THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICAN COBALT: HOW SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PERPETUATES NEOCOLONIAL MOTIVES THROUGH COBALT MINING IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

By
Jayna Lee Brisibe

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Supervisor: Professor Daniel Large

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Jayna Lee Brisibe**, candidate for the MA degree in Public Policy, declare herewith that the present thesis titled "The Scramble for African Cobalt: How Sustainable Development Perpetuates Neocolonial Motives through Cobalt Mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo" is exclusively my own work based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree

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Jayna Brisibe

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Abstract

This thesis aims to answer the question “Is cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) an agent of sustainable development?" by critically examining the intersection of cobalt mining practices, human rights violations, and the principles of sustainable development. Sustainable development is often approached from the standpoint of developing society in a way that benefits the planet. Cobalt is a critical mineral used in the development of renewable energy, which mining often involves human rights violations. Applying dependency theory and the concept of neocolonialism, this thesis argues that mining in the DRC cannot be an agent of sustainable development because it benefits from exploitation, which stems from Belgium's colonial rule and Mobutu’s regime. Evidence suggests that MNCs are agents of neocolonialism due to the need to amass wealth at the expense of Congolese people. It demonstrates the inability of the DRC to emancipate itself from a colonial cycle that is perpetuated by the incursion of MNCs and by the ruling elites for personal gain. Carried out through qualitative desktop research using secondary sources, this adds to a larger body of literature addressing human rights concerns surrounding the exploitation of Congolese people and their land for cobalt in the name of sustainable development and acknowledges that the current system of governance and society in the DRC is based on colonial motives that are invisible to those not willing to look.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Extractivism, Exploitation, Human Rights, Multinational Corporations, Cobalt, Mining, Neocolonialism, Dependency Theory, Democratic Republic of Congo

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List of Acronyms

DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ERG	Eurasian Resources Group
IAC	International Association of the Congo
IRA	International Rights Advocates
KCC	Kamamoto Copper Company
MIP	Mineral Impact Profile
MNC	Multinational Corporation
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
RAID	Rights and Accountability in Development
ROAPE	Review of African Political Economy
TFM	Tenke Fungurume Mining
UDHR	Universal Declaration for Human Rights
UNGP	United Nation's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
UN	United Nations
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

Electric vehicles, widely regarded as one of the most accessible ways for consumers to reduce their carbon footprint and combat climate change, are directly linked to human rights atrocities in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Cobalt, best known for its use in lithium batteries in EVs (Gully, 2022), is an essential natural resource found in the DRC that serves to reduce carbon emissions, among other factors contributing to climate change. According to the United Nations Brundtland Commission (1987), sustainable development can be defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Multinational corporations (MNCs) and global powers are aware of this and are working relentlessly to take advantage of the wealth of cobalt found there to push their version of sustainable development. What their version seems to omit is the fact that forced labor, child labor, and essentially slavery is what is sustaining the sustainable development movement. They conveniently omit that children as young as 5 (Amnesty International, 2016) are digging through the surface rubble of the larger industrial mines where their parents are being abused and subjected to slave labor.

The methods of production that are being used to extract and produce cobalt in the DRC are mirrored in the practices of the colonial power, Belgium, and King Leopold II in relation to the export of natural resources and slave labor. In his book, Kwame Nkrumah (1965), who coined the term 'neocolonialism', illustrates it to be when the state has the outward trappings of international sovereignty, but its economic system and political policies are directed from the outside through economic of monetary means rather than explicit political domination. Whether MNCs and global powers admit it or not, neocolonial motives are being perpetuated through the unethical extraction of cobalt. The concept of sustainable development is not real. Cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo cannot be sustainable for the people and the environment because of the simple fact that colonial powers and MNCs still have a grip on the economy and the greater society. Sustainable development, green growth, and the green economy are all buzzwords to garner support from the public, but behind closed doors, the current form of mining is the farthest thing from sustainable.

While popular discourse surrounding sustainable development approaches from a positive outlook and celebrates the shifts to renewable energy, it often skims over or overlooks the human rights atrocities closely linked to the extraction of critical minerals like cobalt. Sustainable development, as outlined by the United Nations (2023) and the DGB Group (2021), is envisioned as a pathway to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. It aims to promote social stability, reduce poverty, and ensure access to basic necessities such as clean water, healthcare, education, and decent work, while also emphasizing the responsible use of natural resources to avoid environmental degradation and discrimination, ensuring no one is left behind. Cognitive dissonance could be a concept used to describe this discrepancy, but it assumes that MNCs and global powers are completely oblivious to the destruction they are leaving in their wake. It is a paradox between sustaining the planet and sustaining the residents of the planet.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to critically examine the extraction of cobalt in the DRC within the larger context of sustainable development while drawing on dependency theory and neocolonialism. This thesis asks the larger question, "**Is cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo an agent of sustainable development?** This thesis argues that cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo is not an agent of sustainable development because it perpetuates human rights violations, environmental degradation, and neocolonial exploitation, directly contradicting the principles of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I expect to find that the pursuit of global sustainability by MNCs like Apple and Tesla, and global powers, perpetuates local injustices because it is inherently linked to a colonial past.

Methodology

Research for this master's thesis was carried out using qualitative desktop research methodology gathering data from secondary resources to analyze the role of cobalt mining in the DRC in relation to sustainable development. It focuses on bringing the found data together cohesively to address the research question.

The evidence in this thesis was collected from scholarly articles, reports, human rights organizations' reports, mining company websites, MNC (Apple and Tesla) websites, and consulting legal documents when necessary. Academic databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect, were utilized, along with source recommendations from my thesis advisor. There was a focus on finding sources that were closely linked to the objectives the research question looked to address. Accounts of cobalt mining practices, human rights violations, and socioeconomic impacts of mining in the DRC were key themes kept in mind when looking for credible sources. Additionally, policy documents detailing recommendations and international frameworks like the UNs SDGs were consulted to provide a broader context in which the literature was situated, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of cobalt mining in the DRC and sustainable development. Looking at these types of sources was imperative to understanding the broader implications of extraction practices and their connection to neocolonial dynamics perpetuated by MNCs. Potential methods, other than qualitative, that could have been used in this thesis include quantitative methods and a mixed methods approach.

Qualitative methods could not have adequately illustrated the nuanced, context-specific, and human-centered dynamics which are core to this study. Similarly, a mixed method approach, for this specific thesis, would have provided added more depth and understanding of the research findings, however, the nature of the requirements of this thesis and the overarching thesis question did not allow for adequate data collection to support choosing a mixed methods approach. Therefore, a qualitative approach was best suited for this thesis.

Limitations

Because of the emphasis on desktop research only, the amount of data available was very limited. The emphasis being on qualitative methods further narrowed the scope of available relevant information. While this qualitative desk approach provides value insights and contribute to the current discourse surrounding sustainable development and cobalt mining, primary data collection methods like interviews with stakeholders in the DRC and MNCs or fieldwork in the DRC could have helped to enhance the outcome of this research by confirming or denying further what the literature is saying about this topic. Further research should employ a mixed methods approach, including primary research, to ensure a well-rounded approach to answering this question. However, due to time constraints, this next step was not possible.

Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis will proceed in a thoughtful, cohesive manner, each section working to build off the next in the quest to answer the larger research question. This thesis consists of a **literature review** outlining the current discourse surrounding the topic and providing context, along with the relevant theories (dependency theory and neocolonialism) used to conceptualize the research findings. **Chapter 1** addresses the role that cobalt plays in the green economy, outlining its importance in green technologies, the DRC's dominance in cobalt mining, and preliminary ethical concerns. **Chapter 2** takes a deeper look at the ethical and human rights concerns surrounding the extraction of cobalt, assessing the working conditions of industrial mine workers and child laborers. **Chapter 3** looks at the role of MNCs and the Congolese government in the sustainability of cobalt mining. It examines MNCs' exploitative practices, lack of accountability, and resource dependency. **Chapter 4** asks the question of how cobalt aligns with the principles of sustainable development, along with barriers and potential pathways to sustainable cobalt mining. Finally, the **conclusion** synthesizes the evidence presented in this thesis and provides future research directions.

Literature Review

Chapter 1: The History of the Democratic Republic of Congo

1.1 Belgium's Colonial Rule

In the late 1800s, European powers partitioned Africa in the Scramble for Africa (Voelcker, 2023). Congo was the first to be carved out after the Berlin conference in 1884 by Britain, France, and Belgium (Voelcker, 2023). Belgium was the European colonial power that colonized the DRC. There were 2 phases of colonization under Belgian rule; the first was by King Leopold II from 1885 to 1908, and the second by the Belgian state from 1908 to June 30th, 1960, when the Congolese people gained independence (Tunamsifu, 2023). Both were characterized by the theft of previous resources and violence (Tunamsifu, 2023). An estimated population of 25 million people were subjugated under King Leopold II's rule, about 5 times the size of Belgium (Udegbunam, 2020). Compared to other colonies, the human rights violations were far worse despite promises to help end slavery (Tunamsifu, 2023; Voelcker, 2023). The first step in conquering the Congo was to steal their land. Through the International Association of the Congo (IAC), King Leopold II, who was the King of Belgium at the time of initial colonization, acquired signatures of Congolese kings renouncing their land, forcefully (Tunamsifu, 2023). In 1884, the local kings signed 'treaties' to give up their land freely in exchange for just a piece of cloth and alcohol, etc. (Tunamsifu, 2023). 400 treaties were signed, but the local kings did not know they were signing the rights to their land away (Tunamsifu, 2023). This was a ploy by King Leopold II and his followers to dispossess the Congolese land. After this, the flag of the newly named Congo Free State, characterized by a blue background with a singular yellow star in the center, was erected (Tunamsifu, 2023; Voelcker, 2023). Between 1890 and 1904, the Congo Free State was the most lucrative colony in Africa because of the increasing demand for rubber (Tunamsifu, 2023). This made King Leopold II extremely rich because of the gains he received from exports (Tunamsifu, 2023). However, to keep the rubber trade quotas, extreme human atrocities were committed by the Belgian power (Tunamsifu, 2023). The most common torture tool, made from dried hippopotamus called the Chicotte, was used by the regime's soldiers to kill or intimidate Congolese kings on King Leopold II's orders (Tunamsifu, 2023). During his reign, King Leopold II ordered his soldiers to cut off the right hand of Congolese people who did not reach the rubber quota or simply resisted (Tunamsifu, 2023). Severed right hands of Congolese people were presented as a trophy to the commissioner who represented the authority of King Leopold; additionally, the hands were seen as proof that the ammunition given was not wasted on other activities (Tunamsifu, 2023). The Congo Free State began to be associated with cutting off and producing the right hand of 'rebellious' Congolese people (Tunamsifu, 2023). As a result of slavery, torture, and mutilation, the population of the Congo Free State was reduced by half; an estimated 10 million people (Tunamsifu, 2023). These savage acts caused King Leopold to hand over his power to the Belgian government, which then took over the Congo Free State on November 15th, 1908, and renamed it the Belgian Congo (Congo Belge) (Tunamsifu, 2023).

Under the rule of the Belgian government, a new colonial charter was adopted, stating that 'nobody can be forced to work on behalf of individuals of Congo' (Tunamsifu, 2023). Despite this, slavery and forced labor continued. High racial segregation in the Congo excluded Black people from political and civic participation, leaving them economically marginalized and without influence over the country's future (Tunamsifu, 2023). Tunamsifu (2023) emphasizes that after the Congolese people gained their independence in 1960, there was a period during which the DRC went through extreme political instability because they were not prepared for post-colonial self-governance. This contributed to the inability of colonial atrocities that the Congolese people because of their poor systems of government and institutions that were set up to fail post-independence (Tunamsifu, 2023). Although the DRC has gained independence, a Congolese artist Sammy Baloji, emphasizes that the colonial legacy continues to live on in modern Congolese society because global powers continue to compete over its natural resources, which is enabled by colonial legacy of dependency (Udegbunam, 2020; Voelcker 2023).

Mobutu and the Zaire

The colonial penetration of Zaire under Belgian rule devastated traditional modes of production, replacing them with an economic structure designed to benefit Belgium (Naniuzeyi, 1999). Their financial interests controlled the means of production and aligned closely with the colonial state, while companies in mining and agriculture drastically transformed Zairian society (Naniuzeyi, 1999). This capitalist development before independence fostered the emergence of social classes with conflicting interests (Naniuzeyi, 1999). At the top of the colonial hierarchy were the Belgian capitalists and administrators, who prioritized resource extraction over Zaire's development. Despite extracting 5.5 million tons of copper and over 260,000 kilograms of gold over half a century, the Belgian colonialists took the time to educate only ten Zairians to college level (Naniuzeyi, 1999).

The évolués, a class of Zairian employees in subordinate roles within the colonial system, initially pursued material and cultural advancement but later challenged the colonial system when they realized their progress was limited due to barriers set in place by the nature of colonialism (Naniuzeyi, 1999). They eventually led the independence movement alongside urban workers and the lumpenproletariat, who faced harsh conditions and exploitation under colonial rule (Naniuzeyi, 1999). The January 4, 1959, revolt demonstrated the readiness of these groups to fight for decolonization (Naniuzeyi, 1999). However, independence did not bring the radical transformation many had hoped for. The postcolonial state remained neocolonial, serving foreign powers and local elites rather than the masses (Naniuzeyi, 1999). Leaders like Patrice Lumumba relied on the Zairian masses, but his radical stance and refusal to align with Western interests led to his assassination, orchestrated by imperialists and their Zairian allies (Naniuzeyi, 1999).

Mobutu Sese Seko's rise to power initially gave hope to the masses, frustrated by the selfishness of the first regime's leaders (Naniuzeyi, 1999). Many évolués had taken over positions left by Europeans, benefiting from political and socioeconomic opportunities while most of the population saw no improvement (Naniuzeyi, 1999). Mobutu's coup on November 24, 1965, was welcomed by many who expected socioeconomic change (Naniuzeyi, 1999). However, his 32-year rule was labelled as one of the most corrupt and repressive regimes in the world (Naniuzeyi, 1999). The ruling class, described as a politico-commercial bourgeoisie, used the state to amass wealth, distribute favors, and suppress the masses, deepening social cleavages and fueling class conflicts (Naniuzeyi, 1999).

Mobutu relied on foreign backers to maintain power, using material assistance to crush revolts and suppress opposition (Naniuzeyi, 1999). Although he introduced political openness in 1990, allowing for multiple parties, these adjustments were surface level (Naniuzeyi, 1999). The Sovereign National Conference proposed reforms, but Mobutu's unwillingness to implement democracy, opportunistic politicians, and a divided opposition undermined these efforts (Naniuzeyi, 1999). Laurent Kabila's armed rebellion ultimately overthrew Mobutu in 1997, ending decades of repression and corruption but leaving Zaire with a legacy of inequality and unfulfilled promises (Naniuzeyi, 1999).

Chapter 2: Neocolonialism, Dependency Theory, and Green Imperialism

To talk about neocolonialism and dependency theory in the context of African economies and societies, we need to talk about the role of colonialism in the involuntary subjugation of African territories. Africa, as a continent, seems to be in this perpetuated state of underdevelopment despite attaining so-called independence from its colonizers. Marx proposed the concept of articulation, which is described as a vehicle for explaining underdevelopment and the persistence of pre-capitalist forms of production (Berman, 1984). Initially, pre-capitalist forms of production were accomplished peacefully through merchant capital, and then later through the colonial state by taxes, forced labor, etc. These pre-capitalist, indigenous productive systems were subjugated to powerful forces of transformation by the ruling colonial powers (Berman, 1984). Indigenous practices were now subjugated to the system of European forms of capitalism, which did not align with the current functioning of African societies. Domestic production became the reproduction of labor power within capitalism instead of being an autonomous form of production (Berman, 1984). Contributing to the colonial powers' skewed presentation of incompetence, in their quest for domination, they would not incorporate Africans as free citizens or 'workers' in their free markets but as subjects dependent on the system of imperial paternalism (Berman, 1984). This was done to 'protect' Africans from 'unfair' exploitation by regulating conditions of labor, but the underlying motive was to dispel any emergence of a permanent class consciousness and a combative working class (Berman, 1984). This was how colonial powers enforced European capitalism on a group of people vulnerable to their manipulative tactics. The colonial state pursued complete control in a contradictory manner, simultaneously dismantling and reviving indigenous societies by promoting a transition to capitalism while hindering its full development (Berman 1984). That is where the idea, perception, and reality of the continuous perpetuation of underdevelopment come from. These schemes were only a cog in the manipulative machine of giving African nations a false sense of independence when they were finally able to, so-called, emancipate themselves from the colonial system (Udegbunam, 2020).

Green imperialism

The need to expand, conquer, and steal is what fueled green imperialism, backed by a colonial mindset, and still affects our world systems to this day. The word 'green' garners a positive response from the public because of its association with development, sustainability, and prosperity, but this concept is far from it. Congolese artist Sammy Baloji talks about how the words 'resilience' and 'sustainability' can hide an agenda that reinforces inequality between people and states (Voelcker 2023). The ways that large capital and hegemonic powers seek to control and generate profit from economies outside of their home territory under the guise of furthering and promoting a green shift in the global economy is green imperialism (Radley, 2023). This takes place through the extraction of cheap primary commodities, primarily located in the global south, that are needed for the manufacturing of renewable energy and other clean technologies (Radley, 2023). Zaire under Mobutu provides a historical precedent for the dynamics of green imperialism. As Naniuzeyi (1999) explains, the country's vast reserves of minerals such as copper and cobalt were extracted by foreign corporations with little regard for the welfare of the local population. These minerals, now essential to produce renewable energy technologies, have long been a source of exploitation in Zaire, now the DRC. Based on explanations from Naniuzeyi (1999) about Zaire during Mobutu's rule, colonial extractivist development model established during the colonial period and perpetuated under Mobutu ensured that the wealth generated by these resources benefited foreign powers and the Zairian elite, rather than contributing to the development of the country or improving the living conditions of its people. The focus on transitioning to low-carbon societies within capitalist economies through green imperialism is, as previously stated, kept alive by colonial ideals, whether it is evident or not. The DRC is one of the many modern examples of green imperialism. Cobalt, copper, and lithium are 3 low-carbon metals that are essential in the push towards green technologies because they are low-carbon (Radley, 2023). Radley (2023) talks about how The Economist in 2014 highlights that cultural forms of imperialism operate within a neocolonial 'civilizing' mission to light a dark continent, which is a driver in the renewable energy movement. This connects directly to the concept of imperial paternalism mentioned by Berman (1984). Green imperialism in the DRC has had a hand in dismantling Congolese sovereign ownership and control over its natural resources. It continues to perpetuate a mining-led development model that, historically, offers little improvement for most of the population and undermines prospects of prosperity in the DRC (Radley, 2023).

Neocolonialism and the dependency of African Nations

Discourse centered around the current underdevelopment of African nations seems to be attributed to the incompetence or unusual corruption of their governments, essentially attributing current underdevelopment to the impossibility of development in African nations (Mkandawire, 2001). While corruption is indeed a factor, a crucial aspect of the issue remains overlooked in these discussions. The problems associated with neocolonialism and neoliberalism are directly linked to the crisis of underdevelopment in Africa, along with the problem of dependency (Udegbunam, 2020). At the 1961 All African People's Conference in Cairo, neocolonialism was defined as "The survival of the colonial system despite the formal recognition of political independence in emerging countries which becomes the victims of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military or technical means" (Udegbunam, 2020). The core nature of neocolonialism is inherently exploitative. The state is perceived to have gained international sovereignty, independence from its colonial enslavers, but it is an illusion (Udegbunam, 2020). In reality, the state remains under the influence of former colonial powers, operating primarily to serve their interests. Their economic system and its political policy are in direct control from the outside (Udegbunam, 2020). Mobutu's Zaire exemplifies this form of neocolonialism. As Naniuzeyi (1999) explains, Mobutu's regime was deeply tied to the interests of Western powers, particularly Belgium and other Western countries because of the regular transfer of raw materials. This resulted in Zaire remaining economically dependent on its former colonizers. The neocolonial state under Mobutu blocked economic growth and development by depriving the Zairian population of the resources needed to improve their living conditions, instead prioritizing the interests of Western powers and the ruling elite (Naniuzeyi, 1999). Udegbunam (2020) quotes Nkrumah Kwame, the first president of Ghana, after gaining independence from the British. He says, "[F]or those who practice [neocolonialism], it means power without responsibility, and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress." States under the suffocating grip of international big players are used as punching bags (Udegbunam, 2020), only seen as stepping stools to world domination. Neocolonialism is an attempt to perpetuate colonial motives while talking about freedom and independence (Udegbunam, 2020). Imperialists, furthermore, colonizers structured the economy of the colony in such a way that they would have to depend on them for its growth; imperialists did not want their colonies to be fully independent (Udegbunam, 2020). This is where this false sense of independence comes from, connecting back to Berman's (1984) comment about blocking full development and the parent state. The structure of Zaire's economy under Mobutu mirrored this dynamic. As Naniuzeyi (1999) highlights, the country's mining sector was dominated by

Belgium that extracted resources such as copper and gold for export, leaving little benefit for the local population. The profits were funneled to Belgium and benefited the Zaire's ruling elite, while the majority of the population remained impoverished. This aligns with Udegbunam's (2020) observation that African economies are structured to serve international capitalism, with local industries unable to diversify or develop independently. Because of this blockade to growth, despite Africa being the producer of primary commodities, it has no viable industries that can diversify their own economy. They only exist to supply the rest of the world with its materials (Udegbunam, 2020). The product of mining is destined for export because most of the ore is processed by internationally owned mining companies in the DRC or overseas (Amnesty International, 2016; Udegbunam, 2020). Additionally, the money that stays inside Africa is used to pay miners whose wages are abysmally below the absolute minimum (Udegbunam, 2020; RAID, 2021a; RAID, 2021b). The rest of the money goes overseas to Western transnational corporations (Udegbunam, 2020).

The result of neocolonialism is that foreign capital is continuing to be used for exploitation, rather than developing the 'less developed' parts of the world (Udegbunam, 2020). Because of neocolonialism, the gap between the rich and the poor is wider than ever. African economies are structured to serve international capitalism (Udegbunam, 2020).

Chapter 3: Neocolonialism and Global Capitalism - The Role of MNCs

In the modern era of globalization, MNCs have been a key player in the development of global economic systems. However, MNCs continue to implement colonial mindsets in their mission to generate profit. In the past decades, continuing today, is the second scramble for Africa. Mbah (2012), mentioned by Udegbunam (2020), referenced a definition of MNCs as a business enterprise that owns and controls income flow and generates assets in more than one country. It also has its operating headquarters located in a developing country, with its subsidiaries spread across multiple countries. They are not charitable institutions; they are focused on profit maximization. Chikendu (2006), referenced by Udegbunam (2020, describes MNCs as agents of neocolonialism; they were created by imperialists to fill the void of departed colonial powers, but they have more security than a government entity because of their increased security and secrecy. MNCs are the primary entities working to perpetuate neocolonialism in place of the influence of the government. They have dominated the productive forces of neocolonialism, including mining, manufacturing, petroleum, finance, distribution, transport, and communications (Udegbunam, 2020). Because these sectors are being controlled by major MNCs, it has essentially turned into a monopoly (Udegbunam, 2020)

The Review of African Political Economy (ROAPE) characterizes this as a capitalist scramble in the context of cobalt mining in the DRC (2022). The growing attention to the climate breakdown and the increasing need for renewable energy sources has sparked a larger conversation surrounding the ethics of mining. The cost of the cobalt boom has weighed disproportionately on the Congolese people and their land, while reaping little to no benefits (ROAPE, 2022). This new scramble is centered in the DRC but spans to financiers, refiners and battery manufacturers, transnational corporations, car companies, and tech firms. These extensive networks and not governed properly concerning public and private sustainability standards, which they are and should be upheld too (ROAPE, 2022). Several major players in the cobalt sphere, including Apple, Volkswagen, and BMW, have sought to establish long-term contracts (Ochiai, 2018) directly with these mining operations in the DRC since 2018 (ROAPE, 2022) despite proclaiming the need for ethically sourced conflict minerals (Apple, 2019). Additionally, Tesla signed an agreement with Glencore to supply cobalt for its new battery gigafactories, which is in direct contradiction to Tesla's commitment in their Impact Report to using ethically sourced cobalt in their batteries because of claims made against Glencore and mining company's they own in the DRC of extremely unethical working conditions (Tesla, 2023; RAID 2021b). Congolese families and communities endure significant harm due to the profit-driven practices of multinational corporations.

Under the new scramble for the DRC's cobalt, working conditions for the miners are atrocious. RAID (2021a) interviewed Congolese miners; they said they receive extremely low pay, were subjected to long work hours, violence, discrimination, unsafe working conditions, and a disregard for basic health needs. One worker specifically said, "[O]ur situation is worse than before, the Chinese come and impose their standard and culture. They don't treat Congolese well. This is a new colonization." Ultimately, the pursuit of profit and the advancement of the global economy by MNCs has resulted in adverse effects on the communities they exploit and depend on for resources.

Chapter 4: Sustainable Development and Ethical Contradictions - SDGs, Green Growth and Ethical Challenges in Cobalt Mining

The UN outlines 17 SDGs in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They include no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanitation; affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life below water; life on land; peace, justice, and strong institutions; and partnerships for the goals (United Nations, 2015). All these goals are relevant to the DRC, but more specifically no poverty, good health and well-being, reduced inequalities, responsible consumption and production, and climate action are particularly relevant due to the human rights issues experienced and detailed by the Congolese workers and communities. The mining industry claims that large-scale mining in Congo is clean, sustainable, and free of human rights violations. This has not matched the reality of the situation (RAID, 2021a). The cobalt that is destined for electric vehicles used in the transition to renewable energy and ‘green’ growth has been extracted by systems of cheap labor and exploitation of thousands of Congolese people (RAID, 2021a). These workers are heavily exploited by the mining companies supplying MNCs like Apple and Tesla with cobalt. Workers experience extremely low wages much less than their living wage of $402 (RAID, 2021a), are unable to pull themselves and/or their families out of poverty as promised and have limited healthcare benefits despite the Congolese law requiring employers to provide free healthcare (RAID, 2021a). Direct quotes from Congolese workers describe the unethical working conditions saying “We were working hard, without any breaks, for $2.50 a day. If you didn’t understand what the boss said to you, he would slap you in the face. If you had an accident, they would just fire you.” (RAID, 2021a). 80% of the cobalt exported comes from industrial mines. Many of these multinational mining companies use subcontracting to source their long-term workers despite being created for short-term contract work (RAID, 2021a; RAID, 2021b; ROAPE, 2022; Radley, 2020). Direct contradiction to the ethical goals of the 17 SDGs set by the UN. Workers and managers from these subcontracting first have reported that they believe companies used them to reduce costs, limit liability for worker (miners) safety, and prevent them from joining unions (RAID, 2021b).

Because experts believe that 70% of the mining industry in the DRC is backed by Chinese investment, increased involvement from the Chinese end has led to increased tensions between the Congolese and Chinese workers (RAID, 2021b). Despite this, working conditions are vastly different between the two groups of workers in favor of Chinese workers. The subcontractors working for Sincomines, Somidez, and Tenke Fungurume Mining (TFM) (major mining companies in the DRC backed by Chinese investment) have reported discrimination and racism (RAID, 2021b). In direct contrast to the reality, TFM's values are on par with the sustainability goals, highlighting safety, creativity, responsibility, integrity, collaboration, and respect (Tenke Fungurume Mining, 2025). TFM is committed to the sustainable development of communities within its mining concession (Tenke Fungurume Mining, 2025). Similarly, Metalkol RTR describes itself as an international sustainable, socially responsible, and efficient natural resource company (ERG Africa, 2025). They have a clean cobalt framework outlining their goals to source cobalt and copper responsibly, meaningfully contribute to the communities they operate in, and comply with the UN SDGs and international frameworks focused on climate change and sustainable development (ERG Africa, 2019). Again, these claims are in direct contradiction with the UN SDGs that they are allegedly adhering to and aspiring to. 80% of cobalt exports come from industrial mines. The other 20% comes from artisanal miners (RAID 2021b). Artisanal mining became a source of livelihood for many people when state-owned mining collapsed in the 1990s (Amnesty International, 2016). Children as young as 5, along with women, are digging around in the tailings of the industrial mines looking for rocks containing minerals at the surface (Amnesty International, 2016; Zuckerman, 2023). Adult men work deep underground to access the ore using chisels, mallets, and other hand tools. The children often work without company permission (Amnesty International, 2016). Cobalt is very toxic, so long exposure to this mineral can cause a wide range of alarming health issues, including birth defects, cancers, thyroid disease, neurological and respiratory ailments, dermatitis, and hard metal lung disease (Amnesty International, 2016; Zuckerman, 2023). This is a largely neglected issue for MNCs at the top of the global supply chain, some stating that they are disconnected from the wrong doers and cannot be held responsible for the conditions at the bottom of the global supply chain (Zuckerman, 2023; United States Court of Appeals, District of Columbia Circuit, 2024). Accidents are another big concern, along with the various health concerns that come with mining cobalt. Children go barefoot or wear thin sandals to climb steep mountains with precarious footing. They will fill sacks with up to 30kg of mineral, and when descending, they fall down these mountains, shattering their limbs and spines in the process (Zuckerman, 2023). Underground, crawl spaces dug by miners (20-50 meters deep) are highly precarious and often collapse, burying miners alive. There is no ventilation of rock bolts to support these tunnels because they are dug by artisan miners (Zuckerman, 2023). Sexual violence is also very prevalent in these mines, which come with a host of psychological issues for victims (Zuckerman, 2023). On the environment, cobalt mining has been linked to substantial forms of social and ecological degradation in the DRC (ROAPE, 2022). There is a responsibility to pursue climate sustainability goals, but Zuckerman (2023) explains that we cannot pursue a green future and continue to destroy the environment of the DRC.

Analysis

Chapter 5: The Role of Cobalt in in the Global Green Economy

Importance of Cobalt in Green Technologies

Cobalt plays a crucial role in the global green economy due to its essential use in green technologies. However, the methods of sourcing cobalt often contradict the values of sustainability that the green economy promotes. The rapid shift toward 'green' and 'sustainable' energy solutions, including the electrification of industries and the production of electric vehicles (EVs) as alternatives to fossil fuels, has dramatically increased the demand for critical minerals like cobalt. Historically, the United States of America and Zambia held the dominant positions within the trade networks for cobalt, but the DRC and China have replaced them (Yang and Chen, 2023). The DRC is very rich in its natural resources. More than half of the world's total supply of cobalt comes from the DRC. Despite this, it remains one of Africa's poorest countries (RAID, 2021b). According to their government, 20% of the cobalt currently exported comes from artisanal miners in the Southern region (Amnesty International, 2016). Because of this transition to clean energy and the increasing focus on decarbonization to combat climate change, the majority of cobalt consumption (57%) came in batteries in 2020, and most of the finished products containing cobalt (74%) were portable electronics and automotives (Cobalt Institute, 2022). The motives of decarbonization in the context of cobalt mining in the DRC are very important because it is one of the ways that governments and MNCs prioritize tackling the climate crisis. Industry experts predict that EV sales will increase in the next 10 years, which will inevitably lead to a skyrocketing demand, and therefore, cobalt production (RADI 2021b). Cobalt is a cornerstone of the green economy, enabling sustainable development while minimizing environmental harm. The rich reserves in the DRC are essential for achieving the

UN's sustainability goals. However, this progress comes at the cost of human lives, raising questions about its true worth.

On the surface, sustainable development for the sake of combating climate change is a noble action to take. Climate change and by extension, environmental degradation and human displacement, and suffering should be at the forefront of our agendas. However, this transition has been linked to serious human rights violations in the DRC (RAID, 2021b). The dominant narrative fails to highlight that in this transition, environments are being degraded, for example the miombo woodlands, communities are being destroyed, and people are being displaced in the DRC (Cobalt Institute, 2023; Radley, 2020; ROAPE, 2022). The exact opposite of that is that this so-called green economy is building its foundation on. Widespread dispossession (ROAPE, 2022) of local land in the DRC is definitively evident, which forces the Congolese people to rely on the exploitation of their land by larger powers to sustain their livelihoods. Academic analyses have focused on social and humanitarian issues associated with mining in the DRC (Amnesty International, 2016), but the looming agenda of sustainable development continues to dominate the world stage. There is a complete disconnect between the agenda of the green economy and the reality of sustainable development. The exploitation of the Congolese people and their environment is merely a repetition of neocolonialism. The approach of MNCs and world governments toward the natural resources of the DRC, and largely the Global South, has to do with Berman's (1984) concept and understanding of imperial paternalism. How society looks at cobalt mining and the production of cobalt in the DRC as an agent of sustainable development, when it just so happens that Africans, or Congolese people in this context, have always been the ones exploited. It completely contradicts what the UN SDGs stand for. Despite contributing minimally to the climate crisis as compared to world powers like the USA and China, Africa as a continent is suffering the brunt of the effects, as they are being exploited in order to fix a problem it did not heavily contribute to. The sustainable development and green economy agenda seemingly prioritize global environmental preservation over the well-being of the Congolese people, framing the exploitation of their resources as a necessary trade-off to mitigate the effects of climate change and reinforce the perception of positive progress. Despite cobalt being an essential piece in the puzzle in what is called sustainable development, the Congolese people have been devalued. This is exploitation.

The examination of cobalt's role in the global green economy reveals its critical importance in addition to the costs borne by the Congolese people in order to further the green economy. While the green economy and the shift towards more sustainable forms of energy sources is working towards lessening the effects of climate change, it is important to understand that consequences on the Congolese people are detrimental and do not correlate with sustainable development.

Chapter 6: Human Impacts of Cobalt Mining in the DRC

Labor Exploitation - Artisanal Mining

Moving from cobalt's role in the green economy, to the social and human impacts of cobalt mining as an industry, labor exploitation in artisanal mining which is the more informal sector or the mining industry and industrial mining, the more formal sector will be discussed in the context of the UN's SDGs and how current practices in both artisanal and industrial cobalt mining sectors contradict the UNs standards of sustainable development. The SDGs listed by the UN are in place to provide potentially attainable aspirations for what the world should look like. However, having sustainable development being one of, if not the main driver of extreme inequality and human rights violations in the DRC regarding cobalt mining is cognitively disorienting. The UN's SDGs strive to eradicate poverty, hunger, and inequalities, promote the provision of quality education and good health and well-being, promote responsible consumption and production, and decent work and economic growth, among other goals, all the while making negative progress on all these concerning cobalt mining in the DRC.

Artisanal mining in the DRC has been a source of income for many people since the collapse and privatization of the mining industry in the 1990s and 2000s (Amnesty International, 2016; ROAPE, 2022). Before the collapse, the state-owned mining firm Gécamines produced about 450,000 tons of copper (cobalt is a by-product of mining copper), employing 30,000 people. Because of the collapse, production has fallen to 8,000 tons, and in response to this shortage, restructuring and privatization left more than 10,000 workers out of a job (ROAPE, 2022). Privatization caused mining rights to be increasingly marketized, which caused widespread poverty in mining communities along the Congolese copper belt (ROAPE, 2022). Artisanal mining is one of the most dangerous jobs a Congolese person can have, not only adults, but also children. The youngest (around 5 years old) would typically sort through the tailings of the cobalt discarded from the industrial mines (Zuckerman, 2023). Children are deprived of their childhoods and safety as the green economy and sustainable development goals prioritize climate change mitigation over other UN SDGs. This pursuit often advances the Global North at the expense of Congolese communities, perpetuating a deeply entrenched cycle of exploitation and human suffering. However, the exploitative practices in the mining industry can be traced back to the governance of Mobutu Sese Seko, whose regime supported the foundations for the current dynamics of labor exploitation and state weakness in the DRC. As mentioned by Naniuzeyi (1999), Mobutu's rule was characterized by rampant corruption and the mismanagement of state resources, which lead to poorly managed institutions. Beyond Mobutu's rule, cobalt mining dates back to colonial times when their oppressor, Belgium, treated the country as a source of cheap labor, food, and land, consequently making them incredibly rich (Sovacool, 2019). The UN, MNCs, and global powers demonstrate a lack of commitment to true sustainability, as some of their practices stray from the principles of sustainable development. Congolese artisan miners work in highly precarious work environments where they are exposed to the toxic health effects of cobalt, including birth defects, cancers, contact dermatitis, fatal lung diseases, neurological issues, and thyroid disease (Amnesty International, 2016; Zuckerman, 2023). The word 'artisan' is defined as "A worker in a skilled trade, a craftsperson; (in later use) esp. one utilizing traditional or non-mechanized methods," typically referring to an artist, carpenter, potter, etc. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2008). Congolese miners who mine with their hands are not artisanal miners, they are essentially slaves. Artisanal is a word that sugar coats the dire reality of these workers' situations. It suggests that the grueling fact of children as young as 5 up to adults trying to support their families can be equated to weaving a basket or making jewelry. I believe that this is one of the easiest ways in which the UN, MNCs, and global powers can skirt around the responsibility of human rights violations because the language that is used holds the power to influence thoughts, decisions, and convictions.

Labor Exploitation - Industrial Mines

Industrial mines are not better just because they have some semblance of structure. The industrialized large-scale mining sectors have been continuously critiqued, accusing them of solidifying state control, failing to reduce poverty, breeding corruption, entrenching elitism, and perpetuating violence (Sovacool, 2019). A report conducted by RAID (2021a) exposes the systems of exploitation that live in these industrial mines. Workers themselves have said they received low pay and were subjected to excessive working hours, degrading treatment, violence, and discrimination. One said, "[O]ur situation is worse than before, the Chinese come and impose their standard and culture. They don't treat Congolese well. This is a new colonization." (RAID, 2021a). Congolese miners claim they are being colonized, but the world disregards their plight under the guise of sustainable development. The industrial mining industries go as far as to say that large-scale cobalt mining in the DRC is clean and sustainable and free of human rights violations (RAID, 2021a). Institutions that make this argument are driven by profits, not even by the sustainable development movement that they allegedly care so deeply about. It is incorrect to state that industrial cobalt mining in the DRC is clean when their workers are subjected to serious health ailments, as previously stated. It is misguided to believe that cobalt mining in the DRC is sustainable and devoid of human rights violations, as evidence demonstrates the inhumane treatment of workers; a persistent reality rooted in the historical legacy of the Scramble for Africa. These labor rights abuses are directly linked to the abusive model of outsourcing, where workers are hired through subcontracting firms, not directly by the mining company (RAID, 2021a; RAID, 2021b; Radley, 2020; ROAPE, 2022). In their report, RAID

(2021b) references workers and managers from subcontracting firms, where they say they believe that companies use this model intentionally to reduce cost, limit liability for workers' safety, and prevent workers from joining unions. This concept of suppression is mentioned by Berman (1984) when talking about articulation. When the DRC was ruled by Belgium, colonial officials feared the possibility of a permanent class consciousness leading to a 'combative African working class'. Ultimately, this drove them to leave, but one could argue that there is a current fear that Congolese people will start to take their autonomy back that was stolen by colonialism, which is now neocolonialism. The 5 mines (Metallok RTR, Kamoto Copper Company (KCC), Tenke Fungurume Mining (TFM), La Sino-Congolaise de Mines (Sincomines), and Société Minière de Deziwa (Somidez)), all Chinese-owned or backed, mentioned in this report, use subcontractors to source their workers. Approximately 57% of workers out of the 5 companies are supplied by subcontractors; at TFM, 68% of the workforce in 2020; and at Metalkol RTR, it was 64% (RAID, 2021b). Subcontractors are only appropriate for short-term or contract assignments, but these mining companies have used subcontractors to supply long-term workers (core business operations) with little pay. Workers have described being treated as second-class citizens in their own country. RAID (2021b) quotes a Congolese miner saying, "We were working hard, without any breaks, for $2.5 a day. If you didn't understand what the boss said to you, he would slap you in the face. If you had an accident, they would just fire you." How can mining be an agent of sustainable development when working conditions and the treatment of miners are completely unethical and exploitative? Isn't the whole tenet of the green economy to be sustainable? 63% of workers do not earn the inadequate $402 per month to sustain their lives. This is $13.4 per day; however, industrial miners are receiving 5.36x less than 'minimum wage'. To continue with the account of abuse, workers have described a 'colonial era' level of discrimination, they have been kicked, slapped, beaten with sticks, insulted, shouted at, and pulled around by their ear when they are unable to understand Mandarin instructions, made errors, or refused to do dangerous tasks (RAID, 2021b). When state-owned mining collapsed in the 1990s and 2000s, the 10,000 workers laid off were paid severance by the World Bank, despite being owed up to 36 months of back pay (ROAPE, 2022). The suboptimal levels of payment or lack thereof have continued to exist into the 2020s, when Congolese workers are dismissed without pay when opposing a task that is a threat to their life (RAID, 2021b). Furthermore, Congolese law required employers to cover the costs of healthcare for their workers and their families if on a permanent contract (RAID, 2021b). These mining companies do not abide by DRC law. Subcontractors at most provide $10 of healthcare per worker per month, some provide none at all (RAID, 2021b). Doctors report seeing chronic health problems and disabilities connected to the exposure to cobalt and abysmal working conditions. Subcontractors are aware of this risk but do nothing. (RAID, 2021b). The UN's "decent work" SDG is being compromised in favor of the "economic growth" aspect of the goal. SDGs like no poverty, zero hunger, good health, reduced inequalities, and peace and justice are seemingly disregarded by the sustainable development agenda.

Connecting back to the concept of green imperialism mentioned by Radley (2023), parental colonialism by Berman (1984), and neocolonialism illustrated by Udegbunam (2020), the justification for Congolese workers being a dependent subject of MNCs, mining companies, and world powers ultimately is pushed by green imperialism. Having outside players controlling the DRC's natural resources is being perpetuated on the fact that it dismantles ownership over its natural resources. With the colonial mindset of needing to take care of people who appear not to be capable of taking care of themselves (parental colonialism) is directly related to the current oppression, suppression, and exploitation of Congolese miners as a whole because it is assumed that the workers cannot think for themselves and do not know better than being used a cog in the machine which is the green economy. The justification that is based on the need to sustainably develop and move away from the usage of fossil fuels to combat climate change is inherently flawed. Cobalt mining in the DRC could be seen as an isolated situation, yet Congolese miners work to produce exports that primarily benefit multinational corporations. Understanding labor exploitation requires examining the roles of MNCs and the DRC government in the global economy.

Chapter 7: The Influence of Multinational Corporations and the DRC Government on the Sustainability of Cobalt Mining

The Role of MNCs from a Neocolonial Perspective

MNCs could be seen as the backbone that props up major global economies. This chapter examines the role of MNCs in cobalt production and their impact on sustainable development, using a neocolonial framework informed by Udegbunam (2020). Apple and Tesla serve as case studies, highlighting contradictions between their sustainability claims and practices. It also addresses the DRC government's accountability in perpetuating malpractice in the cobalt mining industry. Ultimately, MNCs are analyzed through a profit-driven lens, as monetary gain remains their central motive, a conclusion supported by scholars cited in Udegbunam (2020).

Through the neocolonial lens, MNCs can be defined as large private enterprises characterized by a global organizational structure, extending from parent countries to subsidiaries in host countries. They act as Trojan horses, using their monopoly on capital and advanced technology, supported by political pressure from their home governments, as the primary means of integrating developing countries into the international capitalist system. MNCs transfer profit out of the host economy to benefit their home economy; development of underdevelopment, as Udegbunam (2020) describes it. Due to MNCs operating in this way in underdeveloped countries, it creates this sense of dependency that the host country cannot escape from. The DRC's economy relies on the exports of its natural resources, which are essential to MNCs like Apple for their technological devices and Tesla for their electric vehicles. It is clear that these are 2 highly successful MNCs that generate billions of dollars annually. However, the economic and social climate of the DRC is alarmingly inferior despite sourcing one of the most important minerals currently. The main tenet of MNCs is that they focus on generating profit at the expense of the host country (Udegbunam 2020). Just like colonial powers did before them, MNCs continue to perpetuate neocolonial, motives by the suppression and exploitation of the host country. They have dominated the producing forces of neocolonialism like mining, manufacturing, petroleum, finance, distribution, transport, and communications and have made these sectors into a monopoly (Udegbunam 2020).

Apple Case Study

Apple stated in their Mineral Impact Profile (MIP) that they believe they have a responsibility to leave the world better than they found it (2019). In 2017, Apple made a public commitment to only use recycled and renewable materials in its products. To ensure this, the created 3 environmental priority areas to focus on including (1) reducing apples impact on climate change by using renewable energy, driving efficiency in products and facilities, and addressing the entire lifecycle of all their products and accessories; (2) Conserving precious resources by using materials efficiently, using more recycled and renewable context in products, and recovering material from products at the end of their life; and (3) Identify, develop and utilize materials in products and processes (2019). These are professions to closely analyze where their materials are coming from to make sure that they are fully sustainable and renewable. Apple (2019) has said that it adheres strictly to international standards and frameworks like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) due diligence guide. Apple has also challenged itself to stop its reliance on mining as a whole. They worked with Oeko-Institute e.V to develop MIPs to assess the supply impacts of a mined material but the environmental and social impacts (Apple, 2019). Through this collaboration, Apple identified critical minerals to focus on. Cobalt was the second listed out of sixteen. To assess the supply impact of the critical mineral on the supply chain, Apple (2019) used the following indicators (1) Companionality; (2) Geographic Production Concentration; (3) Reserve

Concentration; (4); Global Recycling Rate at End of Life; (5) Substitutability; (6) Political Stability in Producing Countries; and (7) Political Stability in Reserve Holding Countries. The first round of MIPs did not accurately capture the environmental impacts of raw materials, so they identified Geochemical, Chemical Usage, Life Cycle Impacts, and Specific Recyclability indicators. Social impacts were the hardest to quantify for Apple. The indicators were (1) Artisanal Mining, (2) Child Labor and Forced Labor, and (3) Corruption and Conflict (Apple, 2019). The development of these MIPs and Apple's commitment to only using recycled and renewable materials in their product acts as an inspiration to other MNCs to analyze the impacts of materials used in their products and begin their work towards a 100% recycled and renewable supply chain (Apple, 2019).

Tesla Case Study

Recognizing that Tesla is a publicly traded company responsible to their shareholders, Tesla has also stated that their mission is to "accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy" (Tesla, 2023). They have put together a comprehensive impact report document that details sustainability goals, climate risk, human rights efforts, and discourse around their supply chain. According to Tesla, they are taking steps to manage the climate risk of production by meeting with stakeholders to assess the physical impacts of climate change and integrating assessment of these impacts into future expansion plans (2023). Tesla professes that ethical treatment of all their people and regard for human rights are core to their mission of accelerating a sustainable future. They base their definition of human rights on the UN's Universal Declaration for Human Rights (UDHR) that focuses on dignity, respect, and equality, without discrimination for all people (Tesla, 2023). Tesla states that they utilize the UN's Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) and the OECD guidelines for multinational enterprises (2023). Additionally, they are committed to upholding and respecting all internationally recognized human rights of those in their supply chain, including employees, customers, shareholders, suppliers, and communities (Tesla, 2023). Tesla states they seek to avoid causing and contributing to adverse human rights impacts and expect their supplier to promote the same values (2023). In regard to the supply chain, Tesla explains that their EVs are better than internal combustion vehicles and that their supply chain is more transparent (2023). Tesla focuses on leveraging their market power to make mining and refining more sustainable, optimize the recyclability of battery inputs, and innovate through vertical integration (2023). Forced labor, child labor, modern slavery, human trafficking, environmental protection, relationships with communities and indigenous rights, and transparency are all points that Tesla makes sure to touch on, stating their importance to Tesla's main goal (Tesla, 2023; Tesla, 2024).

Lack of Accountability and Contradictions

It is evident from the previous statements that Apple and Tesla state the importance of human rights and ensuring their supply chain is completely transparent, sustainable, and ethical. However, evidence shows that they are not being completely truthful when it comes to the core values of their sustainable development movement. Apple and Tesla, among 3 other technology MNCs (Dell, Microsoft, and Google), were caught in a legal case by the Congolese families represented by the International Rights Advocates. These families state that their children were killed or injured while mining for the cobalt used in smartphones, laptops, and electric cars (Kelly, 2019). Despite accounts from the families explaining the dire conditions of poverty and exploitation that they have been bound to through neocolonial MNCs, the tech companies argued that the chain is speculative and ‘flows through the independent actions of third parties’ (United States Court of Appeals, District of Columbia Circuit, 2024). They argue that because forced labor in the DRC depends on a network of local actors, they are disconnected from the wrong doers and as purchasers of replaceable metals, they cannot be held liable for the conditions at the bottom of the supply chain (United States Court of Appeals, District Columbia Circuit, 2024). The lack of accountability shown through this court case demonstrates the immense power that large MNCs like Apple and Tesla have, and their ability to escape responsibility. The statements in court directly contradict both Apple and Tesla's commitment to social justice and ensuring that their supply chain and where they supply their cobalt from is completely ethical and free of child labor. Additionally, Huayou Cobalt, the supplier of Apple's cobalt says on their company profile that they positively respond to the UNs SDGs and emphasizes safety and the health of its employees, creating a green and friendly work environment, maintains the leading salary and welfare in the region and contributing the common goal of prosperity (Huayou Cobalt, 2023). Similarly, Glencore, the supplier of cobalt for Tesla, states its purpose is to make a positive contribution to society and create lasting benefits for stakeholders in a manner that is responsible, transparent, and respectful to the rights of all (Glencore, 2025). They value safety, integrity, openness, responsibility, simplicity, and entrepreneurialism (Glencore, date). However, Kamamoto Copper Company (KCC), a mining company in the DRC owned 75% by Glencore, has been cited for its use of subcontractors and accounts of workplace violence by their employees (RAID, 2021b). Additionally, several major end users, including Apple, have sought to establish long-term contracts directly with mining operations in the wake of the new scramble for cobalt since 2018 (Ochiai, 2018; ROAPE, 2022). These mining corporations and MNCs have shown immense neocolonial greed under the guise of being responsible and claiming to produce clean and sustainable cobalt (RAID, 2021b). They use profits from exploitation to fuel their corporations and economies while portraying themselves as climate champions by adopting sustainable energy. However, MNCs exploiting Congolese workers cannot be agents of sustainable development. Colonialism never left but has reinvented itself into a new form, which is the oppressive hand of MNCs.

The role of the DRC Government

It is important to note that the Congolese government is complicit in the selling of its people to MNCs through forced labor. The DRC government has primary responsibility to make sure that its labor laws are being respected (RAID, 2021b). Andrews et. al. (2022) emphasizes that governance initiatives surrounding the natural resource sector in Africa will not have an impact unless national policies, subnational politics, cross-border dynamics, and geopolitics are involved and addressed in the implementation process. So, despite the DRC having poor governance, the system on which it has been built goes back to colonial rule. The system in which they were meant to function was not meant to be emancipated from colonial rule. Understanding the concept of false independence talked about by Nkrumah (1965) and Udegbunam (2020) is imperative because the extent of its internalization determines how a country's government will be run to a certain extent. Because economic systems are still bound and dictated by the colonial power in addition to neocolonial ways of governing my Mobutu, full autonomy is not achievable, therefore leading to faulty governance. Again, it is important to note, though, that the DRC government must take accountability for its shortcomings by implementing stricter regulations, addressing corruption, ensuring fair labor practices, and establishing control over foreign operations to the best of their ability.

Taking this into account, the role of MNCs in the cobalt mining sector is large and impactful, they are able to dictate market conditions, local economies and the socio-political landscape of countries like the DRC. Copulated with the notion that they have a neocolonial background, MNCs use their power to perpetuate neocolonial characteristics in the extraction of cobalt. The power that they have bleeds into the lack of accountability they express which does not align with the tenets for the UNs SDGs. Furthermore, the DRC government and ruling elites play a large role in the continuation of human rights violations of Congolese miners that needs to be acknowledged. Despite the fact that the economy was not built to be self-sustaining after independence from their colonial masters, from the evidence presented in this chapter, the DRC government has not made firm attempts to make sure that labor laws are being followed when it comes to cobalt miners. Because of these discrepancies, it is imperative to question whether cobalt mining in the DRC can align with the overarching principles of sustainable development that cobalt is being used for.

Chapter 8: Cobalt Mining in the DRC Aligning with the Principles of Sustainable Development

Principles of sustainable development

This chapter examines cobalt mining's alignment with sustainable development principles in the Brundtland Report and UN SDGs, highlighting a disconnect between mining practices and how MNCs utilize cobalt. The principles of sustainable development cannot align with cobalt mining in the DRC. On paper, sustainable development is a humane concept that the global society should be striving towards. However, the practical implementation of sustainable development in the DRC is based on exploitation, exclusion, violence, the perpetuation of inequalities, and neocolonial motives. The SDGs that are most relevant to cobalt mining are (1) no poverty, (2) zero hunger, (3) good health and well-being, (4) decent work and clean energy, (5) reduced inequalities, and (6) responsible consumption and production (United Nations, 2015). Although intended to promote sustainable development, cobalt mining in the DRC, driven by the shift away from fossil fuels, ultimately undermines the social principles these goals aim to uphold. The production of EVs and cellphone parts does not protect the human rights of the Congolese people or improve their community's well-being. It does the exact opposite. Since the 1990s, after the state-mining collapse, Congolese families have been violently displaced due to the adverse ecological outcomes that stem from mining. These include pollution from acid, dust, and cobalt tailings (ROAPE, 2022). Due to the calamitous nature of colonialism, Congolese people are systematically devalued within the framework of cobalt mining operations. They are another piece in the fractured puzzle of what is called 'sustainable' development. Despite the argument that the cobalt mining industry in the DRC has created jobs (RAID, 2021b), the conditions of those workplaces are atrocious, negating any benefits of the positives of employment.

Neocolonial practices and dependency on MNCs, in this context, are creating a barrier for true sustainable development because neocolonialism and foreign dependency are not sustainable. Because of neocolonial motives, African countries like the DRC have to depend on foreign powers and MNCs to supplement their economy. How can a country sustain itself when the system has been built on exploitative measures that are inherently unsustainable? The breakdown in governance, or the lack thereof, has a lot to do with the fact that foreign powers are focused on bolstering their economy, which in turn perpetuates the cycle of dependency connected to neocolonialism (Udegbunam, 2020). This has created weak governance and institutional frameworks. With that being said, as previously stated, the DRC government needs to work hard to emancipate itself from the cycle of oppression instilled by the oppressors by strengthening regulatory systems, combating corruption, ensuring transparency, and prioritizing the welfare of its citizens over the interests of MNCs. Relying on foreign powers and MNCs will only aid the economy in the short run and perpetuate dependency. On the MNC side, 4 out of 5 mining companies mentioned in RAID's (2021b) report mention that they abide by international and industry standards. An average of 80% compliance with international mining guidelines is insufficient. It can be argued that mining companies operating in the DRC fail to adhere to international standards to the extent required. This creates a gap between what was proposed by sustainable development and the reality because sustainable development does not stand for human rights abuses. Furthermore, cobalt mined by these companies is going to MNCs like Apple, Tesla, Volvo, Dell, Microsoft, Google, Samsung, etc. (Amnesty International, 2016; RAID, 2021b). Cobalt mining in the DRC exacerbates socioeconomic inequality by further enriching the wealthy while deepening poverty among the marginalized. It perpetuates the exploitation of children, often resulting in fatal consequences, and contributes to widespread workplace violence. Mining in the DRC perpetuated the system that Congolese people have been enslaved to since King Leopold II's entourage arrived in Central Africa in 1885 in addition to the system that was continued by Mobutu.

Because cobalt mining in the DRC has become so entrenched in the fight against climate change and the transition to more sustainable ways of living, efforts have been made to bring awareness to the cobalt mining situation in the DRC in hopes of reform as illustrated by human rights organizations like the International Rights Advocates (IRA) filing a lawsuit against 5 major tech companies on behalf of Congolese families, Amnesty International, and RAID. International standards and guidelines for human rights and social justice are in place, but there also needs to be an effort from the DRC government towards detransitioning from dependency on former colonial powers by cultivating their natural resources for majority local benefit rather than for global/formal colonial powers with extensively developed economies, and MNCs to truthfully adhere to the pure goals of sustainable development. While systems, policies, and reforms can be implemented by higher bodies of governance like the UN, their effectiveness is nullified if those in authority fail to follow them. This is evident in the ongoing lack of accountability, where large MNCs consistently exploit loopholes due to the absence of entities both powerful enough and willing to hold them accountable. A clear example of this is the dismissed lawsuit against Apple, Tesla, Dell, Google, and Microsoft.

Cobalt mining in the DRC starkly contrasts the principles of sustainable development, perpetuating exploitation, inequality, and environmental degradation. To align with true sustainability, there must be a shift away from neocolonial dependency and stricter enforcement of international standards to protect human rights and foster genuine progress.

Conclusion

Cobalt mining in the DRC has contributed to providing a renewable energy source alternative to fossil fuels and power batteries used in electric vehicles and smartphones. However, the main discourse around sustainable development fails to address the fact that cobalt mining for renewable energy sources is not sustainable at all. MNCs and global powers that are at the forefront of the push toward sustainable living are the same ones that are not doing enough to mitigate the harmful actions inflicted on the Congolese people. This thesis has argued that the values of colonialism (neocolonialism) are what drive the lack of accountability for MNCs and the dependency of African countries on global powers. Because the systems of governance in the DRC were stunted post-colonial reign due to dependency, much like many African nations where political, economic, and socio-cultural systems introduced by colonial powers were left intact, the society remains at the mercy of large MNCs and global powers (Udegbunam, 2020).

Cobalt mining in the DRC is not an agent of sustainable development. The evidence presented in this thesis about forced child labor, workplace violence, lack of proper compensation, and healthcare, supported by statements by workers describing “colonial-era” working conditions in industrial mines, points to the conclusion that cobalt mining fails to align with the principles of sustainable development. The 17 SDGs presented by the UN in 2015 are the benchmark for what sustainable development should be trying to achieve. Nevertheless, multinational corporations and the global powers that host them continue to exploit the dependency and vulnerabilities rooted in colonial legacies, framing their actions as contributions to so-called "sustainability." This exploitation directly contradicts the principles of the SDGs, as they continue to skirt around taking responsibility for human rights violations in the DRC against adults, children, and their communities. Their immense power, which commands the global exchange of goods, enables them to perpetuate these injustices while avoiding accountability.

To achieve sustainable development, as outlined in the 17 UN SDGs, MNCs, global powers, and the DRC government must be held to the highest standard possible and take accountability for their actions. Completely transparent supply chains, truly ethical labor and mining practices, and strictly enforced international regulations around cobalt mining are essential to ensure that exploitation of Congolese miners is eradicated and completely avoided. This thesis has attempted to highlight the pressing need to rethink the global approach to sustainability because current practices are not sustainable. The transition to renewable energy sources through the extraction of cobalt should not come at the expense of human dignity and basic rights. This is the paradox that undermines what sustainable development is and what it professes to be.

There are 4 key areas of future research surrounding the sustainability of cobalt mining in the DRC. The first should work to explore pathways to reduce dependency on cobalt by conducting primary research of affected peoples. This would allow for a deeper, human-centered understanding of the social, economic, and political impacts of cobalt mining on the Congolese people which is absent from this thesis. The second would investigate the role of the Congolese government in the extraction of cobalt by analyzing their role in the perpetuation of addressing exploitation in mining, including corruption, governance challenges, and policy failures. The third should focus on analyzing how international frameworks like the UNGP and the OECD guidelines for multinational enterprises can be better enforced in the DRC. Finally, arguably most importantly, the fourth should examine alternative sustainable development models by investigating alternative frameworks that prioritize human rights and true environmental justice in natural resource-rich countries like the DRC. True sustainable development must prioritize both environmental and social justice, ensuring that no community is left behind in the global race for renewable energy. This commitment is particularly critical in regions like Africa, where renewable energy has the potential not only to combat climate change but also to drive equitable economic growth, empower marginalized communities, and redefine global partnerships for a more just and inclusive future.

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