

Opinion: The fight against child labor abuses in mining

By Juliane Kippenberg, Human Rights Watch, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.07.16

Word Count **854**

Level **1040L**



A child stands next to blackened zinc sheets, used in illegal gold mining, at the municipal-owned G Hostel on the outskirts of Welkom, South Africa, Oct. 10, 2007. AP Photo/Peter Dejong

I recently met “Joshua” in Ghana. Joshua was about 7 years old and worked in a gold mine. Surrounded by dust and noise from rock crushing machines, his job was to shovel and pan gold ore. Joshua and his friends were also breathing in poisonous mercury fumes. The fumes were released into the air during gold processing.

Tackling Child Labor Violations In Minerals Industry

Joshua is one of the many children who work in local small-scale mines in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These mines are operated with simple machinery and run informally. As such, they are not tracked by any form of government.

This week, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has a chance to do something about this. The OECD is an international organization that studies and coordinates economic policy of its member states.

One thing OECD does is determine whether current sourcing of minerals meet the Due Diligence Guidance that it set in 2011. The Guidance lays out five steps that companies need to take to avoid human rights abuses. It applies not only to war-torn regions, but also to “high-risk” areas such as Ghana.

So far, the OECD has not done enough to tackle child labor in minerals supply chains. Its focus has been on the important issue of conflict minerals, where companies acquire raw materials from the conflict-torn Great Lakes region in Africa. The OECD has already laid out the steps to do this responsibly. However, the specific issue of child labor has received far less attention. The lack of concrete action is the responsibility of the OECD as much as it is of the governments and companies involved.

Problems With Child Labor

The Human Rights Watch is in charge of analyzing human rights issues internationally. It has documented the risks children face in small-scale gold mines. Children have died or been injured when mining pits have collapsed. They have also risked mercury poisoning. Mercury, a liquid metal used to extract gold from ore, causes brain damage, heart and lung conditions and other permanent health damage. Work in mining also takes a toll on children’s education. Child miners often find it difficult to attend school regularly, and sometimes drop out altogether.

Human Rights Watch research in Ghana, Mali, the Philippines and Tanzania has found that governments and businesses are not doing enough. These countries have laws against child labor. However, no one enforces these laws, and the institutions that are supposed to do so are weak.

Businesses sometimes fail to ensure that their supply chains are free from child labor. Many local gold traders do not check the labor conditions at the mining sites they source from. Sometimes, they even buy gold from child laborers. Then this tainted gold is used by global companies. Around 15 percent of the world’s gold supply comes from small-scale gold mines.

In Ghana, we found that traders bought gold from unlicensed mines, where child labor was common. They then sold it to export companies which did not check where the gold came from. Some of these companies exported gold to companies in Dubai and Switzerland, such as Metalor, Emirates Gold and Kaloti. This way, gold processed by Joshua may end up in our watches, smartphones or other goods.

More Attention To Child Labor By The OECD

There are some hopeful signs at the OECD. At this week’s OECD conference, participants will debate a suggested toolkit that companies could use to detect child labor in their supply chains. The OECD is also including child labor issues more frequently into its work. These are good first steps that could convince mineral companies that safeguards against child labor are possible.

What is needed is a joint effort by the OECD, governments and business. Companies at all points in the supply chain should conduct strong child labor due diligence. They need to have management systems in place to identify child labor risks, and this process should be monitored by a third party. Every company should also publicly report on their efforts.

In addition, companies should cooperate on a large scale against child labor in mining. In fact, this kind of effort against child labor has already taken place in the cocoa and tobacco industries. The OECD should support such projects by providing a space for discussion and seeking expert input.

Higher Standards Are Not Enough

Finally, the OECD and its member states need to sharpen their teeth. Voluntary codes of conduct and standards are not enough to achieve responsible behavior by minerals companies. The OECD should create a system to effectively monitor the implementation of their Due Diligence Guidance. This includes regular and public reviews. Member states should also make human rights due diligence legally required for all business areas. This is already being considered by the French parliament.

Later this month, there will be an important vote at the International Labor Conference. States will vote for an international treaty on human rights and global supply chains. Taking these steps would help make the future of children like Joshua look brighter.

Juliane Kippenberg is associate director of the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentences from the section "Tackling Child Labor Violations In Mineral Industry."

So far, the OECD has not done enough to tackle child labor in minerals supply chains. Its focus has been on the important issue of conflict minerals, where companies acquire raw materials from the conflict-torn Great Lakes region in Africa.

Based on information in this excerpt, what is the BEST explanation of "supply chains"?

- (A) the benefits a company can provide for the country it works in
 - (B) the profit a company can expect to gain from its products
 - (C) the location where a company markets its products
 - (D) the sources a company uses to get materials to make its products
- 2 Read the sentence from the section "Problems With Child Labor."

Mercury, a liquid metal used to extract gold from ore, causes brain damage, heart and lung conditions and other permanent health damage.

What is the BEST definition of "extract" as used above?

- (A) begin to use
 - (B) lower into place
 - (C) remove by pulling out
 - (D) prove something is true
- 3 Which of the following people or groups would be most likely to DISAGREE with the author of this article?
- (A) Gold traders in Ghana
 - (B) Human Rights Watch
 - (C) Children working in mines
 - (D) Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

4 Read the section "Problems With Child Labor."

Why does the author mention watches and smartphones?

- (A) to show that gold is necessary to make these products
- (B) to show that child labor in gold mines is a far-reaching issue
- (C) to highlight the importance of gold in the global market
- (D) to highlight the corruption among gold traders