

On 27 April, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a €18 billion investment from the European Investment Bank into the EU's Global Gateway, an ambitious programme to support sustainable development projects in partner developing countries.

This announcement comes on the heels of the EU and Norway's newly-signed 'Green Alliance' partnership to accelerate Europe's clean energy transition, which will largely depend on its ability to source critical minerals, including copper and cobalt, from developing countries such as the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](#) (DRC).

Europe's [green transition](#) is crucial, but key stakeholders must also remain mindful of the potential environmental and ethical pitfalls if mining is carried out irresponsibly. Informal mining practises often result in human rights violations, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic challenges that are at odds with Europe's Global Gateway ambitions. To maintain their commitment to responsible practices while achieving green goals, stakeholders should seek partnerships with mining operations that share their values and prioritize sustainable and ethical practices.

A new mineral rush

In recent years, Europe's ambitious decarbonisation agenda has sent demand for critical minerals soaring. Green technologies, such as solar panels and batteries, require significant quantities of minerals such as lithium and cobalt—global cobalt demand, for example, is expected to increase up to 403% by 2050, due to its central role in electric vehicle (EV) batteries and other high-demand technologies for the green transition.

Some of the world's largest deposits of these critical minerals are found in the DRC - home to 70% of the world's cobalt as well as massive copper reserves - with the value of its untapped minerals estimated at an eye-opening €22.6 trillion. Earlier this year, the EU announced a €50m investment in the DRC's critical minerals sector and infrastructure projects at the inaugural Kinshasa Economic Forum, which brought together the leaders of the DRC, France and the EU, as well as the CEOs of over 50 French companies.

Human rights violations and child labour

Despite this significant, globally-recognised potential, the DRC's mining sector has had to confront the human rights abuses and environmental problems which are common with artisanal and illegal mining.

An estimated 200,000 people work as informal diggers, or artisanal miners, in the country's cobalt mines, making its informal sector one of the world's top producers of cobalt. These mines have faced widespread criticism over child labour, dangerous working conditions and corruption. Tragically, many children in illegal and informal mines are working long hours

in hazardous conditions instead of attending school. Additionally, the lack of safety measures and equipment in these mines puts workers at risk of serious injury or death. Given these challenges—yet the critical importance of mining to both the DRC’s economy and to the global green transition— there is a clear need for increased efforts to promote more responsible mining practices.

Major mining companies stepping up

Mining companies operating in the DRC are increasingly taking action to support the professionalisation of the mining sector and ensure that its minerals are sourced in a humane, sustainable manner.

For example, Chinese mining company CMOC, 80% shareholder in the DRC’s Tenke Fungurume mine (TFM) – home to one of the world’s largest copper and cobalt deposits – joined the Fair Cobalt Alliance (FCA) in 2021. As the world’s second-largest cobalt producer, CMOC is understandably keen to support the FCA’s aims to tackle the root causes of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) abuses. While not directly involved in ASM mining itself, CMOC supports the sector with security and human rights training and meetings with artisanal miners – who are largely driven to illegal mining out of economic necessity – to better take into account their needs and reduce risks, in addition to abiding by the highest ESG standards in its own industrial mining operations.

Similarly, Swiss mining firm Glencore, also an FCA member and cobalt producer in the DRC, has ramped up engagement with the ASM sector to support legitimate artisanal cooperatives aligned with international human rights, safety and child labour standards. With their action driven by the conviction that “legal ASM can play an important and sustainable role in the DRC when carried out responsibly and transparently,” Glencore has met with the communities surrounding its operations to help integrate artisanal miners in the supply chain and unlock their significant potential. In addition to responsible mining practices, the company is also working to help local communities find alternative income sources to reduce poverty.

Future opportunities

Formalisation and reform of the artisanal sector is crucial in meeting skyrocketing global demand and helping the DRC government recover tax revenues lost to illegal mining. Given that the primary benefit of these resources is their revenue, governments such as the DRC should strengthen tax regimes to maximise revenue collection and finance urgent socio economic objectives in public education and health, while stabilising their fiscal regimes to encourage outside investment.

Those revenues, in turn, can help strengthen regional economic partnerships, such as by

boosting cross-border trade through the **African Continental Free Trade Area**. There are signs that this may already be happening, with the DRC and [Zambia](#) signing a cooperation agreement last year to facilitate the development of a value chain in the electric battery and clean energy sector, which has the potential to create major new job opportunities and help pull communities out of poverty.

We may yet be seeing only the tip of the iceberg in terms of Africa's potential for [rare earth minerals](#) such as those used in EVs, suggesting the region's full potential is still untapped as much of its mineral wealth remains unexplored.

As such, it is clear that the shift to renewable technologies has the potential to bring massive benefits to [African economies](#), as well as to the global green transition—as long as efforts persist to carry out this mining in a sustainable and responsible manner, in line with the values of international initiatives such as the Global Gateway.

Source: European Views