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From wind turbines to electric vehicles, rechargeable battery technology is key to a green future. Today, lithium-ion batteries can be found in everything from electric vehicles to the cell phone in your pocket.

These rechargeable batteries can store significantly more power than earlier battery technology. Drawing on minerals like cobalt, a by-product of copper, lithium-ion batteries are replacing fossil fuels in critical technology.

As demand for green energy grows, the spotlight shines brighter on where these materials come from and how they make their way into our electronics.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the main source of cobalt globally--in fact, over 70% of the world's cobalt comes from mines in this country. Cobalt mining is centered in the "copper belt" region of Haut-Katanga and Lualaba Provinces, where the cobalt is also refined for export.

While some cobalt is mined at large-scale industrial mines, artisanal and small-scale mines are responsible for 15-30% of local production. Child labor is often found in these artisanal and small-scale mines, which are less regulated and rarely visited by labor inspectors.

Recognizing the prevalence of child labor in the mining of this mineral, in 2009 the Department of Labor placed cobalt ore from the DRC on its List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor. Over a decade later, child labor persists in cobalt production, raising risks for the entire lithium-ion battery supply chain.

Child labor, under international standards, means work (excluding permissible light work) below the minimum age as established under national legislation--usually 14 or 15 years old--as well as the worst forms of child labor which, for children under the age of 18, includes all forms of slavery, commercial sexual exploitation, illicit activities, and hazardous work that is likely to harm their health, safety, or morals.

Ziki Swazey was a child laborer in one of the DRC's artisanal small-scale cobalt mines. As an 11-year-old, he had never seen the inside of a classroom, nor could he read or write. All he knew was mining. He worked in

blistering heat under dangerous and exploitative labor conditions washing cobalt. Each evening, with hands weary from washing cobalt and a heart longing for education, he returned home with a mere dollar or two in his pocket to provide for his family and tend to his sick grandmother.

In early 2018, Ziki was able to leave the cobalt mine and enroll in school for the first time. But many of his peers still work in the mines. Often working in tight spaces underground without proper safety equipment or procedures, child laborers face serious risks of injury or death. They can fall into open mine shafts or they can be trapped or crushed by tunnel collapses. The DRC's laws prohibit children under the age of 18 from working in mining. However, due to lack of enforcement of labor laws, widespread poverty, and a growing global demand for cobalt, children continue to work in dangerous conditions mining this critical mineral.

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