

How China milks the DRC's precious cobalt

Cobalt blue has been prized by artists from the Ming dynasty in China to the masters of French Impressionism. However, there is another kind of cobalt, an industrial form that is not cherished for its complexion on a palette, but for its ubiquity across modern life. An analysis on the [allAfrica](#) site notes that this mineral is found in every lithium-ion rechargeable battery on the planet – from smartphones to tablets to laptops to electric vehicles. It is also used to fashion superalloys to manufacture jet engines, gas turbines and magnetic steel. And more than half of the world's supply of cobalt is mined in the 'copper belt' of the south-eastern provinces of DRC. According to the government agency charged with oversight of the informal or 'artisanal' mining sector, at least 20% of this supply is mined by locals. The remainder is produced by industrial mines that are typically operated by foreign companies following the collapse of the state-owned mining company, Gécamines. Across the south-eastern provinces, Chinese companies run many of the industrial mines in the region. The Chinese also run most of the 'buying houses' that purchase cobalt from children. Chinese processors then mix cobalt from industrial and artisanal sources during a preliminary refining stage to produce crude cobalt hydroxide, which they drive to ports at Dar es Salaam and Durban for export to China. **After additional refining in China, the cobalt is sold to major component manufacturers and consumer electronic companies across the world.** These companies are collectively worth trillions of dollars. Yet according to Amnesty International in a report at the end of 2017, none of them are making sufficient efforts to ensure that their riches are not being built on the backs of the oppressed women, men and children of the Congo.