

POLICY BRIEF

COVID-19, INDIGENOUS BATWA'S RIGHTS, THE BWINDI CONSERVATION LANDSCAPE: GAPS, IMPACTS AND RESPONSES.

By

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1.0 Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, calls have been made for continuing analyses of its impacts on and dynamics among the world's most vulnerable groups and peoples. Indigenous peoples have been recognized as one of the groups at heightened risk for COVID-19 and its many adverse socio-economic and other impacts. This brief summarizes emerging evidence on the Gaps, impact and responses related to COVID-19 among Indigenous Batwa in the Bwindi gorilla Conservation area.

On 21 March 2020, Uganda confirmed its first COVID-19 imported case. The Ugandan government then instituted a curfew, closed schools, a lockdown, mask mandate and strict measures on physical distancing in a bid to limit the spread of the Virus. As other countries are having these lifted, the government of Uganda has once again instituted a 42 days lockdown starting 18 June 2021. But as all these happen there is a neglected group indigenous people living adjacent to Bwindi National Park i.e. The Batwa indigenous people who are a 'different' social and cultural group that share collective ancestral ties to the Bwindi impenetrable National park and its natural resources living adjacent to the park where they were displaced having been their home for thousands of years, provided them a livelihood and medicines, and contained their religious/sacred sites.

It should be noted that the Batwa were chased out of their ancestral land without compensation or skills to live outside the forests and they have since then experienced both political and social neglect, faced with vulnerability, marginalization, land tenure insecurity, poverty and inadequate political representation. These have even increased with the challenges brought about by the COVID19 pandemic.

¹United Nations. (2020). COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Indigenous peoples. COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples | United Nations For Indigenous Peoples

²Ministry of Health Uganda (MoH) <https://www.health.go.ug/covid>

2. The Batwa women discrimination among communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally, outbreaks affect women and men differently, and pandemics tend to deepen existing inequalities and discrimination. Batwa women are facing high rates of domestic and sexual violence compared to men. During the coronavirus pandemic violence against women and girls, especially domestic violence has risen due to increased tensions in the Batwa settlements due to quarantine, social distancing and self-isolation in response to COVID-19. They are also facing challenges in accessing health facilities as there is double discrimination of the Batwa women in addition to lack of transport means.

3. Batwa Discriminated at Work

Before the coronavirus pandemic the Batwa were working in the informal economy and relied primarily on income from handicrafts, seasonal work and tourism, which have been impacted by COVID-19. Batwa community members in the Bwindi conservation area are living without an income since their traditional means of work is no longer viable.

As employers lay staff, they Batwa are discriminated by hotel owners, business men, crafts shopkeepers and even civil society organizations, as they reduce staff the Batwa are never included amongst the staff that remain working, companies remain with other tribes apart from Batwa. Batwa are never given contracts by their employees yet the same employers give the other tribes contracts of the same staff level/Rank.

3. Lack of COVID19 information amongst the Batwa Communities.

The Batwa live in remote areas of Kanungu, Kisoro and Rubanda Districts that have limited cellphone reception many times without electricity. In addition, due to poverty the Batwa can't get information for they have can't afford information devices like newspapers, phones radio and Tv sets and neither the cost of newspapers and therefore have since lost their right to information regarding the pandemic. They have therefore resorted to receiving information through third parties and most often taken advantage of and have become the highest consumers of fake news and misinformation. Those that can access radio sets gather to get information violating the preventive measure of social distancing. To bridge this gap there is need for swift, good communication that will be carrying accurate information in their local language for them to prepare and respond to the pandemic. Furthermore, it is an imperative that specific initiatives are developed and strengthened to empower Batwa with media and information literacy competencies (information, media, and digital skills) needed to detect disinformation and to resist the misinformation beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

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4. Covid-19 and Batwa rights affecting conservation in the Bwindi conservation area.

Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has revealed that the use of snares for poaching in the Bwindi conservation area increased from 50 snares discovered per month to 400 in the month of April 2021 alone. And no wonder we lost a mountain gorilla (Rafiki) to the effects of this pandemic³. In the pandemic Poaching activities, Illegal wildlife trade, and even Human-wildlife conflicts have increased. These negative changes can however be related to the rights of the Batwa and the effects of the pandemic. During the learning PCLG group meeting in Buhoma Batwa women revealed that they could support poaching by their husbands and sons to fend for them and have a living then be killed by hunger during the lockdown. Women have also revealed that in order for their men to be respected and make a difference in their homes they had to provide yet they lost jobs and the only way has been encroaching on both private and natural forests for survival.

Batwa men that have lost their jobs due to the pandemic are being employed in the Charcoal and wood fuel business and all this is putting more pressure on private forests and also removing a buffer between the local populations and the forest and could result in Human wildlife conflicts could at worse result in zoonotic diseases.

While pre-existing threats shape The Indigenous Batwa's inability to cope with COVID-19, the pandemic also threatens their lives wellbeing and could equally threaten the conservation efforts in the Bwindi/gorilla conservation area.

Therefore, Urgent action is needed to address the vulnerabilities in a bid to tackle the emerging impacts of COVID, and ensure that Batwa are included into the existing COVID-19 responses.

As Uganda looks into prevention, treatment, care and vaccination efforts, the Batwa shouldn't be left behind. Addressing the impacts of the pandemic among the Batwa and The Bwindi conservation landscape requires;

- Support and capacity strengthening to Batwa organizations and organizations working with Batwa on Conservation, Rights, health and livelihood around the Bwindi Conservation area.
- Uganda Wildlife Authority and government of Uganda should be interested and work to Curb the Increasing destruction of forests in the Bwindi Conservation areas.

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5. Recommendations

5.1 Mitigating the Impacts of COVID-19 on The Batwa.

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- Support and capacity strengthening to Batwa organizations and organizations working with Batwa on Conservation, Rights, health and livelihood around the Bwindi Conservation area.
- Uganda Wildlife Authority and government of Uganda should be interested and work to Curb the Increasing destruction of forests in the Bwindi Conservation areas.
- The Government of Uganda and Batwa organizations should work to improve labour Rights of Batwa Workers.
- There is need for research on how abuse of human rights and gender based violence breeds destruction of natural resources in the Bwindi Conservation area.
- Building Batwa's capacities in resilience and pandemic decision-making and management from a right based, gender-responsive and intercultural inclusion perspective around the Bwindi Conservation area.
- Promoting dialogues on the Indigenous and their future in the Bwindi conservation landscape.
- Broadening the human rights contexts of engagement with the Batwa to recognize and reflect local notions of consent, self-determination and individual rights.
- Promotion of A gender and culture-sensitive strategy for ongoing COVID-19 related relief, support and engagement with the Batwa People.
- Government of Uganda both national and local should include a different component in its fight against COVID19 tailored for the Batwa people by allocating targeted funding.
- Improve the access and management of clean water and sanitation, particularly for indigenous Batwa communities, to avoid further spread of the virus.
- Ugandan Government/local Government should Ensure that the Batwa have access to information COVID19 in their languages.

References

United Nations. (2020). COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Indigenous peoples. COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples | United Nations For Indigenous Peoples
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Poverty and Conservation Learning Group (PCLG)

PCLG (<http://povertyandconservation.info/en/pages/uganda-pclg>) is an international network of organizations coordinated by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), which promotes learning on the linkages between biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction.

African Initiative on Food Security and Environment (AIFE-Uganda)

AIFE-Uganda (<https://aifeuganda.org/>) is a non-profit organization whose role is to organize communities to be proactive against climate change and conserve the environment through biodiversity conservation. To achieve its objectives AIFE-Uganda Engages local communities in sustainable wildlife management, combating illegal wildlife trade, developing sustainable Alternative livelihood opportunities for park-adjacent communities including minority groups and strengthening grassroot communities in policymaking and mainstreaming biodiversity and climate change mitigation and adaptation by involving in campaigns, policy outreach and on ground actions.



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