

Indigenous mobilization for community tenure-led conservation in Cameroon

By Timothée Emini, Cat Clarke & Cath Long, 12th May 2023

Indigenous forest peoples in Cameroon are taking the initiative when it comes to talking about how conservation of their ancestral forests should be practised. Our article documents how Gbabandi, Cameroon's national platform of forest Indigenous Peoples, initiated a process of dialogue with key conservation actors on their own terms, setting out their experience of so-called fortress conservation and opening up conversations about ways this could be challenged and changed.

The cultural survival of forest Indigenous Peoples is linked inextricably to the survival of the forest environment and many of their ancestral practices have been shown to contribute actively to biological diversity. 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. Many cases of physical abuse and attacks by ecoguards on community members have been recorded over several decades.

In our paper, we document a process initiated by Gbabandi, which sought to open dialogue with key conservation actors to work towards community-led, rights-based alternatives to fortress conservation in Cameroon.



Gbabandi preparatory meeting. Photos: Gbabandi.

In June 2021, Gbabandi invited key conservation actors to a 1-day listening event, where Baka and

Bagyeli community members from around the Campo Ma'an National Park, the Ngoyla Faunal Reserve and the Lobeke National Park in Cameroon gave testimonies of physical violence and abuse they had suffered in the name of conservation.

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.

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.



Gbabandi preparatory meeting. Photos: Gbabandi.

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.

As author Timothée Emini says: *"We could celebrate this event, but now we have to recognize that the change in discourse is just a starting point. We have to continue with other reflections, with other actions, so that on the ground real change materializes."*

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.

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.

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 benefitting communities today."



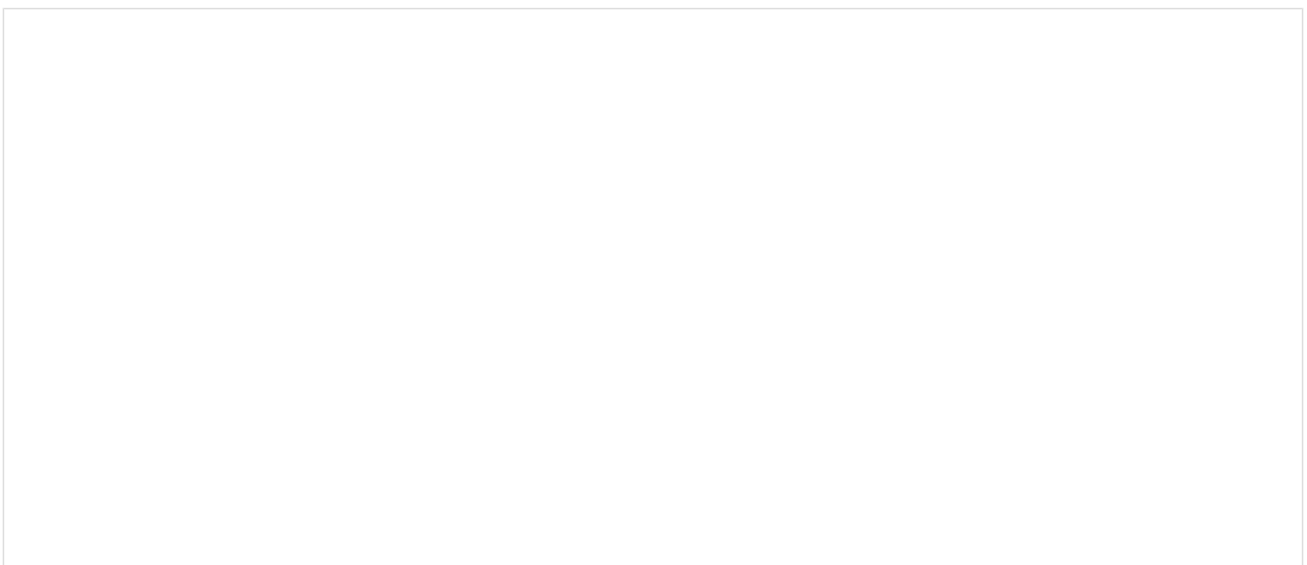
The 1-day listening event, held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in June 2021. Photos: Gbabandi.

Gbabandi's listening event was funded by a PCLG small grant. PCLG are launching a new small grants initiative for 2023 to fund locally-led action for people and great ape conservation in Cameroon, DRC and Uganda. Details of how to apply can be found [here](#) from 15th May 2023.

Gbabandi's website: <https://en.gbabandi.org>

Gbabandi's declarations: <https://en.gbabandi.org/declarations>

The article '[Ripples from a single stone: Indigenous mobilization for community tenure led conservation in Cameroon](#)' is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.





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