

# TAINED TECHNOLOGY

## FORCED AND CHILD LABOUR IN THE ELECTRONICS INDUSTRY

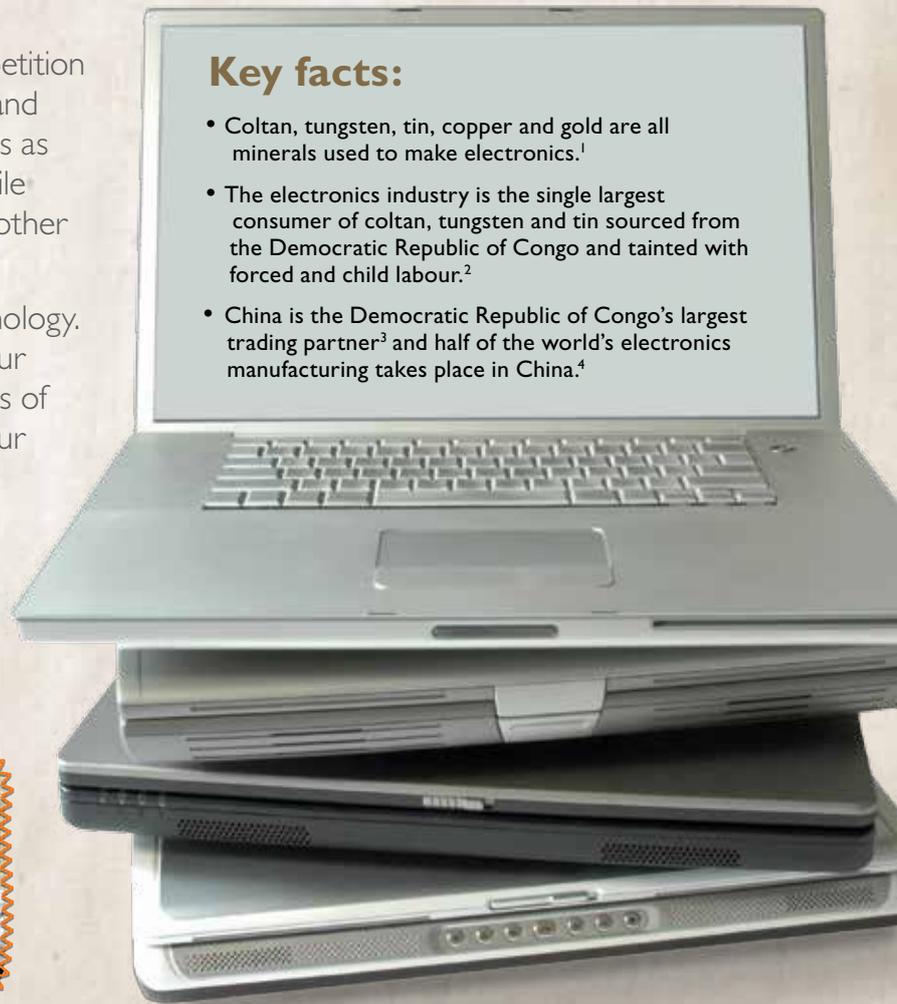
The global electronics industry is big business and is fuelled by intense competition to provide customers with the latest and greatest electronic devices. This means as consumers we can purchase our mobile phones, MP3 players, computers and other common electronics at a cheap price.

However, there is a dark side to technology. Research shows that exploitative labour practices and some of the worst forms of child labour are often used to make our favourite electronic devices. Forced and child labour has been reported in the mining of the minerals that make our electronic components and also in the manufacturing of the devices themselves.



### Key facts:

- Coltan, tungsten, tin, copper and gold are all minerals used to make electronics.<sup>1</sup>
- The electronics industry is the single largest consumer of coltan, tungsten and tin sourced from the Democratic Republic of Congo and tainted with forced and child labour.<sup>2</sup>
- China is the Democratic Republic of Congo's largest trading partner<sup>3</sup> and half of the world's electronics manufacturing takes place in China.<sup>4</sup>



DON'T TRADE LIVES FACTSHEET



# FROM PIT TO PURCHASE: THE SUPPLY CHAIN OF YOUR ELECTRONICS

## Mines:

Where the minerals that make common electronics are extracted. There are many reports of forced and child labour within these mines.



## Trading houses:

Located in towns close to the mines, they buy the raw products from miners in various quantities and trade them with exporters.

## Exporters:

They buy the desired quantities and export the products to overseas markets.

## Transit countries:

Exporters transport minerals using neighbouring country infrastructure, where the origin of the product is obscured.

## Refiners:

Metal processing companies turn minerals into metals. Once this occurs, it becomes impossible to trace the origin of minerals.



## Manufacturers:

Metals are used to manufacture electronic parts. Parts are then assembled into products. Exploitative labour practices are commonplace within this industry.



## Consumer electronics companies:

The branded product, recognisable by consumers, is put on retailers' shelves and sold to the public.



# MINERALS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

In the Democratic Republic of Congo there are numerous reports that forced and child labour is used to mine minerals<sup>5</sup>.

## Artisanal mining

Subsistence mining is an important livelihood source in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This is when people are not directly employed by a mining company but work independently in small-scale mines. Approximately 2 million people in the DRC make their living this way<sup>6</sup> and the conditions are incredibly bad.

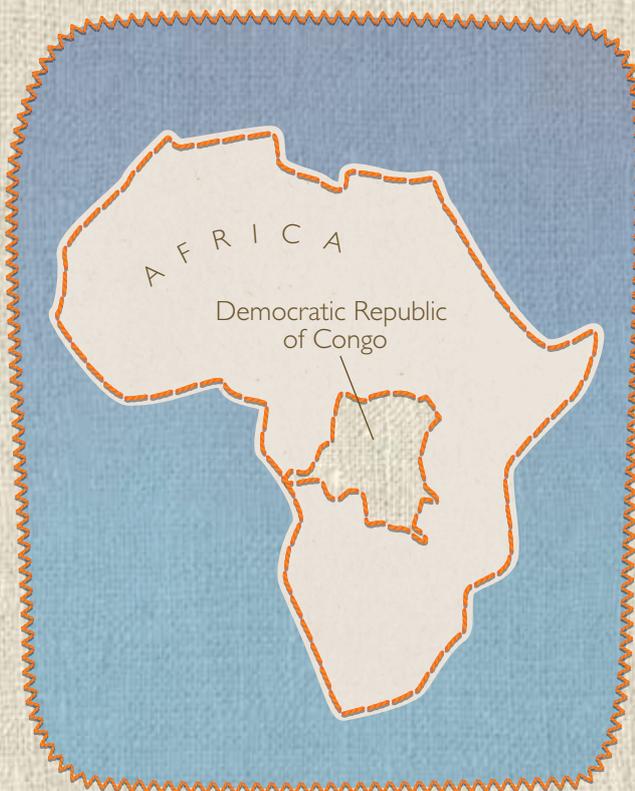
Many mine workers are from rural areas where they have limited livelihood choices.<sup>7</sup> They endure the terrible conditions because it offers a greater income than other options available to them. For others it is the only trade they know because the industrial mines they used to work in have now shut down. Their work can involve mining in complex underground systems with no ventilation and little or no protective clothing.<sup>8</sup> As a result fatalities are common.

In some places, children can represent a large proportion of the total workforce.<sup>9</sup> Their work may involve heavy lifting and exposure to minerals, dust, chemicals and radioactivity.<sup>10</sup> Children often work in these hazardous conditions in order to help support their families. This hazardous labour can be extremely damaging to a child's physical and mental health. Working long days can also prevent a child from attending school, limiting their future opportunities and keeping them locked in a cycle of poverty.

## Conflict minerals

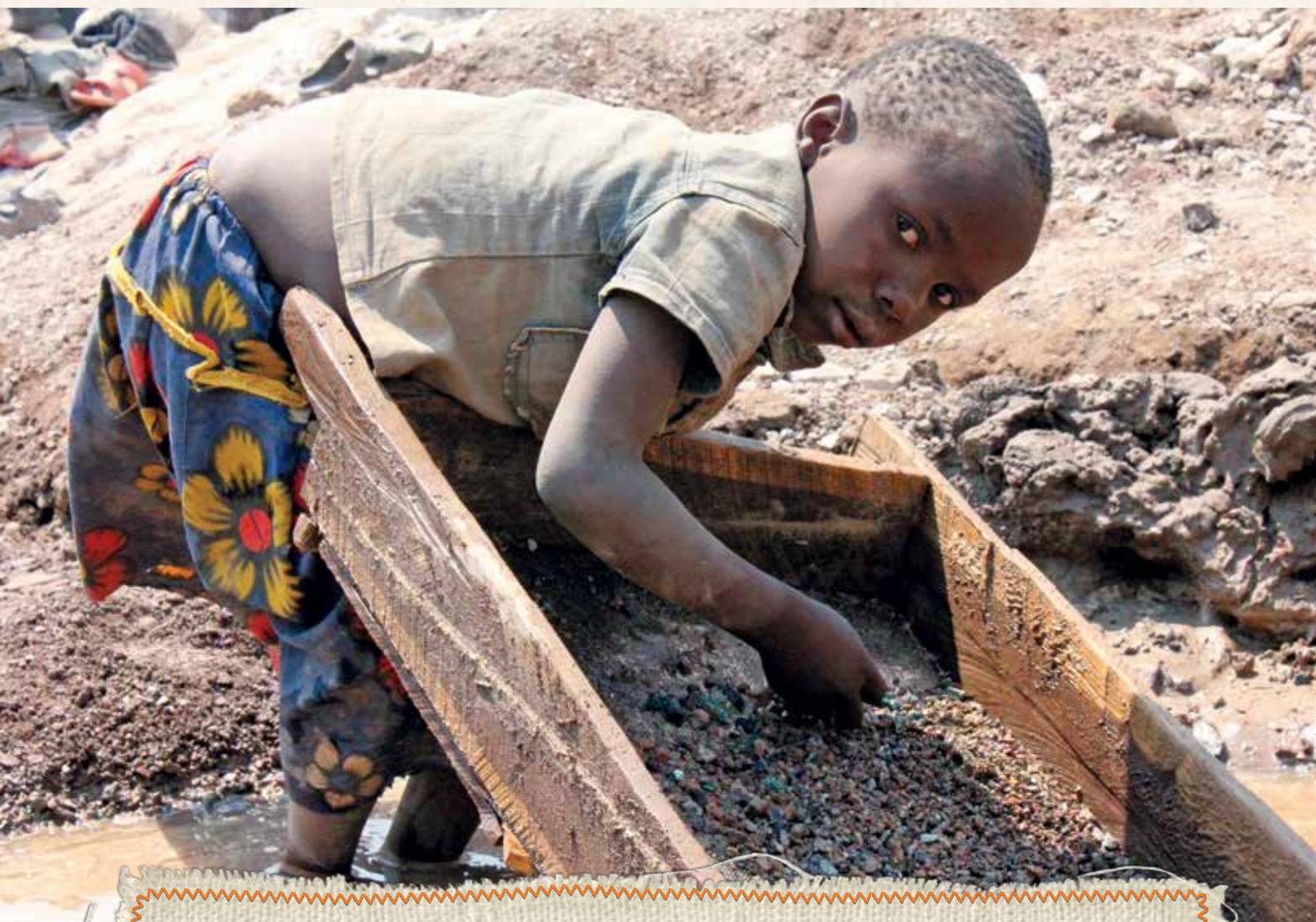
There are well publicised reports of horrific conditions in mines controlled by local armed groups and militia. Predominantly found in the east of the DRC, they are reported to force

miners to work in dangerous conditions without pay.<sup>11</sup> Child labourers are also commonly found here.<sup>12</sup> Children are sometimes forced to work deep below ground breathing dusty air without protective equipment. Mine shaft collapses are common.<sup>13</sup> Children are also used as porters and must walk for up to two days, carrying heavy bags of minerals to airstrips where they can be transported by air to the capital, Goma.<sup>14</sup>



## WHAT IS CHILD LABOUR?

Child labour is work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity; work that exceeds a minimum number of hours; work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and work that interferes with their schooling.<sup>15</sup>



### Digging for hope

This young girl (pictured) works daily with her mother and four brothers and sisters, collecting copper in a mining quarry in Kambove, DRC. The children and their mother dig and clean raw copper to get it to a sellable quantity. They spend the day barefoot in the gravel pits, sieving and cleaning through soil to find the copper. It is hot

and dusty and they have no protective clothing to stop them inhaling the dust. "My husband is sick in bed for two years now and nobody is assisting my family with food and soap," her mother says. Working in the mines is the only way they can afford to buy food.

*Photo: Alain Mwakul/World Vision*

# LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN CHINA'S ELECTRONICS MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Half of the world's electronics manufacturing takes place in China,<sup>16</sup> where labour exploitation has been widely reported.<sup>17</sup> Workers often receive little pay and are forced to work excessive overtime to meet unrealistic production quotas.<sup>18</sup> In some factories, protective clothing and equipment is either inadequate or non-existent, resulting in workers being exposed to hazardous chemicals and odours.<sup>19</sup> Discrimination, verbal harassment and excessive punishment from factory management are all reportedly common.<sup>20</sup>

In some of the most severe cases children as young as nine years old have been reported as working in factories making electronics.<sup>21</sup> Increasing labour shortages in China have meant children from poor, rural areas are targeted by labour recruitment agents working for factories, including electronics factories.<sup>22</sup> Recruiters may send money back to the child's family on a monthly basis to convince parents to keep their child working.<sup>23</sup>

Reports exist of children being kidnapped or enticed with false promises of high wages.<sup>24</sup> They are transported to manufacturing cities where middle men brokers deal with factory owners to supply child labourers, offering to attend the factories to beat the children if they are seen to be disobedient.<sup>25</sup> Children are then transported by trucks all over the region to work in factories, which may include electronics factories.<sup>26</sup> They are threatened to prevent them from running away<sup>27</sup> and work up to 12 hours in a day.<sup>28</sup> Many have no idea if and when they will be allowed to return home to their families.

## Bonded labour: "student interns"

Reports exist of children being forced out of school to work as "student interns" or "apprentices" in factories manufacturing devices for well known electronics companies.<sup>29</sup> Some children must work to pay off debts owed for tuition and school fees.<sup>30</sup> If they express a wish to quit and return to their family, school administrators may threaten to fail them. They are forced to work long hours in order to meet large quotas and are paid very little. If children refuse overtime, they may be prevented from working for a month as punishment.<sup>31</sup> Factory management may also threaten to withhold wages or confiscate identity papers if they attempt to leave.<sup>32</sup>



## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and business initiatives can all play a role in addressing forced and child labour in the electronics industry. A holistic development approach is needed, which takes into account the fragile context of the place where forced and child labour is occurring. For example, any approach to addressing forced and child labour in DRC mines must account for poor governance and the need for building up a more diverse economy.

It is not an effective solution to simply stop buying from places with a high risk of forced and child labour because the communities will end up in worse circumstances; facing a diminished income and other exploitative situations. Companies have a responsibility to ensure that all their suppliers and contractors adhere to labour standards that help improve conditions in the communities they source from. Companies should also engage with NGOs who run programs in mining communities that

assist with developing safe and sustainable livelihoods and improving the health, protection and education of children and their families.

When sourcing materials from high-risk areas, Australian businesses should adopt international guidelines such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s guidelines on responsible supply chains. Other industry initiatives such as the Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition (EICC) and the Global e-Sustainability Initiative (GeSI) also provide codes of conduct to ensure ethical supply chains in the electronics industry.

Finally, all companies should transparently report on their efforts to eradicate harmful practices so consumers can be sure they are not indirectly supporting forced labour, child labour or labour exploitation.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Demand better behaviour from business! Before you make a purchase, educate yourself about the company's policies and practices so you are satisfied it is working to combat exploitation throughout its supply chain. You can find information about a company's supply chain on their website or by contacting them directly.

For more information visit [dontradelives.com.au](http://dontradelives.com.au)

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