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DRC: Humanitarian agencies fight child exploitation

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6 June 2013, South Kivu, DRC: About 14 per cent of people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) depend on mining for an income. About two per cent of people actually work in the mines. This includes tens of thousands of children. Credit: OCHA/Philippe Kropf

"Quite a few of the most beautiful homes in Bukavu are built on the sweat of children working in the mines," says a child protection officer who works in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). He can rattle off the names of dozens of artisanal mines that surround South Kivu's. He explains that much of the work in the mines and in the businesses that have sprung up around them, falls on the shoulders of young boys and girls.

Mining makes up a significant part of South Kivu's economy. The [International Crisis Group](#) (ICG) estimates that artisanal or subsistence mines account for "hundreds of thousands" of jobs. According to the international NGO [World Vision](#), 14 per cent of all people in DRC depend on mining for an income, with about two per cent of the population spending their days under ground or panning for gold.

Prostitution, HIV and AIDS, physical violence and drug use are major issues in and around the mines, explains the child protection officer, who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of his work. He says that the efforts of humanitarian agencies to address this problem struggle to get funding.

"These issues fall in the gap between humanitarian activities and longer-term development efforts," he says.

Overcoming the lure of "quick money"

In Kamituga, a large mining town about 200 kilometres from Bukavu, the NGO [War Child](#), works to combat child labour by supporting communities to identify and help at-risk children and young people. Their goal is to get children to enrol in basic classes or in vocational training such as masonry, carpentry, tailoring, and baking. In 2012, 41 girls and boys completed their training and are now working in small cooperatives where they are beginning to earn incomes.

"The young people also participate in life-skills education where they improve their social skills, manage relationships and gain an understanding of their rights and responsibilities," says programme manager Lisa Carl.

For the NGO EIRENE, it is important to stress long-term solutions, bridging humanitarian and development action.

"Just one or two semesters at school cannot give (these children) a real perspective," says Nicole Poissonier. "Our interventions are successful but the attractions of quick money and family obligations mean that young people often re-engage in these activities and go back into the mines".

"Warlords and armed groups control the mines"

The mines – or more specifically the spectacular wealth they offer – are major drivers of the persistent insecurity that plagues eastern DRC.

The United Nations Group of Experts for the DRC has regularly highlighted links between the region's violence and mining, noting that armed groups and criminal networks smuggle "tons of gold" out of the country. According to ICG, armed groups and the military have become "informal owners" of the mining pits.

"Warlords and armed groups control the mines," said an official from South Kivu's provincial Ministry of Social Affairs. The Ministry, explains the official, wishes to play a more active role in addressing the exploitation of children and in mitigating the wider humanitarian fallout of this trade, but like many other government bodies it lacks the funding and capacity to do so.

Building resilience

"We need to offer people a more durable solution," says Florent Méhaule, the Head of OCHA's South Kivu Office. "It is clear that we cannot address the exploitation of children in isolation from other issues that affect vulnerable communities here."

The OCHA-managed [Common Humanitarian Fund](#) in the DRC - a country-based pool of funding from multiple donors - is now supporting projects that are designed to run for up to two years. Traditionally, humanitarian projects only run for a few months or perhaps for one year at a time.

The idea, explains OCHA's Méhaule, is to encourage humanitarian agencies to design multi-year projects that address the immediate consequences of a crisis while also seeking to reinforce the resilience of affected communities.

"There is a clear need for humanitarian agencies to support children who work in these mines," said Méhaule. "By

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offering longer-term funding, we are encouraging agencies to link their immediate efforts to protect these children, with efforts to provide them with a more sustainable alternative."

Today (12 June) is the World Day Against Child Labour. There are an estimated 215 million children trapped in child labour; 115 million of these are working in hazardous conditions, like in the mines of eastern DRC.

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