

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/12/time-get-children-out-hazardous-supply-chain>

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Many multinational companies now ban children from working in their operations, but child labor is still a central issue for them. In the globalized economy, products have long and complex supply chains, often reaching down to a multitude of small, local producers. Companies may source from businesses that use child labor without knowing unless they take steps to ask the question.

As we mark World Day Against Child Labor, companies should do more to prevent child labor throughout their supply chains that is, the entirety of businesses involved in trading the product, supplying raw materials and other components, processing, or otherwise contributing to the value of a finished product.

Take the example of small-scale gold mining, where child labor is common and very hazardous. 13-year-old Richard, in Tanzania, described to us how the mining pit he was working in collapsed on him, knocking him unconscious and causing internal injuries. Children also use toxic mercury to process gold and risk mercury poisoning, which causes brain damage and even death.

Typically, the gold mined in Tanzania is bought by local traders, who sell it on to larger trading companies in the country, who in turn export it to gold companies abroad. Human Rights Watch has found that many gold traders in [Tanzania](#), as well as in [Mali](#) and [Ghana](#), buy gold mined by children. Some said they bought gold directly from child miners. One Tanzanian trader admitted: I buy from anyone and I sell to anyone. I sell to individuals in Dar es Salaam, and they sell to Dubai.

Dubai is one of the worlds biggest gold trading hubs, dealing US\$75 billion of gold in 2013. The authorities there recently developed a [standard](#) for so-called responsible gold, but it is purely voluntary. It only applies to companies located in a special free trade zone, and does not mention child labor in the supply chain.

But you dont have to leave the Western world to encounter hazardous child labor. In the United States, thousands of children work each summer in tobacco farming, where they are exposed to nicotine, toxic pesticides, and other dangers. Many children interviewed in 2013 for a Human Rights Watch report told us they suffered from vomiting, nausea, headaches, and dizziness while working on tobacco farms all symptoms consistent with acute nicotine poisoning. Many of the pesticides used in tobacco production are known neurotoxins, poisons that alter the nervous system.

The worlds largest tobacco companies buy tobacco grown on farms in the [United States](#), where weak laws permit hazardous child labor. None of these companies have policies that would prevent children from engaging in all hazardous tobacco farming and many dont yet have systems in place to monitor the dangers working children face. In some cases, companies allow for lower standards of protection for children in their US supply chain than for kids working on tobacco farms in other countries where they buy tobacco.

But gone or going are the days when companies could ignore or downplay human rights concerns in their supply chains.

Governments around the world increasingly recognize that it is not enough for companies to respect rights in their own operation or country that their responsibility stretches to all parts of the supply chain, even if it is abroad. Under the [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council and supported by governments, businesses and, nongovernmental organizations, companies must have a process to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for impact throughout their value chain. Just this week, the International Labor Organization adopted a [Protocol to the Forced Labor Convention](#) that promotes due diligence measures by both the public and private sectors to prevent and respond to risks of forced or compulsory labour.

These are important steps in the right direction. Companies now have to conduct clear and meaningful human rights due diligence, including looking out for child labor, and implementing training and monitoring throughout their supply chains. They may be surprised to see what they find.

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