
Rwanda: Dispossessed Twa people press for recognition

The indigenous inhabitants of Rwanda are the Twa, a 'Pygmy' people who originally lived as hunters and gatherers in the high altitude forests around the lakes in the Albertine Rift area of central Africa, in the present-day countries of Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In some parts of DRC, Twa are still able to live a forest-based existence. However, in most other areas the Twa have had to abandon their traditional way of life as their forests have been destroyed by logging, agriculture and "development" projects. Wildlife conservation areas, established to protect gorilla populations and watersheds, have evicted Twa communities in Rwanda, DRC and Uganda even though the Twa traditionally do not hunt gorillas nor do their activities affect watershed functions. In common with many other Pygmy peoples, the Twas' rights to forest lands and resources are not recognised in customary or written law and the evictions took place without compensation or alternative land provision.

Rwanda's forests began to be felled centuries ago as incoming Hutu farmers and Tutsi herders cleared land for agriculture and pasture. Rwanda avoided the ravages of the Arab and European slave trades, and its population increased as other people sought refuge there. Local chiefs encouraged settlement on their lands because they gained power and revenues the more 'clients' they had. Rwanda's population increased from 1 million to 7 million from the 1940s to the 1980s. During the colonial period, land held by heads of clans was redistributed and from the 1960s onwards government policy encouraged farmers to expand into pastures, wetlands and forest areas such as around the Volcanoes National Park, and migrate east into less densely populated grazing lands. Between 1970 and 1986 the cultivated area increased by 56%, meanwhile the average land holdings had been steadily decreasing from 3 ha/family in 1949 to 0.7 ha in 1990. By the mid 1980s almost all land available for agriculture had been used up except for the areas under national parks.

Up to the end of the 1970s land distribution is considered to have been relatively equitable. Rwanda could feed its population; small farmers were more productive than larger ones. However, farmers' main method of increasing the production from ever decreasing plots of land was to reduce the fallow period, resulting in depletion of soil fertility.

Rwanda's population is now 8.3 million, with an average population density of 315 people per square kilometre (800 per sq km in the north-west) making it the most densely populated country in Africa. Ninety-one percent of the population depends on subsistence agriculture for survival. Landlessness and inequity in land distribution worsened after the mid 1980s as land was expropriated by government for middle-class housing, parastatal projects and industrial development. Land also became concentrated in the hands of the emerging wealthy elite who had off-farm incomes or were employed on the many foreign aid projects, and who were able to buy land off indebted or starving small farmers.

Rwanda's forests have been drastically reduced from approximately 30 percent at the beginning of the 20th century to 7 percent of the total land area. In 1934, the Mukuru–Gishwati–Volcans forest complex in the north of Rwanda was a single forest block of 833 square kilometres. By 1955, it was divided into three discrete patches, and by 1998, only 18 per cent of the original forest remained. The

largest forest in the south of the country, Nyungwe, lost 26 per cent of its area over the same period. Its area is now only 87,000 ha. Overall, 49 per cent of Rwanda's Afromontane forest disappeared between 1934 and 1998.

Clearance for farming and pasture land has contributed to the reduction in forest cover, as well as harvesting of fuel-wood and timber for housing and small scale mining. Production of export crops is also a factor in forest destruction: half the forests around the volcanoes in the north were cleared for pyrethrum plantations in the 1960s, and areas around the Nyungwe forest were cleared for tea estates. After the 1994 genocide, in which 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed by Hutu extremists, forests were further depleted by the establishment of fuel-hungry refugee camps just over the border in DRC and the need to rehabilitate thousands of refugees returning to Rwanda after long periods of exile. These refugees were mostly accommodated in former protected areas, including the Mutara Game Reserve, two-thirds of the Akagera National Park and the Gishwati Forest.

The loss of biological resources affects everyone in Rwanda, but especially the Twa who originally depended on the forest. The Twas' customary rights to forest lands were never recognised either by local rulers or under colonial laws, with the result that as the forest was cleared, the Twa became landless squatters except for a few families that were given land by Rwanda's former Kings, the Mwamis. The last forest-dwelling Twa, the Impunyu, were cleared from the Gishwati forest in the 1980s and 90s to make way for World Bank-financed projects aimed at relieving human pressure on forests by increasing the supply of wood products through industrial eucalyptus plantations and developing a productive dairy industry using pastures in degraded forest areas. Ironically, these projects were intended to protect the forest, but they had the opposite effect: by 1994 two-thirds of the original forest had been converted to pasture, almost all of which was allocated to friends and relations of the President. Throughout this process, the Twa received no compensation or remedial measures, nor were they included among the thousands of people employed by the projects. Returning refugees settling in the area and clearing land for subsistence farming have now effectively completely destroyed the forest.

Conservation projects removed Rwandan Twa communities from the Nyungwe forest reserve in 1998 and from the Parc des Volcans (the oldest park in Africa, created in 1924 as the Albert National Park). Older Twa living in southern Rwanda recall hunting for buffalo and elephant in the Nyungwe forest and taking the horns and tusks to the Mwami as tribute. Currently a mere handful of Twa are employed in the parks as casual labour or trackers; they have no involvement in park management or decision-making. While some conservation agencies are carrying out development projects that include Twa communities around the Parc des Volcans and Nyungwe forest, these generally don't address the fundamental issue of land and access to forest resources.

The land situation in Rwanda is acute and that of Rwanda's Twa is very precarious. In 1991 it was reported that nationally only 50-57 % of households had the minimum amount of land (0.7 ha) needed to feed the average household of 5 people. However for the Twa the situation is much worse --only 1.5% Twa households surveyed by the Forest Peoples Programme and Twa organisations in 1993 and 1997 had enough land to feed their families. Since colonial times there has been virtually no land distribution to the Twa: in 1995, 84% of landed Twa were still living on land given to them by the Mwamis. The Twas' political weakness makes them vulnerable to expropriation of their existing lands by neighbouring farmers and local authorities. The marshes providing clay for Twa communities' traditional pottery are often allocated by local authorities to other groups for farming.

The Twa are the poorest group in Rwandan society, lacking access to formal education, housing and health care. Few of them know how to farm, and most eke a living from pottery, casual labour and

begging. The Twa are marginalised and discriminated against because of their identity, and have virtually no representation in Rwanda's local or national administration or decision-making processes. The Twa were victims of the 1994 genocide, losing an estimated 30% of their population compared to 14% of the overall population. The Twas' losses have never been acknowledged by the post-genocide Rwandan government. They feel that they have been forgotten in the post-genocide reconstruction of Rwandan society.

However, over the past few years there have been some positive developments. Rwandan Twa have organised themselves, creating NGOs to press for improvements in the situation of the Twa. These organisations have made representations to the President of Rwanda and to the Commission charged with the revision of Rwanda's constitution, calling for affirmative action on land and education and requesting special measures for their representation in government processes. The Twa NGO 'CAURWA' is working with 70 local Twa associations, helping them to get land, learn how to farm and develop non-agricultural income generating activities such as tile-making, basketry and pottery. These activities are complemented by advocacy work at local, national and international level and community capacity building to enable the Twa to play an active role in national processes such as Rwanda's Poverty Reduction Strategy, the traditional gacaca courts that will judge the thousands of prisoners accused of genocide-related crimes and the national Unity and Reconciliation process, that seeks to heal the wounds caused by Rwanda's long history of ethnic strife.

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