
Uganda: The Batwa organize to reassert their rights

The Batwa (so-called Pygmies) are the Indigenous peoples of south-west Uganda. According to historical records and oral histories, only the Batwa inhabited this area until at least the mid sixteenth century. They have been mostly hunter-gatherers, some in the mountainous forests, and some in forest savannah or lake environments.

The Tutsi moved into the area after 1550. Although recognizing Batwa ownership of the high altitude forest, the Batwa were regarded as Tutsi's servants within the King's courts. From about 1750, Hutu clans began to move into the area, and from 1830 the Tutsi sought to establish more direct rule over the territory, leading to conflict between the two groups. The Batwa played an important role in these conflicts and the Tutsi could not have established or retained this region as part of their kingdom without the support of Batwa archers. Some Batwa established themselves in powerful positions and claimed tribute from Hutu around them, but most would pay tribute to the Tutsi kings by bringing them ivory, animal skins and meat. Throughout this whole period - and up until their forced expulsion by conservationists from the forests in 1991 - Batwa would also barter meat, honey and other forest products for other products from the local community around them.

In 1991, the Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks were established which caused great suffering to Batwa and other neighbouring local communities. In 1995 the conservation Trust became fully operational. In spite of the resulting violation of the Batwa's territorial and human rights, the establishment of the parks was funded by the World Bank/GEF which granted 4.3 million US dollars for resource management and biodiversity conservation in Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks. The gazetted boundaries of Bwindi Park are 321 Sq. kms (over 80,000 acres) and Mgahinga Park is 33.7 Sq kms.(under 8,000 acres). The parks are hilly islands of moist tropical and upland forest within a densely cultivated region. The Batwa are by far the most affected group since they no longer have access to their forest resources, and so their forest-based participation in the local economy has been destroyed and they have been reduced to landless labourers. Nearly 20% of the Parks' income is meant to be for park management, 20% for research and 60% to local community development. As a result of the development of an Indigenous peoples policy (as required by the World Bank) - and in recognition of the devastating impact on the Batwa of the creation of the National Parks - a proportion of the conservation Trust's community development budget was allocated to a Batwa component, the most important element being a process of buying small fields for individual Batwa families.

In addition to their forced expulsion from the living in or using their forests, the Batwa of Uganda suffer severe discrimination at the hands of other communities. They experience marginalisation and discrimination, a lack of land, of access to formal education and to employment and even to secure an area to put up temporary dwellings involves having to work long hours in others' fields. They are not represented --locally or nationally. Instead of being able to base their livelihoods in the forests using their traditional skills, they now depend on labouring --and even begging-- to support their livelihoods.

To make matters even worse, there has been very slow movement in terms of achieving some form of compensation for the Batwa for their loss of their territories. The conservation Trust's buying of

small parcels of land for Batwa families finally started to get somewhere in 2000. Today, according to Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest Conservation Trust (MBIFCT) a total of 326 acres has been bought for the Batwa. The original owners of the entire forest have been "compensated" with a mere 326 acres and, furthermore, there are many more Batwa still lacking even such miserable patches of land. The problem has been further compounded because the 4.3 million US dollars funding for the conservation Trust was invested in an offshore investment trust by the World Bank/GEF in the early 1990s. The funding for the conservation Trust has therefore been dependent on the performance of the international stock market. With the severe downturn in stock markets the Trust's income has suffered. As a result, in July 2002, the Trust announced that it was cutting the Batwa component entirely. No more land would be bought for Batwa, but meanwhile the Trust would continue to fund the other aspects of the National Park, including the park guards who forcibly exclude Batwa from entering the forest. The World Bank's own research on the impact of the National Parks on the Batwa had stated that without the Batwa component, the Trust's work would simply worsen the situation for the Batwa and would therefore run counter to the Bank's Indigenous Peoples Policy. That situation now appears to be the case. Will there be enough international pressure to ensure that the Trust continues with the Batwa component, or is there a case in international law to argue for the return of the forests to the Batwa?

The Forest Peoples Programme has been supporting the Batwa to establish their own Indigenous organisation known as the United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda (UOBDU) which is based in Kisoro in S.W. Uganda. UODU co-represents the 3000 or more Batwa within the 3 Districts Kisoro, Kabale and Kanungu where Batwa communities exist. The organisation has a Batwa Representation Committee, which represents them in meetings/workshops with the MBIFCT conservation Trust. The organisation has been campaigning for land and forest access, and has represented Batwa views in meetings with Government representatives and with NGO's. As well as continuing to argue their case, UOBDU is also providing a vehicle for the Batwa to re-develop lost skills and bring together their expertise in forest-related knowledge as a first step in reasserting their rights and improving their quality of life.

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