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Armed Actors, Modern Slavery, and Cocoa Smuggling

An Investigation into the Cocoa
Sector in the Democratic
Republic of the 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 their 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. [Minimum Age Convention No.138; Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No.182; Convention on the Rights of the Child]



Cocoa Supply Chain – The network of individuals, organizations, resources, and technology involved in producing, processing, and selling cocoa and cocoa-based products. Links within the cocoa supply chain include cocoa producers, intermediaries who buy and sell cocoa, exporters who export cocoa beans abroad, manufacturers who turn cocoa beans into cocoa-based products, transporters who move and deliver cocoa-based products, retailers, and consumers.

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 International Labour Organization (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 [Forced Labor Convention (No.29); ILO Indicators of Forced Labor]

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



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 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. Natural resources related to farming (i.e., crops and livestock) are agricultural resources.

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 the Congo (FARDC) are also involved in raiding cocoa farms and illegally appropriating their produce.

02

Farmers who are not killed are either forced to abandon their cocoa farms or subjected to forced labor, harvesting their cocoa for the exclusive benefit of the armed actors. Children are also abducted and forced to work on cocoa farms under the control of the armed groups.

03

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 substantial, particularly compared with legal trade, where returns are lower and bureaucratic requirements are stringent.

04

Both the DRC and Uganda are failing to fulfil their commitment to address the illegal exploitation of agricultural and other natural resources. Prevalent corruption and collusion among border officials, customs authorities, and armed forces on both sides of the border facilitates this reality.



INTRODUCTION



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

The most common form of modern slavery associated with agricultural and other 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 them after extraction. 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 are abducted by armed actors, others are deceived with false promises of income opportunities, and others are trapped in forced labor alongside their families.

Debt bondage is also another prevalent form of slavery in the DRC's natural resource sectors. Predatory actors attract laborers with the promise of a stable job in mining. They advance money for food and tools, then manipulate the interest rate of the loan to create debts that cannot be repaid, preventing laborers from leaving.

Sexual exploitation is also connected to the illicit extraction of agricultural and natural resources in the DRC. Armed actors use it as a tactic to assert control over territories and resources (e.g., creating situations of displacement) or to attract, retain, and control workers—especially in mining areas.

While the use of modern slavery in the DRC's mining sector is well documented, far less is known about its presence in agricultural production. To address this gap, this research investigates the intersection of modern slavery and the illicit appropriation of resources in the DRC's agricultural sector, with a particular focus on cocoa. Cocoa production is critical to explore for several reasons.

First, cocoa plantations in the DRC are primarily concentrated in the eastern regions, where the intersection of armed conflict, illicit appropriation of resources, and modern slavery is most prevalent. Second, the DRC cocoa sector has been steadily expanding over the past two decades, making it increasingly significant 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, the reality on the ground calls for further and deeper investigation. Armed actors in North Kivu and Ituri appear to have recognized cocoa's economic value and have developed a considerable interest in the crop.

The evidence collected through this research is crucial to addressing the current knowledge gap and deepening our understanding of how the exploitation of cocoa and modern slavery intersect in the DRC. Most importantly, the evidence collected in this study can guide interventions aimed at mitigating the risk of modern slavery in the DRC's cocoa sector and protecting the (human and labor) rights of civilians who live in the cocoa-growing areas of the 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 shares borders with **nine countries**: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.
- There are over **500 tribal groups** in the DRC, and more than 240 languages.
- Due to the detrimental effects of decades of war and political instability on economic growth, the DRC has **one of the the lowest GDPs per capita in the world at \$647.44** in 2024 according to World Bank data.
- The DRC is exceptionally **rich in natural resources**, including cobalt, copper, tantalum, petroleum, diamonds, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, uranium, coal, and timber. The DRC also has approximately 200 million acres of **cultivable land**.





AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONFLICT IN THE EASTERN DRC



The roots of the civil conflict in the DRC trace back to the 1990s, to the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. In 1994, Rwanda's radical Hutu regime carried out a genocide that killed 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus before being defeated by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Afterwards, at least 2 million Rwandans fled into what was then Zaire (renamed the DRC in 1997) (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Among the Hutu refugees in the eastern DRC were former members of the defeated Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and the Interahamwe paramilitary organization that had led the genocide. Once in the DRC, they formed the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), an armed movement committed to overthrowing the RPF-led government in Rwanda and reestablishing 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 Rwanda (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). While Rwanda's intervention was officially framed as an effort to dismantle the security threat posed by DRC-based génocidaires (Rwandans accused of participating in the genocide), other motivations also contributed. One was the desire to overthrow President Mobutu and install a puppet regime in Kinshasa—a goal that enjoyed the support of other regional states (Kennes, 2005). Another, highlighted by the United Nations (UN) Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (UNSC, 2001), was the opportunity to plunder the DRC's rich natural resources, including 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 President of the DRC.

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 and, since 2019, has split into two factions.
- **Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC)** – Army of the DRC, composed of the former Zairian armed forces, rebel groups integrated after the Second Congo War, and more recently incorporated militias.
- **Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)** – Ethnic Hutu group opposed to Tutsi influence and power, founded in 2000 through the amalgamation of other groups of Rwandan refugees. Its current size and strength are the subject of debate.
- **East African Community Regional Force (EACRF)** – Multinational mission established by the East African Community comprising troops from Burundi, Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda. Deployed in eastern DRC from November 2022 to December 2023; it aimed 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)**. Formed in 2012 to represent the Congolese Tutsi population 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 considered the most threatening armed group in the eastern DRC.
- **Rwandan Defence Force (RDF)** – Army of Rwanda, succeeding the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), which 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 point to RDF troops fighting in support of M23.
- **Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC)** – Peacekeeping mission deployed to the eastern DRC from December 2023 to March 2025 to assist the government in restoring peace and security. It comprised troops from Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania.
- **Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF)** National army of Uganda, previously known as the National Resistance Army, it has deployed multiple times in the eastern DRC to fight armed groups considered to be security threats 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 in North Kivu made up of local community fighters allied with the FARDC and opposed to M23.



As Kabila took power in 1997, he signed contracts with several foreign companies and businessmen, paving the way for large-scale plundering of coffee beans, livestock, and other natural resources that took place throughout 1997 (UNSC 2021, pp.13-14).

In July 1998, Kabila demanded that the Rwandan and Ugandan armies withdraw from the DRC, as his credibility was increasingly undermined by the perceptions among many Congolese that he was 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 Ugandan and Burundian troops, invaded the DRC, launching the Second Congo War. As additional countries in the region were drawn into the fighting (Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Chad were siding with Kabila's government against Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi), the conflict came to be known as "Africa's World War."

Foreign intervention was again driven by a mix of security, political, economic, and financial interests. Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi wanted to counter the threat posed by Hutu forces in the Eastern DRC and to protect their countries from insurgent groups allegedly preparing to use the area to launch cross-border attacks. At the same time, they had interest in the DRC's rich natural resources. Together with Congolese allies, such as the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), they systematically exploited diamonds, gold, coltan, cassiterite, cobalt, timber, coffee, okapis, gorillas, and elephants. Private companies, political figures, military officials, and businessmen were deeply involved (UNSC, 2001, pp. 8-13). Significantly, many of those resources were extracted through forced labor, labor exploitation, and child labor (UNSC, 2021, 13-14), underscoring the deep roots of patterns of slavery and plundering examined in this report.

A peace agreement was 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 remained mired in vicious cycles of violence between rival rebel groups and between rebel groups and government forces. The eastern DRC remains the epicenter of the conflict. Abundant and 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 key drivers of instability in the Eastern regions.

Since the First Congo War began in 1996, the civilian population in the DRC has endured widespread atrocities and human rights violations (UNOHCHR, 2010). These have included enforced disappearances, 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 of the conflict as a weapon of war to destabilize populations, destroy communities, and displace families (Mukwege, 2022; Peterman et al., 2011). Over the years, an estimated 6 million people have been killed directly or indirectly by the war, including by violent death, disease, and famine (World Without Genocide, n.d.).

Since 2022, violence has once again been 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 (Masisi territory); Bukumbo (Rutshuru territory); and Buhumba and Kibumba (Nyiragongo territory). Goma, the eastern DRC's largest city with 2 million residents and 1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) which had been briefly captured by M23 rebels in November 2012, has once again become a hotspot of fighting, with M23 rebel forces entering and asserting control over the urban center in January 2025 (Kabumba et al., 2025).

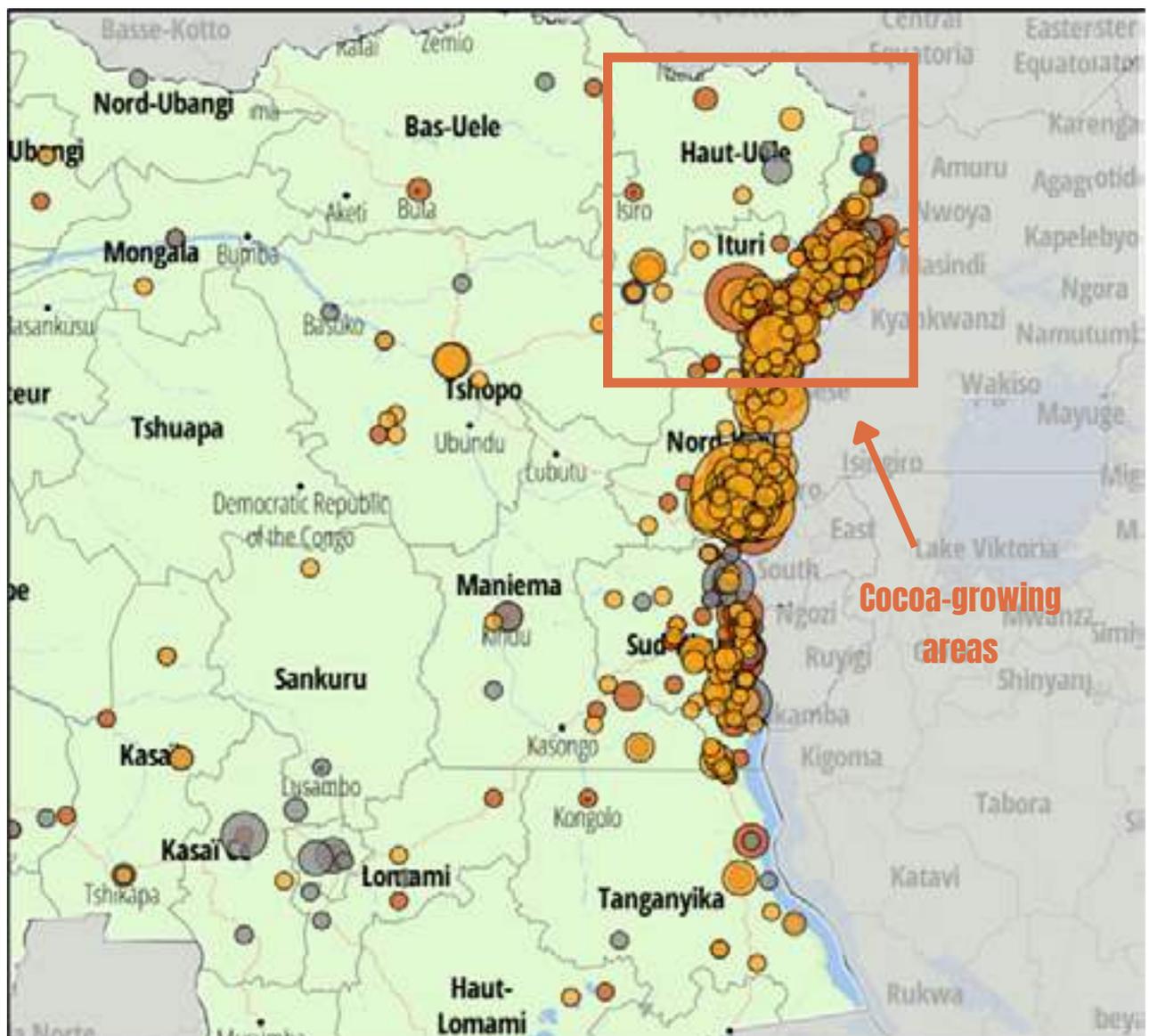
These escalating clashes between non-state armed groups and the Congolese army in the eastern DRC are intensifying one of the world's most alarming and protracted humanitarian crises. Several health facilities have been destroyed, and those left operational face critical shortages of medical supplies, staff, and fuel for ambulances (UNFPA, 2025). The threat of infectious diseases has multiplied (including cholera, malaria, measles, meningitis, Mpox, and tuberculosis), while access to clean drinking water in major urban centers has been disrupted (WHO, 2025). Malnutrition has also worsened dramatically, leaving people even more vulnerable to diseases (WHO, 2025). Although all civilians are affected, the risk is particularly 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; and Tanganyika, 322,302 (IOM, 2024).



The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2025) estimates that between January 1 and February 20, 2025, an additional 500,000 civilians became IDPs in the eastern DRC



Map 1. Episodes of Violence in the eastern DRC, 2023



Source: ACLED, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/>. Edited by the 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 approximately 200 million acres of cultivable land and the world's second-largest rainforest. The is home to an immense diversity of wildlife, including forest elephants, okapis, mountain gorillas, forest buffalo, chimpanzees, bonobos, and bongos. It also has more than 10,000 plant species and 600 timber species. Five of its 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 minerals, including cobalt, copper, tantalum, petroleum, diamonds, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, and uranium. These resources are vital to the country's economy, as they are exported worldwide for use in electronics, jewellery, manufacturing, and many other industries.

The extraction of the DRC's natural resources, however, has too often been controlled by armed, predatory, and corrupt actors and has been associated with modern slavery practices—especially in the eastern regions of the country.

In the eastern DRC, armed gangs reportedly “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 and Sovacool, 2021). During the most recent cycles of violence, multiple armed groups have engaged in the illegal extraction and taxation of timber and charcoal, which are transported out of the area and traded in regional markets (O'Leary Simpson et al., 2025). In these circumstances, profits from agricultural and other natural resources benefit only a few, while most people continue to remain trapped in poverty, vulnerability, and exploitation.

Modern slavery practices connected to the DRC's natural resources take many forms, including 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 made to work under the threat of violence (Bales, 2016; Free the Slaves, 2011; U.S. Department of State, 2016).

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

Several reports also document labor exploitation in mines. For example a study of artisanal mining industry in select sites in North Kivu and South Kivu found that underpayment and working for extended periods of time without pay are common (Rothenberg & Radley, 2014).

In industrial cobalt mines, similar patterns of exploitation have been reported. Workers endure extremely low pay, lack of contracts, small food rations, abuse, and discrimination. During the COVID-19 pandemic, companies imposed severe movement restrictions, with one company reportedly confining workers to its mine for three months at the onset of the pandemic. As one Congolese expert observed, 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.” (Bales & 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 reports by the United Nations Group of Experts on the DRC (2021, 2024) the FDLR finances itself through the **exploitation of charcoal and wooden planks in Virunga National Park**, as well as through **illegal hunting, poaching, and trading of wildlife products (e.g., ivory)**. Similarly, the ADF has historically benefited from the **exploitation of timber and gold mines, as well as from rice, manioc, coffee, and cocoa**, alongside **poaching and trade in bushmeat**. The Rwanda-backed rebel group M23 also generates revenue from **illegal logging, mining of coltan, tin, tungsten, and tantalum**, and **wildlife trafficking**, while additionally controlling **mineral transport routes** into Rwanda.



Practices of forced labor and labor exploitation are not confined to mines but are also observed in the production of timber and charcoal (Dranginis, 2016), even though these resources receive less international attention than gold, coltan, cobalt, and copper. In these sectors, armed actors establish control over production areas, force local communities to engage in logging activities, and either appropriate the timber and charcoal produced or impose taxes on their transport through territories under their control (O’Leary Simpson et al., 2025). Civilians are therefore a critical component of the illegal charcoal trade, as armed groups recruit local people for production, transportation, and selling (Dranginis, 2016). Local Indigenous communities, such as the pygmies, have been particularly targeted enduring systematic human rights violations. They are exploited because they are regarded “as a cheap labor force destined for all manner of demeaning work,” and have been harassed, persecuted, forcibly displaced, and even killed by armed corrupt actors seeking to profit from forest resources (Oakland Institute, 2024).

Debt bondage is another form of exploitation, particularly in situations of artisanal mining. Many workers travel to mines voluntarily in hopes of securing a livelihood. At the mine, overseers offer them jobs, and advance money, food, and tools at undisclosed interest rates to get them started (Bales, 2016).

However, the work is insufficient to repay the debt. Accumulating interest, exorbitant interest rates, and false accounting practices trap workers, forcing them to work excruciatingly long hours (Bales, 2016; U.S. Department of State, 2016; Free the Slaves, 2013). Debt bondage can also occur when a person “inherits” the debt of a deceased family member (ILO, 2015). Significantly, it is not only poor miners who are vulnerable to debt bondage; even senior mining officials, may become trapped after taking high interest loans to invest in a mines production. (Free the Slaves, 2013).

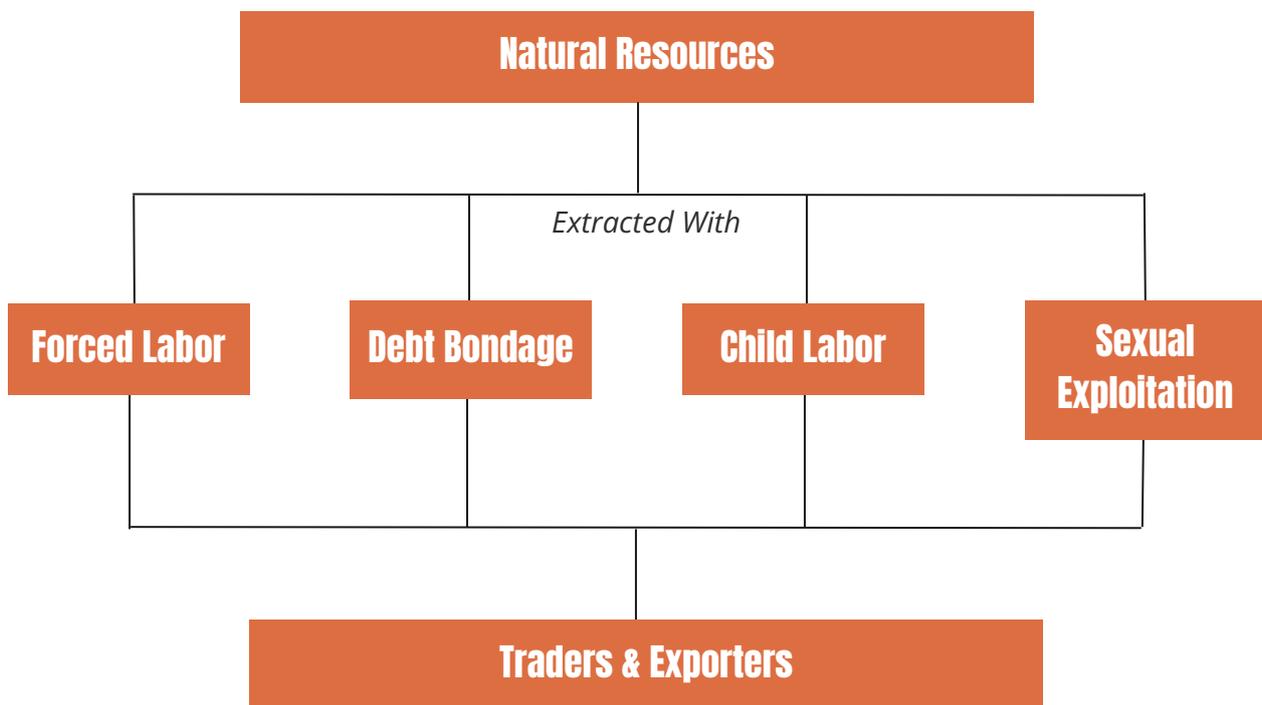
Children are also commonly exploited in the extraction of the DRC’s mineral resources. Reports indicate child labour in the mining of diamonds, copper, gold, cobalt, ore, tin, cassiterite, and wolframite, particularly in North and South Kivu. Armed actors also exploit children in the smuggling of minerals, compelling them to transport precious stones (Free the Slaves, 2013). Poverty and lack of access to education make children especially vulnerable to enslavement (Free the Slaves, 2011). Some children are forced to work with their families in situations of bonded labor, while others are sent, by their parents to mines to repay family debts (ILO, 2015). Additionally, some children are abducted by armed actors or lured with 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 primarily perpetrated against women and girls by armed group members, who use sexual violence as a tactic to assert control over resources and territory. Women and girls are often abducted from their villages and taken to serve as sexual slaves at mine sites (Bales, 2016). There, they are forcibly prostituted in brothels or informal camps—including in markets, bars, and bistros—surrounding 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 essential needs (Bales, 2016). Cases have also been reported in which women, in order to be allowed to participate in the charcoal business, are subjected to systematic sexual violence and forced marriage by the armed group members controlling 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 DRC's mining sector has been well documented in recent years. Far less, however, is known about the forms of exploitation associated with the production, transportation, and trade of agricultural resources.

This gap is significant: agriculture accounts for 19.7% of the DRC's GDP, and the government is committed to expanding the agricultural sector to reduce over-reliance on the extractive industry (African Development Bank, 2023; U.S. Trade Administration, 2024). Understanding how modern slavery intersects with agriculture is therefore crucial to ensuring that growth in this sector occurs with full respect for labor and human rights.

Box 4 - Cocoa Cultivation in the DRC

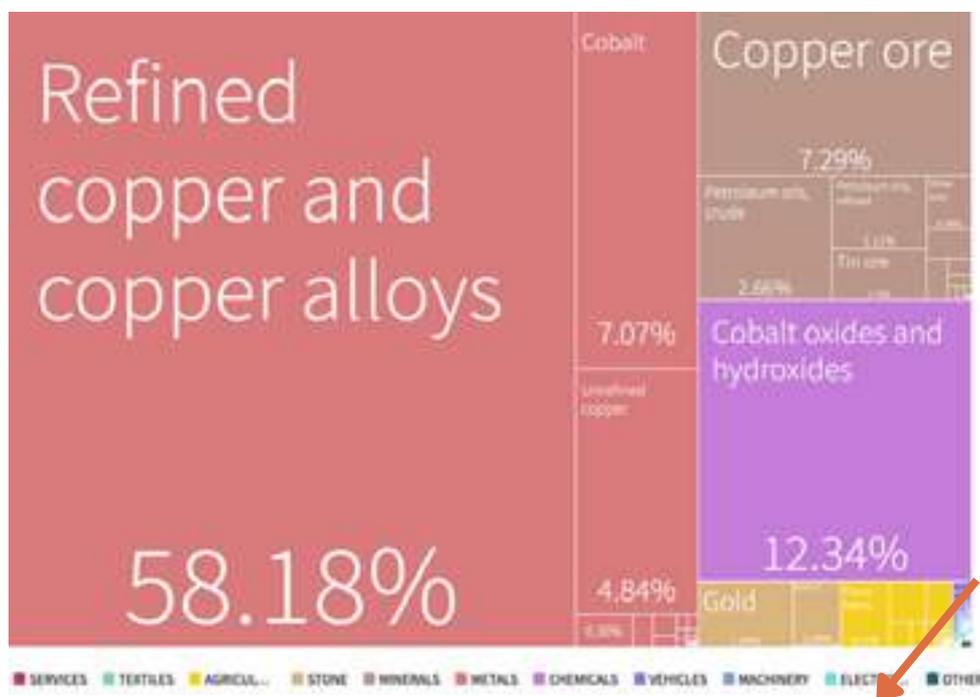
Cocoa cultivation was introduced to the DRC in the late 1800s, during Belgian colonial rule. After winning independence in 1960, Cocoa production declined considerably and the colonial-era cocoa farmers left the country. Over **the past two decades, however, cocoa farming in the country has been on the rise again**, driven by a growing global demand and by the spread of the Coffee Wilt Disease, which ravaged coffee crops across sub-Saharan Africa and forced many Congolese coffee farmers to seek alternative crops. 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 hectares**, according to the Association of Exporters of Cacao and Coffee of the DRC. The Forastero variety is the most widely produced cocoa bean in the DRC.



Building on these considerations, this research investigates the intersection of modern slavery and illicit resource appropriation in the DRC's agricultural sector, focusing specifically on cocoa. Cocoa production is a particularly interesting case for several reasons. First, cocoa plantations in the DRC are concentrated in the eastern regions of the country (especially Beni in North Kivu province and Bunia in Ituri province), where armed conflict, illicit resource appropriation, and modern slavery intersect most sharply. More than 120 militias and armed groups operate in the eastern provinces of the DRC, regularly perpetrating violations and abuses against the civilian population (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025).

Second, the DRC's cocoa sector has grown steadily over the past two decades, fueled by a rising global demand that major producers such as Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire are struggling to meet and by a disease that devastated coffee plantations and forced Congolese coffee farmers to seek alternative crops (Nieburg, 2017). This growth is well captured in trade data: in 2022, the DRC exported \$112 million in cocoa beans, becoming the eleventh largest cocoa exporter worldwide, and in 2023, DRC's cocoa exports rose to \$119 million (Growth Lab). In 2024 the International Trade Administration (2024) noted that the DRC has registered a certain "success in developing cocoa and coffee for export".

Figure 2. DRC Exports by Sector of the Economy, 2023

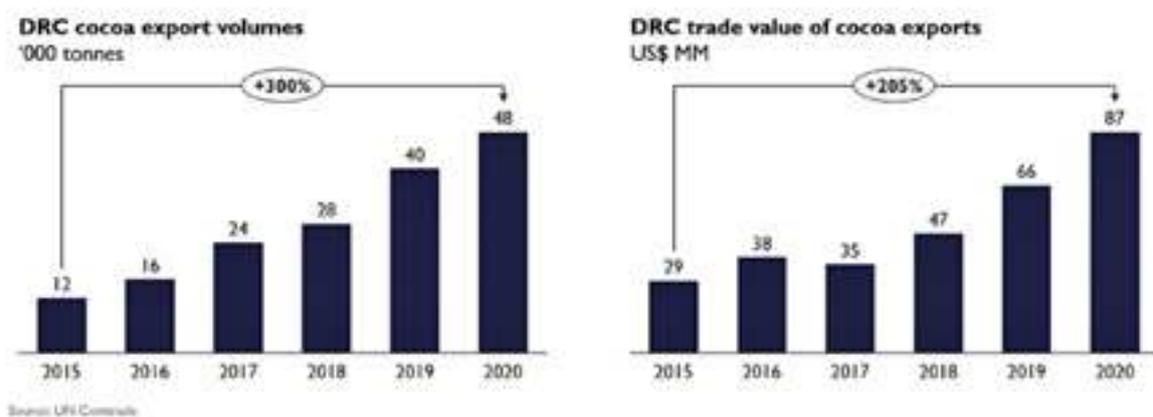


Source: Growth Lab, Atlas of Economic Complexity, Harvard University. Edited by the author to highlight exports of cocoa beans. <https://atlas.hks.harvard.edu/countries/180/export-basket>.

Third, cocoa used to be considered “militia-proof” because its true value is only realized after it is processed (unlike gold and diamonds) (Kitchens, 2014). Yet, the reality on the ground suggests otherwise, which demands further and deeper investigation. Over time, armed actors in North Kivu and Ituri have come to recognize the economic value of cocoa and have developed a considerable interest in the crop.

Presumably, this is explained by the rising global price of cocoa, which reached a historical high of nearly \$10,000 per metric ton in March 2024 (International Cocoa Organization, 2024). These dynamics suggest that global commodity prices have an impact on the strategies and behaviors of armed actors’ on the ground where those commodities are produced.

Figure 3. DRC Cocoa Exports – Volume and Trade Value, 2015-2020



Source: USAID, 2023 – USAID’s investment facilitation activity in the DRC (USAID invest). An introductory guide to the cocoa sector in the DRC.

The methodology for the report combined desk-based research and key informant interviews. Desk research entailed a comprehensive review and analysis of existing studies—academic publications, journalistic investigations, and reports by non-governmental organizations—with a focus was on modern slavery practices and illicit appropriation of resources, both in general terms and specific to the cocoa sector in the eastern DRC. The research was conducted using key terms in both English and French.

In-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants generated original data and helped validate findings from the desk research. The interviews were conducted with journalists, members of local NGOs and Civil Society Organizations, scholars, researchers, government officials, representatives of MONUSCO, and businesspeople involved in the Congolese cocoa sector.

Mapping relevant organizations in North Kivu and Ituri helped to locate potential participants. Efforts were made to include a diversity expertise among the organization mapped—modern slavery, labor exploitation, armed groups, illicit appropriation of natural resources, war economies, and cross-border smuggling. Expert sampling identified topical specialists among scholars, journalists, and human rights activists, and snowballing was used to identify additional experts through referrals from participants.



Considering the security risks posed by sharing sensitive information about armed actors, human rights violations, and illicit activities—especially for respondents based in the volatile regions of the eastern DRC—all interviews were fully anonymized to protect the identity of participants. This approach was in line with the ethical protocol developed for this study and was clearly communicated to interviewees both during their consent process and prior to conducting each interview.

Map 2. The Areas Studied in this Report: North Kivu and Ituri



Source: Infoplus <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 plays an integral role in 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). Cocoa has become a source of insecurity, targeted by multiple armed actors who raid local farms, use modern slavery practices, illicitly appropriate the farms’ produce, and smuggle cocoa into Uganda for a profit.

From the Bush to the Cocoa Farm

Multiple armed actors engage in raiding local farms and appropriating their output. Among those most involved in these crimes 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, a neighborhood in northern Beni, reported that “whenever we [the farmers] produce a lot of cocoa, the massacres [by the ADF] increase.” (International Crisis Group, 2022). Another farmer confirmed this, lamenting that they work hard to grow cocoa only to have the ADF come and seize the crops at harvest time (ibid.).

According to the UN Group of Experts on the DRC, since late 2020 North Kivu has witnessed a spike in attacks against cocoa farmers. Specifically, the ADF has carried out violent and deadly attacks against cocoa farmers across Beni, Bulungo, and Mutwanga (UNSC, 2021). A representative of cocoa farmers from Mayangose reported repeated ADF attacks on cocoa farmers in their fields, including farmers undertaking cocoa harvesting (UNSC, 2020).

According to that person, the farmers had been executed so the ADF could harvest the cocoa, as this is how “Islamists support themselves.” (ibid, 2020). Around Mwalika, in the Virunga National Park, the ADF has also demanded a contribution of farmers’ harvest as a tax in exchange for road access and protection (UNSC, 2021).

Beyond the ADF, farmers in Mavivi, Rwenzori, and Kainama, North Kivu, attributed attacks on cocoa farms to civilian bandits or unidentified armed men mimicking the ADF to occupy cocoa fields and steal cocoa during harvest periods (UNSC, 2020). A civil society representative in Kasindi, North Kivu, described how some armed bandits deliberately dressing as “Islamists” to frighten cocoa farmers. A trader who purchased cocoa throughout Beni territory reported similar patterns, saying that armed men dressed like the ADF threatened farmers, chased them from their fields, and then stole and sold the harvest (ibid.). Like the ADF, militias and gangs attack cocoa farms and their communities through attacks, massacres, raping, and killings of innocent cocoa farmers. As local observers explained, for these armed groups such acts are “a way of humiliating people, making 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).

Yet the violence is not limited to irregular armed actors. Every informant with whom we spoke emphasized that, on top of the attacks perpetrated by the ADF and other groups, members of the FARDC have also raided cocoa farms and illegally appropriated their produce (author’s interview, Kinshasa). Ironically, the FARDC were allegedly deployed to protect local communities from ADF abuses, but instead engaged in the same practices (author’s interview, Goma; author’s interview, Bunia). Farmers and traders complain that FARDC members based in Rwenzori and around Oicha prioritize trading cocoa over protecting the population (UNSC, 2021).

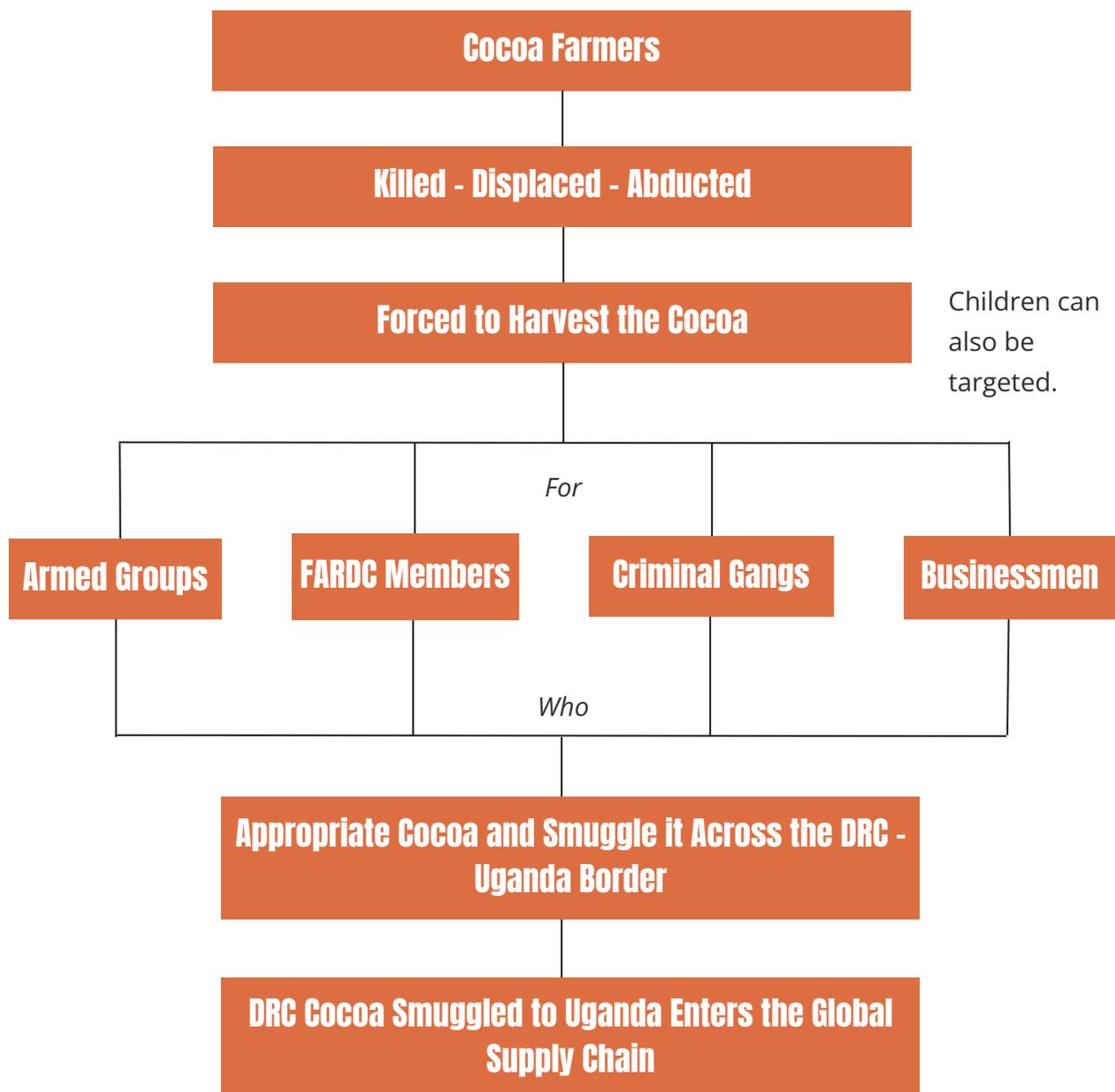
In some cases, soldiers illegally harvested cocoa crops abandoned by farmers fleeing the violence and sold them illegally for a profit (Au, 2021; author’s interview, Goma). The manager of an agricultural cocoa cooperative confirmed that “as soon as the planters leave the fields, there are soldiers who steal the products and resell them to smuggler fraudsters” (Le Monde Afrique, 2021).



Fear of armed attacks and violent expropriations has driven 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).

Nevertheless, some farmers, continue to cultivate their fields despite the risks, as they have no 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 frequently raid cocoa-growing villages, killing many—if not most—of their members. These brutal tactics are used to establish control by force and to terrorize survivors, compelling them either to abandon their cocoa fields and surrender their plantations or submit to the armed actors' demands.

The most common pattern of exploitation is that farmers who survive violent attacks on their farms or villages are placed 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). Local observers noted that militia leaders and "their powerful and often very wealthy clients" benefit from illegal resource extraction by forcing local communities to undertake agricultural activities (Luneghe, 2024), including cocoa farming. The ADF, for instance, not only attacks cocoa farmers in their fields but also abducts them, forcing abductees to farm on their behalf (UNSC, 2021). ADF captives abducted around Oicha (North Kivu), reported being forced to farm cocoa and other crops for the group (UNSC, 2020).

Farmers are also exploited in other ways. For example, cocoa farmers in Kainama who were captured by ADF and held for several days were required to work as porters for the group (ibid).

Reports from local sources indicate that, armed groups in the eastern DRC are also implicated in the forcible recruitment of children, who are then deployed on cocoa plantations to produce and harvest cocoa beans that the militants sell for profit (Schipani, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2022). Respondents with whom we spoke also described cases in which children were 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 children's health and development and exposes them to multiple hazards. Children in forced labor on cocoa farms typically use chainsaws to clear land, climb the cocoa trees to cut bean pods using machetes (large, heavy, and dangerous knives)—the standard tools for children on the cocoa farms (author's interview, Bunia). Once they cut the bean pods from the trees, the 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, the children pack the beans into heavy sacks and load them onto the armed actors' trucks or other transport (author's interview, Goma).



While forced labor—including child labor is common, they are not universal in cocoa plantations controlled by armed actors. In some cases, violence is used to drive all farmers off their fields at harvest time, after which the armed actors themselves carry out the final phase of the harvest so as to appropriate the cocoa beans directly.

A Profitable Cross-Border Smuggling Business

Once armed actors assert their presence on cocoa farms and force farmers to carry out the harvest, or do it themselves, they establish control over the entire produce. The most common strategy to maximize profit is to smuggle the beans into Uganda. Prominent reports note that, “vast amounts of Congolese cocoa and coffee are smuggled into neighboring countries each season,” taking advantage of porous borders and weak law enforcement (Vyawahare, 2022). Local authorities and security services also describe a network of young people who collaborate with armed groups to steal cocoa and sell it in town to exporters (Mapenzi, 2024). Civil society representatives and farmers report that unidentified armed attackers and the ADF collaborate with businesspeople in Watalinga and Rwenzori to buy and smuggle cocoa into Uganda for sale (UNSC, 2020).

Like the raids on cocoa farms, this activity is not limited to non-state armed actors. Some FARDC soldiers are also involved in smuggling cocoa beans into Uganda or selling beans to local cross-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 participate 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 businesspeople, most of whom have strong political connections (author’s interview, Beni).

Respondents reported that cocoa smuggling into Uganda is driven by higher per-kilo prices in Uganda and the high taxes and complicated bureaucratic processes for regular legal export of cocoa from the DRC (author’s interview, Bunia). People who purchased cocoa near the Ugandan border then smuggled it into Uganda reported conducting transactions in Ugandan shillings to avoid currency exchange fees in Uganda. A border official and a trader in Nobili both reported that Ugandan shillings were used for cocoa sales in the region (UNSC, 2021).

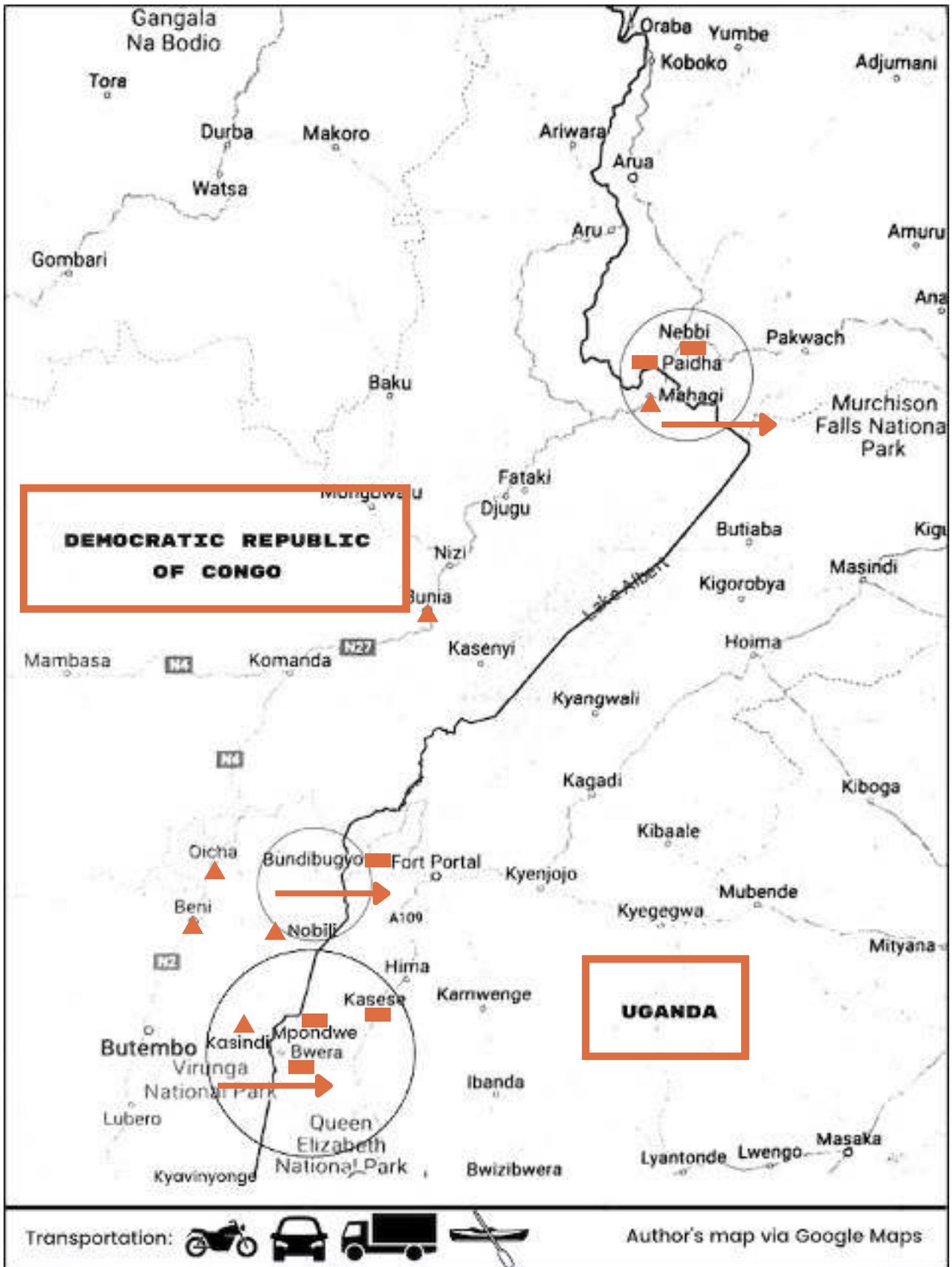
The 950 km-long DRC-Uganda border dotted with hundreds of unmanned entry points (Blanshe, 2023), provides ideal conditions for illegal cocoa transactions. Trucks carrying cocoa pass weekly along Route Nationale 4 (RN4), which runs from the Central African Republic border to the border between the DRC town of Kasindi and the Ugandan town of Mpondwe (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 Lake Edward from Kyavinyonge Port (author's interview, Kinshasa). Individuals with first-hand knowledge reported that on the Ugandan side DRC cocoa 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. Respondents estimated that up to 80% of Congolese cocoa passes through this opaque and criminal circuit before reaching Uganda. Once in Uganda, traders affix Ugandan certificates of origin and export the cocoa to international chocolate companies (author's interview, Bukavu; author's interview, Goma).

The consequence is that the economic benefits of DRC cocoa production are largely reaped by Uganda—which likely explains the Ugandan governments's reticence to curb this illegal business (Herve, 2023). The Virunga Chocolate factory, one of only two chocolate factories currently operating in the DRC, noted that "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 described this reality as a "regional fraud of agricultural products" (author's interview, Kinshasa).



Map 3. DRC-Uganda Border, Cocoa Smuggling Business



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



In the eastern DRC, cocoa has become deeply entangled in the war economy. Armed groups and criminal gangs have developed the practice of attacking cocoa farms in North Kivu and Ituri. Many farmers are killed, while others are spared only to be forced 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 and cocoa crops, which are then occupied and harvested by the armed groups. Reports indicate that children are abducted and forced to work on cocoa plantations in abusive and hazardous conditions.

Worryingly, these practices are not confined to non-state armed groups. Members of the FARDC, deployed to North Kivu and Ituri to protect communities, have themselves perpetrated violent attacks. Some force farmers to harvest the cocoa, which they then appropriate, while others force the farmers off their fields and take over the cocoa harvest themselves.

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

Smuggling is more profitable than legal trade, due to high taxes and cumbersome bureaucratic requirements. The long and porous DRC-Uganda border offers an ideal setting for these illegal transactions. Connivance among border officials on both sides also contributes to creating an environment conducive to smuggling.

Once in Uganda, Congolese cocoa is given Ugandan certificates of origin and sold to international chocolate companies—many of which are seemingly unaware that the beans are produced through forced labor in the eastern DRC. From there, Congolese cocoa enters the global supply chain. This system ensures that Uganda reaps the economic benefits of Congolese cocoa exports while the DRC only realizes minimal economic value from this economic resource. Cocoa farming communities in North Kivu and Ituri continue to be victims of violence and exploitation, while predatory armed actors and smugglers profit from their cocoa.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CONGOLESE GOVERNMENT

- **Establish a transparent shared registry of cocoa farmers and traders to enable identification and prevent illicit cocoa trading.** A registry 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.
- **Strengthen enforcement against illegal cocoa appropriation by members of FARDC. Invest financial and human resources into investigating cases in which members of the armed forces engage in the illicit appropriation of natural resources.** Existing legislation prohibiting members of the armed forces from engaging in business should be better enforced, and violations (which are often accompanied by human rights abuses) should be prosecuted and adequately punished.
- **Protect civilians in cocoa farming areas. Take urgent and adequate action to protect civilians from armed attacks and forms of enslavement, including forced labor and forced child labor.** Train front-line officials to fully implement standard operating procedures to proactively identify victims of forced labor (including vulnerable populations like children and adults on cocoa farms), and to refer victims to appropriate care in coordination with civil society and international organizations.
- **Provide safe reporting mechanisms. Create secure avenues for local agricultural communities to safely report attacks, abuses, and exploitation** to the relevant authorities and access protection and justice, regardless of whether the perpetrators are armed groups, militias, criminal gangs, or members of the army.
- **Develop innovative responses to curb criminality in the cocoa sector. Implement holistic, innovative approaches to combat criminality that do not harm the vulnerable populations who depend on cocoa for their livelihoods.** These anti-criminality measures should include not only security and law enforcement approaches, but also development actors, to ensure the measure neither harm the local economy, deprive farmers of their income, nor push farming communities into poverty.



- **Reform the export regime. Eliminate the excessive fees, charges, and paperwork requirements that disincentivize legal trade.** Raise the price paid for cocoa inside the DRC. Without these reforms, illicit cocoa will continue to seep into supply chains.
- **Strengthen border and customs cooperation. Equip law enforcement, customs services, and other relevant bodies with adequate staffing, funding, and training to combat illicit cocoa smuggling.** Improve collaboration among state services at border and customs points to increase information sharing and reduce smuggling. Cooperation between Congolese and Ugandan border officials and customs agencies should be pursued and strengthened.
- **Recognize the illegal trade as organized crime. Senior political leaders, politicians, and criminal justice officials should formally classify the illegal cocoa trade as organized crime.** Together with other countries in the Great Lakes region—particularly Uganda—the DRC should lobby for illegal cocoa trading to be treated as a policing priority within the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UGANDAN GOVERNMENT

- **Investigate and prosecute illicit resource appropriation. Launch thorough investigations into the illicit appropriation of agricultural and other natural resources.** Those involved in these trafficking businesses—including traders, businessmen, and officials—should be prosecuted and adequately punished.
- **Tighten Border controls on DRC Cocoa. Enhance regulatory controls on all cocoa coming from the DRC by verifying export permits, customs clearance documents, and DRC tax receipts.** Since cocoa is considerably more difficult to monitor once it enters Uganda, tighten controls at the border. This requires, among other things, increasing the number of law enforcement teams (currently insufficient for the task) and enhancing their training.
- **Acknowledge the long-term harms of cocoa smuggling. Recognize that smuggling networks ultimately undermine the Ugandan state, its functioning, and its development.** They also contribute to the insecurity, conflict, and instability that negatively affect the Great Lakes region, including Uganda. In short, while cocoa smuggling may generate immediate short-term economic gains, its long-term consequences are deeply damaging.
- **Strengthen inter-agency cross-border cooperation.** Equip law enforcement, customs services, and other relevant bodies with adequate staffing, funding, and training to confront illicit cocoa smuggling. Improve collaboration among state services at border and customs points. Improve collaboration among state services at border and customs points to increase information sharing and reduce smuggling. Cooperation between Congolese and Ugandan border officials and customs agencies should also be pursued and strengthened.
- **Recognize the illegal cocoa trade as organized crime. Senior political leaders, politicians, and criminal justice officials should formally classify the illegal cocoa trade as a form of organized crime.** Uganda, together with other countries in the Great Lakes region—particularly the DRC, should lobby for illegal cocoa trading to be included as a policing priority within the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COCOA INDUSTRY

- **Implement a comprehensive human rights due diligence policy.** Invest sufficient resources to investigate, identify, assess, and address the risks of forced labor associated with companies commercial practices, supply chain structures, and relationships, as well as those of their commercial partners, cocoa farm owners, cocoa farmers' cooperatives, or larger cocoa suppliers.
- **Adopt a whole-of-supply-chain approach.** Ensure that supply chain 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, but also where the risks of forced labor and child labor are greater.
- **Develop and enforce a robust supplier code of conduct. Base this code of conduct on international labor standards and apply it across all direct cocoa suppliers and sub-suppliers.** Provide awareness-raising, training, and capacity-building, and make compliance a non-negotiable condition for suppliers to conclude any contract with the companies.
- **Strengthen the traceability of cocoa beans. Allocate sufficient resources and efforts to trace cocoa beans down to the farming site to identify any red flags of forced labor and to take appropriate action when needed.** In particular, chocolate companies sourcing from Uganda should thoroughly trace their supply chains to investigate whether the cocoa they are supplied originates from the DRC and through which channels it entered Uganda.
- **Leverage economic influence to curb cocoa smuggling.** Chocolate companies sourcing from Uganda and the DRC should use their market power to demand that both governments take stronger action against cocoa smuggling. This includes tightening controls at key border points, combating the corruption that prevails among many border officials, and reducing the fees and paperwork requirements that disincentivize legal trade.
- **Abandon the misleading assumption that cocoa is "militia-proof."** Acknowledge that violent and predatory groups increasingly target cocoa in Ituri and North Kivu. Chocolate companies sourcing from the DRC have a responsibility to recognize this reality and the serious risks faced by cocoa-growing communities.



- **Protect the farmers' rights and safety.** Sourcing cocoa from the DRC can provide sustainable income to farming communities in Ituri and North Kivu, but chocolate companies must take steps to ensure that cocoa production does not endanger the human rights, labor rights or physical safety of farmers and their communities. This could include supporting community-based vigilance committees in cooperation with trustworthy and committed local business partners.





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