

## Mapping Indigenous Land to Promote Conservation and Secure Land Rights

**TIMBY and the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) are working with the Indigenous Sengwer community to create detailed maps of their ancestral land**

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Maps have been -- and continue to be -- an important tool in determining access and use of land for millions of people in Kenya. Through their impact on making large areas 'legible' to authorities who may be living thousands of miles away, maps can have an outsized influence on policy both during and after the colonial period in Kenya. However, what is drawn on a map is not necessarily reflective of the actual, and often complex dynamics of the land being represented. In Kenya, the formalization of land-ownership was distinctive for who it left out in the process of moving from ownership in the eyes of those living on the land, to ownership in the eyes of the national government.

Indigenous communities were especially vulnerable to pressure from colonial authorities seeking to appropriate and re-distribute land to those favoured by the administration, and communities often faced forced evictions if they resisted this dispossession. For the Sengwer community in Kenya, their ancestral land within the Cherangany ecosystem was mapped and claimed by colonial authorities during the 20th Century and turned into highland farms, while forested areas were designated as protected areas. However, unlike other

communities living in the area, the Sengwer weren't allocated any reserve land. After Kenya gained its independence in 1963, Sengwer land that had earlier been appropriated by colonial administrators was opened up to other communities. The Sengwer, with no representation in the new government, had little influence and consequently little ability to reclaim this land.

While many other indigenous communities in Kenya had their tenure formalized following independence from the British, the Sengwer did not. They were thus perceived by the newly established Kenyan government as illegal squatters in Embobut Forest. Since the 1970s, this has culminated in government efforts to forcibly remove the Sengwer from these lands. Evictions have recently intensified due to renewed interest in conserving Embobut linked to the launch of the World Bank's Natural Resource Management Project (NRMP) and subsequently the EU Water Tower Protection and Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Project (WaTER).

In response to the threat of evictions and the risk from continuing environmental degradation of Embobut, the Sengwer are working to create a detailed map of their land to support the process of securing tenure, and facilitate efforts to conserve and restore key areas in the forest.

### Participatory Mapping Methods

In January 2019, representatives of the Sengwer came together for a community mapping workshop led by Tom Rowley (a GIS expert from FPP) in Eldoret to create detailed maps of their ancestral land and trace out the zonation areas described in their by-laws, which set out specific activities permitted in the various parts of Embobut such as habitation, grazing, rehabilitation.

Initially, the community created a list of areas and locations important to the Sengwer such as sacred sites, swamps, and habitation. These points, as well as named river and streams, were then located on a 3D terrain model created from sub-meter resolution imagery of Embobut Forest provided by Planet Labs, with supplementary imagery from Google Earth and other sources. Participants then marked all the locations referred to in the Sengwer by-laws and traced areas that were designated for rehabilitation, conservation, sustainable use, grazing, and habitation.

To supplement this session, fieldwork with handheld GPS units was undertaken to collect data which was used to check and improve the accuracy of this traced boundaries. The results confirmed the accuracy with which the community had located features of interest on the aerial imagery, while also adding several points that had not been captured during the workshop. Following a few adjustments to the map, the map was reviewed by the participants who agreed they were happy with the map as drawn so far.

In July 2019, a further mapping workshop was conducted in Eldoret, reconvening members of the community to supplement and expand upon the map created in January. This time, with the help of data from reports collected by community monitors over the preceding 6 months, the participants were able to identify additional features that were missed during the initial mapping exercise. The workshop further allowed the community to expand on some of the mapping of surface water areas such as rivers and swamps, and validate the boundaries of zonation areas in their bylaws.

The product of these 6 months of work is a set of detailed maps of Sengwer land inside Embobut forest that has been able to provide officials in the county and national government with visibility into the areas occupied by the Sengwer community and help counter narratives that Sengwer were no longer living in Embobut. The maps are also proving essential as the Sengwer build support and compliance with their community bylaws, giving Sengwer a visual representation of the standards around conservation and responsible use of land to which they are working to sustain.