

# Ripples from a single stone: Indigenous mobilization for community tenure-led conservation in Cameroon

TIMOTHÉE EMINI, CATHERINE CLARKE and CATH LONG

**Abstract** We document a process initiated by Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon that seeks to open a dialogue with key conservation actors to work towards community-led, rights-based alternatives to so-called fortress conservation. In June 2021, Gbabandi, a platform of forest Indigenous Peoples, invited key conservation actors to a 1-day listening event. This represented an important precedent, reversing the usual approach to dialogue in which Indigenous Peoples are invited to participate at various levels in externally directed processes. In this case the space for engagement was opened by Indigenous Peoples on their own terms based on Indigenous ways of organizing, and conservation organizations were invited to participate. Indigenous Peoples gave testimonies of physical violence and abuse in various protected areas across Cameroon. Conservation actors acknowledged there had been violations of human rights and there was substantial discussion about threats to wildlife and the need for more inclusive approaches to conservation, redevelopment of management plans and renegotiation of access for Indigenous communities based on community consent. The long-term impact remains to be seen but the immediate effect of an Indigenous-led process was that key decision makers in conservation in Cameroon heard directly from the people affected by their decisions and, since the event, have been more active than previously in contacting and consulting Indigenous Peoples about how protected areas are managed. Gbabandi is hopeful that this type of initiative will change the dialogue between communities and protected area managers and will lead to real changes in conservation practice.

**Keywords** Baka, Cameroon, community-led conservation, Congo Basin, Indigenous Peoples, protected areas

## Introduction

The conservation experiences of forest Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon are complex and challenging.

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Their cultural survival is linked inextricably to the survival of the forest environment and, as we document in this article, many of their ancestral practices have been shown to contribute actively to conservation (Dawson et al., 2021; Watio & Nlom, 2022). Yet in spite of this, forest Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon have suffered significant abuses of their rights in the name of conservation. They have been dispossessed and displaced from their ancestral homes, had their access to the forest restricted and been marginalized and discriminated against in almost every area of life (Pemunta, 2019). Many cases of physical abuse and attacks by ecoguards (the term used in Cameroon for protected area rangers) on community members have been recorded over several decades.

Recently the issue of such abuses has been highlighted by a controversy surrounding the work of WWF in Cameroon and elsewhere. In 2020, following a series of reports by BuzzFeed News alleging the complicity of WWF in abuses of rights, WWF commissioned an independent investigation into the allegations. The investigation found that human rights abuses had been committed in Cameroon against Indigenous Peoples and local communities by ecoguards employed by the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife and by the Cameroonian army. Significantly, the report found that 'WWF failed to take adequate steps to prevent, respond to and remedy allegations of human rights abuses committed by ecoguards it funded and supported' (Pillay et al., 2020, p. 46).

In November 2020, the Gbabandi platform, which is the national platform of forest Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon, met in Abong Mbang in east Cameroon to discuss the findings of the independent investigation report and to develop a collective position and strategy (Gbabandi, 2020). This was followed in June 2021 by a Gbabandi gathering of Indigenous Peoples that culminated in a 1-day listening event held in Yaoundé, where they presented their position and ideas to assembled representatives of conservation organizations and local and national authorities. The gathering and listening events were significant in that they represented a reversal of the usual dynamics in which the authorities make proposals and communities react. Instead, Indigenous representatives put forward their own perspectives, organized the event on their own terms and invited conservation actors to react. Based on a series of conversations between the authors, one of whom is Baka, we summarize the evidence for the contributions of Indigenous Peoples to conservation in Cameroon, describe the effects that state-protected areas

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have had on their lives and their relationships with the forest, and document a process initiated by Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon that seeks to open a national dialogue with key conservation actors and work towards community-led, rights-based alternatives to fortress conservation. We then explore the wider implications for a different approach to conservation and human rights in the Congo Basin, in which Indigenous Peoples take back the initiative.

## National context

Cameroon has a network of > 20 protected areas covering a total area of c. 5 million ha, and most forests in Cameroon are enclosed in protected areas or logging concessions (Global Forest Watch, 2022). The first protected areas were established as faunal reserves under the French colonial government in 1932 and the most recent to be declared was Douala Edéa National Park in 2018. As is the case across sub-Saharan Africa (Blanc, 2020), the protected area system in Cameroon grew from a series of colonial-era designations and regulations affecting large swathes of previously community-controlled land (Mengang, 1998). Faunal (hunting) reserves and logging concessions became the network of protected areas (faunal reserves, forest reserves and national parks) of today that exists alongside the large Permanent Forest Estate in which commercial logging concessions are allocated. Local communities are not allowed to settle in or cultivate these areas, and extensive restrictions are placed on their access to and use of forest resources within these areas (Nguiffo, 2001). Formal protected areas have had a significant effect on Indigenous Peoples because they have been established over forest traditionally under the custodianship of Indigenous Peoples, based on an exclusionary model of conservation with no regard for the rights of affected communities and with little or no compensation offered (Ndameu, 2001; Colchester, 2003). This has been the experience of the Baka, Bagyeli, Bakola and Bedzang peoples across south and east Cameroon, where they have their ancestral lands. The legislation that sets up protected areas is made by national government decree (Pemunta & Mbu-Arrey, 2013) and by policymakers detached from the realities of the communities living in the forest (Carson et al., 2018), and then imposed on communities, violating their customary Indigenous rights to access and use the forest land that are recognized in international law (including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Article 14), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Articles 1, 2, 11, 12) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 1, 27)). In this way there has been a process of official monopolization of land and Indigenous forests, putting almost all of them into conservation zones and leading to complex and difficult interactions between protected area managers, the agents responsible for implementing conservation policies and

the Indigenous forest communities who have lived in these forests for centuries.

The Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife carries out patrols around the protected areas along with their main partner, WWF, in protected areas such as Lobéké National Park and the Ngoyla Mintom Faunal Reserve. Separate from the fact that patrols and raids violate the traditional spaces of Indigenous Peoples, this surveillance prevents people from meeting their basic needs by limiting access to the forest (Colchester, 2003; Clarke, 2019). There have also been many witnessed cases of physical assault by ecoguards (Warren & Baker, 2019). This is why Indigenous Peoples have concluded that conservation as it is practised at the moment in Cameroon is a source of violence and conflict, and of the abuse of Indigenous rights.

In the south and east regions of Cameroon, where the Baka and Bagyeli forest Indigenous Peoples live, c. 1.9 million ha of forested land are within protected areas (Clarke, 2019). The protected areas that have had the greatest effect on Indigenous Peoples include: Campo Ma'an National Park established in 2000, which included large areas of Bagyeli land; Lobéké National Park established in the same year on extensive areas of Baka land; Boumba Bek and Nki National Parks established in 2005, which incorporated large areas of Baka land; and Dja and Ngoyla Faunal Reserves, both of which include large tracts of Baka territory. The Dja Faunal Reserve was established in 1950 and under French colonial rule, but Ngoyla Faunal Reserve was established formally only in 2014. In every case, free, prior and informed consent of the Indigenous communities concerned was not obtained, pre-existing customary land, access and use rights were not respected and a limited amount of compensation, if any, was provided. The management of these areas has been problematic (Clarke 2019; Forest Peoples Programme & Okani, 2019).

Despite the requirements of international law, under Cameroonian national laws the customary ownership of land by Indigenous Peoples and local communities is often unrecognized (Wily, 2011). There is a possibility for communities to request a Community Forest Concession but the process is laborious, expensive and restrictive and does not include land title (Moutoni, 2019). There is at present no legal mechanism to enable the implementation of community-led or community-managed protected areas in Cameroon (unlike, for example, Local Community Forest Concessions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which grant title to local communities and Indigenous Peoples and should allow them to manage conservation for themselves; Moïse, 2019), and generally community access to and use of forest resources within a protected area are not permitted. It is sometimes possible for communities to negotiate limited access and use as a subsequent arrangement in the form of a memorandum of understanding. In practice, however, many years often pass between the creation of a

protected area and the negotiation of a memorandum of understanding, and even then access is not guaranteed (Clarke, 2019; Nsioh et al., 2022a,b). The Ministry of Forests and Wildlife, which is responsible for forests and protected areas, usually drafts these memoranda of understanding, and community rights are not fully taken into account.

### Contributions of Indigenous Peoples to forest conservation in the Congo Basin

Although not conceptualized in terms of conservation, Indigenous knowledge and livelihood practices across Central Africa have been shown to contribute to forest conservation, having positive impacts on the distribution and diversity of flora and fauna (Ichikawa, 2001; Yasuoka, 2013; Fa et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2020; Baka of Dimgba et al., 2021). For example, in Cameroon the Baka rely on a wide variety (> 500 species) of wild fruits, nuts, herbs, berries, tubers, leafy greens and invertebrates for their diet, healing and spiritual activities (Billong Fils et al., 2020; Baka of Dimgba et al., 2021). These are gathered across extensive stretches of forest and brought back to seasonal campsites along forest trails, and there is evidence that this gathering activity and movement ‘facilitates regeneration and dispersal of light-demanding useful plants and incidentally creates favourable niches for wildlife’ (Baka of Dimgba et al., 2021, p. 102). Similarly, wild yam *Discorea* spp. paracultivation by the Baka has been shown to increase its abundance within the forest, hence sustaining the genetic diversity and sustainability of wild yam species (Dounias, 2001).

Food prohibitions (taboos) offer another set of traditional practices that regulate resource use and limit overexploitation. For example, the largest groups of Baka in eastern Cameroon belong to the *Kema* and *Mambe* clans who consider monkeys as their totems (Forest Peoples Programme & CED, 2006), meaning that they never kill or eat them. *Kema* means ‘monkey’ and refers to the eastern black-and-white colobus monkey *Colobus guereza*. Many other food taboos exist that are related to gender, to certain forest activities (e.g. processing specific non-timber forest products) or to physical states (e.g. pregnancy). However, traditional hunting methods and associated ceremonies and taboos are changing and losing their prominence because of restrictions on access to the forest, and as a result there are greater pressures on those forest resources that remain accessible (Pemunta, 2019).

Indigenous Peoples supplement the gathering of non-timber forest products with fishing, hunting and a small amount of shifting cultivation for consumption (mainly plantain, manioc, cassava, cocoyam, sweetcorn, okra and to a lesser extent cocoa). Minimal investments of time and labour in agricultural activities such as weeding and clearing mean that a variety of other wild plants are left to grow in

and around crops, increasing biodiversity along roadsides in comparison to the farming techniques of neighbouring communities (Baka of Dimgba et al., 2021). Protocols surrounding hunting, such as avoiding young or female mammals and removing traps when catch is low, support animal reproduction and the maintenance of animal populations. The wide range of species hunted by Indigenous communities in the forests of the Congo Basin also reduces their impacts on populations of individual prey species (Fa et al., 2016; Martin, 2020).

### The impact of protected areas on the relationships of Indigenous Peoples with the forest

We have thousands of pieces of knowledge about the forest that our parents bequeathed to us. But this knowledge is at risk of extinction because of restrictions on Indigenous forest peoples’ access to the forest. Indigenous communities no longer have free access to the forest and visits are limited. Thus learning and knowledge transfer are no longer evident. (Bagyéli Indigenous leader from Campo Ma’an)

More than just a source of food and medicine, for forest Indigenous Peoples the forest is their sanctuary, a place to rest and recharge from roadside villages and associated environmental and social challenges, dust and heat and also from discrimination from neighbouring ethnic groups and external actors. However, militarized restrictions associated with modern conservation in Cameroon create an abrupt separation between Indigenous communities and the forest.

Restricted access and violence over several decades have reduced the ability of Indigenous Peoples to carry out traditional livelihood activities based on hunting and gathering (Warren & Baker, 2019). Communities are no longer able to fully enjoy their relationship with the forest. Usually women would be responsible for gathering yams, fish, caterpillars and wild fruits, whereas men would bring wild meat and honey to the family. However, many Baka do not like to risk entering the forest now for fear of ecoguards patrolling protected areas. Armed guards employed by the trophy-hunting safari companies that occupy concessions in protected area buffer zones add a further barrier to forest access.

When Indigenous Peoples had free access to the forest, they would follow traditional practices. For example, in certain seasons they could take an individual of a particular animal species to bless a year, to initiate young people or for a certain rite. But today, following the advent of exclusionary conservation practices, it has become difficult for the present generation to perpetuate these cultural practices. This is frustrating for communities who witness outsiders being given hunting licenses to take elephants (Hunt Cameroon, 2022), whereas communities for whom it is central to their culture are forbidden to hunt them (Nguiffo & Talla, 2010). Indigenous Peoples are often obliged to carry out their rituals without killing animals, which renders the practices meaningless in cultural terms.

Fear of entering the forest has also affected their cultural practices. For example, *Yeli*, the traditional initiation ceremony for Baka women, is being practiced less frequently. This is also the case for *Molongo* and *Maka*, which are long periods of time that the Baka used to spend moving through the forest (for many months each year) to initiate and introduce youths to hunting techniques, honey and wild yam gathering, mimicking animal cries, traditional medicine, building *moungoulous* (traditional Baka forest houses) and forest spiritual knowledge, such as the rituals and learning associated with the forest spirit or *jengi* (Forest Peoples Programme & CED, 2006).

The current conservation model has also had an effect on the lives of forest Indigenous Peoples in terms of traditional medicine and healing. Their traditional pharmacopoeia comes from the forest but accessing the forest now requires formal authorization. These authorization procedures are often complicated, if harvesting is allowed at all, and could involve going to an office 10–20 km away for a permit, usually on foot. This is challenging for Indigenous Peoples who might be reluctant to visit an intimidating Ministry of Forests and Wildlife office and might face language and literacy barriers (the forms are often complicated and can only be completed in French). In addition, it can take time to find the correct official and to go through these processes if that official is not available. All of these issues combine to discourage forest Indigenous Peoples, compounding their feeling that a permit should not be required for an activity that is a tradition for them. This means that today many forest Indigenous Peoples can no longer receive traditional treatment as formerly because access to the forest and traditional medicines has become too difficult.

All of these factors have led to a dilution of Indigenous cultural life. Most of the species and non-timber forest products important for the lives of these communities are found inside strictly protected areas, which have not been accessible for many years. As the forest Indigenous Peoples teach their children in the forest, sharing traditional knowledge with younger generations is being impeded (Forest Peoples Programme, 2020; Global Network on Indigenous-Led Education, 2022).

### Indigenous mobilization and the creation of the Gbabandi platform

In response to these multiple pressures, Indigenous communities in Cameroon have started associations at local levels. For a long time these Indigenous organizations evolved in isolation and there was no real progress in terms of systemic change to the situation faced by Indigenous Peoples in the forest areas of Cameroon. Collective mobilization of these organizations increased in 2016 when a number of local associations formed Gbabandi, the national platform for the advocacy, defence and promotion of the individual and collective rights of the forest Indigenous Peoples of Cameroon.

Gbabandi currently has 14 member associations, representing almost all of the Indigenous organizations from the equatorial forests of Cameroon and also the four forest Indigenous Peoples in Cameroon: the Baka, the Bagyeli, the Bakola and the Bedzang. Because advocacy is more influential when it is carried out by a large and representative group, it is since the establishment of the Gbabandi platform that collective Indigenous mobilization has begun in full.

The platform has repeatedly denounced the ongoing violation of the rights of Indigenous communities in and around protected areas in Cameroon. Some of these violations were documented in a report that was published by BuzzFeed News and was critical of WWF (Warren & Baker, 2019). In response, WWF released an independent review report in 2020 (Pillay et al., 2020). When the report was released, Gbabandi gathered communities and its member organizations together to share information, discuss the report and develop a response. The communities identified that some of the report's content did not reflect the reality of the situation (Dominguez & Luoma, 2020).

During this Gbabandi meeting in Abong Mbang, eastern Cameroon, Indigenous Peoples developed a position paper (Gbabandi, 2020) to challenge the government (including the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife) and the donors and international conservation organizations that finance and oversee the management of protected areas in Cameroon, making the following key points:

Indigenous forest communities have experienced abuses in relation to WWF's conservation management and have not received adequate reparations or compensation for protected areas established on our traditional lands. Existing complaint mechanisms, when they are in place at all, are inadequate.

There are serious impacts on the cultural life of our communities as a result of exclusion from our ancestral lands.

We recognize the importance of protecting nature for present and future generations and we remain open to dialogue for a better consideration of our rights in the management of protected areas.

Attendees of the Gbabandi meeting also made a number of recommendations to WWF, including, amongst others, that WWF should (1) issue a public apology for the abuses to Indigenous communities documented in the independent report, (2) initiate procedures for the restitution of ancestral lands, and (3) recognize the 'true value of Indigenous Peoples' identity as guardians of the forest' (Gbabandi, 2020, p. 2–3).

This denunciation by Gbabandi had an impact at national and international levels (The Guardian, 2021). In response, a few meetings were held by WWF Cameroon to give feedback on the findings of the report directly to some Indigenous communities. However, WWF Cameroon did not engage directly with the platform on the issue despite repeated requests for a face-to-face meeting. Although informing communities directly of the report and its findings is clearly a positive step at the local level, Indigenous communities are less aware of their rights, less informed and less able to challenge authorities than the platform as a whole. Gbabandi's position is that WWF's failure to engage with the platform

directly undermined WWF's actions, but also undermined and sought to delegitimize the steps taken by Gbabandi to create a strong, representative and federating counterweight: a platform that aims to bring together Indigenous Peoples and present their perspectives.

### **Gbabandi's response: Indigenous Assembly and Listening Event**

Until 2021 all formal engagements between Indigenous Peoples and the state and conservation organizations in relation to conservation policy and protected areas had been held on terms set by the institutions with power rather than the Indigenous Peoples concerned. Gbabandi took a decision to challenge this by hosting their own assembly, controlling the setting and the space and inviting key conservation actors to come into that space to learn about Indigenous perspectives.

The listening event was an important opportunity in relation to the management of protected areas in Cameroon. Indigenous Peoples organized it because they had a clear objective: to make all of the people in charge of protected areas, the relevant sectors of the administration in Cameroon and the international organizations that work on conservation issues in Cameroon hear and respond to the testimony of Indigenous Peoples. Following the publication of the position paper and its recommendations, Gbabandi members wanted to reassure themselves that, even though WWF had not yet opened a space for dialogue, Gbabandi could create a space that would ensure they could share perspectives and promote discussion on the situation of the rights of Indigenous Peoples in relation to protected areas nationally.

### **Process**

The event, which took place in June 2021, took the form of a 2-day Indigenous assembly of Gbabandi members followed by a 1-day listening event. In the assembly the members discussed and agreed on the key messages they wanted to share with conservation actors. Invitees to the listening event included conservators of national parks and reserves; Ministry of Forests and Wildlife staff from headquarters; local and national administrations; the human rights commission of Cameroon; and also the international organizations in charge of protected area management and conservation in Cameroon, including WWF and their representative in charge of Indigenous Peoples issues, and donor representatives and other civil society organizations in Cameroon.

To the surprise of the Gbabandi members, everyone who was invited attended. The space allowed Indigenous Peoples to meet and talk about their rights in relation to conservation and protected areas. It was also an opportunity to create alliances and establish the basis for a more detailed exchange at the local level.

The event, originally planned to take place in a venue close to Baka territory, was eventually hosted in the capital, Yaoundé, because of organizational complications related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, Gbabandi made every effort to ensure that the event was Indigenous in nature.

The principal moderator was a non-Indigenous person familiar with the cultural and social norms of Indigenous Peoples present, and who ensured that attendees followed the rules set by the platform. This moderator was accompanied by a co-moderator who was an Indigenous person who could advise on Indigenous norms and specific issues.

At the beginning of the listening event, a Baka initiate invoked the forest spirit and made an incantation in the hall. This process opened the event and involved incantation and song, with some Indigenous participants entering a trance-like state. Many of the non-Indigenous participants had not seen such a ceremony before, and some expressed surprise and fear. The ceremony had a significant impact as it brought another dimension into the space and made people realize the profundity of the connection between Indigenous Peoples and the forest. Indigenous participants were surprised by the impact of the ceremony. Some reported that certain invitees from the administrations and conservation organizations indicated they had not realized the strength of the spiritual importance of the forest for Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous participants themselves explained that they were reassured to see their connection to the forest being witnessed and treated in a respectful way by others.

Another innovative aspect of the listening event was the way in which people were invited to speak, which followed a model of organization that Indigenous Peoples often use. Attendees were given nutshells and other objects that had been gathered in the forest, and were asked to clack them together to attract attention if they wished to speak. The attendees engaged with and followed this model. Using Indigenous modalities to organize the conversations also appeared to have a significant impact on the quality of listening and exchange.

### **Content of the listening event**

During the 2-day assembly held before the listening event, Indigenous representatives developed specific ideas about what they wanted to present to the wider audience and what they hoped for in terms of a response from government and conservation organizations. Their decision was to provide an overview of the situation regarding the rights of Indigenous communities within conservation areas and then to develop further arguments in which they presented more detailed statements regarding specific issues.

The position paper produced by Gbabandi in 2020 acted as the framework for the discussion at the Indigenous assembly and for the subsequent exchanges at the listening

event. During the assembly, members developed messages to be delivered at the listening event that included an embrace of the principle of protecting and caring for nature but highlighting that conservation as it is practiced currently in Cameroon has the following weaknesses: (1) lack of respect for the international human rights legislation to which Cameroon is signatory, (2) failure to obtain free, prior and informed consent for the establishment and management of protected areas, (3) threats to Indigenous culture through the prohibition of access to the forest and its resources and the inadequacy of the current memoranda of understanding that are supposed to facilitate such access, (4) human rights abuses by ecoguards, and (5) benefit-sharing initiatives that do not actually benefit Indigenous Peoples or are otherwise inadequate.

During the listening event, these key points were presented by Indigenous participants along with testimony from Indigenous participants living around Campo Ma'an and Lobéké National Parks and Ngoyla Faunal Reserve. These participants spoke about incidents, including physical violations, mistreatment and dismissals without due cause of the few Indigenous people who had been recruited by Campo Ma'an National Park to work as trackers. Following the initial presentations and testimony from Indigenous participants there were further discussions based on the presentations and on the questions from and responses to the attendees.

There was substantial discussion regarding threats to wildlife, during which the Indigenous participants made it clear they were serious about protecting wildlife and pointed out they were aware that if they did not commit to conservation as their ancestors had, they would be depriving future generations of Indigenous Peoples the chance to celebrate and appreciate their heritage. The discussion then focused on inclusive conservation that respects traditional knowledge. Indigenous participants explained that in the Indigenous world there are traditions and norms that protect wildlife and ecosystems. One such example is that of clans who do not eat great apes. Indigenous participants made it clear they wanted time and space to remind themselves of these traditions and to integrate them into how the land is managed rather than having rules imposed on them from outside. Indigenous representatives also mentioned that WWF, the main conservation actor in the areas of Cameroon in which they live, appeared to be reluctant to engage in focused exchanges on the rights of Indigenous communities despite the specific recommendations made in Gbabandi's position paper (Gbabandi, 2020).

During the discussion, Indigenous participants asked government and conservation organizations specifically why they had been excluded from their lands. The conservationists struggled to justify the exclusion of Indigenous communities from the forest. Indigenous participants pointed out that the forest is still at the centre of their lives and

that their culture is linked inextricably with the forest, so the only way for their culture to be respected is to give them access to the forest.

A powerful series of ideas emerged from the discussions at the listening event regarding the training of conservation agents, including capacity strengthening so that they could better understand Indigenous perspectives and priorities. Indigenous participants explained that conservation agents need to be able to identify the rights and responsibilities of each actor and to respect human rights, collective rights and biodiversity. They also emphasized that all conservation actors need to understand that there are competencies and knowledge systems in Indigenous communities that need to be considered, such as skills in tracking and identification and knowledge of fauna, flora and landscape, and the relationship between land and people. Conservation actors can learn from Indigenous Peoples who have managed the forest sustainably, and they need to recognize their own responsibilities. For example, one participant pointed out that it was modern conservation that had brought trophy hunting to Cameroon, not the forest Indigenous Peoples. For those Indigenous Peoples, the fact that hunters from abroad can pay large amounts of money to kill wildlife that they do not even eat, whereas Indigenous Peoples are in many cases not allowed to hunt the same animals, seems unjust and unsustainable.

One of the issues that emerged from the Indigenous participants was that communities acting in isolation do not have sufficient capacity or information regarding who to take action against in cases of human rights violations. The listening event therefore represented an opportunity for exchange with all of the conservation actors, and most of the conservationists appeared to be willing to listen and recognized the abuses that had been committed against these communities. A senior manager from one of the protected areas said, 'Here is a new field of reflection that we must have with Gbabandi so that at each process of reorganization of the management plan, of rereading of the memorandum of understanding, Gbabandi is always present, to continue to be effective and transparent.'

### **Impact of creating an Indigenous space**

This listening event, organized and led by Indigenous Peoples and attended by conservation actors and government representatives, reversed the usual power dynamic between decision makers and Indigenous communities in conservation. This event was the first of its kind in Cameroon and represented the first step in an ongoing discourse in which Indigenous Peoples take the lead.

Gbabandi members felt that conservation actors, both private and state, appeared to take them seriously for the first time and recognized them as valid interlocutors. At the end of the event the conservation organizations

confirmed they wanted to work with the platform to continue these conversations at the community level.

## Outcomes

It is too early to identify long-term outcomes from the event. For the first year after the event little changed in the approach of conservation organizations to working with Indigenous Peoples and nothing changed in terms of how they worked with communities in protected areas or in terms of re-examining the areas allocated to strictly protected areas. However, one positive outcome is that conservation actors are now aware there are additional spaces and actors that must be included in these debates. The visibility of Indigenous Peoples and organizations and the need to take their perspectives into account is now undeniable.

As examples of this change, the then Conservator of Campo Ma'an National Park, who has since been transferred to other responsibilities, has maintained regular contact with Gbabandi and has asked for its perspectives on several issues. The conservation unit at Lobéké National Park has also expressed its appreciation of the initiative and proposed that something similar should take place locally, for further discussions.

Since the listening event, in the last months of 2022 Gbabandi members noted a higher frequency of contact from conservation organizations and, more specifically, from the directors of protected areas. This has often taken the form of messaging service communications and informal phone calls but one of the messaging groups is now discussing the establishment of a working group of conservationists and Indigenous Peoples to address issues regarding the rights of Indigenous Peoples and issues relating to protected areas, and to develop practical responses to these problems. The idea was proposed initially by TE, and the conservation organizations and protected area managers appear to be engaging seriously with the proposal, and Gbabandi members are hopeful this will develop into a body that takes action.

## Implications beyond Cameroon

There is now strong evidence that when Indigenous communities have secure tenure rights to their lands, conservation is more effective and levels of biodiversity are higher (Fa et al., 2020; Dawson et al., 2021). This has been demonstrated, for example, in Peru (Blackman et al., 2017) and in Australia, Brazil and Canada (Schuster et al., 2019). Yet despite this evidence, many conservation programmes continue to favour exclusionary approaches, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, locking out the people who have preserved tropical forests for many generations.

The creation of an Indigenous-hosted and Indigenous-controlled space to discuss issues that are critical to the people concerned is a significant advance in Indigenous advocacy, not only in Cameroon but across the Congo Basin. In other areas, Indigenous Peoples have long asserted their territorial rights and their rights to adhere to their culture and traditions in interaction with other peoples. From the Dakota Access Pipeline campaign (Lakhani, 2021) to the First Nations reframing of Australia Day as Invasion Day (Dreher et al., 2022), Indigenous Peoples have asserted their own interpretations of history and justice. This was particularly visible at the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2021 (First Peoples Worldwide, 2021).

Elsewhere in the Congo Basin, Indigenous Peoples have made various attempts to improve the relationships between conservation organizations and the Indigenous Peoples on whose land protected areas have been established. For example, in the Republic of the Congo concerns raised by Indigenous Peoples and local communities about the establishment of a new protected area in Messok-Dja resulted in a substantial lobbying effort by international organizations, with the result that the free, prior and informed consent process was conducted for a second time, by a consortium rather than by WWF. This is recognition that the first consent process was inadequate and that Indigenous Peoples had not had sufficient opportunity to give or withhold fully informed consent.

In eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Batwa communities around Kahuzi-Biega National Park have made use of the Whakatane Mechanism, which is an IUCN-approved conflict resolution mechanism designed to open dialogue between Indigenous Peoples and local communities and conservation authorities (IUCN CEESP, 2016). This process, which aimed to open dialogue and find mutual solutions to conservation-related impacts on communities, was started in 2014, but as of January 2023 nothing has changed for the Batwa, and their human rights situation might even have worsened (Forest Peoples Programme, 2021). Key issues they faced were landlessness and poverty as a result of being expelled from their ancestral lands, and human rights abuses by park guards. The initial dialogue in 2014 identified some ways forward, but one of the factors that has caused the current stalemate is that the conservation institutions concerned have not yet fulfilled the most important commitment they made to the Batwa communities at the end of the 2014 dialogue: that of finding a solution to the landlessness challenge facing the Batwa as a result of their expulsion from their territories. The Batwa have proposed from the start that they should return to their ancestral lands and act as partners in conservation. However, this has never been considered seriously by the conservation authorities, who have stated they cannot change the rules under Congolese law about access to and

use of land and resources in a national park (this is despite there being opportunities within existing national law to permit the access of Indigenous Peoples to protected areas; Koné & Mukumba, 2018). During 2014–2022, the authorities did not meet with these communities in situations other than those defined and controlled by the authorities, and the scope of discussion has always been curtailed so as to exclude the most significant demands of the Indigenous communities. For example, dialogues initiated by the park, and including an invitation list defined by the park team, took place entirely in French and with a pre-set agenda, meaning that the Batwa were unable to choose their own representatives or influence what was discussed. Any discussion of access within the boundaries of Kahuzi-Biega National Park has been limited to permission to enter for supervised ceremonies only. This could yet change: the management of the Park changed in 2022 and the new managers are communicating more positively regarding the role of Indigenous Peoples in the Park (Raj & Barume, 2022).

The Gbabandi initiative discussed here could offer inspiration for a different approach. It would be a positive advance if conservation institutions in the Congo Basin engaged in listening events organized by Indigenous Peoples in their own spaces or in spaces in which they feel able to speak freely. In such events, the institutions should not be setting the agenda, but rather they should listen seriously to the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples regarding their situation and about potential solutions to the conflicts between conservation institutions and Indigenous Peoples. It was notable that when Gbabandi opened a space and set the agenda in Cameroon, conservation and government organizations were willing to attend and listen. This is a first step in the long process needed to undo decades of poor practice and communication. Gbabandi is now reflecting on how it can use this type of approach in other negotiations that affect their communities. Other Indigenous Peoples across the region could also explore this option, changing the dynamic between Indigenous Peoples and conservation organizations from one of conflict and confrontation to one of respect that builds alliances for protecting the land and ecosystems.

### Concluding remarks by author TE

For us Indigenous Peoples the listening event was like a stone that we dropped into a pond. It made small ripples that, up to the international level, meant that WWF had to hear and acknowledge the information we shared. I think that this first step was important for the Indigenous forest communities, most of whom were represented by the organizations that are in Gbabandi.

We could celebrate this event, but now we have to recognize that the change in discourse is just a starting point and we have to continue with other reflections, with other

actions, so that on the ground the change in terms of respect for the rights of Indigenous communities in conservation in Cameroon actually materializes.

Conservation organizations need to understand and integrate into their policies that Indigenous Peoples are the first and the real conservationists. We want, as Indigenous Peoples, these organizations to be open to spaces for dialogue between us and them that offer a better balance of power in conversations. We need these dialogues at local, national and regional levels, and they should be ongoing as new issues arise. Our lands and our peoples are spread across the whole of the Congo Basin and these conversations should be a continuous exchange as we learn about each other and find ways to work together.

Our initiative to start a dialogue without waiting for someone from outside to come and set it up and to organize it in our own way could be an inspiration for conservation organizations and for other communities to change the current unequal dynamic between conservation organizations, governments and Indigenous Peoples. We want to keep on doing this at every level, from community to national and even international levels. Our communities will initiate events and invite conservationists to come to us and hear directly from us when we have concerns or when we have suggestions so that they can change and improve how they work with us and support us in protecting our lands.

We do not want an expansion of protected areas whilst they are being managed as they are now, with exclusion, abuses of human rights and a lack of respect for our knowledge and traditions. We need to see that the managers of existing protected areas have understood the impacts that they have had on us and that they are ready to change how they do things. If there is funding, it must stop going to the militarization of protected areas and must instead go to supporting Indigenous organizations and networks to build on our own traditional ways of organizing and protecting our lands and forests. We are increasingly well organized today and are ready to take on the responsibility of supporting our people to lead on conservation. We would be reassured if conservation organizations were ready to change how they think and how they work with us, treating our expertise and experience with the respect it deserves, listening to how we express ourselves and adapting their practices to ours rather than always expecting us to adapt our ways to theirs.

We Indigenous Peoples would also like to see conservation organizations learn from us in terms of their own practices. There are times when they seem to be making an effort to reach out to Indigenous Peoples by recruiting Indigenous Peoples officers, for example, but it is rare that an Indigenous person takes that post and, even if they do, they find themselves coming into a structure that does not reflect the ways of organizing and working of their communities. All too often they have to change themselves and their way of thinking when it should be the conservation



organization that takes a look at itself and changes how it works to better reflect the communities it wants to work with. This should not just apply to specialist posts related to Indigenous Peoples but throughout the organization concerned. If you want to work with us to protect our forests and lands you must understand us and adapt yourself to our ways of working and living.

It is a struggle but we have many tools and arguments in our favour. It is clear that it is increasingly difficult to justify talking about so-called conservation without Indigenous organizations such as Gbabandi and our communities being a central part of the conversation. I think that with the involvement of state institutions and partners who are open and committed to revolutionizing the relationship between conservation and community rights at the level of Cameroon, and even at the subregional level, human rights issues in relation to conservation could improve in the future so that we will no longer need to speak of these violations against Indigenous communities or other local communities in protected areas. Modern conservation does not need to be militarized. Instead, it should be inspired by Indigenous ways of life and the strong relationship that we have with the forest. If conservation were participatory and inclusive, Indigenous Peoples could achieve a life that would enable the conservation and protection of animal and plant species for future generations whilst also benefiting communities today.

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