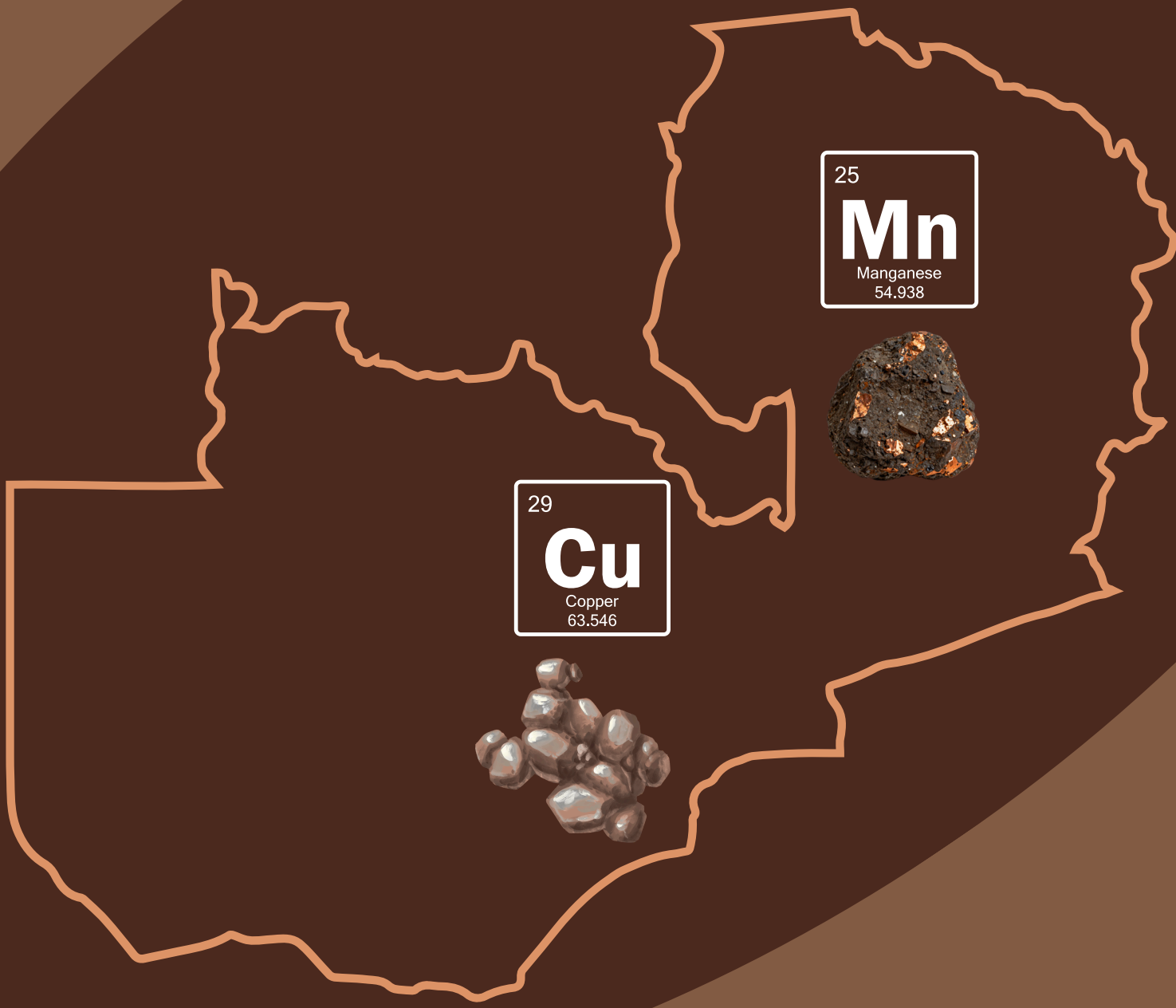
Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Child Labour in Manganese & Copper Mining in Zambia

June 2026



1 Background

According to UNICEF and ILO, an estimated 138 million children worldwide were engaged in child labour in 2025, with nearly half (49.3%) exposed to hazardous work.[1] The ILO estimates that approximately 72 million children aged 5-17 are involved in child labour across Africa, across sectors including agriculture, mining, and domestic work.[2]

Zambia is rich in mineral resources and relies heavily on its mining sector for economic growth. The Eighth National Development Plan (2022-2026) highlights that mining accounts for 14.8% of GDP, over 70% of foreign exchange earnings, 30% of government revenue, and 8% of formal employment. Zambia is ranked the second-largest copper producer in Africa and holds substantial manganese reserves.[3]

While the government has implemented initiatives to formalise the sector and strengthen regulatory oversight, **child labour continues to present a major challenge**, particularly in informal Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM operations).[4] These activities expose minors to hazardous environments and **negatively impact their educational, health, and overall development**.[5]

With rising demand for green energy transition minerals and Zambia's target of three million metric tonnes of annual copper production by 2031, there is mounting pressure to increase output.[6] This risks can accelerate the expansion of informal mining activity, and with it, **increased child labour exposure**.

Copper, obtained both through ASM and large-scale mechanised operations, has seen children observed in activities with existing research flagging child labour risks in Zambia's mining sector.[7] For **manganese**, a 2024 desk research by Terre des Hommes Netherlands assessed the probability of child labour in manganese mining in Zambia.[8]

Despite these indications, systematic evidence on the prevalence, nature, and geographic distribution of child labour in either sector remains scarce. This scoping study was therefore conducted to assess the extent and contextual factors of child labour in Zambia's manganese and copper mining sectors and lay the groundwork for potential future research and programming.

[1] UNICEF & ILO. (2025). Global child labour estimates.
[2] Zambia Statistics Agency. (2023). Child Labour Survey Report.
[3] Republic of Zambia. (2022). Eighth National Development Plan 2022-2026.
[4] Kaczmarksa et al. (2025). A policy and practice divide? Zambia's artisanal and small-scale mining sector and the Sustainable Development Goals.
[5] U.S. Department of Labor. (2023). Child Labor in Zambia.
[6] Republic of Zambia. (2022). Eighth National Development Plan 2022-2026.
[7] U.S. Department of Labor. (2023). Child Labor in Zambia.
[8] Kutscher et al. (2025). Child Labour in the Extraction of Strategic Raw Materials.

2 Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods, exploratory design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine child labour in Zambia's copper and manganese mining sectors.

2.1 Study approach

The study was conducted in three phases:
(1) planning and refining the methodology;
(2) key informant interviews (KIIs) and secondary data analysis;
(3) field visits and targeted engagement with CSOs, community members, and government institutions.

2.2 Data sources

Primary data:
Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 11 participants across government (5), NGO/CSO (3), community representatives (2), academia (1), and media (1), at national, provincial, district, and community levels. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select participants. All interviews were conducted virtually.

Secondary data:
National surveys, government reports, and policy documents, including the 2023 Child Labour Survey and published grey literature.

2.3 Analytical approach

Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed thematically.
Quantitative data from secondary sources were analysed descriptively to identify trends, gaps, and contextual factors.

2.4 Ethical clearance

The study was approved by ERES CONVERGE IRB under the National Health Research Authority (NHRA) of Zambia. Informed consent was obtained from all participants; participation was voluntary and confidentiality was maintained throughout.

2.5 Limitations

Administrative approval processes caused delays. Some originally identified key informants were unavailable, requiring replacement by staff with less thematic depth. The absence of comprehensive national data on child labour in mining specifically presented challenges in answering several research questions. Given the non-representative sample size and limited quantitative data, findings should be understood as indicative rather than statistically representative.

3 Findings and Discussion

3.1 Prevalence of Child Labour

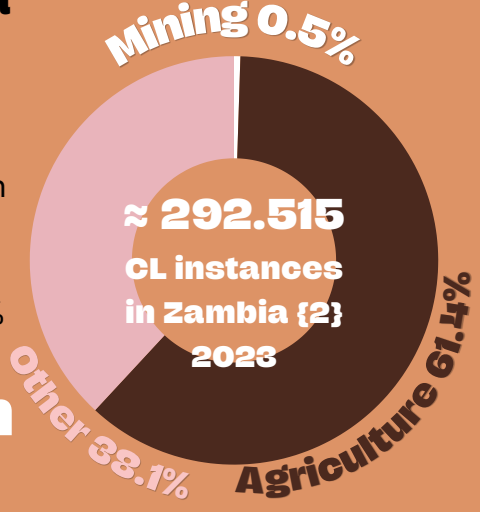
Stakeholders across all levels consistently perceived child labour as present in Zambia's manganese and copper mining sectors, particularly in informal ASM operations. As one government representative stated:

> **Child involvement is prevalent, especially in informal operations, though I cannot quantify the extent, and mostly in small operations.**

Sector specific data

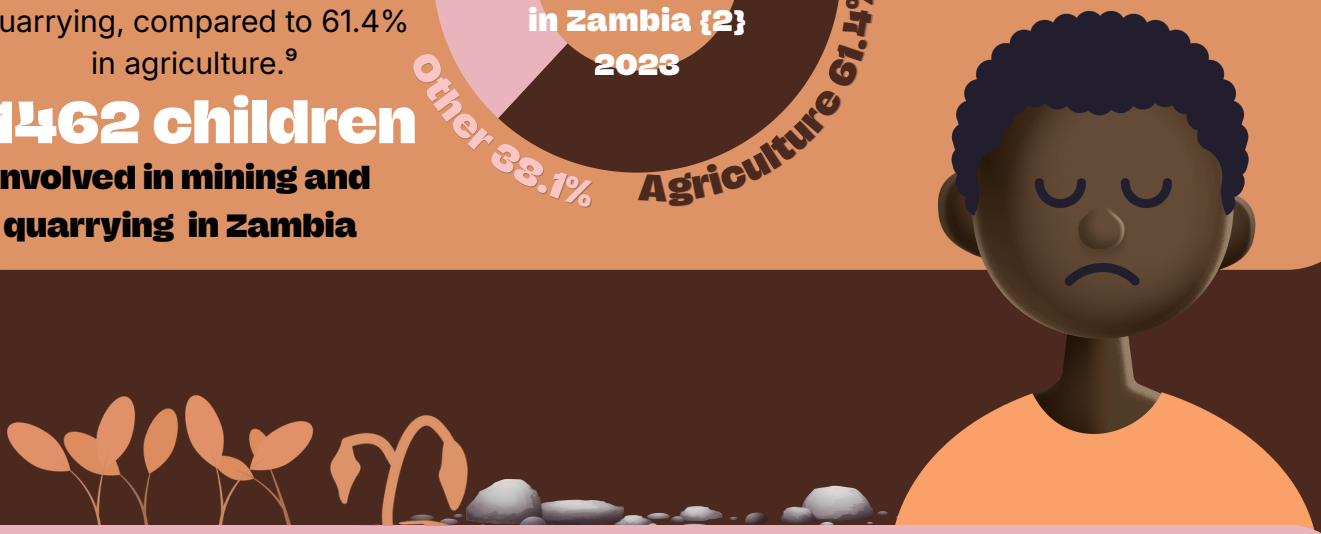
National data from the 2023 Child Labour Survey indicate that approximately 0.5% of children aged 5–17 engaged in income-generating activities are involved in mining and quarrying, compared to 61.4% in agriculture.[9]

≈ 1462 children
involved in mining and quarrying in Zambia



Gender

All identified instances of child labour in mining and quarrying involved male children, reflecting a pronounced gender disparity in this sector.



Seasonal shifts

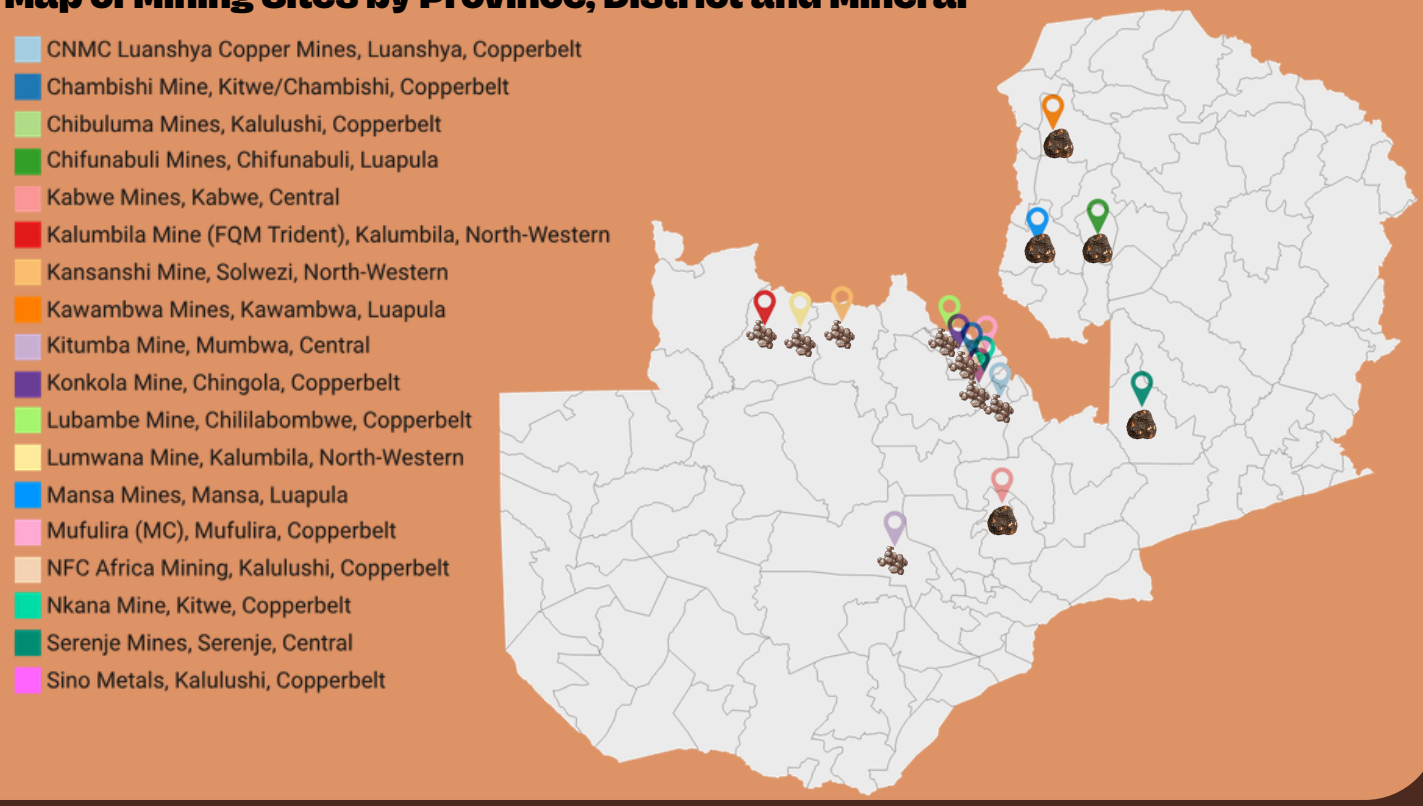
Child labour in mining is closely linked to seasonal shifts: families involved in agriculture turn to ASM during the post-rainy season (May–October) when farm work subsides, and children become available for mining tasks alongside adults.

[9] Zambia Statistics Agency. (2023). Child Labour Survey Report.

3.2 Key Mining Locations

Copper mining is concentrated in the Copperbelt Province (Kitwe, Mufulira, Chingola, Luanshya, Chililabombwe, Kalulushi, Chambishi) and North-Western Province (Solwezi, Kalumbila, Mufumbwe). Manganese extraction is primarily concentrated in Central Province (Kabwe, Serenje) and Luapula Province (Mansa, Chifunabuli, Kawambwa).
In large-scale copper operations, child involvement is considered improbable due to mechanisation and regular government inspections. However, children have been observed scavenging at mine dumps in areas such as Kitwe and Chingola, even where security measures are in place.

Map of Mining Sites by Province, District and Mineral



Source: Key informant insights and secondary data

3.3 Types of Work Performed by Children

Children in manganese and copper ASM undertake tasks spanning the full mining value chain, with roles often differentiated by age and gender.

Boys are primarily engaged in: mineral extraction from underground shafts and trenches, digging, stone crushing, transporting heavy loads, washing and sorting minerals by grade and size, manually loading minerals onto trucks, and serving as site guards or vendors.

Younger children (aged 10–14) are assigned the most physically demanding and hazardous tasks: crawling into narrow shafts to retrieve ore, carrying extracted materials to the surface, and assisting with auxiliary duties such as cooking and packing.
Older adolescents (aged 15–17), often called "captains," take on supervisory and logistical roles, supervising younger children, acting as lookouts for police or mine security, and managing ore transport. This arrangement serves to shield adult operators from direct legal exposure.

3.4 Socio-economic Context and Local Dynamics

Child labour in mining presents in several forms:

- **Family-based labour mirroring agricultural practices;**
- **Child-headed households compelled to seek income following parental loss or absence;**
- **Isolated cases of commercial child labour such as scavenging from tailings dumps.**

Key drivers identified include:

1. **Poverty**
2. **Seasonal dynamics of local mining economies**
3. **Limited alternative livelihoods**
4. **Family structure**

As one government representative noted:

> **"The participation of children in mining, whether directly or as part of family-based economic strategies, is determined by the local socio-economic context, including poverty, limited employment opportunities, and the necessity to supplement household income."**

3.5 Mining Activities: ASM vs. LSM

Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM)

ASM is characterised by small-scale, manual extraction by individuals, families, or small groups, often operating informally without regulatory oversight.
Child participation is most observed in ASM, particularly in manganese extraction in Central and Luapula provinces. Activity peaks in the post-rainy season (May onwards), when families shift from agriculture to mining as a supplementary income source.

Large-Scale Mining (LSM)

Large-scale operations are capital-intensive, technology-driven, and regulated by the Ministry of Mines and Minerals Development.
Children are not directly involved in primary large-scale mining activities. However, indirect involvement through scavenging of surface materials has been observed in Copperbelt sites such as Kitwe and Chingola.

3.6 Policy and Regulatory Environment

Zambia's child labour governance is primarily regulated by the Employment Code Act (2019), which sets a minimum employment age of 15 and prohibits those under 18 from hazardous work including underground mining.

The Children's Code Act (2022) further bans economic exploitation of minors. Together, these instruments support Zambia's adherence to ILO Conventions 138 and 182.[10]

Mining governance is overseen by the Mines and Minerals Development Act, the Minerals Regulation Commission Act (2024), the Eighth National Development Plan (2022–2026), and the National Mineral Resources Development Policy (2022–2032).

ASM is formally recognised, with licensing regulations designed to promote formalisation.

In practice, key informants cited:

- Limited public awareness of child labour laws
- Economic necessity overriding compliance
- Insufficient inspection capacity
- Weak penalties
- Poor inter-agency coordination between labour inspectors and mining regulators

Recent reform:

The establishment of the Minerals Regulation Commission in 2024 signals a deliberate shift toward stronger oversight of ASM, with a mandate to ensure compliance and facilitate sustainable practices.

However, the reforms have focused primarily on mining regulation, with limited parallel investment in district-level enforcement capacity, community awareness, or targeted social protection.

Key informants cautioned that expanding ASM without strengthening labour inspection and child protection systems may inadvertently increase child labour exposure.

[10] Kutscher et al. (2025). Child Labour in the Extraction of Strategic Raw Materials.

3.7 Supply Chain Analysis

ASM of manganese and copper is predominantly undertaken by families using manual extraction, with minerals sold at the mine site to local traders and intermediaries who aggregate ore from multiple miners.

Buyers and middlemen:

Licensed intermediaries source from both formal and informal sites, prioritising mineral grade and volume over labour standards. **Indian operators** are reported to dominate local purchasing of manganese, grading and exporting smelted products to **Asian markets. Chinese buyers** are frequently cited as sourcing through less transparent channels, often from unregulated sites.

Selling prices:

Premium-grade manganese reaches approximately **ZMW 850–1,200 (USD 44–60) per tonne**. Intermediaries secure substantial margins while family miners earn comparatively little.
Daily compensation for child labourers has been reported at as little as **ZMW 200 (approximately USD 10)**. Payments are typically informal and cash-based, with **no wage protection** or **documentation**.

Traceability gap:

The supply chain is characterised by **informal transactions** and **weak traceability**. Once minerals leave mining areas, details on production practices are largely lost, allowing minerals associated with child labour to enter formal export channels undetected. **Main importing regions** are **Europe** and **Asia**, where Zambian minerals enter industrial supply chains — exposing international buyers to reputational and ethical risks related to child labour and informal mining practices.[11]

3.8 Field Visit Observations (Mansa and Kawambwa, Luapula Province)

Field visits to Mansa and Kawambwa the sites with the clearest evidence of child involvement in ASM manganese mining provided direct observations and CSO engagement.

CSO-level insights:

Multiple CSOs confirmed the presence of child labour in manganese and copper mining, particularly in **Luapula** and **Copperbelt** provinces.
CSOs noted that while child labour is referenced in policy documents, these references lack detail and do not lead to concrete protective initiatives.

Community-level observations:

Community members reported that children are typically discouraged from formal mine sites, which are regarded as hazardous. However, families were observed taking children along while **scavenging manganese**, selling a **bucket** for around **ZMW 10**.
Residents also reported using **water** collected from manganese mining pits.
Schools in the area are located far from mining sites, complicating children's access to **education**.
Community members confirmed that child labour is predominantly observed in **informal, small-scale, and artisanal operations** rather than at formal sites.

[11] OECD. Responsible Mineral Supply Chains

4 Conclusion & Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

This scoping study finds that child labour is present in Zambia's manganese and copper sectors, predominantly in informal ASM operations.

It is driven by poverty, family economic structures, seasonal agricultural shifts, and the absence of alternative livelihoods. Boys are disproportionately affected and are assigned the most hazardous roles.
Despite a robust legislative framework and the recent establishment of the Minerals Regulation Commission, enforcement frequently falls short of policy goals due to limited resources and weak inter-agency coordination. Expanding ASM without parallel investment in labour inspection, social protection, and education risks worsening the problem.

Positive steps include government training programmes delivered through established cooperatives, the introduction of free education (linked to reduced child involvement in mining), and civil society-led platforms such as Environmental Protection Dialogues and Child Labour Summits that facilitate multi-stakeholder engagement.
The supply chain for family- and community-mined minerals remains complex and largely informal. Weak traceability protocols allow minerals obtained through child labour to be commingled with those from regulated sources, increasing the likelihood that such products enter international markets undetected.

4.2 Recommendations

Conduct comprehensive research	Undertake detailed, representative quantitative research to accurately measure child labour in manganese and copper sectors. Current findings are based on perceptions and a limited sample. Robust, targeted research is needed to generate actionable evidence.
Investigate seasonal and socio-economic drivers	Analyse how child labour prevalence shifts with agricultural seasons, school calendars, commodity prices, and household economic shocks (illness, debt, harvest failure). This will inform targeted social protection and livelihood-based interventions.
Map supply chain traceability	Investigate the undocumented pathways through which minerals produced with child labour enter official supply chains and global markets. Conduct value chain mapping focused on informal ASM nodes, identifying intermediaries, traders, transport routes, and first buyers.
Evaluate regulatory enforcement	Assess the effectiveness of recent policy reforms, including the Minerals Regulation Commission and free education policy, and identify enforcement gaps at the local level.
Strengthen multi-stakeholder coordination	Systematically assess the roles, coordination, and impact of actors tackling child labour across government, civil society, industry, and international agencies. Identify collaboration bottlenecks and success factors, and develop practical recommendations for strengthening multi-stakeholder coordination at district and national levels.

Suggested citation: Terre des Hommes Netherlands. (2026). *Child Labour in Manganese and Copper Mining Industry.* The Hague: Terre des Hommes Netherlands.

Research team

Commissioned by:	Child Labour team Terre des Hommes Netherlands
Local research team:	David Mulemena, Kate Nsunge, Emeldah Samatemba, Simukali Mulongwe