

CASE STUDY

Republic of Congo: TRIDOM II

Indigenous Rights Violations Lead to Project Closure

Social and Environmental Compliance Unit (SECU) -- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

SYNOPSIS

The TRIDOM II case underscores the critical importance of rigorously applying social and environmental safeguards in conservation projects affecting Indigenous lands and livelihoods. It demonstrates how well-intentioned initiatives—such as protected area expansion—can result in serious human rights violations when carried out without meaningful consultation or Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). In this case, the failure to recognize Indigenous tenure rights, conduct adequate risk screening, or develop an Indigenous Peoples Plan (IPP) created conditions for violence, exclusion, and marginalization under the guise of conservation. More broadly, the case exposes systemic weaknesses in oversight, partner accountability, and due diligence—particularly in government-implemented projects involving high-risk private sector actors.^{1 2}

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The *Integrated and Transboundary Conservation of Biodiversity in the TRIDOM Region (TRIDOM II)* was a UNDP-GEF initiative implemented by the Republic of Congo's Ministry of Forest Economy under a National Implementation Modality. The project aimed to reduce illegal wildlife trade—particularly bushmeat and ivory—through protected area expansion, promotion of sustainable livelihoods, and improved conservation governance across a tri-national forest landscape shared by Congo, Cameroon, and Gabon.

A central component of TRIDOM II was the proposed creation of **Messok Dja National Park**, a 144,000-hectare ecological corridor connecting key biodiversity zones in the Congo Basin. However, this initiative became controversial when **Baka Indigenous communities submitted a formal complaint to UNDP's Social and Environmental Compliance Unit (SECU)** in August 2018, supported by the NGO Survival International.

¹ UNDP-OAI, Social and Environmental Compliance Unit. 2020. Final Investigation Report Investigating allegations of non-compliance with UNDP social and environmental commitments relating to the following UNDP activities: Integrated and Transboundary Conservation of Biodiversity in the Basins of the Republic of Congo, TRIDOM II. https://info.undp.org/sites/registry/secu/SECU_Documents/SECU0009_Final%20Investigation%20Report0c492fa6e2084b6bae7015945cabe25f.pdf

² UNDP-OAI, Social and Environmental Compliance Unit. 2021. Closure note: Complaint from six Baka indigenous communities regarding UNDP's project "Integrated and Transboundary Conservation of Biodiversity in the Basins of the Republic of Congo, TRIDOM II. https://info.undp.org/sites/registry/secu/SECU_Documents/SECU0009%20Closure%20Note839ed6ad96cc44a493d2a70ac84e71c3.pdf

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMPLAINT

The Baka, a semi-nomadic Indigenous people with deep historical ties to the rainforest, alleged that the project facilitated the establishment of a protected area on their ancestral lands without their consent. They reported being:

- Denied access to forest resources essential to their livelihoods; and
- Subjected to intimidation and physical violence by eco-guards hired to patrol the area.

SECU registered the complaint in October 2018 and launched an investigation, including a field mission and a review of relevant project documentation.

COMPLIANCE REVIEW FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SECU concluded that UNDP failed to comply with its Social and Environmental Standards (SES), resulting in harm to Indigenous Peoples, insufficient risk mitigation, and inadequate oversight of high-risk private sector partnerships. **The review revealed systemic failures in safeguard implementation in complex conservation contexts.**

Key Findings:

- Ongoing reports of intimidation and abuse of Baka community members by eco-guards were found credible. While UNDP did not directly hire these personnel, it provided logistical and material support—including training, uniforms, and allowances—through a partnership with WWF-ETIC and the Government of Congo. This established a material link between UNDP-supported activities and the harm reported.
- The Social and Environmental Screening Procedure (SESP) was applied superficially. Based on unfounded assumptions that Indigenous communities would benefit from the project, the screening:
 - Failed to classify the project as high-risk;
 - Did not trigger Standard 6 (Indigenous Peoples);
 - Resulted in the absence of a social impact assessment;
 - Omitted the development of an Indigenous Peoples Plan;
 - Failed to secure FPIC from the Baka, despite clear and direct project impacts on their lands and livelihoods.
- The project also included partnerships with industrial logging and palm oil companies, sectors explicitly identified as high-risk under UNDP policy. Yet, no due diligence was carried out to assess their environmental or reputational risks. While these companies were not direct fund recipients, their involvement—given their role in deforestation and wildlife trafficking—was deeply problematic.

In light of the harm and institutional failings, **SECU recommended** that:

- UNDP Congo, in consultation with Baka communities and partners, provide appropriate in-kind or service-based support to address the impacts of violence, exclusion, and loss of livelihoods;

- Implement effective measures to prevent future acts of violence and ensure protection of Indigenous rights moving forward;
- Develop a Stakeholder Engagement Plan aligned with SES requirements;
- Create a participatory Indigenous Peoples Plan, informed by consultation with affected communities;
- Establish accessible, fair, and transparent grievance mechanisms for impacted populations;
- Conduct a due diligence assessment of private sector partners involved in or associated with the project;
- Document both direct and indirect environmental and social impacts of extractive activities linked to the project area.

CASE CLOSURE

In November 2020, following consultations with government and NGO stakeholders, GEF Council members, and the GEF Secretariat, the UNDP Administrator announced the formal closure of the TRIDOM II project, stating the need for a "fundamental reset". With the project terminated, SECU formally concluded its case review, bringing the compliance process to a close.