

Keepers of the forest

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Central Africa harbours the Congo Basin forest, also called the Green Heart of Africa: the second largest intact tropical forest in the world after the Amazonian forest. Central Africa is known for the diversity and richness of its flora and fauna species in the different landscapes. The region is also known for a unique group of indigenous forest people (IFPs) who have lived there longer than any other human tribe or race.

This group of people, often called the “Pygmies” (a term which can, however, have pejorative associations), include the Baka, Bagyeli, Bakola, Bedzang, Bayaka, Mbendjele, Bambuti, Batwa and Babongo, found in countries such as Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Republic of Congo and Rwanda. No disaggregated data on the population of IFPs from the census are available in the countries of Central Africa. Olivera et al (2016)² estimate the potential population of IFPs at 920,000.

IFPs are strongly attached to the forest for their livelihoods, mainly hunting, gathering and freshwater fishing. Their whole culture and way of life is related to the forest.³ The forest is everything to them, providing food, snacks, medicine/healing, shelter, a prayer ground and leisure place. For IFPs the forest is like a supermarket, pharmacy/hospital, church/mosque or a playground for a city dweller in the modern world, but with far deeper relations. They

Resource map drawn on the ground by the Batwa in Lokuku, Equateur Province, DR Congo, March 2017. The resource map serves as a participatory tool to enhance broad community participation and ownership of processes that relate to the lives of indigenous forest peoples and their livelihood sources. The resource map permits communities to illustrate what they do and where they carry out their activities in the forest. They first draw these sketch maps on the ground, showing rivers, paths/roads and hills and using symbols to indicate the forest types and activities they carry out there. With the help of high tech GPS their land use maps are integrated into classical government maps and clearly show the overlappings between community traditional use areas and government allocations. The resulting map eases dialogues and negotiations with governments and their partners.



are a very spiritual people, communing with the Great Spirit, called “Komba” by the Baka, while the Spirit of the Forest is called “Enjengui” by the Baka. Their way of life is intricately linked to and synchronized with the other beings in the forest, including large and small animals, fishes, insects, all sorts of plants and mushrooms, and rivers and hills. As such they have long known where and when to hunt, fish or gather and which areas are reserved as worship sites or sacred sites, also serving as regenerative sites for what they use. Jerome Lewis,⁴ in his work with the Bayaka, confirms that the IFPs follow strict hunting and gathering rules. Most importantly, they live the lore of the forest, and in harmony with this lore: this is the

reason that the forest has remained intact and stable where indigenous forest people live.

EVICTED Despite this wealth of knowledge and wisdom of the forest, IFPs have been denigrated, evicted from the forest and sidelined from decision-making processes regarding the forest since the brutal colonial era. In most countries they have been pushed out of the forest to roadside settlements, causing new forms of conflicts with neighbouring Bantu farmers. Tragically, but true, the first inhabitants of the forests in Central Africa are mostly landless, because their ancestral land, the forest, is taken and converted for other use, while ownership of their roadside settlements is

Lokuku, Equateur Province, DR Congo, March 2017. The Batwa show the forest use map they have drawn to their community.



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claimed by the Bantus. The Bantus have “added value” to the land by planting crops which are visible, whereas the activities of the IFPs, hunting, gathering and fishing, leave no trace on the land, hence go unrecognized.

No “value addition” or conversion of intact forests, no recognition of rights to forest. This is paradoxical, as those who have catered for the forest do not have their rights recognized over the land, while this is the opposite for those who destroy.

By keeping the forest intact, IFPs contribute to safeguarding the great web of life and ecosystem services which are of great importance to Africa and to the world: preserving important medicinal plants, clean air and stabilizing the climate through the storage of carbon dioxide and also providing clean sweet water, generating rain and the free flow of gigantic rivers in the Congo Basin. Even when, within the current capital dominant world, these functions of the forest are being commercialized, the IFPs often receive no returns, not even the recognition of their stewardship regarding the forest.

Their special status as indigenous peoples or as first inhabitants of the land is not taken into account in policies, laws and regulations.⁵ Their traditional and customary rights in the forest are not recognized, as national laws have carved out forests into Protected Areas for flagship species or logging concessions for commercial wood/timber production, and forests are still being converted into monoculture agro-industries and plantations and used for mining.

CATEGORIES In these new processes of forest use, IFPs are treated badly. The indigenous peoples are now placed in categories. Some who live in a kind of voluntary isolation, living in the forest for months; come out for a short time and then return. Others live in a more dualistic way – they go back and forth from the forest and the roadside. Then you have a third category, those who are more or less ‘modernized’,

who live in the urban centres. In all three categories, the one common denominator is that they are all marginalized and all discriminated against; they have no identity.

The benefits from the forest hardly ever go to the IFPs. This recurrent marginalization has often affected their self-esteem, rendering them voiceless.

International legal instruments like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the International Labour Organisation’s Convention 169, on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, strongly protect the rights of IFPs. In Central Africa, some governments are making efforts to see how to address the issues of rights of IFPs, even though this is only on paper. The Central African Republic

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ratified the ILO 169 convention, while most of the countries have signed UNDRIP. The Republic of Congo is the first to adopt a national legislative framework to protect the rights of indigenous peoples in line with UNDRIP; the DR Congo is also following with a Fundamental Law Protecting the Rights of Indigenous “Pygmy” Peoples, which is already at an advanced stage of adoption by the National Assembly of the country. In Cameroon questions over the indigenous status prompted the Ministry of External Relations to conduct a study in 2009 to identify and characterize indigenous peoples and their problems. The study, which was completed in 2011, proposed that the groups to be considered indigenous include the Mbororo pastoralists and the hunter-gatherers (Pygmies).⁶ Cameroon officially celebrates the annual International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples and the Government is involved communities in celebratory events. All this is rather superficial, because in practice the governments do not sufficiently enforce the protection of IFPs.

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CONFLICTS The deep knowledge of the IFPs of the Congo Basin has been neglected, as their way of life and culture is regarded as unworthy by the current resource-extractive and capital-driven system. In the future, as climate breakdown and resource depletion diminish the prospects of prosperity, this dismissal of sustainable practices will haunt our descendants. There are recurrent conflicts between IFPs and different forest users. Tensions between IFPs and neighbouring Bantus and herdsman, resulting in ethnic violent conflicts, have been recorded.⁷ This is the case in the Kasai and Tanganyika Provinces in the DRC, where the Batwa people and the Luba ethnic tribe have been in armed conflicts over land rights. Indigenous peoples have been displaced or resettled with little or no compensation, as is the case in another typical scenario where the forest on which IFPs depend is converted to oil palm or rubber plantations, for large infrastructure development projects such as the Chad-Cameroon Pipeline and the Deep Sea Port

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in Cameroon, or for Agricultural Parks in the DR Congo. Some of the most prevalent and documented conflicts are the various conflicts between IFPs and Protected-Area managers. It sounds surprising that those who are supposed to protect the forest, for or with the IFPs, are seemingly their worst enemies. Below are some notorious cases of conflicts between IFPs and Protected-Area managers.

- Concerning the IFPs in the Kahuzi Biega National Park. This park was created during the colonial period and expanded twice; it is in a region with a high population density and a huge pressure on land. The indigenous Batwa people, who were evicted from their land following the expansions without a resettlement, are landless and

have conflicts with the neighbouring agrarian Bantus. Unable to bear the landlessness, some Batwa communities had to return to their ancestral lands in 2018 following failed negotiations. Some local and international organizations have been facilitating the dialogue between the Congolese Nature Conservation Institute (ICCN in French), which is in charge of managing protected areas, and Batwa representatives. The negotiations have been exploring co-management options, whereby the Batwa are resettled outside or inside the Park and participate actively in the conservation of the park, their ancestral lands.⁸ The conflicts have been violent and led to the loss of lives for both Batwa people and eco-guards of the park.

- Other cases concern serious allegations of government eco-guards/rangers, who receive technical support from an international organization, and who are involved in a wanton abuse of the rights of IFPs in and around protected areas found in Cameroon, CAR, DRC and Republic of Congo. This case was reviewed by a high-level independent panel of experts, whose results showed a very serious undermining of the rights of indigenous peoples.⁹

The problem lies with policies and practices that result in the abuse of the rights of indigenous peoples, especially by the institutions that are supposed to protect them, and the imposition of solutions that are not culturally appropriate nor designed, considering their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). The result is that most IFPs live in misery, poverty and quasi-dependence on neighbouring Bantus, leading to a loss of dignity, self-esteem and so on. Moreover, in rare cases, they have joined commercial poachers in desperation.

OPPORTUNITIES There are huge opportunities to reverse the trends by legally recognizing IFPs' rights over their customary and ancestral lands and supporting them to reweave those ancestral spiritual attachments to the forest and live in harmony with the forest. This has been possible in other parts of the world, including the cases of Indigenous Reserves in the Amazon.



Baka Community Dialogue at the OKANI Learning Centre, Ntam, Cameroon, showing traditional sitting arrangements to ensure equity during the dialogue. November 2020.

This could be done through several actions, including:

- Facilitating meaningful dialogues among IFPs, especially elders and custodians of ancestral knowledge, raising their awareness of the pains of a rapidly depleting forest and their motivation to redeem its secret potency;
- Based on the above, facilitating meaningful dialogues between genuine IFP representatives, including elders or Kobos, custodians of ancestral wisdom, on the one hand and governments and their allies in protected area management and “development” on the other hand;
- Ensuring that legal reform processes and legislation in favor of IFPs are enacted and implemented, taking into consideration their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and their traditional ecological governance systems;
- Using emerging global and bilateral processes such as REDD+ and VPA FLEGT to enhance and strengthen the recognition of the rights of IFPs to the forest, which is their ancestral land.
- Government and nature conservation bodies should protect the cultures, knowledge and wisdom of IFPs, while acknowledging their conservation expertise.

Implementing these actions contribute to the protection of life-sustaining forest ecosystems, in which IFPs can play an

important role. This would serve the national interests of the countries where they live and have a great value for the global community, which needs solutions to keep the world healthy and safe.

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² Olivero J, Fa JE, Farfán MA, Lewis J, Hewlett B, Breuer T, et al. (2016) Distribution and Numbers of Pygmies in Central African Forests. PLoS ONE 11(1): e0144499. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0144499
³ Ndobe, S.N. & Halleson, N.D. (2012). Why a stand-alone indigenous peoples policy within the African Development Bank's Integrated Safeguards System. An Assessment by the CSO Coalition on the AfDB. Indigenous People of Africa Co-ordinating Committee. Available online at: <http://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2012/11/why-standalone-ip-policy-afdb-s-iss.pdf>
⁴ <https://africanelephantjournal.com/how-sustainable-development-ravaged-the-congo-basin/>
⁵ Ndobe, S.N. (2013). Experiences of Indigenous Peoples in Africa with Safeguard Policies: Examples from Cameroon and the Congo Basin. FPP E-Newsletter Special. Available online at: <http://www.forestpeoples.org/en/topics/african-development-bank-afdb/news/2013/04/experiences-indigenous-peoples-africa-safeguard-po>
<http://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2012/11/why-standalone-ip-policy-afdb-s-iss.pdf>
⁶ See www.iwgia.org/regions/africa/cameroon/855-update-2011-cameroon.
⁷ <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/1854/conflictspotlightanganyikav5.pdf>
⁸ <https://www.forestpeoples.org/en/lands-forests-territories-rights-based-conservation/news-article/2020/update-batwa-communities-and>
⁹ <https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/12500>