Conference on conflict minerals
Brussels, 10 and 12 November 2026 and online
15:30 – 17:00

Concept Note

Background

In mines across central Africa, people - mainly young - work on poorly supervised artisanal sites with unstable and dangerous tunnels. They do heavy manual work with inhumane schedules. They are exploited and underpaid. There is little safety equipment and often no access to medical care. These workers breathe carcinogenic dust and are exposed to incidents of all kinds. In small-scale gold mining, mercury, used to separate gold from the sand, harms miners and nearby communities. Environmental damage is widespread.

Child exploitation is common: children dig, crush and wash ore, carry heavy loads or handle mercury in gold mining. They risk cave accidents, toxic exposure and lasting injury, Work keeps them out of school. Poverty and displacement further increase their vulnerability.

These challenges are not limited to minerals formally defined as "conflict minerals". Valuable mineral resources, including critical raw materials such as cobalt and copper, may also be associated with conflict, governance, human-rights, environmental and human-security risks when extracted and traded in fragile or conflict-affected environments. The nature and severity of these risks vary considerably according to the mineral, location, type of mining and supply chain.

Armed groups often capture a mine or a transport route, demand payments from miners and traders, then sell minerals through intermediaries who conceal their origin. That revenue sustains fighters and military operations; the value of a mine deposit is itself a reason to fight for territory.

The chain is usually miners - local buyers and transporters - exporters - international traders - smelters or refiners - manufacturers. Armed groups may sell minerals themselves, but they also earn money by controlling mines, charging traders at checkpoints, or taxing each shipment. A later buyer may be several transactions removed from the armed group.

The relationship between mineral extraction and conflict is broader than the direct financing of armed groups. Mining and associated investment can affect local livelihoods, land and resource access, the environment, employment opportunities and the distribution of economic benefits. Where communities have little influence over decisions or perceive that the costs and benefits are distributed unfairly, these dynamics may contribute to grievances and tensions. Conversely, responsible investment, sourcing and governance can help create livelihoods, strengthen local economies and reduce conflict risks.

Young people are particularly relevant to this discussion. They may experience the negative effects of unsafe work, exploitation, environmental degradation, displacement and limited livelihood opportunities, while often having little influence over decisions concerning mining and investment in their communities. At the same time, young people can contribute knowledge and proposals on employment and livelihoods, community participation, environmental protection, responsible sourcing and the distribution of benefits. This provides a direct link between mineral governance and the Youth, Peace and Security agenda.

Legal environment

EU Regulation 2017/821 requires due diligence from EU importers of tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold, with compliance checked by Member State authorities. OECD minerals guidance applies across minerals; its related guidance addresses child labour and environmental harm. The Commission has initiated work on a further review of the Regulation in 2026, creating a timely route for evidence-based recommendations.

The event will maintain this legal distinction. "Conflict minerals" will therefore be used, where referring to the EU Regulation, specifically in relation to tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold. Critical raw materials constitute a broader and distinct category, although there is some overlap between the two frameworks.

The discussion will not assume that conflict and human-security risks are limited to 3TG. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, cobalt and copper are critical raw materials but are not covered by the EU Conflict Minerals Regulation. Their extraction and supply chains may nevertheless raise issues related to human rights, corruption, security actors, livelihoods, environmental impacts and governance. The event will therefore distinguish between the specific legal framework governing conflict minerals and the broader question of conflict-sensitive and responsible engagement around mineral extraction and supply chains in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Format and purpose of the event

The conference will be split into two parts: the first one will take place on Tuesday 10 November and will consist of a closed-door hearing with five young activists from the affected areas.

The hearing will provide an opportunity not only to document the problems experienced by young people and their communities, but also to hear their perspectives on possible solutions, including employment and livelihoods, participation in decisions around mining and infrastructure, environmental and community impacts, responsible sourcing and the distribution of benefits.

On the basis of the findings, the second part of it will take place on 12 November and will explore possible solutions and strategies. It will be a public event, in which policymakers, young peacebuilders and think tanks will debate and identify areas of convergence and concrete possibilities for action.

Both parts will last one hour and a half and will take place online.

Follow-up

A report will be prepared in the two weeks following the event, to which both the young activists from the first part (anonymously) and the panellists from the second part will contribute. On the basis of this report, appropriate actions will be conceived and generated.

The report will bring together the evidence and perspectives presented during the closed-door hearing and the public event and translate the discussion into a set of possible actions and an indicative roadmap for follow-up. It will seek, where feasible, to identify relevant actors, possible entry points and indicative timelines for taking forward the actions identified during the event.

The ultimate objective is to contribute to more conflict-sensitive, responsible and youth-responsive approaches to mineral extraction, investment and supply chains, addressing the conditions that allow mineral wealth to reinforce conflict and insecurity while strengthening its potential to support sustainable livelihoods, local development and peace.