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Displacement, food insecurity, and loss of traditional ecological knowledge among the Batwa of southwestern Uganda

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Abstract

The Batwa, an indigenous and marginalised minority community residing in Southwestern Uganda, were displaced following the implementation of the Ugandan government's 1990 biodiversity conservation policy. This displacement led to profound disruptions in their traditional food systems, livelihoods, and cultural continuity. Their removal without compensation or resettlement has resulted in persistent landlessness, livelihood precarity, and the erosion of traditional food systems. This study provides one of the first mixed-methods analyses linking the socio-economic conditions, food security status, and declining intergenerational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge among Batwa households in Kisoro and Rubanda Districts. Using a mixed-methods design, we conducted four key informant interviews (KIIs) and administered surveys to Batwa households (N = 67; 28 men and 39 women), employing the World Food Programme's Food Consumption Score (FCS). Results reveal that 75 % of the Batwa households rely primarily on casual labour, while only 16 % reported owning land. Food insecurity is severe: 59.7 % fall within poor or borderline Food Consumption Score categories, reflecting low dietary diversity and dependence on purchased food or labour exchange.

Traditional knowledge loss is pronounced: 85 % of individuals no longer consume forest foods, and 60 % no longer pass this knowledge on to youth. These findings demonstrate that displacement, restricted forest access, and structural marginalisation have simultaneously undermined food security and cultural continuity. These patterns, observed among the Batwa, reflect broader challenges faced by Indigenous communities worldwide under exclusionary, conservation-driven displacement. Integrated, culturally grounded interventions, especially securing land access and revitalising Indigenous food knowledge, are essential for equitable development outcomes and long-term food system resilience for the Batwa.

Keywords: Food security, forced displacement, indigenous food systems, land rights, traditional ecological knowledge, Uganda

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