SEMMUNA

Southeast Michigan Model United Nations Association

GENERAL ASSEMBLY -- DISEC

Ensuring Fair and Sustainable Access to Critical Resources

Background Guide

November 14, 2026 • West Bloomfield High School

A note to delegates:

This guide is your starting point, not your finish line. Read it carefully, then go deeper. The delegates who arrive with a real understanding of their country's position are the ones who make the most impact in committee.

Table of Contents

I. About SEMMUNA and DISEC **(Page 3)**

II. Introduction: Why Are We Talking About This? **(Page 3)**

III. What Are Critical Resources? **(Page 3)**

IV. Historical and Geopolitical Background **(Page 4)**

V. How Do These Resources Move Around the World? **(Page 5)**

VI. Why Is This a Problem? **(Page 5)**

VII. Existing International Frameworks **(Page 6)**

VIII. Understanding Different Perspectives **(Page 7)**

IX. Finding Your Path: Approaches to a Solution **(Page 8)**

X. Questions to Consider **(Page 10)**

XI. What Will You Do in Committee? **(Page 10)**

XII. Key Terms **(Page 11)**

XIII. Further Reading **(Page 12)**

Sample Resolution **(Page 12)**

I. About SEMMUNA and DISEC

The Southeast Michigan Model United Nations Association, SEMMUNA, brings together students from across Michigan to simulate the work of the United Nations. At this conference, you will represent a real UN member state. You will debate international issues, negotiate with fellow delegates, and work together to write solutions in the form of UN resolutions.

This committee is the UN General Assembly First Committee, formally known as the Disarmament and International Security Committee, or DISEC. Its job is to tackle issues tied to international peace, global stability, and conflict prevention.

On the surface, competition over lithium, cobalt, nickel, and rare earth minerals might look like a purely economic argument. But these materials power advanced technology, renewable energy, and military systems alike. That makes access to them a matter of geopolitical consequence. When countries depend heavily on materials controlled by just a few suppliers, supply disruptions can spark political tension, economic instability, and sometimes even armed conflict.

> **Your task:** *Balance national sovereignty, economic development, sustainability, fairness, and international security. All at once. That is what diplomacy looks like.*

II. Introduction: Why Are We Talking About This?

Think about what you used today. Your phone. Your laptop. Maybe your family's car. Almost all of it depends on materials that are hard to find, hard to replace, and getting harder to get. These are called critical resources, or critical minerals.

The world is using more of these resources than ever before. Countries are racing to build cleaner energy systems and more advanced technology, and they are all reaching for the same limited pool of materials at the same time. That creates some urgent questions:

- Who gets access to these resources, and on what terms?
- How do countries share them fairly without triggering conflict?
- How do we protect the environment in the process?
- What happens when one country controls too much of the global supply?

These are not abstract questions. They affect governments, corporations, workers, consumers, communities in developing countries, and the future of the planet. In this committee, you will represent a country navigating exactly these tensions. Your job is to help find solutions that the international community can actually get behind.

III. What Are Critical Resources?

Critical resources are raw materials that are essential to modern technology and difficult to get. Either they are scarce, they are concentrated in a small number of countries, or they are very costly to extract from the environment. You will also hear them called critical minerals or strategic materials.

Resource	Where It Is Found	Why It Matters
Lithium	Chile, Argentina, Bolivia (salt flats); Australia (hard rock)	Powers batteries in phones, laptops, and electric vehicles
Cobalt	Democratic Republic of Congo (~70% of global supply)	Improves battery stability and safety; used in jet engines
Nickel	Indonesia, Philippines, Russia, Canada	Strengthens steel; increasingly critical for high-performance EV batteries
Rare Earth Elements	China dominates processing; mined in China, Australia, U.S., Myanmar	Essential for wind turbines, electronics, and military systems
Copper	Chile, Peru, DRC, China	Conducts electricity efficiently; required for virtually all electrical systems

What makes these materials geopolitically significant is not just that they are scarce. It is that their production is so concentrated. The DRC holds roughly 70% of global cobalt reserves. China processes approximately 60% of the world's lithium and an even larger share of other critical minerals. A disruption in a single country -- from political instability, export restrictions, or an environmental crisis -- can ripple across the entire global economy.

IV. Historical and Geopolitical Background

The Energy Transition

Many countries are trying to use less fossil fuel and shift toward clean energy. Electric vehicles, battery storage systems, and renewable energy infrastructure all need massive quantities of lithium, cobalt, nickel, and rare earth elements. The International Energy Agency (IEA) has estimated that demand for critical minerals could increase several times over in the coming decades. Some projections suggest lithium demand alone could rise by as much as 40 times by 2040.

The DRC and Cobalt

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the world's dominant cobalt supplier, accounting for the majority of global production. That creates real economic opportunity, but also serious concerns: unsafe and often illegal mining practices, child labor, endemic corruption, political instability, and severe environmental damage. Many governments worry that any disruption in the DRC could cripple global battery production. Depending on a single fragile state for that much of the world's cobalt is a genuine strategic vulnerability.

China and Rare Earth Processing

Even when critical minerals are mined in other countries, they frequently end up in China for refining and manufacturing. China's dominance in mineral processing gives it significant leverage over global supply chains, and it has been willing to use that leverage. In 2023, China imposed export controls on gallium and germanium, two materials critical to semiconductor manufacturing.

The United States, European Union, and Japan have all responded by investing in diversification, but reducing dependence on Chinese processing capacity is a slow and expensive undertaking.

Supply Chain Disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed just how fragile global supply chains really are. When logistics networks broke down, prices spiked, manufacturing stalled, and countries scrambled to secure supplies on their own. That experience drove home a broader recognition: critical resource supply chains are not just economic infrastructure. They are a matter of national security.

V. How Do These Resources Move Around the World?

Critical resources do not travel from the ground directly to your device. They pass through a complex, multi-step global supply chain. Understanding that chain matters because it shows where power is concentrated, where vulnerabilities exist, and where international cooperation is most needed.

1. Extraction (Mining): Raw materials are removed from the earth through mining operations. This requires land, labor, energy, and heavy equipment, and it generates significant environmental impact. Mining is concentrated in a relatively small number of countries.
2. Processing and Refining: Raw ore is chemically treated to produce usable materials. This stage requires advanced technology and is heavily concentrated in China, which dominates global refining capacity across multiple mineral categories.
3. Manufacturing: Refined materials are turned into components -- battery cells, semiconductors, electric motors -- which are then assembled into finished products by manufacturers around the world.
4. Distribution and Trade: Finished products are shipped across international markets, governed by trade agreements, tariffs, export controls, and geopolitical relationships.

> **Key insight:** *No country controls every stage of this chain. That interdependence creates both opportunities for cooperation and real vulnerabilities. When one link breaks -- as it did during COVID-19 -- the consequences ripple everywhere.*

VI. Why Is This a Problem?

The current system for managing critical resources was not designed with fairness or sustainability in mind. It grew out of decades of trade and investment decisions made by individual countries and corporations, mostly without any global coordination. Several serious problems have come out of that.

1. Unequal Distribution

Some countries sit on enormous reserves of critical minerals. Others have none at all. That creates a real power imbalance. Resource-rich countries can use their reserves as diplomatic and economic leverage, which is sometimes called "resource nationalism." Countries without resources are left depending on whoever controls the supply, with little ability to negotiate on equal terms.

2. Rapidly Increasing Demand

The global shift to clean energy and electric vehicles is dramatically accelerating demand. As competition grows, countries may become increasingly aggressive about securing access -- especially as the gap between supply and projected demand widens.

3. No Clear International Rules

There is no comprehensive global framework governing fair access, environmental standards, ethical labor protections, or supply chain transparency. That regulatory vacuum creates uncertainty, encourages exploitation, and makes international coordination far more difficult than it needs to be.

4. Geopolitical Tension

Competition over critical resources has become a flashpoint in broader geopolitical rivalries, particularly between the United States and China. Both have passed legislation and formed alliances designed to bring supply chains closer to home and reduce dependence on each other. These tensions risk breaking global trade into competing blocs, which would make resources more expensive and harder to access for developing countries.

5. Environmental and Human Rights Concerns

Mining is not a clean industry. It can contaminate water supplies, displace communities, destroy ecosystems, and produce significant greenhouse gas emissions. Cobalt mining in the DRC has been particularly associated with dangerous working conditions and child labor. The world needs more of these materials to build a greener future, but the process of getting them causes serious harm to people and the environment.

6. Price Volatility

Because supply is concentrated and demand is growing, critical mineral prices can swing dramatically. Lithium prices tripled between 2020 and 2022 before collapsing in 2023. These fluctuations make long-term planning extremely difficult for both governments and businesses, and they hit developing countries especially hard.

VII. Existing International Frameworks

Before proposing new solutions, delegates should understand what already exists. Nobody is starting from scratch. That said, what exists is largely voluntary, fragmented, and unevenly followed.

- UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (the "Ruggie Principles"): Establish a framework for corporate responsibility, including expectations for companies operating in mining contexts.
- OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Mineral Supply Chains: Provides voluntary standards for companies sourcing minerals from conflict-affected or high-risk areas. Widely referenced, but compliance is inconsistent.

- UN Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 9 (Industry and Infrastructure), and SDG 13 (Climate Action) all connect directly to this issue.
- International Energy Agency (IEA): Tracks global mineral demand and supply chain risks. Its reports have repeatedly warned of impending shortfalls.
- Minerals Security Partnership: A coalition of over a dozen countries, led by the United States, working to diversify critical mineral supply chains. It represents one model of international cooperation, though critics note it excludes China and many developing nations.
- African Union Initiatives: The AU has increasingly pushed for value-added mineral processing to happen on the continent, rather than exporting raw ore. That position has significant implications for how resource revenues are distributed.

> **A central question for this committee:** *Are voluntary frameworks sufficient, or does the international community need binding agreements? That debate has no easy answer, and it is one where delegates will likely disagree strongly.*

VIII. Understanding Different Perspectives

One of the most important things to understand before walking into committee is that every country in the room has legitimate goals. And those goals frequently conflict. Effective diplomacy requires understanding not just your own position, but the positions of those you are negotiating with.

Resource-Rich Developing Countries (e.g., DRC, Chile, Bolivia, Indonesia)

These countries want to move beyond simply exporting raw ore and toward processing and manufacturing their resources domestically. They argue that the current system locks them into the lowest-value part of the supply chain, sending wealth abroad while leaving local communities with the environmental costs. They typically push for technology transfer, debt relief, and the right to set their own resource policies without outside interference.

Major Industrialized Economies (e.g., United States, EU, Japan)

These countries are primarily worried about supply chain security. Having absorbed the lessons of COVID-19 and their dependence on Chinese processing, they are investing in diversification and domestic capacity. They tend to favor bilateral partnerships and regional alliances over binding UN frameworks, which they see as slower and harder to enforce.

China

China occupies a unique position as the world's dominant processor of critical minerals. It has used this leverage as a diplomatic tool, including through export controls on gallium and germanium. China typically opposes international frameworks that would constrain its market position or subject its companies to outside oversight. At the same time, it frames its investments in African mining as South-South cooperation.

Developing Countries Without Significant Resources

Countries that lack major mineral wealth but need access to critical resources for their own development are in a genuinely tough spot. They cannot negotiate from a position of strength, and they risk being priced out of the market as demand rises. They tend to support stronger international regulation, greater pricing transparency, and mechanisms to ensure equitable access.

Environmental Organizations and NGOs

Many civil society organizations emphasize sustainable mining practices, environmental protections, ethical labor standards, and corporate accountability. They often push for binding regulations and meaningful community consent processes before mining projects begin.

IX. Finding Your Path: Approaches to a Solution

Here is something important to understand before you start writing your resolution: there is no single correct answer to this problem. Nobody in this committee is going to hand you the solution and tell you to copy it down. That is not how diplomacy works, and it is not how this committee works either.

What you will find below are three broad approaches that countries and organizations have taken when dealing with challenges like this one. Think of them as different paths up the same mountain. Each path has different terrain, different risks, and different rewards. Most delegations who do this well do not pick just one path and stick to it rigidly. They mix elements from different approaches, adjust based on who they are negotiating with, and find creative combinations that can get enough countries on board to actually pass.

Read through all three approaches carefully. Notice what each one can accomplish, and what it asks you to give up or think carefully about. Your job is not to find the "right" answer -- it is to find an approach, or a combination of approaches, that honestly reflects your country's interests and can build enough support to move the committee forward.

> **The real skill here:** *The delegates who make the biggest impact are not the ones who pick a path and recite it. They are the ones who understand all three paths well enough to build something new from the pieces. Use these as a starting point, not a script.*

Path A: Countries Compete Independently

Under this approach, each country or actor takes care of itself. Nations secure their own access to resources through bilateral trade agreements, direct investment in resource-rich countries, and strategic stockpiling. The market largely determines who gets what. This approach reflects how much of the current system already operates.

What This Approach Can Do	What You Have to Think About
Can move quickly, without waiting for multilateral consensus	Tends to leave smaller and poorer countries behind
Allows countries to protect their own interests directly	Can escalate into geopolitical competition and economic pressure
Does not require trust between competing nations	Offers no real stability mechanism when a crisis hits

Path B: Countries Cooperate Through Partnerships

Under this approach, countries work together through voluntary agreements, information-sharing, and coordinated supply management. Nobody gives up full sovereignty, but nations agree to act in concert rather than purely in their own interest. The Minerals Security Partnership is a real-world example of this kind of thinking.

What This Approach Can Do	What You Have to Think About
Builds stability and reduces the risk of supply crises	Requires real political trust, which is hard to build and easy to lose
Creates diplomatic relationships that can be useful beyond this one issue	Voluntary agreements are only as strong as the political will behind them
Can offer some protection for smaller economies	Hard to maintain when geopolitical tensions run high

Path C: The International Community Creates Formal Rules

Under this approach, the international community negotiates binding rules governing how critical minerals are extracted, traded, priced, and regulated -- and those rules are enforced through multilateral mechanisms. This is the most ambitious path, and the hardest to achieve.

What This Approach Can Do	What You Have to Think About
Creates consistent and predictable rules that apply to everyone	Extremely difficult to negotiate, especially when major powers disagree
Addresses the root causes of inequality and instability, not just the symptoms	Enforcement is only as strong as member states' willingness to comply
Gives smaller nations a seat at the table they do not have in bilateral deals	Can move too slowly to respond to an acute crisis

Building Your Own Approach

Most effective resolutions blend elements from all three paths. A resolution might start with Path B style cooperation, while also pushing for Path C style transparency standards, while acknowledging the reality of Path A dynamics among major powers.

Ask yourself: What does my country actually need most? What is it willing to give up? Which other countries share enough of my interests to build a coalition? The answers to those questions should shape the approach you take, not these three categories.

The goal is a resolution that is realistic enough to pass, specific enough to actually do something, and honest enough to reflect the real interests of the countries that sign on to it. That is harder than it sounds, and it is exactly the right challenge for this committee.

X. Questions to Consider

As you research and prepare your country's position, think carefully about the following questions. Your resolution should address at least several of them directly.

- Should critical resources be treated as global strategic assets, or does national sovereignty over natural resources take precedence?
- How can the international community balance urgent demand for these materials with the environmental and human costs of extracting them?
- Should global frameworks for critical resources be binding or voluntary? What realistic enforcement mechanisms exist?
- What role should the private sector play, and how should corporations be held accountable for their behavior across supply chains?
- How can developing countries without significant mineral wealth be protected from being priced out of access?
- Is it possible to build a truly multilateral framework when the U.S. and China have fundamentally competing interests?
- How should the international community address the specific concerns of mining-affected communities, who often bear costs without receiving proportionate benefits?

XI. What Will You Do in Committee?

If this is your first MUN conference, here is a quick overview of how sessions typically work. Your chairs will walk through procedure in detail at the start of the conference.

Step	What Happens	Tips
1. Speeches (Speakers List)	Delegates sign up to speak and deliver formal statements introducing their country's position.	Speak early. Even a short positioning speech establishes your country's stance and makes you visible to potential allies.
2. Unmoderated Caucus	Informal time where delegates leave their seats, circulate, and negotiate directly with others.	This is where the real work happens. Use it to find allies, build your bloc, and start drafting resolution language.
3. Working Papers	Informal draft documents containing possible solutions, co-written by groups of delegates.	Focus on operative clauses -- specific, actionable steps that your coalition can agree on.
4. Draft Resolutions	Once approved by the dais, a working paper becomes a draft resolution open to formal debate and amendment.	Be prepared to negotiate. A resolution that passes with broad support is more powerful than one that barely survives a vote.
5. Voting	Delegates vote on draft resolutions. A simple majority passes in most GA committees.	Know your bloc's position going in. Surprises at the voting stage can undermine relationships you have built.

What Makes a Strong Delegate?

- Speaks early and often, even just to introduce your country's position
- Listens actively and responds to what others actually say, not just to what you planned to say
- Builds relationships across blocs, not just with countries that already agree with you
- Focuses on solutions -- the best delegates do not just identify problems, they write the language that addresses them
- Stays in character as their country, even when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient

XII. Key Terms

Term	Definition
Critical Resources / Minerals	Raw materials essential to modern technology that are difficult to obtain due to scarcity or geographic concentration.
Supply Chain	The full sequence of steps (mining, processing, manufacturing, distribution) through which a material passes before reaching a consumer.
Resource Nationalism	Government policy asserting greater control over natural resources, including through export restrictions or limits on foreign investment.
Price Volatility	Large, unpredictable swings in commodity prices that create uncertainty for governments and businesses.
Value-Added Processing	Transforming raw ore into refined materials or finished components, which generates far more economic value than exporting unprocessed ore.
Preambulatory Clause	The opening section of a UN resolution that acknowledges the problem and cites relevant context (e.g., "Recognizing", "Concerned that").
Operative Clause	The action section of a UN resolution proposing specific measures (e.g., "Urges", "Calls upon", "Encourages").
Bloc	A group of countries with broadly aligned positions that work together to draft and support a common resolution.
Due Diligence	Investigating and monitoring a supply chain to identify and address ethical, legal, or environmental risks.
Diversification	Reducing dependence on a single supplier or source by developing multiple alternative supply relationships.

XIII. Further Reading

These sources are a good starting point. You are expected to go beyond this list.

- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- International Energy Agency – Critical Minerals Reports
- UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
- BBC News – Critical Minerals Coverage

Sample Resolution

The following is provided as an example of resolution format and language only. It is not a model for content. Your committee's resolution should be far more specific and should reflect the actual debate and negotiation that takes place in the room.

United Nations General Assembly First Committee (DISEC)

Ensuring Fair and Sustainable Access to Critical Resources

Sponsors: Kenya, Germany, Brazil

Signatories: India, Japan, Mexico, Indonesia, France, South Africa

The General Assembly,

Recognizing the increasing importance of critical resources such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, and rare earth elements in enabling modern technology and the global transition to renewable energy,

Concerned by the unequal global distribution of these materials and the structural dependencies this creates for resource-poor nations,

Aware of the risks posed by supply chain disruptions and overdependence on a limited number of suppliers,

Noting the serious environmental and humanitarian concerns associated with certain mining operations, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo,

Emphasizing the importance of multilateral cooperation and the principles of sustainable development,

Hereby:

1. ***Encourages*** member states to strengthen international cooperation regarding access to critical resources through existing UN mechanisms and bilateral dialogue;
2. ***Recommends*** the creation of voluntary international partnerships between resource-producing and resource-dependent countries to promote more stable and equitable supply arrangements;
3. ***Calls for*** greater transparency regarding global supply chains and mineral markets, including data-sharing on availability and pricing;
4. ***Supports*** efforts to diversify supply chains in order to reduce excessive dependence on single suppliers;
5. ***Encourages*** investment in environmentally sustainable mining practices and rehabilitation of affected ecosystems;
6. ***Recommends*** stronger protections for workers and local communities affected by mining operations, including meaningful consultation rights;
7. ***Invites*** member states to collaborate on research into recycling technologies and alternative materials that may reduce pressure on critical mineral supplies;
8. ***Requests*** continued dialogue within the United Nations regarding long-term frameworks for fair and sustainable access to critical resources, with developing nations as equal participants.

Good luck to the committee. The problems you will be debating are real, the stakes are high, and the solutions you help craft matter. Prepare thoroughly, listen carefully, and negotiate honestly. Make it count.