

The Impact of the Mining Industry on the Local Population in Southern Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is endowed with vast mineral resources, particularly in its southern provinces of Lualaba and Haut Katanga, which host some of the world's largest deposits of cobalt and copper. Despite this mineral wealth, communities living in mining affected areas continue to experience persistent poverty, environmental degradation, and social marginalization. This study examined the impact of the mining industry on the socio economic wellbeing of local populations in southern DRC, focusing on economic livelihoods, social and cultural conditions, and health and environmental outcomes. The study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm and a qualitative dominant mixed methods design. Primary data were collected from 144 respondents through in depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field observation across Kolwezi, Likasi, and Lubumbashi. Quantitative descriptive and inferential analyses were used to complement qualitative findings. Results indicate that mining proximity is strongly associated with negative welfare outcomes, including reduced income adequacy, food insecurity, weakened social cohesion, environmental contamination, and adverse health indicators. Correlation analysis showed strong positive relationships between mining proximity and heavy metal exposure ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$), and between contamination and respiratory illness ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analysis revealed that mining proximity, environmental contamination, land displacement, governance deficit, and gender vulnerability jointly explained 68 percent of the variation in community wellbeing. The study concludes that mining related harm in southern DRC is structurally generated and reinforced by weak governance frameworks. It recommends strengthened regulatory enforcement, mandatory community participation, gender responsive policies, and transparent revenue sharing mechanisms.

Keywords: Environmental Sustainability Policies, Institutional Challenges, Sustainability Practices

1. Background

The mining sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo occupies a strategically central position in the global political economy of critical minerals, supplying raw materials that are indispensable to the production of electric vehicles, renewable energy technologies, and consumer electronics. Southern DRC particularly the provinces of Lualaba and Haut Katanga constitutes the heart of this extractive economy, accounting for approximately 70 percent of the world's known cobalt reserves and substantial deposits of copper and other strategic minerals. The region has therefore become a focal point of intensified mineral extraction driven by the global energy transition and growing demand for low carbon technologies. Mining activities in southern DRC are conducted through a dual system comprising large scale industrial mining operations dominated by multinational corporations and extensive artisanal and small scale mining (ASM), which employs hundreds of thousands of people through largely informal and precarious labor arrangements.

Despite the sector's immense economic importance and its contribution to national export revenues, mining affected communities in southern DRC continue to experience limited development benefits and persistent socio economic vulnerability. Communities located near mine sites face environmental degradation, including contaminated water sources, degraded agricultural land, and declining ecosystem services, alongside heightened health risks linked to exposure to toxic substances. Social consequences such as displacement, weakened social cohesion, gender based inequalities, and the erosion of customary governance structures further compound these challenges. This disjuncture between mineral wealth generation and local deprivation exemplifies the "resource curse" phenomenon, whereby extractive industries generate substantial economic value that is systematically captured by elites while failing to translate into improved living conditions for the populations residing in extraction zones.

It is within this paradoxical context of global mineral importance and localized social harm that this study is situated (Kithandi, 2023). The research moves beyond macro-economic narratives of mining led growth to empirically examine how industrial and artisanal mining operations shape the everyday economic, social, environmental, and governance realities of communities that bear the direct costs of extraction in southern DRC. By centering the experiences of mining affected populations, the study contributes to a more nuanced and grounded understanding of the structural dynamics through which mineral extraction produces both global prosperity and local precarity.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Mining operations in southern DRC generate billions of dollars annually, yet affected communities experience land dispossession, health risks, and social fragmentation. Existing governance frameworks, including the DRC Mining Code and corporate social responsibility initiatives, have failed to ensure equitable outcomes. While prior studies focus on macro level economic indicators or conflict minerals, limited empirical evidence captures how mining affects everyday life at the community level. This study addresses that gap by focusing on localized socio economic, health, and governance impacts.

1.3 Purpose of the Study.

To examine the impact of the mining industry on the socio-economic wellbeing of local populations in southern Democratic Republic of Congo

1.4 Research Objectives

- To examine the economic impacts of mining on local livelihoods.
- To assess the social and cultural effects of mining on community cohesion and gender relations.
- To evaluate the environmental consequences of mining activities on local populations.

1.5 Research Hypothesis

H₀: Mining activities have no significant effect on the wellbeing of local populations in southern DRC.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

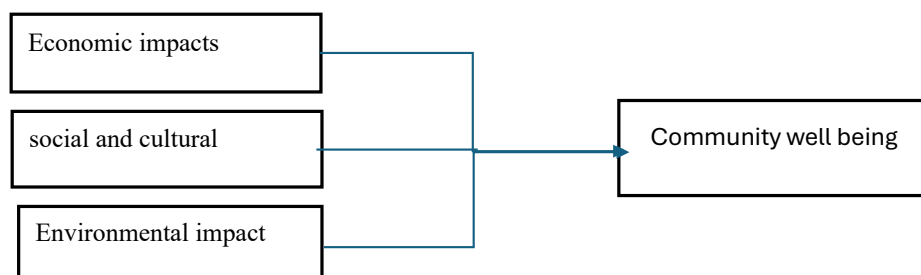


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Financial Intermediation Theory, originally advanced by Gurley and Shaw (1960) and later refined by Diamond (1984),
Resource Curse Theory

Resource Curse Theory explains the paradox whereby countries and regions endowed with abundant natural resources experience persistent poverty, low human development outcomes, and weak economic diversification. Initially articulated by Auty (1993), the theory argues that resource rents generated from mineral extraction tend to be captured by political and economic elites rather than being equitably distributed across society. In mineral rich regions, the influx of large revenues can weaken institutional accountability, encourage corruption, and reduce incentives for governments to invest in productive sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and human capital development.

In the context of southern Democratic Republic of Congo, the resource curse manifests in the stark contrast between mineral wealth and community deprivation. Despite the region's central role in global cobalt and copper supply chains, local populations experience land dispossession, food insecurity, inadequate public services, and persistent poverty. Weak institutional capacity and limited transparency in revenue management mean that mining revenues rarely translate into meaningful improvements in local infrastructure, healthcare, or education. As a result, the resource curse theory provides a foundational explanation for why large-scale mineral extraction coexists with low community wellbeing and entrenched underdevelopment.

Political Ecology

Political ecology offers a critical framework for understanding how environmental degradation associated with mining is shaped by political and economic power relations rather than purely technical or natural processes. Emerging from the work of Blaikie and Brookfield and later developed by Peluso and Watts, political ecology emphasizes that environmental harm is socially produced and unevenly distributed. It highlights how powerful actors—such as multinational corporations and state elites—are able to externalize environmental costs onto marginalized communities with limited political influence.

Applied to mining in southern DRC, political ecology illuminates how global demand for minerals drives local environmental destruction, including water contamination, air pollution, soil degradation, and ecosystem loss. Communities living near mine sites bear the health and livelihood consequences of these environmental changes, while the economic benefits flow outward to national elites and international markets. Political ecology thus provides an analytical lens for tracing how global economic forces, national governance structures, and corporate interests intersect to produce localized environmental harm and unequal exposure to risk.

Structural Violence Theory

Structural Violence Theory, introduced by Galtung and later expanded by Farmer, frames social suffering as the outcome of historically embedded and institutionalized inequalities rather than isolated or accidental events. Structural violence refers to harm that is produced by social, political, and economic systems that systematically disadvantage certain groups and prevent them from meeting their basic needs. These forms of violence are often invisible, normalized, and sustained over time through legal frameworks and governance practices that favor powerful actors.

In mining affected communities in southern DRC, structural violence is evident in chronic health burdens arising from toxic exposure, forced displacement without adequate compensation, unsafe working conditions in artisanal mining, and intergenerational poverty. These outcomes are not random but are predictable consequences of colonial extraction legacies, post-colonial governance failures, and contemporary global capitalism. Structural violence theory therefore helps to interpret mining related illness, food insecurity, and social breakdown as expressions of systemic injustice, rather than as unfortunate side effects of development.

Feminist Political Economy

Feminist Political Economy (FPE) focuses on the gendered dimensions of economic systems and exposes how power, labor, and resources are distributed unequally between men and women. The framework challenges gender neutral analyses of development by demonstrating that economic policies and industries—including extractive sectors—affect men and women differently. FPE emphasizes the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism, and governance in shaping women's economic exclusion and social vulnerability.

Within mining communities in southern DRC, feminist political economy explains why women and girls experience disproportionate harm despite contributing significantly to household and community survival. Women are systematically excluded from formal mining employment, decision making structures, and compensation processes, while simultaneously facing increased exposure to gender-based violence, economic dependence, and health risks. At the same time, women shoulder the burden of unpaid reproductive labor, caring for sick family members and managing household food security in environments made less livable by mining activities. By centering gender as a core analytical category, feminist political economy highlights the necessity of gender responsive governance and policy reforms in resource extraction contexts.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Empirical research on the mining industry in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), particularly in its southern provinces of Lualaba and Haut Katanga, has consistently documented profound socio economic, environmental, and governance impacts on local populations. This body of literature spans quantitative environmental health studies, qualitative community level analyses, and mixed methods investigations linking extraction to development outcomes, inequality, and social harm.

Economic Impacts of Mining on Local Communities

A substantial body of empirical work demonstrates that mining in southern DRC generates limited and uneven economic benefits for local populations. Hilson (2016), drawing on comparative studies across sub-Saharan Africa, found that large scale industrial mining tends to create fewer employment opportunities than anticipated, with most skilled and better paid positions occupied by expatriate or non-local workers. In the DRC specifically, mining employment has been shown to be highly segmented, with local communities largely confined to low wage, insecure, and hazardous labor roles, particularly in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM).

Geenen (2020), through extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Katanga, documented that ASM provides a critical livelihood buffer for households displaced from agriculture, yet remains structurally exploitative. Artisanal miners frequently operate without legal recognition, labor protections, or stable incomes, while intermediary traders capture the majority of value generated within mineral supply chain (Kithandi, & Ondabu, 2024). This empirical evidence supports the assertion that mining driven economic activity does not translate into sustainable livelihood security for communities in extraction zones.

World Bank (2020) macro-economic assessments further corroborate this pattern, showing that although mining contributes significantly to national export revenues and GDP, fiscal transfers to local governments and mining affected communities remain minimal and opaque. The disconnect between mineral wealth generation and community development outcomes reinforces empirical claims associated with the resource curse phenomenon as experienced at the local level in southern DRC.

Environmental and Health Impacts

Environmental and public health impacts constitute one of the most empirically documented dimensions of mining in southern DRC. Banza Lubaba Nkulu et al. (2018) conducted a landmark epidemiological study in the Katanga region, revealing alarmingly high concentrations of cobalt, lead, cadmium, and uranium in soil, water, and human biological samples from mining communities. The study found that children living near mining and processing sites exhibited heavy metal exposures significantly above internationally accepted safety thresholds, with strong associations to respiratory illness, dermatological conditions, and neurodevelopmental risks. Nzuki and Kithandi (2025) similarly asserts that environmental impact of mining have highly affected Mavoko constituency residents.

Sovacool et al. (2020), employing a mixed methods approach combining environmental data with social analysis, demonstrated that cobalt extraction linked to global clean energy transitions has produced localized environmental injustice in southern DRC. Their findings reveal that pollution, unsafe working conditions, and health burdens are concentrated in impoverished communities that lack political power, while the benefits of mineral extraction accrue to global industries and consumers.

World Bank (2022) sectoral assessments similarly highlight that environmental degradation in mining zones undermines agricultural productivity, water security, and ecosystem resilience. These empirical findings collectively confirm that environmental harm in southern DRC mining regions is systematic, spatially concentrated, and directly linked to adverse health and livelihood outcomes among local populations.

Social and Community Level Impacts

Empirical research consistently identifies mining as a source of social disruption and community fragmentation in southern DRC. Geenen (2020) observed that rapid in migration to mining areas intensifies competition over land, water, and economic opportunities, contributing to weakened social cohesion and the erosion of customary governance systems. Mining communities experience increased conflict, informal settlement growth, and the commodification of social relations previously governed by reciprocity and kinship norms. Shuna and Kithandi (2024) after examining monitoring and evaluation practices and performance of health development projects in Kenya concluded that health development projects om Kenya were adversely affected by mining activities that increased hazardous chemicals in the environment.

Amnesty International (2016), through extensive field investigations and interviews, documented how mining related displacement and land loss have undermined traditional livelihoods and social structures. Communities reported inadequate consultation, coercive land acquisition practices, and insufficient compensation, leading to long term social and psychological distress. These findings underscore the incompatibility between rapid extractive expansion and the maintenance of stable community life in mining zones.

Governance, Accountability, and the Resource Curse

Governance failures emerge as a central empirical theme in the literature on mining impacts in the DRC. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) empirically linked resource dependence to institutional weakness, conflict risk, and reduced accountability, a pattern that has been repeatedly observed in the Congolese mining sector. Despite legal frameworks governing mining activities, enforcement remains weak, allowing rent capture by political elites and multinational corporations Oino and Kithandi (2025) echoes this and argues that sustainability of mining firms listed in NSE is highly depended governance.s

Global Witness (2022) provided compelling empirical evidence of revenue mismanagement, corruption, and opaque contractual arrangements governing cobalt extraction in southern DRC. Their investigation demonstrated that mining revenues largely bypass local development needs, leaving mining affected communities chronically under resourced in terms of health services, education, and infrastructure. Bukhala, Ekambi and Kithandi (2025) asserts that Sustainability of Donor Funded Projects is highly affected by mining activities in East Africa Region

Kithandi, (2022). resource curse framework finds strong empirical validation in these studies, as mineral wealth in southern DRC continues to coexist with poverty, inequality, and governance breakdown, illustrating how extractive dependence undermines inclusive development.

Gendered Impacts and Structural Inequality

Although not always central in early mining studies, more recent empirical work has highlighted gender differentiated impacts of mining. Amnesty International (2016) and Geenen (2020) documented that women in mining communities are disproportionately affected by livelihood displacement, exclusion from formal employment, and increased exposure to violence and economic dependency. Women often engage in informal and poorly remunerated mining adjacent activities while shouldering the burden of unpaid care labor exacerbated by illness and environmental degradation. Chege, Kithandi and Waweru (2025) asserts that mining has highly affected Performance of Housing Projects in Kenya.

Sovacool et al. (2020) further emphasized that gender and age shape vulnerability to extraction related harm, with women and children facing heightened risks of health impacts and social exploitation. These findings provide empirical grounding for feminist political economy analyses that link extractive industries to the intensification of existing gender inequalities.

3 Research Methodology

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative dominant mixed methods design. The target population comprised residents of mining affected communities in Lualaba and Haut Katanga. Purposive sampling was used to select 160 participants, of whom 144 completed the study instruments (90% response rate). Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for the key study indicators are presented in Table X. The results provide an overview of the average levels of economic, social, and environmental wellbeing among mining affected communities in southern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Indicator	Mean
Income Adequacy	2.40
Food Security	2.10
Social Cohesion	2.30
Environmental Quality	1.90
Community Wellbeing Index	2.20

The results indicate generally low mean scores across all wellbeing indicators, suggesting that communities in mining affected areas experience considerable socio economic and environmental deprivation. Income adequacy recorded a mean of 2.4, reflecting the perception among respondents that earnings from mining and mining related activities are largely insufficient to meet basic household needs. This finding underscores the precarious nature of livelihoods in both artisanal and industrial mining contexts, where income volatility and informality remain pervasive.

Food security recorded an even lower mean of 2.1, indicating widespread challenges in accessing sufficient and nutritious food. This outcome is consistent with the displacement of agricultural land by mining operations and the erosion of subsistence farming, which traditionally served as a safety net for rural households. The low food security score highlights the structural dependency created when communities are pushed away from agriculture and into unstable mining based livelihoods.

Social cohesion recorded a mean score of 2.3, suggesting moderate to low levels of trust, cooperation, and collective solidarity within communities. This reflects the disruptive social effects of mining, including in migration, competition over scarce resources, and the weakening of customary governance institutions. Environmental quality recorded the lowest mean score at 1.9, indicating severe degradation of water, soil, and air resources in mining zones. This finding reflects widespread exposure to pollution and environmental contamination, particularly among communities located in close proximity to mine sites.

Overall, the composite Community Wellbeing Index recorded a low mean of 2.2, confirming that adverse economic, social, and environmental conditions converge to undermine overall wellbeing in mining affected communities in southern DRC.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength, direction, and statistical significance of the relationships between mining related variables and key wellbeing indicators. The results are summarized in Table X.

Table 2: Correlation

Variable Relationship	r	p-value
Mining Proximity - Heavy Metal Exposure	0.82	< 0.001
Heavy Metal Exposure - Respiratory Illness	0.79	< 0.001
Mining Proximity - Social Cohesion	-0.71	< 0.001
Mining Proximity - Income Adequacy	-0.63	< 0.001

The findings reveal strong and statistically significant relationships between mining activity and adverse wellbeing outcomes. Mining proximity exhibits a very strong positive correlation with heavy metal exposure ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that communities located closer to mine sites are substantially more exposed to toxic substances such as cobalt, lead, and copper. This confirms the existence of a clear spatial gradient of environmental harm in mining zones.

Heavy metal exposure also shows a strong positive correlation with respiratory illness ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting a direct link between environmental contamination and negative health outcomes. This relationship provides quantitative confirmation of the environmental health pathway through which mining activities translate into human suffering.

Conversely, mining proximity exhibits a strong negative correlation with social cohesion ($r = -0.71$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that communities closer to mining operations experience greater social fragmentation, weakened collective governance, and increased conflict. Similarly, the negative correlation between mining proximity and income adequacy ($r = -0.63$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that closer exposure to mining does not improve economic wellbeing but instead exacerbates livelihood insecurity.

Taken together, these correlations demonstrate that mining proximity is systematically associated with environmental harm, poor health, reduced income adequacy, and social disruption, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of extractive industry impacts on local populations.

4.3 Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the combined and relative influence of key mining related factors on community wellbeing. The model summary indicates a strong overall explanatory power, with an R value of 0.82 and an R^2 of 0.68. This implies that the included predictors jointly explain 68 percent of the variation in community wellbeing among the sampled population.

Model Summary

- $R = 0.82$
- $R^2 = 0.68$

Table 3: Regression Coefficients

Predictor	β	p-value
Mining Proximity	-0.41	< 0.001
Environmental Contamination	-0.38	< 0.001
Land Displacement	-0.34	< 0.001
Governance Deficit	-0.29	< 0.001
Gender Vulnerability	-0.25	< 0.001

The regression results reveal that mining proximity is the strongest negative predictor of community wellbeing ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that closer physical proximity to mining operations significantly reduces overall wellbeing, even when other factors are controlled for. This finding confirms that spatial exposure to mining is a central mechanism through which harm is experienced.

Environmental contamination also shows a strong negative and statistically significant effect on wellbeing ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the central role of pollution, water contamination, and air quality degradation in shaping community outcomes. Land displacement similarly exhibits a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.34$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting the impact of forced relocation and loss of agricultural land on livelihoods and food security.

Governance deficit emerges as an independent and significant predictor of reduced wellbeing ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$), underscoring the role of weak regulatory enforcement, inadequate compensation mechanisms, and exclusion of communities from decision making processes. Gender vulnerability also shows a negative and significant effect ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that gender-based inequalities amplify the adverse impacts of mining, particularly for women and girls.

Since all predictor variables are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, the null hypothesis was rejected. The analysis therefore confirms that mining related factors have a significant and substantial negative effect on community wellbeing in southern DRC.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concludes that mining in southern DRC generates systemic socio-economic harm rather than inclusive development. Proximity to mining sites is the strongest determinant of poor wellbeing outcomes. Environmental contamination, land displacement, governance failure, and gender inequality compound these effects. The findings validate the resource curse, political ecology, and structural violence frameworks in explaining extraction driven deprivation.

Recommendations

The findings of this study point to the need for coordinated action by multiple stakeholders in order to mitigate the adverse impacts of mining and enhance the wellbeing of local communities in southern DRC. First, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo should strengthen the enforcement of the Mining Code by ensuring consistent regulatory oversight, effective monitoring, and sanctions for non-compliance. This should include improving the implementation of community compensation mechanisms and rigorously enforcing the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) so that affected communities are genuinely consulted and meaningfully involved in decisions concerning land acquisition, resettlement, and mine expansion.

Second, mining companies operating in the region should take greater responsibility for the social and environmental consequences of their activities. This can be achieved through the regular commissioning of independent social and environmental impact assessments whose findings are publicly disclosed and accessible to communities. In addition, corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks should be redesigned to move beyond short-term philanthropic projects toward participatory, community-driven initiatives that respond directly to local priorities and contribute to long-term socio-economic sustainability.

Third, international development partners and donors have an important role to play in supporting environmental health monitoring, particularly in communities exposed to heavy metals and other mining-related pollutants. Their interventions should also prioritize gender-responsive programming that addresses the specific vulnerabilities faced by women and girls in mining areas, as well as initiatives that strengthen community legal empowerment by improving access to legal information, advocacy support, and grievance redress mechanisms.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they are not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

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Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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