United Nations University
Centre for Policy Research

Executive Summary

Conflict Economies and Peace Operations

A Case Study on Peace and Security and Development Responses to Conflict Minerals in Eastern DRC

Erica Gaston, Nicole Goldin, Catharina Nickel and Rebecca Hinkhouse

August 2026

UNU CPR

XCEPT
CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

United Nations University
Centre for Policy Research

Attribution and funding support
This publication is supported by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org or contact us at info@xcept-research.org.

About the authors and acknowledgements
The four authors are senior and junior researchers at United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR), which is a research institute within the United Nations that carries out policy-focused research and capacity-building on issues of strategic interest and importance to the UN and its Member States. Dr. Erica Gaston leads the Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace pillar; Dr. Nicole Goldin leads the Equitable Development pillar; Catharina Nickel is a Peace Operations Fellow at UNU-CPR; and Rebecca Hinkhouse is a junior programme associate in the Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace pillar.

The authors would also like to thank Jack Durrell for tremendous communications support, the team at XCEPT for their feedback and review, the peer reviewers for their expertise and brainstorming, and Kayla Ermanni for research support.

ISBN: 978-92-808-6674-2

Citation: Erica Gaston, Nicole Goldin, Catharina Nickel and Rebecca Hinkhouse, *Conflict Economies and Peace Operations: A Case Study on Peace and Security and Development Responses to Conflict Minerals in Eastern DRC* (New York, United Nations University, 2026).

Executive Summary

Competition for control of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)'s vast mineral wealth lies at the heart of one of Africa's most persistent and internationally consequential conflicts. The takeover of large parts of eastern DRC by the non-State armed group March 23 Movement (M23) in early 2025, its use of proceeds from mineral rich areas, and how this connected to foreign support and involvement has renewed attention on the role of natural resources in incentivizing and helping to fund cycles of violence in eastern DRC.[1] While the complexity of conflict in eastern DRC cannot be reduced to competition over minerals alone, control over mineral-rich territory, trade routes and cross-border exports has been intertwined with cycles of conflict and armed group mobilization for decades.

Since 2000, the United Nations (UN) Security Council has recognized the link between the illicit exploitation of and trade in natural resources and conflict in eastern DRC and the broader region. In recognition of this link, the two successive peacekeeping operations in the DRC, the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) (1999–2010) and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (2010–present), as well as the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region (OSE-GL), created in 2013, have been assigned a range of tasks designed to address the link between armed group support and mobilization and the illicit exploitation of and trade in natural resources. Beyond these UN missions, bilateral donors, international financial institutions, development entities and private sector actors have supported a number of economic or development initiatives and mechanisms related to conflict minerals issues, ranging from due diligence and responsible sourcing initiatives to mine site development and alternative livelihoods initiatives. The research asks:

- How have these different peacekeeping, diplomatic, private sector and development initiatives sought to address the role of natural resources as conflict drivers? How have these different initiatives and efforts complemented each other in practice?
- What does the record of these peace and security on one hand, and development initiatives on the other, suggest for future peace interventions or other efforts to address regional conflict economies?

This paper examines these research questions by exploring a number of both development and peace and security-related initiatives in the eastern DRC and the broader Great Lakes region. This contributes to a broader research initiative exploring policy responses to cross-border or borderland sources of conflict supported by the Cross-Border Conflict, Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) programme.[2] The principal types of initiatives considered are summarized in the chart below.

Development and private sector responses	**Peace and security responses**
Responsible sourcing and supply chain governance • Due diligence and responsible sourcing standards • Traceability initiatives (e.g. the International Tin Supply Chain Initiative) • Regional certification mechanisms (e.g. the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region Regional Certification Mechanism (RCM))	Peacekeeping responses to armed group control and conflict financing • Security and stabilization operations around mine sites and key transport routes • Disruption and interdiction of armed group control and exploitation of natural resources • Joint initiatives addressing the crime–conflict nexus • Quick-impact projects and other stabilization initiatives • Support to mine site validation and traceability
Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) governance • Formalization of ASM • Mine site governance initiatives	Diplomacy, governance and regional cooperation • Good offices engagement in DRC, including support for domestic regulation and legal reform

• Licensing, inspection and regulatory oversight	• Regional cooperation frameworks, including support for harmonizing policies and regulatory approaches
Community resilience and livelihoods • Alternative livelihood programmes • Community-based interventions in mining areas	Sanctions and monitoring • UN sanctions regime listing criteria and designations • Security Council-mandated monitoring mechanisms (Panel of Experts; Group of Experts)

Examining these different initiatives yielded the following key findings on responding to conflict economies:

- **Past responsible sourcing initiatives have offered proof of concept that coordinated development and private sector pathways can limit armed groups' ability to profit from conflict minerals.** When effectively designed and robustly implemented, traceability, due diligence and certification initiatives can close some of the pathways through which armed groups profit from illicit exploitation and trade in natural resources.
- **However, implementation, security and governance constraints have prevented responsible sourcing initiatives from delivering on this potential at scale.** Slow and uneven implementation of validation, traceability and regulatory processes, limited participation and engagement by miners, traders and broader financial partners, and insufficient attention to community and livelihood needs have constrained their reach and effectiveness. More fundamentally, these initiatives depend on a minimum level of security, enforcement and political commitment, including cooperation by neighbouring States – conditions that are largely absent in eastern DRC and the Great Lakes region.
- **Development progress and due diligence compliance do not automatically translate into conflict prevention.** As a result of these gaps, initiatives could succeed from a development perspective – successfully validating a mine and enabling formal, certified exports – while leaving paths for conflict financing intact. Armed groups adapted by moving to other sites and trade routes, exploiting porous borders and cross-border arbitrage to sustain regional conflict economies.
- **These constraints point to an important potential complementarity between development approaches and peace and security tools.** Many of the challenges that constrain responsible sourcing initiatives – insecurity, weak governance and regulatory systems, political obstacles and limited regional cooperation – are issues that peace operations and other peace and security tools are commonly designed to address.
- **Peacekeeping operations have more to offer on conflict economies than is commonly recognized, but lack of prioritization limited meaningful effects.** MONUC and MONUSCO supported mine site validation and regulatory reforms, helped to disrupt armed group capture of illicit natural resource chains, and provided broader support to development actors and responsible sourcing initiatives. However, these contributions were often undertaken incidental to other priority tasks, rather than being designed and taken forward for strategic effect. Even where mandates enabled more active engagement, interventions were episodic, geographically limited and insufficiently sustained to reshape entrenched systems of armed group control and illicit trade.
- **Conflict economies cannot be treated as technical governance or regulatory challenges alone.** While responses to illicit exploitation and trade sometimes figured in the mandates, these were one task among many and often delegated to technical reporting or regulatory engagement measures alone. Because conflict economies are fundamentally political systems that distribute power, revenue and influence, disrupting them requires sustained political prioritization rather than treating them as a peripheral component of stabilization or development programming.
- **Better coordination alone will not produce integrated responses.** Contrary to standard assumptions, more cooperation and integration frameworks will not resolve the disjuncture between peacekeeping operations, United Nations Country Teams (UN CTs) and other development actors in responding to conflict-economy issues; fundamentally different mandates, incentives, objectives and time horizons undermine their ability to undertake responses to conflict economies as a shared strategic priority.

- **International interventions cannot substitute for political will.** Whether supporting responsible sourcing, strengthening regulation, disrupting armed group financing or advancing regional cooperation, international actors depended on national and regional partners willing to undertake reforms and cooperate across borders. As one former UN official observed, these initiatives ultimately require “a willing partner on the other side”.[3]
- **Regional conflict economies consistently outstrip State-based responses.** Mineral supply chains, armed groups and commercial incentives operate across borders, yet most peacekeeping mandates, development programmes and regulatory initiatives remain bounded by national jurisdictions.

This last key finding highlights a broader challenge for peace and security strategies. Environmental exploitation, trafficking networks and resource extraction cut across political, security and development domains while also transcending national borders. Yet the international system still lacks institutions or mechanisms specifically designed to engage regional political economies as integrated systems. The range of mechanisms discussed – from peace operations to sanctions, to development initiatives and programmes – tended to be designed for and operated within designated national territorial boundaries. Those with a more regional focus were repeatedly constrained by sovereign prerogatives, political caveats or limited resourcing, which prevented them from acting in a genuinely transnational manner. Future peace interventions will therefore need to look more to models or mechanisms that can operate across regional political, security and development systems, rather than within the national and sectoral silos through which international responses have traditionally evolved.

Future Directions and Recommendations

These findings have a number of policy implications, both immediately for the current peace process and ceasefire implementation discussions in the DRC, and for those considering future models for peace operations or other peace interventions and potential responses to regional conflict-economy dynamics.

For those working on the current peace process, this report underlines that across multiple previous cycles of conflict in eastern DRC, military disengagement and ceasefire arrangements have proven unable to produce durable peace while the underlying conflict-financing systems remained intact. This suggests a few immediate and mid-term areas for attention:

- **Embed conflict-economy triggers in ceasefire design and implementation.** As the parties operationalize the Doha Framework and the monitoring of the ceasefire terms, conflict drivers related to natural resources must be explicitly identified and built into the terms, interim security arrangements and monitoring mechanisms, including the mandate and operating modalities of the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism Plus (EJVM+).
- **Use implementation of the Regional Economic Integration Framework (REIF) to operationalize a long-term strategy for transforming the conflict economy.** Many of the tools and approaches highlighted in this report – including responsible sourcing, mining governance, regulatory reform and development initiatives – could provide important building blocks for implementing many of the REIF's commitments. The current peace process and the REIF offer an opportunity to revive the best of these past approaches, but these should be oriented around more of a long-term vision of how to use them jointly to prevent conflict recurrence and economic growth.
- **Review whether UN mechanisms are equipped to support implementation of the peace agreement.** This should include an assessment of whether MONUSCO's mandate and resources, as well as the mandate and structure of the OSE-GL, are sufficient to support some of the measures outlined above and to address some of the broader conflict-financing dynamics in the DRC and the region.
- **Reinvigorate the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region’s conflict minerals architecture.** Renew political, technical and financial support for the Regional Initiative against the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources, regional certification systems and cross-border investigative and oversight mechanisms.
- **Lay the groundwork for longer-term conflict minerals responses.** Those involved in the peace process should begin identifying the institutional, governance and development measures that can be initiated during the current implementation phase to begin tackling the way that illicit natural resources trade and exploitation undergirds

conflict-financing systems, ranging from considering conflict-economy incentives in designing the next stages of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, and stabilization strategies, to supporting more cross-border programming and research related to conflict minerals issues.

For those working on some of the broader policy areas that this study touches upon, in particular those engaged in the debate surrounding the future of peace operations, the MONUSCO experience underscores the importance of considering how peace operations might be better structured and resourced to address transnational and cross-border conflict economies. Several points for consideration emerge from the study for those involved in peace operations design, management and support:

- **Recognize regional conflict economies as a core peace operations challenge.** Where regional political economies are identified as strategic conflict drivers, missions should be explicitly mandated, resourced and politically supported to address them, with sufficient prioritization to match the scale and strategic importance of these dynamics.
- **Strengthen institutional learning on peace operations responses to conflict economies.** Better document, evaluate and disseminate lessons from past missions, including MONUC and MONUSCO, while placing greater emphasis on assessing strategic impact – including effects on conflict dynamics, governance and armed group financing – rather than primarily measuring outputs and activities.
- **Move beyond coordination frameworks to strengthen integration between the mission and the UN CT responses.** Stronger cooperation between peace operations and UN CTs is important, but genuine integration requires shared strategic priorities, not better coordination mechanisms or Integrated Strategic Frameworks.
- **In considering new models and "modular" approaches for peace operations, ensure that they retain the political capacities needed to address regional conflict economies.** Technical and specialized capabilities should complement – not replace – the political, security and good offices functions required to address the underlying drivers of conflict.

For development actors and the private sector, this study suggests building on the substantial progress made through responsible sourcing initiatives over the past decade, while broadening these approaches beyond mine site governance to address regional incentive structures, cross-border supply chains and the economic realities facing miners and affected communities. The current peace process presents a rare opportunity to integrate these approaches into a broader strategy that advances both economic growth and development aims, while also reducing the risk of enabling conflict and abuses. Several recommendations emerged from this study's review of past practice that might guide future programming:

- **Pair new investment with responsible sourcing and due diligence.** As the peace process creates new opportunities for investment in the mining sector, comparable attention and resources should be devoted to responsible sourcing, due diligence and conflict-sensitive business practices to avoid reinforcing the conflict dynamics that threaten long-term stability.
- **Address barriers and strengthen incentives toward responsibly sourced minerals.** Formalization and responsible sourcing initiatives should focus more on addressing the practical disadvantages of formal markets, working with governments, financial institutions and commercial buyers to address liquidity and pre-financing constraints, ensure reliable payments and generate more accessible and faster administrative procedures.
- **Design responsible sourcing around the realities facing miners and communities.** Formalization and responsible sourcing initiatives should place greater emphasis on improving mining conditions, supporting realistic livelihood transitions, and ensuring meaningful community participation, grievance mechanisms and tangible local benefits.

[1] For references to Rwanda's alleged involvement and support at various stages of M23's advances, see S/2024/432; S/RES/2773 (2025); S/2025/446. On linkages between DRC's minerals and M23 or regional interests, see, for example, Reade Levinson, David Lewis and Sonia Rolley, "Major Rwandan coltan exporter bought smuggled minerals, a UN report says", *Reuters*, 3 July 2025; Sonia Rolley and Felix Njini, "M23 rebels in Goma: gains to boost illicit mineral trade through Rwanda, analysts say", *Reuters*, 28 January 2025.
[2] The XCEPT research programme brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour. The programme is funded by UK International Development.
[3] Interview #18, via Microsoft Teams, 9 February 2026.

United Nations University
Centre for Policy Research

About UNU-CPR

United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR) is a think tank that carries out policy-focused research on issues of strategic interest and importance to the United Nations and its Member States. The Centre prioritizes urgent policy needs requiring innovative, practical solutions oriented toward immediate implementation.

UNU-CPR offers deep knowledge of the multilateral system and an extensive network of partners within and outside of the United Nations. The United Nations University Charter, formally adopted by the General Assembly in 1973, endows the Centre with academic independence, which ensures that its research is impartial and grounded in an objective assessment of policy and practice.

cpr.unu.edu

New York (Headquarters)
One Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza
885 2nd Avenue, 14th Floor
New York, NY 10017
United States
Tel: +1-646-905-5225
Email: comms-cpr@unu.edu

Geneva
Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E
Geneva, Switzerland.
Tel: +1-917-225-0199
Email: comms-cpr@unu.edu