

THE PRICE OF PROGRESS

REPORT





A copper mine in Katanga Province, Belgian Congo, 1940s.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kolwezi is the main global center for cobalt extraction. A large part of the city extends within mining concessions granted to large companies. This means that for many residents their presence is not guaranteed: in the event of expansion of mining activities, they can be evicted without having alternative housing solutions.

Why Does It Concern Us?

The students of those who live in leased territories are the ones most at risk.

70%

MAIN ISSUES

89%

Some families do not have property certificates recognized by the State, which are necessary to legally contest an eviction.

54%

Some families were unaware that they lived in leased territories, and none knew their rights or the procedures to follow in case of eviction.

KOLWEZI



OUR INTERVENTION

LEGAL TRAINING

In collaboration with local lawyers from IGBDH, a Congolese organization that deals with forced evictions, we organized training activities on eviction rights, reaching approximately 5,000 people. Today, the community knows what it can demand and how to respond.

OBTAINING PROPERTY CERTIFICATES

We directly assisted families in obtaining legal documents, investing €12,000 to enable 60 families of our students to secure property certificates recognized by the State.

NEXT STEPS

In Kolwezi, there is an ongoing competition between major powers for control of the cobalt supply chains, with a gradual shift from strong Chinese influence to a growing American presence. This dynamic could accelerate new mining investments and increase pressure on communities living in leased areas, consequently raising the risk of evictions.

In this context, our goal is to be ready to legally defend families. Protecting the home means protecting the school. And protecting the school means safeguarding the future.

*To Vital:
those who live for the community never truly die.*

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the largest countries in Africa and holds some of the world's richest mineral reserves.

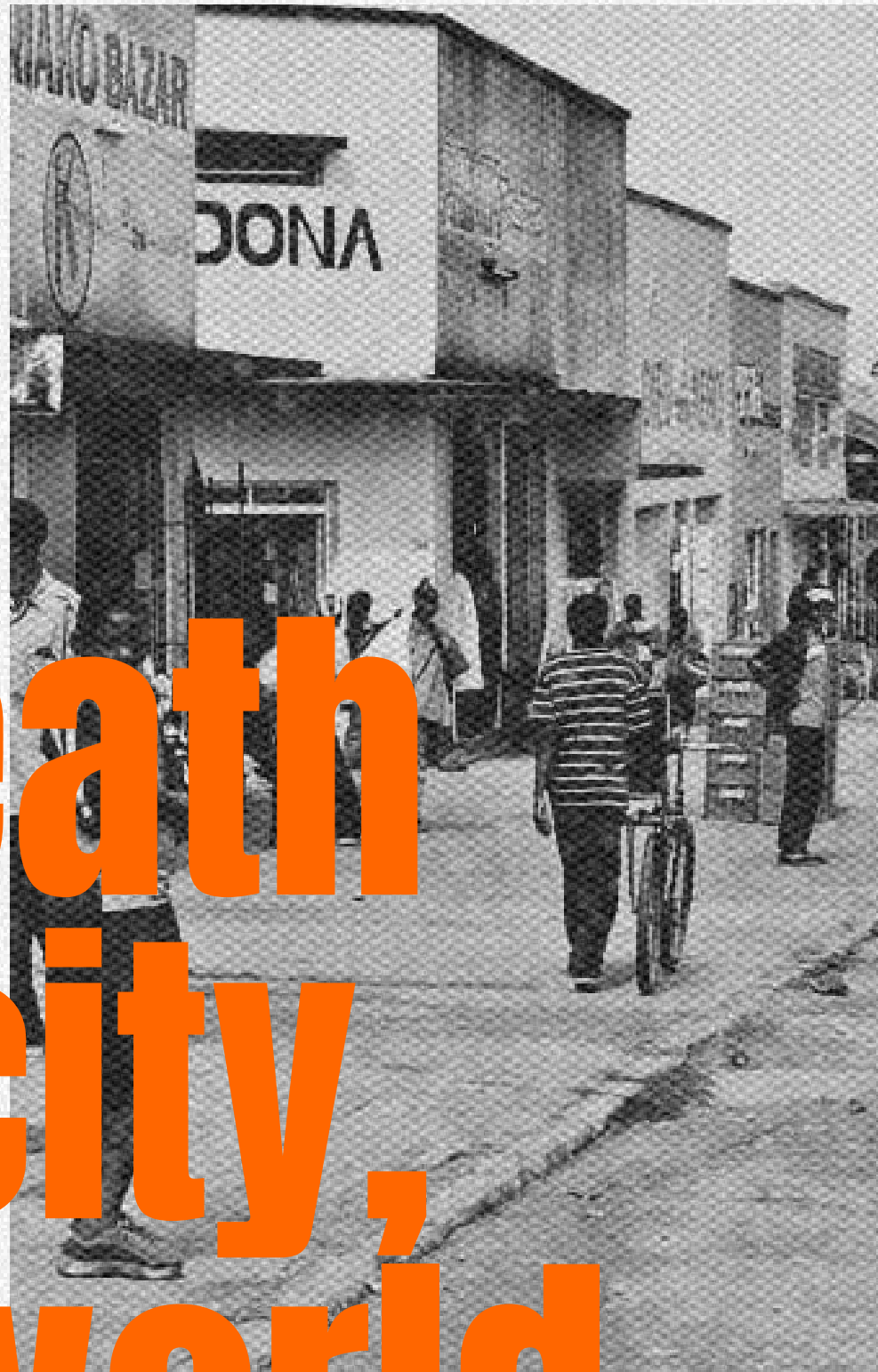
Since the time of Belgian colonial rule, these resources have not only fueled the economy but have also shaped the political landscape. Borders, cities, and infrastructure were built to connect mining areas to external markets rather than to link local communities.

The territory became an extraction system.

Over time, the main resources have changed (rubber, copper, diamonds, coltan, cobalt), but the underlying role has remained the same: to produce raw materials and transfer their value elsewhere along the supply chain.



Beneath the city, the world



Kolwezi was shaped by this history. Founded as a mining city in what is now Lualaba Province, it grew around the deposits. Its economy, urban expansion, and the daily life of its residents are still tied to the mines: **more than 70% of the world's cobalt is extracted here.**

A large part of the urban area lies within mining concessions. A mining concession is a permit from the state that gives a company the right to exploit the mineral resources in a specific area and to decide if and when to begin extraction, in accordance with regulations.

Homes, schools, and neighborhoods are built on land officially designated for mining. As a result, the city exists in a fragile balance, constantly at risk of expanding extraction and forced displacement.

Today, Kolwezi is at the center of the world. Cobalt and copper, essential for the energy transition and defense technologies, flow from here into the global future. The race for defense and decarbonization passes through this territory.

The paradox is clear: while global progress is fueled by these resources, local communities bear the harshest costs—land taken away, polluted air, and denied rights.

KOLWEZI

- 700,000–1,000,000 inhabitants
- 1 in 3 people works in the mining sector
- Over 10 large and cobalt and copper mines



**70% of the world's cobalt
is extracted here**

The Importance of Cobalt

Today, cobalt is much more than a mineral; it is a **strategic node** in shaping global balances. In recent years, cobalt has been at the heart of the energy transition (as a key component of lithium-ion batteries for electric mobility, energy storage, and digitalization). Today, it takes on an even broader significance in an international context marked by instability, systemic competition, and an arms race. Its properties—thermal stability, strength, and high performance in advanced alloys—also make it crucial for **aerospace** and **defense** technologies.

In a historical period marked by **rivalry between powers and the reshaping of alliances**, supply chains become geopolitical levers. In this context, cobalt is considered a critical mineral due to its systemic importance in the new global balance.

1914

MINERAL DISCOVERIES IN KATANGA

The large African copper-cobalt basin was identified, which today holds over half of the world's known reserves.

1924

START OF THE INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION



1946

THE MILITARY INDUSTRY BECOMES THE MAIN GLOBAL CONSUMER.



2007

BEGINNING OF THE REVOLUTION OF LITHIUM BATTERIES

Cobalt is transformed from a material that strengthens machines into one that powers energy: it's no longer just used to build devices, but to make them work.



2020

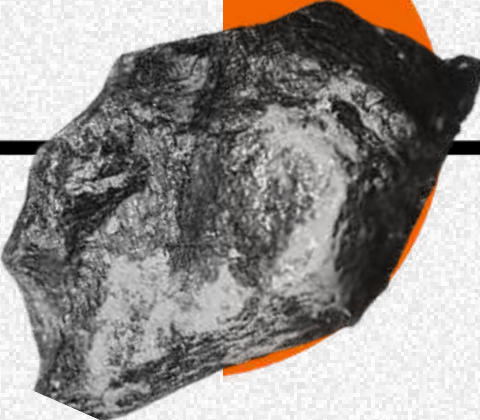
DI KOLWEZI

Kolwezi produces 74% of the world's supply.



2025

COBALT CRITICAL MINERAL



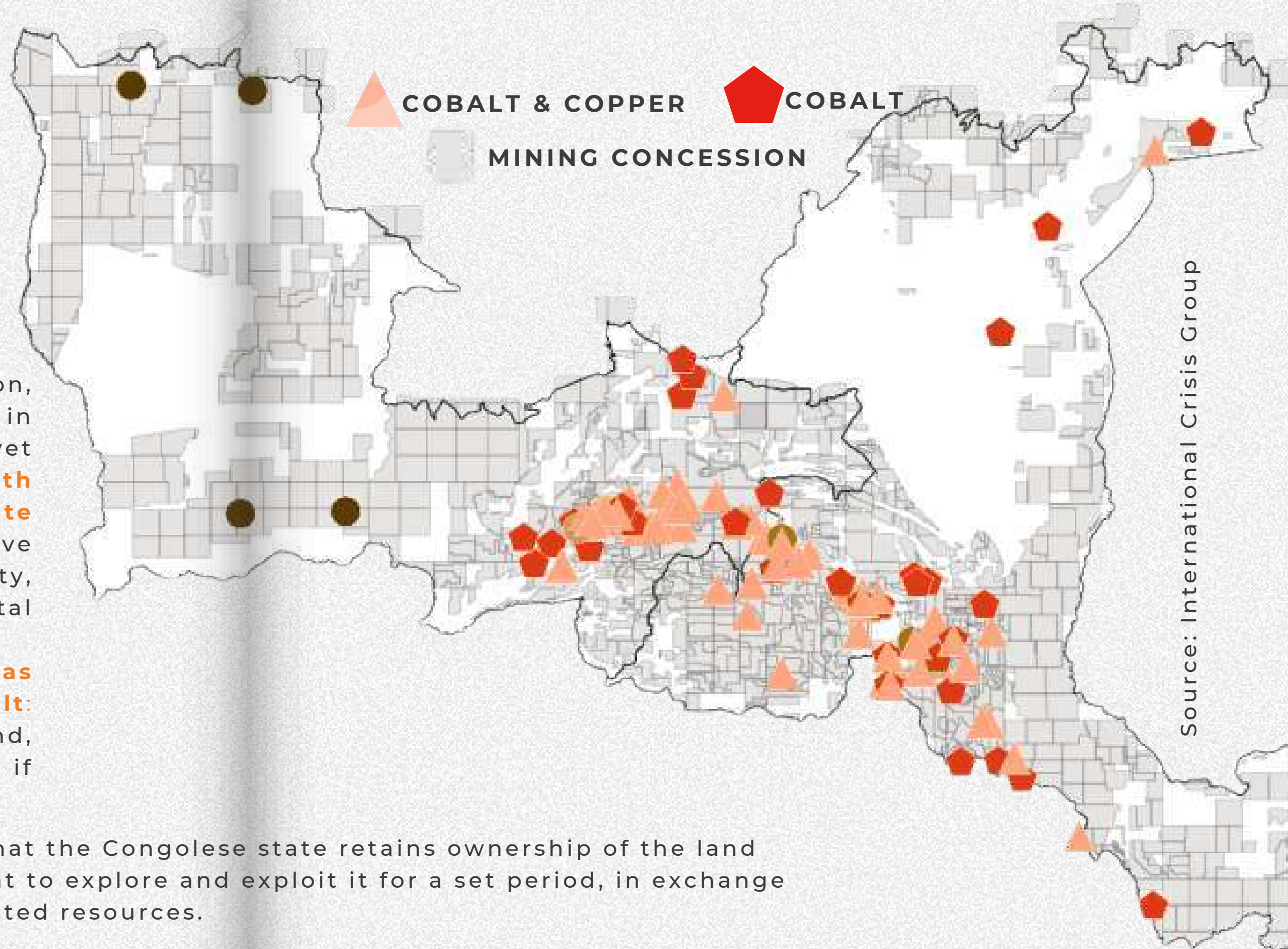
THE PRICE TO PAY

As the global center for cobalt extraction, Kolwezi holds a strategic position in energy and technology supply chains, yet it faces structural fragility. **The wealth beneath the ground does not translate into security for its people:** intensive mining is linked to job insecurity, widespread informal work, environmental degradation, and health crises.

Kolwezi is not seen as a living city but as a map to be divided according to cobalt: its residents remain in the background, forced to adapt to decisions made as if they did not exist.

In theory, a mining concession means that the Congolese state retains ownership of the land but grants a company the exclusive right to explore and exploit it for a set period, in exchange for fees, taxes, and a share of the extracted resources.

This system is used because the Congolese government lacks the financial resources, expertise, and technology needed to run mining operations directly.



Source: International Crisis Group

An aerial photograph showing a town in the lower-left corner, surrounded by large, terraced open-pit mines in the upper-right and center. The terrain is rugged and shows signs of significant excavation.

“A concession as a political framework that reshapes who controls, who decides, and who bears the costs.”

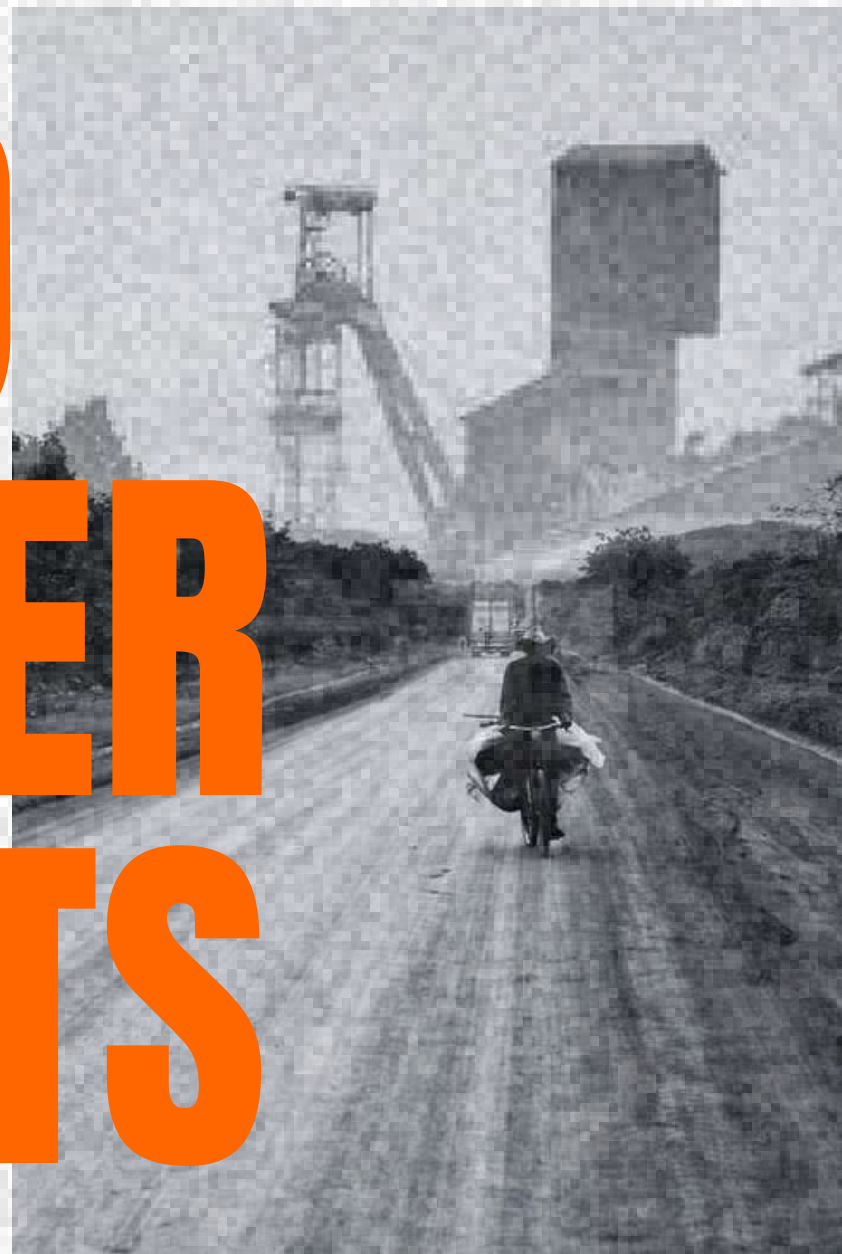
In practice, a concession is more than just a formal authorization. A company investing huge amounts in a mine needs to recoup its investment and make profits quickly. In a weak institutional system with imbalanced economic power, this leads to a simple reality: the company holding the concession makes the decisions.

Public **sovereignty** exists on paper, but in practice it weakens in key areas: labor rights and safety, environmental monitoring, economic transparency, and the ability to ensure that the value of extracted resources reaches local communities.

This gap has a measurable consequence: even when laws provide for redistribution, implementation can be irregular or opaque, leaving communities exposed to a frontier economy where the benefits flow elsewhere while the harms remain locally.

In this way, Kolwezi is a material **center** of the global energy transition, yet it risks remaining a political **periphery** for the value its underground resources generate.

LAND POWER RIGHTS



When the priority in managing a city becomes identifying where businesses can extract the most, even those who inhabit that city end up being subordinated to this logic.

This imbalance weighs even more heavily in a context of widespread poverty: **70% of the population lives below the poverty line and three out of four people survive on less than 2 euros a day.**

In these conditions, even defending one's home becomes difficult. **Obtaining a legal certificate of ownership can cost around 200 euros**, to which indirect costs are added: transportation to distant offices, lost working days, and administrative costs.

This is why many people buy or build a home after years of sacrifices but without official documents. **Not because they don't want to legalize the property, but because they don't have the money to do so.**

To this is added the educational fragility: in mining communities only just over half of adults have completed primary school, and many have limited reading skills. This makes it difficult to know one's rights or navigate administrative procedures.

And this is where mining concessions become decisive. When a new area is assigned to an extractive company, those who live on that land without documents have very few tools to oppose it. A family can have lived for years in the same house, having built it or paid for it with their own savings, yet find themselves from one day to the next with bulldozers outside their door, with no real possibility of being able to do anything.

Mining concessions are therefore not just economic tools: they become mechanisms that redraw who can stay and who must move, often rendering invisible the communities that have inhabited these territories for generations.

FORCED EVICTIONS

Main events that occurred in the Kolwezi area



2015

CITÉ GÉCAMINES (KOLWEZI)

Initial expansion of the COMMUS mine and approximately 39,000 people are evicted or threatened with demolition. The compensations are deemed insufficient and the process lacking in transparency.

2016

MUKUMBI (MUTOSHI)

The village is destroyed and around 400 structures are burned or demolished, according to satellite images. Residents denounce the intervention of the Republican Guard and the absence of adequate compensation.

2020

TSHAMUNDENDA (AREA METALKOL RTR)

Bulldozers destroy the agricultural fields of dozens of farming families for mining expansion. Intimidations and serious abuses by security forces are reported.

2022

CITÉ GÉCAMINES (KOLWEZI)

Some residents independently dismantle their own homes after having received compensation deemed too low. The community denounces the worsening of living conditions and the lack of effective recourse.



GEOGRAPHY OF UNCERTAINTY

The geography of extraction is a geography of uncertainty. Boundaries shift, fences advance, permanence is never definitively guaranteed. Inhabiting becomes a provisional condition, exposed to decisions that are made elsewhere and that redefine, time and again, access to space. **In this scenario, territorial insecurity is not an episodic event but a structure that impacts life trajectories.**

It is within this geography that our work as Still I Rise is inscribed. Our Still I Rise Academy-Kolwezi, which since 2021 has welcomed former child miners, does not operate in a social vacuum: it is born and grows in the same neighborhoods crossed by the expansion of mining concessions.

The education we promote depends on the ability of families to stay, on the continuity of settlement, on the minimum stability that allows children to attend regularly.

When permanence is uncertain, so too becomes the right to education.

THE LIVES BEHIND THE SCHOOL

Between 2023 and 2025 we conducted an internal survey of the families of the 98 students enrolled at the time to understand their housing situation, and to strategically guide our educational and territorial protection intervention.

70%

families live on land in concession to mining companies



OVER 50% DID NOT KNOW THEY WERE LIVING IN A TERRITORY GRANTED AS A CONCESSION

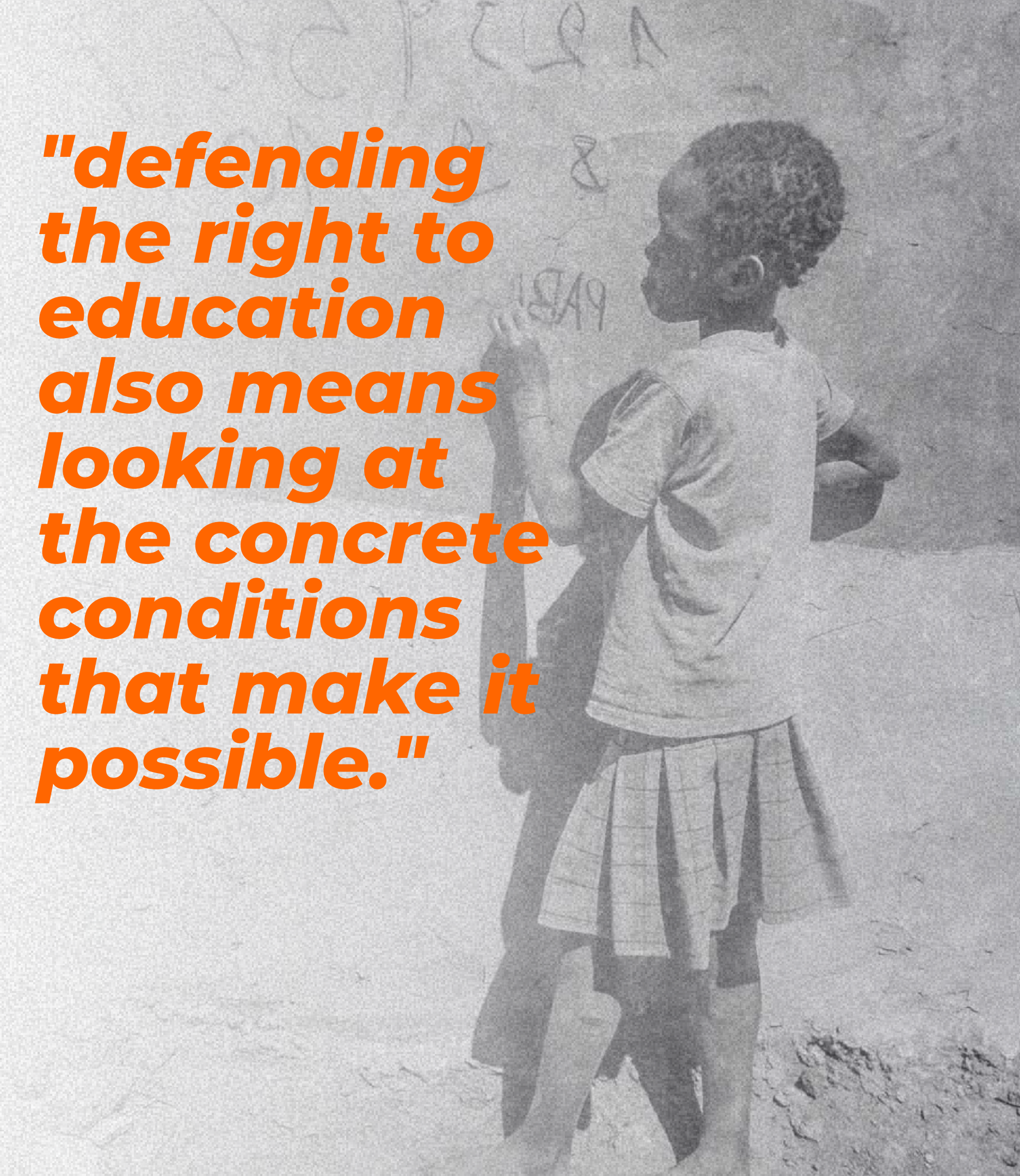


61% OF FAMILIES DO NOT KNOW THEIR MONTHLY INCOME



50% OF FAMILIES STILL HAVE A MINOR WORKING IN A MINE





"defending the right to education also means looking at the concrete conditions that make it possible."

The connection is direct. School dropout does not depend only on poverty or the lack of schools, but also on a condition of vulnerability linked to the management of the territory.

Every threat of relocation, every reduction of living space interrupts relationships, routines, educational paths. In this context, defending the right to education also means looking at the concrete conditions that make it possible.

This is why we address it in this report. Not as a digression, but as an analytical and political necessity.

If the concession system redraws access to land, it also redraws access to the future. It is in education that the question of territory and that of rights meet.

Ignoring this connection would mean reducing extraction to an economic fact, without seeing that it is also a process that deeply impacts the possibility of permanence, protection, and the future of communities.

Defend rights for garanteed education

When a family loses the land on which it lives, the children's education is often disrupted as well. Faced with this situation, taking action is not a choice but a duty.

In collaboration with IBGDH – Initiative pour la Bonne Gouvernance et les Droits Humains, we first involved community, religious and territorial leaders, essential reference points for reaching the entire community.

Through them and with targeted awareness-raising activities we reached approximately 5,000 people, who today know their rights and know how to respond in the event of a forced eviction.

In parallel we invested approximately 12,000 euros to help 60 homeowner families of our students (while the others live as tenants) to obtain documents attesting ownership of the home and the land on which they live.

Today, in the event of an eviction, these families have tools to legally defend themselves. **We started from our students, but defending their right to education has meant strengthening the security of an entire community.**



1.DOCUMENTATION OF FAMILIAR CASES

We conducted joint field missions, directly meeting at their homes all the families of our 72 students who live within the concession, in a six-month-long effort. For each family we reconstructed the housing situation and collected the available documentation: **only 8 families possessed documents related to the purchase of their home, while in the majority of cases these were informal or verbal agreements, lacking any real legal value.** This work made it possible to distinguish between 60 homeowner families and 12 tenant families, as well as to identify cases already numbered for future evictions. We then built a verified documentary archive: making cases traceable strengthens the families' position in dialogue with companies and authorities and allows, if necessary, for legal defense.



2. LEGAL TRAINING AND STRENGTHENING OF COMMUNITY CAPACITIES

We organized three training cycles on community rights in the event of eviction, with the goal of providing concrete tools to understand procedures and defend oneself.

One first meeting was dedicated to the families of our students, while two others were organized for 54 religious and social leaders. Involving the leaders was essential: in a context where access to information is limited, they are the main points of reference and can spread reliable knowledge within the community, also reaching the most isolated families.



PROCESS FOR OBTAINING LEGAL CERTIFICATES OF OWNERSHIP

In Kolwezi, recovering these documents is a long and complex process: properties are often based on informal agreements and the procedures require steps through different levels of authority – neighborhood and street chiefs, cadastral services and administrative offices – as well as administrative costs and legal assistance.

On average, each family would have had to bear a cost of approximately 200 euros, a sum out of reach in a context where families earn on average between 2 and 8 euros per day (60–240 euros per month).

This is why we directly covered the costs, to allow homeowner families to obtain documents that legally attest ownership of the home and the land on which they live.

Today these families have titles recognized by the State and finally have the tools to defend themselves in the event of a forced eviction.



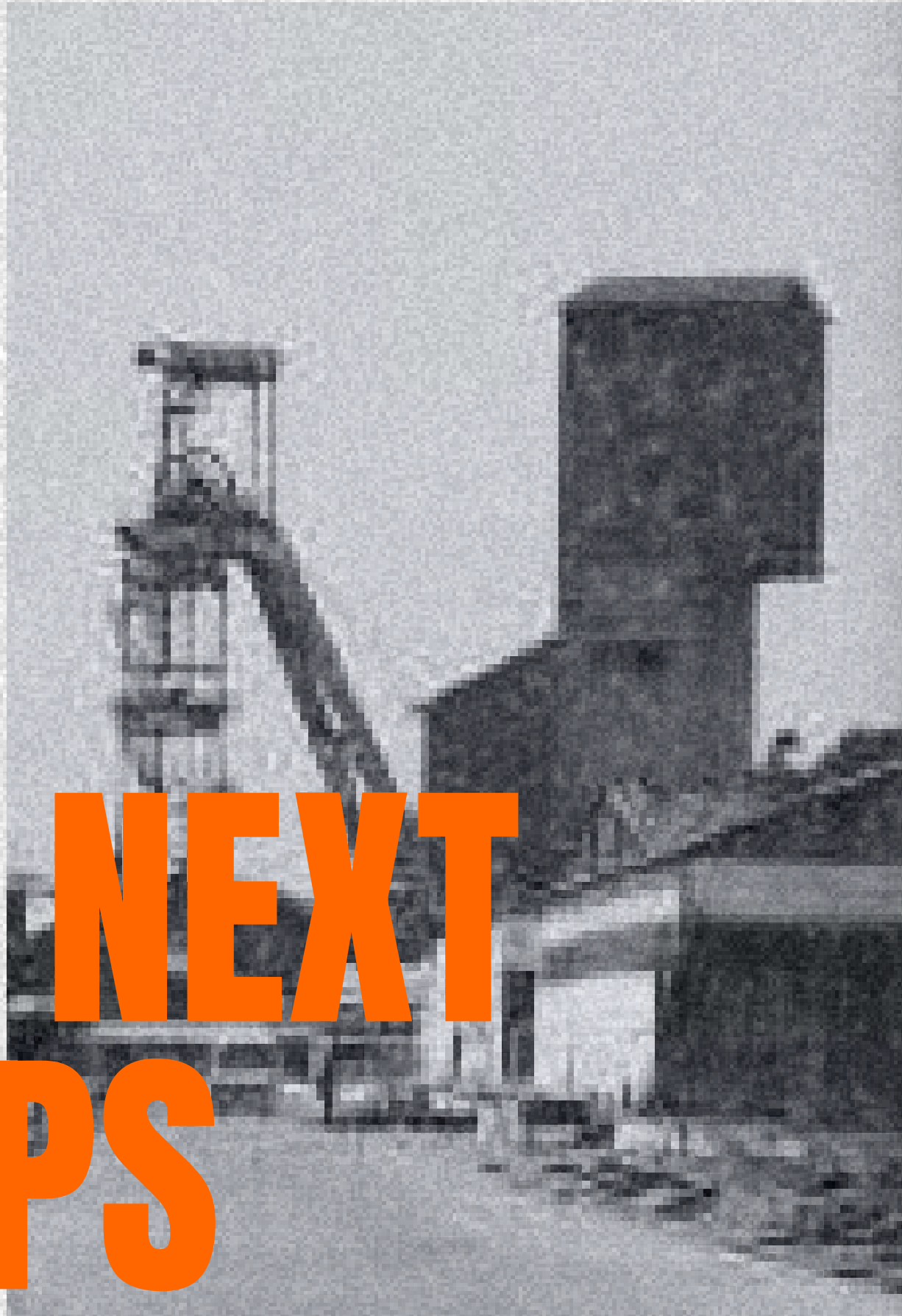
4. AWARENESS-RAISING AND INSTITUTIONAL DIALOGUE

We initiated consultations with the company holding the concession and with the competent authorities to obtain greater clarity on timelines, evaluation criteria, consultation procedures and resettlement plans. The goal is to reduce discretion and make the process more transparent and traceable. In parallel we promoted a widespread awareness-raising effort that reached approximately **5,000 people in the community, through meetings and moments of dialogue**. This was a long and demanding effort, necessary to also reach the most isolated families with no access to information. Today these families know what they can demand and how to act: they can request official information, participate in consultations, claim adequate compensation and oppose an irregular eviction. Informing people thoroughly means reducing the space for arbitrary decisions and strengthening the community's capacity to defend its own rights.

"Intervening on education also means intervening on the causes that make it structurally inaccessible"



THE NEXT STEPS



The future of our students' families depends directly on the outcome of the sale of the mining concessions held by Chemaf (Chemical of Africa), a private mining company.

Although not formally a Chinese company, Chemaf operates within a system dominated by Chinese capital. Today approximately 80% of the industrial production of cobalt and a substantial portion of the mines in the Lualaba province are under Beijing's control.

Chemaf is currently in a situation of heavy indebtedness and has been put up for sale. Its concessions are among the few large-scale ones still available and are considered strategic for the control of cobalt production.

The control of mining concessions represents a matter of political as well as economic relevance.

The interest of United States-backed investors in the acquisition of Chemaf is now well known. This interest fits within the agreement recently signed between the United States and the DRC on cooperation in strategic minerals.

At the same time, the Congolese government declined a proposal backed by Chinese groups for the acquisition of the concessions. This choice reflects a broader strategy by Kinshasa, which is using the growing competition between the United States and China to obtain more favorable economic and political conditions.



The sale of Chemaf therefore represents a crucial step in the redefinition of the balance of power in the Congolese mining sector.

This transition will also be a concrete test of the promises made by major technology and automotive companies, which claim to want to use only cobalt extracted in compliance with human rights. It will be the way in which these concessions are managed that will tell whether the idea of "ethical" cobalt represents a real change or merely propaganda.

For the families involved, these political dynamics have direct and immediate consequences. The potential new owner could in fact decide to expand extraction activities, creating a concrete risk of new evictions.

Compared to the past, however, something has changed. The families involved are today better prepared: they know their rights and have documents that strengthen their legal position. This means they will be able to negotiate fairer conditions or, if necessary, legally challenge the decisions of the future mining operator.

To make this defense possible, concrete resources will be needed. **In the coming years a significant part of our work will be dedicated to supporting the legal costs necessary for any litigation.**

WHERE THE FUTURE IS DECIDED



In these days it has become evident that **competition among great powers is played out over resources**. The attack on Iran and the escalation in the Middle East are not just a regional conflict: they concern the stability of energy routes, the price of oil and gas, the balance between the United States and China.

But today power does not flow only through oil. **In the 21st century, security also means control of critical mineral supply chains**: batteries, digital infrastructure, advanced military technologies depend on materials concentrated in a few territories. When energy becomes unstable, the powers lock down these supply chains too.

This is how competition shifts, silently, from oil routes to the mines of central Africa.

Kolwezi is one of the places where this transition becomes concrete. It is the world's leading center of cobalt production and around its supply chain the rivalry between China and the United States is also measured, both committed to securing access and influence over a now strategic node.

But while at the global level supplies and alliances are negotiated, at the local level instability and vulnerability are produced. The concession regime, as currently implemented, concentrates economic and territorial power without guaranteeing social justice.

Forced evictions, relocations without adequate guarantees, the fragility of rights are not isolated incidents: they are **structural effects of a model that protects extraction more than people**.

In this context, the educational question becomes central. When a family can be displaced without protection, school continuity is interrupted. When inhabiting is precarious, the right to education becomes fragile. **Territorial instability translates into school dropout, child labor, exclusion.**

"it is precisely there, where global strategic balances are redefined, that the true human cost of progress is measured."



Our work in Kolwezi demonstrates that education, land and dignity are inseparable. One cannot speak of sustainable development and school for all if sustainability does not include housing security and school continuity.

Defending the school means defending the material conditions that make a different future possible.

For us at Still I Rise, the global energy transition cannot be limited to replacing one mineral with another by replicating the extractive logic of the past.

If cobalt is the symbol of the future, then that future must be built on higher standards of responsibility, transparency and participation. Kolwezi cannot be merely a basin of strategic resources: it must be a space of recognized and effective rights.

This report is not a simple snapshot of the current situation. It is a statement of position: progress cannot be built on the insecurity of some to guarantee the security of others.

If for the world cobalt is a critical resource, then the rights of the communities living above it must also be considered critical. Because it is precisely there, where global strategic balances are redefined, that the true human cost of progress is measured.

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