

A Concept of developing collaboration between TOUR OPERATORS and BMCT to support the sustainable improvement of Batwa livelihoods around Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Since the 1990s conservation dispensation, the Batwa who occupied the national parks of Bwindi and Mgahinga were forced to leave these protected areas. The Batwa who were naturally hustling to survive by hunting and gathering fruits, honey, and other edible crops from the National Parks were therefore rendered homeless, and landless without any formal means of survival. Adapting to a new lifestyle by these people meant that they acquire basic skill sets to either find employment or start some income-generating activities. This could not happen because they lacked land and other capital assets. This made the Batwa live as beggars on the streets of Kisoro and other urban centers. It was in 1994 that the Government of Uganda and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) started Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust (BMCT) to conserve Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks in harmony with the development needs of the surrounding communities. Since then, BMCT pioneered rehabilitation of the Batwa by buying land (406 acres worth UGX one billion) in both Kisoro and Kanungu for 303 Households Out of about 900 households. So far 59 houses each with a latrine and a kitchen have been built for 59 households. Each of these house units cost UGX30 million. Since 1994, over 200 Batwa children were supported to attend school but most of them do not finish and continue. But each year we spend around UGX 200 million on education (school fees, scholastic materials, and food). The support for Batwa rehabilitation is still ongoing yet only BMCT is actually doing honest support amidst many opportunistic organizations and individuals to the benefit of the highly vulnerable Batwa minority. The opportunists exploit the situation of the Batwa vulnerability and they end up earning peanuts from payments by tourists towards their development initiatives.

1.2. The history of BMCT

Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust (BMCT) was established in 1994 by the Government of Uganda and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to conserve Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks, two critical forest habitats which provide a home to half of the world's remaining population of mountain gorillas in South Western Uganda.

Vision: To conserve the bio-diversity and ecosystem health of Mgahinga and Bwindi protected areas in harmony with the development needs of the surrounding communities.

Mission: To foster conservation of bio-diversity in Mgahinga and Bwindi protected areas through investment in community development projects, grants for research and ecological monitoring, funding park management and protection, and programmes that create greater conservation awareness.

BMCT has been at the forefront of supporting Batwa through projects like education sponsorship, agriculture and skilling youth but most importantly the buying land and resettling them. Since 2000, BMCT has purchased land for these Batwa both in Kisoro and Kanungu districts accumulating to **406** acres to date and **56** houses for Batwa families. However, despite these positive efforts, a lot is still required to transform Batwa lives.

1.3. Why build collaboration between tour operators and BMCT?

Building the collaboration between tour operators and BMCT to support sustainable livelihoods of Batwa is very important for long-term sustainable conservation. Although there is growing organizational support for Batwa's well-being, there are still sections of the public that view them as problematic, undeserving as well as ignored minorities. Some individuals have resorted to using BMCT achievements among the Batwa to falsely mobilize for resources but not take the resources to the destined Batwa beneficiaries. As such Batwa are just viewed as assets for money making.

Raising awareness about Batwa's wellbeing and their importance in society is a critical step to building a long-term conservation agenda largely for Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks which earn 70% of the entire tourism revenue in Uganda.

2.0 Problem statement

Tourist arrivals in 2021 for Bwindi impenetrable National Park was **10.1%** while for Mgahinga national park was **2.3%**. (MTWA analytical report 2021) The most marketed attraction for both these parks is Gorillas, very little effort has been put into marketing Batwa activities apart from a few Trails. As such, many a time, tourists miss out on a comprehensive indigenous Batwa experience because they have no guides or even knowledge of the existence of these Batwa activities. BMCT has thus identified an opportunity to improve the Batwa – Tourist experience by working with the tour operators. The revenues would be better controlled to benefit Batwa's livelihoods.

Batwa have the most interesting culture, language, artifacts, and general lifestyle and we believe that if they are well organized and connected to tour operators, they can be able to generate income from show-casing their lifestyles to the outside world.

Through this initiative, Batwa would have an opportunity to support conservation efforts since they would protect the natural resources around them as assets for exhibiting their uniqueness while earning some money. With such an alternative source of income, the Batwa would have no need to encroach on the environment or even become beggars.

2.1 Objectives of the collaboration

-  Mobilize financial resources to support sustainable Batwa livelihoods

- ✚ Generate revenues for Tour operators
- ✚ Diversify tourists' attractions to promote longer stays.
- ✚ Create employment for Batwa youth

2.2 Benefits of Batwa – Tour operators' collaboration

- ✚ Avenue through which tour operators can prolong tourists stay in Bwindi and Mgahinga area thus getting more money
- ✚ Recognition (locally & internationally) of Tour-operators that support Indigenous people's development
- ✚ Marketing tool for Batwa artifacts and culture
- ✚ Employment opportunity for Batwa youth as tour guides, translators and entertainers among others. Most of these are currently roaming aimlessly on the streets especially in Kisoro.
- ✚ ONLY avenue through which hotel owners that neighbor the Batwa communities can strengthen their relationship with Batwa thus productively gaining from their co-existence
- ✚ Boost sales for other businesses e.g. Hotels, food stalls and other services.
- ✚ An avenue to interest tourists for homestays with the Batwa families.
- ✚ Linkages to other projects that can support the improvement of Batwa lives e.g. education and livelihood projects.

2.3 Economic Feasibility of Tour operators – Batwa collaborations

- ✚ Batwa Home stays.
- ✚ Sale of Batwa artifacts and goods
- ✚ Batwa dances and drama
- ✚ Batwa cultural trail experience
- ✚ Batwa visits payment commission

2.4 Activities that show collaboration

- ✚ Stakeholders Consultations meeting
- ✚ Map out Batwa activities that are worth showcasing.
- ✚ Batwa training on managing tourists
- ✚ Training on Batwa crafts improvement
- ✚ Develop Batwa support pledge app./ website hosted by BMCT.

Developed by BMCT

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