region: “there is gold in Bunia, coltan in Masisi, cassiterite in Walikale, and then there is cocoa in and around Beni” (International Crisis Group 2022). In this context, cocoa has become a source of insecurity, targeted by multiple armed actors that have developed the practice of raiding local farms, using modern slavery practices, illicitly appropriating the farms’ produce, and smuggling cocoa into Uganda for a profit.

From the Bush to the Cocoa Farm

Multiple armed actors are involved in the practice of raiding local farms and forcibly appropriating their output. Among those most involved in this crime is the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a long-standing Islamist insurgent group with Ugandan roots operating in the Eastern DRC.

A female farmer from Kipriani, in northern Beni, reported that “[w]henver we [the farmers] produce a lot of cocoa, the massacres [by the ADF] increase.” (International Crisis Group 2022). Another farmer confirmed this, saying that they work hard to grow cocoa and then the ADF comes and takes over the crops at harvest time (ibid.).

According to the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, since the end of 2020 North Kivu has witnessed a spike in attacks against cocoa farmers. Specifically, the ADF has been carrying out violent and deadly attacks against cocoa farmers across Beni, Bulongo, and Mutwanga (UN Security Council 2021). A representative of cocoa farmers from Mayangose, North Kivu, reported repeated ADF attacks on cocoa farmers in their fields, including farmers who were undertaking cocoa harvesting.

According to that person, the farmers had been executed because ADF wanted to harvest the cocoa, as this is how “Islamists support themselves.” (UN Security Council 2020). Around Mwalika, in the Virunga National Park, the ADF also adopted another approach of illegal expropriation, whereby it forcibly demanded a contribution of farmers’ harvest as a “tax” in exchange for access and protection (UN Security Council 2021).

Beyond the ADF, farmers in Mavivi, Rwenzori, and Kainama, in North Kivu, attributed attacks on cocoa farms to civilian bandits or unidentified armed men “mimicking” the ADF who occupy cocoa fields and steal cocoa during harvest periods (UN Security Council, 2020). A civil society representative in Kasindi, North Kivu, described how some armed bandits in his area had been dressing as “Islamists” to frighten cocoa farmers. A trader who purchased cocoa throughout Beni territory described similar patterns, saying that armed men dressed “like ADF” threatened farmers, chased them from their fields, and then stole and sold the harvest (ibid.). Just like the ADF, armed militias and criminal gangs attack cocoa farms, massacring, raping, and killing innocent cocoa farmers. As local observers noted, for the armed groups this is “a way of humiliating people, make them lose all their dignity so they are obliged to leave, to go far away and to leave the area free for them.” (Mallinder, 2024).

However, it is not only irregular armed actors. All the informants with whom we spoke for this research emphasized that on top of the attacks perpetrated by the ADF and other armed groups, members of the FARDC have also been involved in raiding cocoa farms and illegally appropriating their produce (Author’s interview, Kinshasa). Ironically, the FARDC were allegedly deployed in those territories to protect local communities from the assaults, exploitation, and abuses perpetrated by the ADF, but they ended up doing the same (Author’s interview, Goma; Author’s interview, Bunia). Farmers and traders complain that the FARDC members based in Rwenzori and around Oicha are more interested in trading cocoa than they are in protecting the population (UN Security Council 2021).

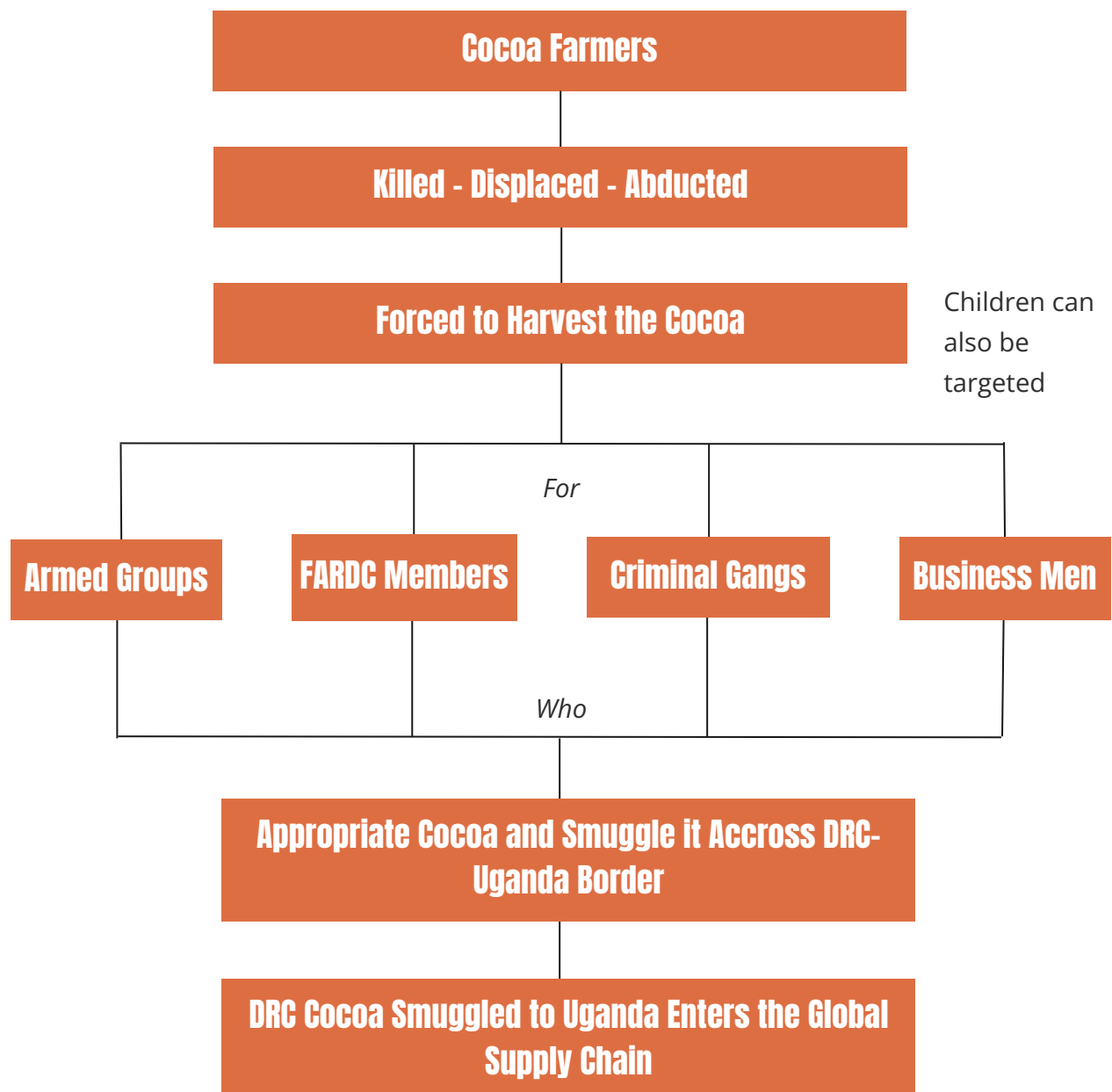
On other occasions, soldiers have illegally harvested cocoa in fields that the farmers abandoned due to the violence and have sold the cocoa illegally for a profit, as will be discussed in more detail below (Au 2021; Author’s interview, Goma). The manager of an agricultural cocoa cooperative confirmed that “as soon as the planters leave the fields, there are soldiers who steal the products and resell them to smuggler fraudsters” (Le Monde Afrique 2021).



Fear of armed attacks and violent expropriations has been forcing many cocoa farmers to abandon their fields (UN Security Council 2020). A farmer from Ituri, for instance, reported that he had no choice but leave his field: "the rebels surprised us working in the field, we abandoned everything. [...] Now I'm here in the city, I'm living hard, even though I had everything, and there are people who collect our cocoa." (Mapenzi 2024).

Other farmers, though, still go to their fields despite the risk of attacks due to the lack of alternatives. In the words of a cocoa farmer, "When you don't have food, you have to pay school fees and childcare, you take the risk. One day, I survived an ADF ambush. [...] I continue to go to my field just to harvest the cocoa [...] I can't leave my field." (ibid.).

Figure 4. Modern slavery and smuggling dynamics in the DRC cocoa sector



Modern Slavery on Cocoa Farms

As noted above, multiple armed actors commonly raid cocoa-growing villages, killing many – if not most – of their members. These brutal tactics are used to establish control by force. They are also used to terrorize those who remain alive and either compel them to abandon their cocoa fields and surrender the plantations to the armed actor or subjugate them to the armed actor's demands.

Here, a common pattern is that farmers who survive violent attacks on their farms or villages are forcibly put under the control of the armed actors and forced to engage in farm labor for the latter's exclusive economic benefit (Author's interview, Beni; Author's interview, Uvira). As has been noted by local observers, militia leaders, together with "their powerful and often very wealthy clients", benefit from illegal resource extraction, forcing local communities to undertake agricultural activities (Luneghe 2024), including cocoa farming. The ADF, for instance, has not only been attacking cocoa farmers in the fields, but has also been abducting them, forcing abductees to farm on their behalf (UN Security Council 2021). Captives captured by the ADF around Oicha, in North Kivu, were forced to farm cocoa and other crops for the group whilst in captivity (UN Security Council 2020).

Besides, farmers are not only targeted by armed groups to engage in forced labor in the fields – even though this is the most common pattern.

Rather, cocoa farmers in Kainama who were captured by ADF and held captive for several days were also forced to work as porters for the group (ibid.).

According to reports from local sources, armed groups in the Eastern DRC are also implicated in the forcible recruitment of children, who are then deployed on cocoa plantations to harvest cocoa and produce beans that the militants will sell for a profit (Schipani 2023; International Crisis Group 2022). Respondents with whom we spoke also recounted that children may be abducted by the armed groups, forcibly separated from their families (who may be killed or forced to flee), and forced to engage in cocoa harvesting for the group's benefit (Author's interview, Bunia).

In most cases, working on cocoa farms harms a child's health and development and exposes the child to multiple hazards. In fact, children in forced labor on cocoa farms typically use chainsaws to clear the land. They also climb the cocoa trees to cut bean pods using machetes, large, heavy, and dangerous knives that are the standard tools for children on the cocoa farms (Author's interview, Bunia). Once they cut the bean pods from the trees, children slice them open, scoop out the beans, spread them in baskets or on mats, and cover them to ferment. Then they uncover the beans and put them in the sun to dry. Afterwards, they pack them into heavy sacks and load them onto the armed actors' trucks or other means of transportation (Author's interview, Goma).



However, it is also noticeable that while forced labor and forced child labor are widely common, they are not universally observed in cocoa plantations controlled by armed actors. In fact, there are also occasions in which violence is used to force all farmers out of their fields at harvest time, following which the armed actors responsible for the violence engage in the final phase of the harvest themselves, so as to appropriate the cocoa beans directly.

A Profitable Cross-Border Smuggling Business

After armed actors assert their presence on cocoa farms and force farmers to carry out the harvest, or engage in harvesting themselves, they establish their control over the whole produce. Once the cocoa beans are in the hands of armed actors, the most common strategy to make the maximum profit is to smuggle the beans to Uganda. As noted in prominent reports, “vast amounts of Congolese cocoa and coffee are smuggled into neighboring countries each season”, taking advantage of porous borders and poor law enforcement (Vyawahare 2022). Local authorities and security services have also spoken of a network of young people who collaborate with armed groups to steal cocoa and resell it in town to exporters (Mapenzi 2024). Civil society representatives and farmers also reported that unidentified armed attackers and the ADF collaborate with businesspeople in Watalinga and Rwenzori to buy and then smuggle cocoa into Uganda for sale (UN Security Council 2020).



As in the case of raids against cocoa-growing farms, it is not only armed groups and criminal gangs. Rather, some FARDC soldiers are also implicated in the smuggling of cocoa beans into Uganda, or the sale of beans to local trans-border smugglers (New Vision 2021; Au 2021). Some FARDC members and their wives were found to use networks of motorbike and taxi-drivers to transport cocoa to trading towns for onward sale, including Oicha, Nobili, and Bunia – all in collusion with some Congolese border officials (UN Security Council 2021). One respondent similarly remarked that high-level political officials on both sides of the DRC-Uganda border are involved in the cocoa smuggling business (Author’s interview, Goma).

The DRC’s cocoa smuggling business is thus controlled by a combination of state-embedded actors, non-state armed groups, criminal enterprises, and powerful businessmen, most of whom have strong political connections (Author’s interview, Beni).

Respondents reported that cross-border smuggling of cocoa into Uganda is linked to the availability of higher per-kilo prices in Uganda as well as high taxes and complicated bureaucracy associated with the regular export of cocoa from the DRC (Author’s interview, Bunia). People who purchased cocoa near the Ugandan border and then smuggled it into Uganda told that their transactions were carried out in Ugandan shillings, to avoid exchange fees in Uganda. A border official and a trader in Nobili also reported that Ugandan shillings were used for cocoa sales in the region (UN Security Council 2020).

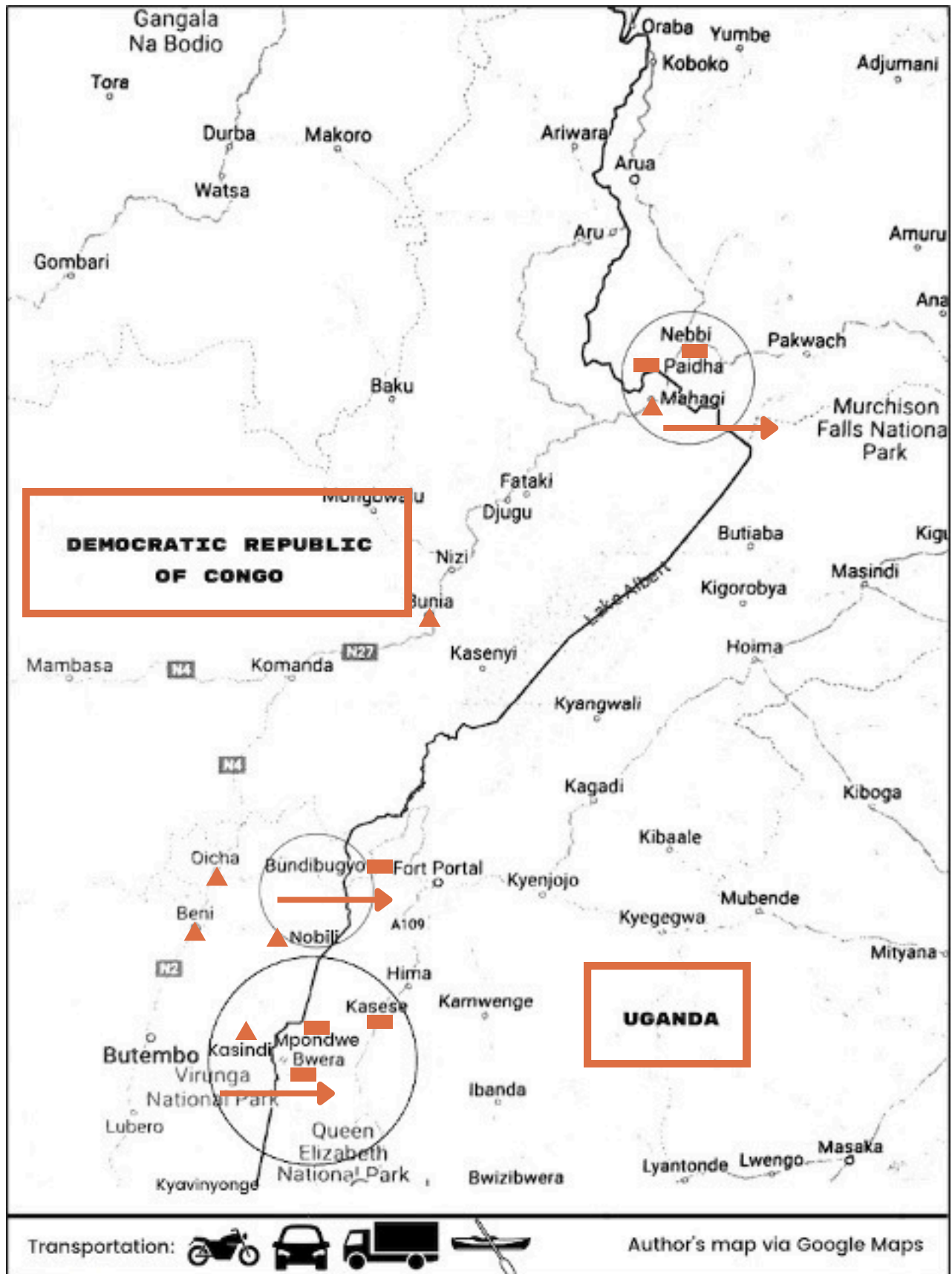
The 950 km-long border between the DRC and Uganda, dotted by hundreds of unmanned entry points (Blanshe 2023), is the ideal site of illegal cocoa transactions. Trucks carrying cocoa pass weekly along Route Nationale 4 (RN4), which connects the border between the DRC and the Central African Republic to the border between the town of Kasindi in the DRC and the town of Mpondwe in Uganda (Author's interview, Kitshanga). Large volumes of cocoa from Beni territory are also smuggled into Uganda by truck or motorbike at Kasindi, Nobili, and Mahagi, or by pirogue across Lake Albert from Kasenyi Port and across Lake Edward from Kyavinyonge Port (Author's interview, Kinshasa). Individuals with first-hand knowledge said that on the Ugandan side cocoa that was smuggled from the DRC goes primarily to Bwere, Bundibugyo, and Kasese (Author's interview, Goma).

Thus, vast amounts of cocoa harvested by Eastern DRC's farmers and illegally appropriated by armed actors enter global supply chains through Uganda. According to respondents, up to 80% of Congolese cocoa passes through the opaque and criminal circuit described above before being exported to Uganda. Once in Uganda, traders affix Ugandan certificates of origin, including for export, and the cocoa is sold to international chocolate companies (Author's interview, Bukavu; Author's interview, Goma).

The consequence is that the benefits of the DRC's cocoa production are de facto reaped by Uganda – which probably explains the reticence of the government in Kampala to curb this illegal business (Herve 2023). In the words of the director of the Virunga Chocolate factory – one of only two chocolate factories currently operating in the DRC – “Congo produces one of the best cocoas in the world...but the added value of this cocoa is felt in neighbouring countries, and very little of that value is retained for the Congolese in Congo.” (Schipani 2023). One respondent with whom we spoke referred to this reality as “regional fraud of agricultural products.” (Author's interview, Kinshasa).



Map 3. DRC-Uganda border, cocoa smuggling business.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



In the Eastern DRC, multiple armed groups and criminal gangs have developed the practice of attacking cocoa farms in North Kivu and Ituri. While most farmers are killed, others are kept alive and forced by the armed group to engage in harvesting. As such they become victims of modern slavery practices used by armed actors for revenue generation purposes. In other cases, farmers are forced to leave their farms, which are then occupied by the armed group to reap the harvested cocoa. Also, reports of children being forced to work on the cocoa plantations are not uncommon.

Worryingly, these practices are not limited to armed groups. Members of the FARDC, sent to North Kivu and Ituri to protect local communities, are often involved in violent attacks themselves. On some occasions they force farmers to harvest the cocoa, which they then appropriate; on other occasions they force the farmers out of the fields and harvest the cocoa themselves.

Armed groups, criminal gangs, and FARDC members appropriate the cocoa to either sell it to illegitimate cocoa traders inside the DRC or smuggle it across the border with Uganda.

Smuggling, in fact, is more profitable than legal trade, due to a combination of high taxes and bureaucratic requirements. The long and porous border between the DRC and Uganda offers the perfect setting where to carry out those illegal transactions. Connivance from border officials in both the DRC and Uganda also contributes to creating an environment conducive to smuggling.

Once in Uganda, Congolese cocoa is given Ugandan certificate of origin. It is then sold to international chocolate companies, which are seemingly unaware of buying beans produced by forced labor in the Eastern DRC. From there, Congolese cocoa enters the global supply chain. While the Ugandan economy benefits from the sale of Congolese cocoa to major chocolate companies, no economic value is felt in the DRC. Cocoa farming communities in North Kivu and Ituri continue to be victims of violence and exploitation and only predatory armed actors and smugglers make a profit out of their cocoa.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CONGOLESE GOVERNMENT

- Establish a transparent shared registry or database of cocoa farmers and traders to enable identification and avoid illicit cocoa trading. A registry or database of farmers, if properly and transparently managed, could help to better support and protect the rights of farmers. A registry or database could also help to ensure that only farmers, and not armed groups, militias, or FARDC members, sell – and benefit from – the cocoa.
- Invest efforts (finances and manpower) into investigating those cases in which members of the armed forces engage in the illicit appropriation of natural resources. Existing legislation that prohibits members of the armed forces from engaging in business should be better enforced, and soldiers found in violation of those laws (which, as seen in this research, is often accompanied by human rights abuses) should be prosecuted and adequately punished.
- Take urgent and adequate actions to protect the civilian population in cocoa farming areas from armed attacks and from enslavement, especially in the forms of forced labor and forced child labor. For instance, fully implement and train front-line officials on standard operating procedures to proactively identify victims of forced labor, including among vulnerable populations such as children and adults in cocoa farms, and refer victims to appropriate care in coordination with civil society and international organizations.
- Create avenues through which local agricultural communities can safely report cases of attacks, abuses, and exploitation to the relevant authorities and obtain protection and justice, regardless of whether those violations are perpetrated by armed groups, militias, criminal gangs, or the army.
- Develop innovative responses to curb criminality. However, combating criminality in the cocoa sector should not harm the vulnerable populations who depend on cocoa for their livelihoods. There is a need for holistic, innovative responses that not only include security and law enforcement approaches, but also development actors. When designing anti-criminality measures, it is important to ensure that they do not harm the local economy, deprive farmers of their income, and push farming communities into poverty.



- Reform the export regime and eliminate the excessive fees, charges, and paperwork requirements that disincentivize legal trade. Also, raise the price paid for cocoa inside the DRC. Until then, cocoa will continue to seep into legitimate supply chains.
- The nature of illicit cocoa smuggling requires cooperation between law enforcement, customs services, and other relevant bodies. Competent authorities need to be adequately staffed, funded, and trained. Collaboration of state services at border and customs points needs to be supported to increase information sharing and decrease smuggling. Additionally, cooperation between Congolese and Ugandan border officials and customs agencies should be pursued and strengthened.
- The illegal cocoa trade should be recognized as organized crime by senior political leaders, politicians and criminal justice officials. Together with other countries in the Great Lakes Region (but, predominantly, Uganda), the DRC should lobby for illegal cocoa trading to be included as a priority for policing within the ICGLR (International Conference on the Great Lakes Region).



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UGANDAN GOVERNMENT

- Launch investigations into the illicit appropriation of agriculture and natural resources. Those involved in this trafficking businesses, including traders, businessmen, and officials, should be prosecuted and adequately punished.
- Enhance regulatory controls on any cocoa coming from the DRC to ensure verification of the export permits, custom clearance documents, and DRC tax receipts. Since it is considerably more difficult to monitor cocoa once it has entered Uganda, it is important to tighten controls at the border. This would require - among other things - raising the number of law enforcement teams, which is currently inadequate to the task, and enhance their training.
- Recognize that smuggling networks are ultimately detrimental to the Ugandan state, its functioning, and its development. Also, cocoa smuggling networks feed into the environment of insecurity, conflict, instability, and warlordism that negatively affects the Great Lake Region, including Uganda. In other words, while cocoa smuggling may create an immediate economic benefit, its effects in the long term are very much negative.
- The nature of illicit cocoa smuggling requires cooperation between law enforcement, customs services, and other relevant bodies. Competent authorities need to be adequately staffed, funded, and trained. Collaboration of state services at border and customs points needs to be supported to increase information sharing and decrease smuggling. Additionally, cooperation between Congolese and Ugandan border officials and customs agencies should be pursued and strengthened.
- The illegal cocoa trade should be recognized as organized crime by senior political leaders, politicians and criminal justice officials. Together with other countries in the Great Lakes Region (but, predominantly, the DRC), Uganda should lobby for illegal cocoa trading to be included as a priority for policing within the ICGLR.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COCOA INDUSTRY

- Implement a holistic human rights due diligence policy. Invest resources to investigate, identify, assess, and address the risks of forced labor associated with a company's own commercial practices, supply chain structure and relationships, as well as those of commercial partners, regardless of whether they are cocoa farm owners, cocoa farmers' cooperatives, or larger cocoa suppliers.
- Adopt a whole-of-supply-chain approach. Ensure that supply chains due diligence efforts go beyond tier one suppliers to higher-risk tiers further down the supply chain. This will entail expanding the focus from where companies may have greater leverage to where the risk of forced labor and child labor is greater.
- Develop and enforce a supplier code of conduct, which should reflect international labor standards. Apply it to direct cocoa suppliers as well as cocoa sub-suppliers, provide awareness raising, training, and capacity building among them, and make compliance with the code of conduct an unescapable condition for suppliers to conclude a contract with the company.
- Invest more serious and consistent efforts in the traceability of cocoa beans. Traceability efforts should go all the way down to the farming site to identify any red flags of forced labor and take appropriate action when needed. Building on the findings of this research, chocolate companies sourcing from Uganda should make an extra effort to investigate deeper into their supply chain whether the cocoa that they are supplied has its origin in the DRC and, if so, through which channels it was brought into Uganda.
- Pressure the Ugandan and Congolese governments to curb cocoa smuggling. Chocolate companies sourcing from Uganda and the DRC should use their economic leverage to demand that the governments in Kampala and Kinshasa do more and do better to curb the smuggling of cocoa. Specifically, they should pressure the governments to conduct more controls at crucial border points, combat the corruption that prevails among many border officials, and reduce the fees and paperwork requirements that disincentivize legal trade.
- Abandon the misleading assumption that cocoa is "militia-proof". Chocolate companies sourcing from the DRC have a responsibility to be more aware of the risks faced by cocoa-growing communities in Ituri and North Kivu. While there is widespread belief that cocoa is a "militia-proof" crop, this research contradicts that assumption and shows that Congolese cocoa has been increasingly targeted by violent and predatory groups. Companies sourcing their cocoa from the country cannot be oblivious to this reality.



- Invest efforts to protect the farmers' human rights, labor rights, and physical safety. Sourcing cocoa from the DRC has the potential to provide farming communities in Ituri and North Kivu with a source of income. However, chocolate companies must take steps to ensure that cocoa production does not endanger farmers' rights and safety. This could be done by supporting the establishment of community-based vigilance committees, including in cooperation with trustworthy and committed local business partners.





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