History of disease exposure in school-aged children working in artisanal mines in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Artisanal mining is one of the main sources of income in Rubaya, DR Congo. In the squares of open land amidst the verdant vegetation of the territory of Masisi, in North Kivu, we do not see powerful excavators, but simply shovels, pickaxes, and muscular arms to handle them. Carriers, more or less solidly built, replace the trucks. They evacuate the ore via the small paths gullied by the torrential downpours that fall on the region during the rainy season. In Rubaya, 45 km from Goma, a dozen open-pit mining squares exploit niobium, cassiterite and coltan (colombo-tantalite). Around the gutted earth, transformed into a mud pit at the slightest rain, young people of school age work: digging, washing minerals, sorting, transport, etc. Judging by the grimacing faces of the young people who work tirelessly, all the tasks seem exhausting. These ores will be used in particular for the manufacture of capacitors, present in all electronic products. Demand does not seem about to decrease, as the new digital economy is greedy for it. In 2011, the Congolese Government submitted a national action plan to the International Labour Organization (ILO) to end their work in the mines. In particular, it planned to "make known and apply the legislation relating to child labour", "make technical and professional training accessible", and "give access to an education programme for children removed from work". It also commited "to improve the living conditions of vulnerable households", so that socioeconomic vulnerability does not push families to make their children work. The programme was ambitious, but it never passed the milestone of official adoption. The children working are exposed to neglected tropical diseases, tuberculosis, respiratory tract infections, HIV/AIDS, and viral hepatitis B. There is also a major risk of the diseases being spread in communities and increases in mortality rates of school-age children.



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