

Response to 'Is the Displacement of People from Parks only 'Purported' or is it Real?' (Schmidt-Soltau 2009)

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INTRODUCTION

The debate concerning the conservation-related displacement of people in Central Africa remains strongly polarised. In an earlier paper (Curran *et al.* 2009), we made a clear plea for in-depth, multi-disciplinary research to provide factual assessments of the extent of physical and economic displacements which Kai Schmidt-Soltau and colleagues have referred to in a series of papers (Schmidt-Soltau 2003, 2004, 2005a, b, Brockington 2004, Brockington and Igoe 2006, Brockington *et al.* 2006, Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2003a, b, 2006, Schmidt-Soltau and Brockington 2004, 2007). We also stressed the need to find some 'common ground' that would allow all of us concerned with this issue to work together in the interests of both biodiversity conservation and human development.

The accusation by Schmidt-Soltau (2009) that conservation organisations willfully continue to commit 'human rights violations' in Central Africa is, in our view, not true. We do not dispute that there are examples from around the world where conservation projects have not respected peoples' rights in the past, and we believe that lessons have been learned and that the conservation approach has shifted accordingly. But citing

isolated incidents between government agents and members of local communities as proof of ongoing, systematic abuse of human rights falls well short of contributing to finding acceptable solutions to these conflicts. Furthermore, we disagree with Schmidt-Soltau's (2009) suggestion that it does not really matter how many people are affected, as long as some negative impact can be demonstrated somewhere, while at the same time continuing to cite inflated figures. In short, he provides no compelling evidence to support his claims that hundreds of thousands of rural poor are being displaced by conservation in Central Africa (Schmidt-Soltau 2003, Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2006).

We feel compelled to address issues of terminology here, because misuse of words can lead to confusion about what is actually happening on the ground in Central Africa. The use of words like 'cleanse' (Schmidt-Soltau 2005a) to describe conservation activities is inflammatory and objectionable. We accept current definitions of 'displacement' which include peoples who have been impacted economically by the creation of protected areas. However, we do not think it appropriate to equate 'expulsion' of peoples or settlements (Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2006), 'brutal eviction' (Schmidt-Soltau 2009), 'physical displacement' (Schmidt-

Soltau 2003) or even ‘resettlement’ (Schmidt-Soltau and Brockington 2007) with instances where communities have lost access to resources, as each of these terms implies the physical relocation of peoples from their homes, which is a rare occurrence in Central Africa. Furthermore, even the question of ‘voluntary’ vs. ‘involuntary’ resettlement in Central Africa is largely irrelevant, as communities are not being moved to make way for protected areas (see the discussion on Korup National Park in Curran *et al.* 2009 for an exception). The issue which must be addressed is whether the creation of protected areas is negatively impacting *hundreds of thousands* of people in central Africa through lost access to natural resources. As discussed below, there are no data to support this claim. Based on our knowledge of the region we find it quite implausible.

It is important to note that the paper by Curran *et al.* (2009) was not written by a group of ‘hardcore conservationists’ who do not understand social science methods, as Schmidt-Soltau (2009) contends. The authors come from a wide range of disciplines: anthropology (Curran, Telfer), rural development (von Loebenstein, Roth), social science (Asaha, Defo), forestry and livelihoods (Sunderland, Balinga) as well as biology (Oates, Dunn, Maisels and Usongo). These authors also represent a breadth of institutions (GTZ, IUCN, CIFOR, FOREP – a local Cameroon NGO – as well as WCS, WWF and academia), hence, it is also incorrect to state that the majority of the authors are in the employ of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) (Schmidt-Soltau 2009: 47).

We collectively respect the fundamental rights of all peoples and value their tenure and use of important resources, and we regret that misrepresentations regarding conservation and displacement in Central Africa continue to gain traction in the literature. For example, in a recently published book entitled *Conservation Refugees* (Dowie 2009), the author falsely claims that in 2005 a ‘blanket, nationwide ban on hunting’ was imposed in the Republic of Congo ‘at the behest of WCS’ (Dowie 2009: 72). WCS never proposed such a ban, nor was it ever enacted (one can only assume this refers to the annual closed hunting season, a common wildlife management tool used the world over), yet these accusations persist. It is this fundamental issue of lack of scholarly rigour which we can no longer ignore that precipitated the in-depth clarifications presented by Curran *et al.* (2009).

The Schmidt-Soltau (2009) response focuses on our original paper on the subject (Maisels *et al.* 2007), which was published both online (ISSN 1534-7389) and in an edited volume in a WCS Working Paper Series (ISSN 1530-4426). Schmidt-Soltau (2009) does not address many of the more substantive and more thoroughly researched factual issues presented in Curran *et al.* (2009), despite being invited to do so by the editors of *Conservation and Society*. He thus ignores the issues we raised concerning forestry concessions, inequity in resource allocation (notably forestry taxes, elite capture and outright corruption), the failure of community forestry and inadequate law enforcement (a problem which affects protected areas even in developed nations; see Stern 2009).

The central message of both of our papers is that Schmidt-Soltau does not provide any facts to prove his statements, nor does he elaborate upon the methods he used to substantiate his accusations.

It is important to understand in more detail where Schmidt-Soltau got his figures from and which methods he used. He only states that the data which form the basis of his papers were based on ‘rough estimates and extrapolations’ (Schmidt-Soltau 2005b: 285, 2009: 47), which is not a scientifically sound basis for reaching the conclusions that he presents in his papers. It is unfortunate that the resulting publications based on these ‘baseline data’ leave the impression that estimates related to physical and economic displacement were based on thorough surveys and rigorous scholarship. As both Maisels *et al.* (2007) and Curran *et al.* (2009) point out, this is not the case. It should not be acceptable to simply claim, for example, that ‘3,000 people in “pygmy-bands” were expelled’ when Nouabale Ndoki National Park was created (Schmidt-Soltau 2003, Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2006). This is just one example amongst others where Schmidt-Soltau’s ‘rough estimates and extrapolations’ have no basis in fact, as emphasised by Curran *et al.* (2009).

Another example of this lack of thoroughness concerns the creation of the 13 National Parks in Gabon in 2002. We previously made the claim (Maisels *et al.* 2007 and Curran *et al.* 2009) that not a single person has been physically removed from any of these parks, yet, in contrast, Schmidt-Soltau states that 14,000 people have been ‘displaced’ (leaving the reader with the impression that at least some of the displaced were expelled from their villages). We stand by our assertion regarding the complete lack of physical displacement, and challenge Schmidt-Soltau to explain exactly which villages he has studied around which of these 13 National Parks, and what methods he used to measure how people were supposedly being economically displaced. In his response to our paper, he cites a number of papers which purportedly support his conclusions, but in fact do not. Blaney *et al.* (1998) and Blaney and Thibault (2001) were both written before the National Parks were created in Gabon, so it is difficult to understand how they could support Schmidt-Soltau’s assertions. The Angoué *et al.* (2002) paper is a socio-economic study commissioned by the Gabonese government and conservation NGOs that was intended to evaluate the potential impacts of creating the parks on local communities, and nowhere does it refer to anyone being displaced, involuntarily or otherwise. While the design of the Gabonese National Park system intentionally sought to create parks where there were no settlements, in the case of the Moukalaba-Doudou National Park, this was unavoidable and four villages remain within the park boundaries. Ironically, and in contrast to what has been published by Schmidt-Soltau – the socio-economic study by Mboulou (2005) shows that in villages in and around the park, standards of living, as measured by the number of houses with tin roofs, and the numbers of schools, health clinics and wells, have all demonstrably improved between 1999 and 2005. Mboulou (2005) also makes no mention of displacement and thus it is not true that

this is an area where human rights violations are underway, nor are people being driven to poverty by their proximity to the National Park, as Schmidt-Soltau (2009) claims.

The Curran *et al.* (2009) paper states clearly that for many sites, the data necessary to make any confident assessment of how many people have been economically displaced (and this is, after all, the real issue, since people are not being physically resettled) by the creation of protected areas are inadequate. This is the reason why the Curran *et al.* (2009) paper does not provide figures to refute those listed by Schmidt-Soltau and his collaborators in their numerous papers: the data simply do not exist for most of these protected areas. We discussed in detail the type of research that would be needed to evaluate the real impact of protected areas on local livelihoods. Yet Schmidt-Soltau goes so far as to belittle our efforts to measure the impact of protected areas in Gabon on local communities, suggesting that because we are ‘natural scientists’ using ‘natural science methodologies’ (Schmidt-Soltau 2009: 47) we are incapable of undertaking this research (this despite the multi-disciplinarity of the authors of Curran *et al.* 2009). In fact, to ensure that the human welfare metrics assessed in this ‘People and Parks’ study (e.g. consumption, health, education, social relations, income and wealth, etc.) were valid and accepted by a broad constituency, World Bank guidelines for assessing impoverishment risks associated with projects were used (Cernea and McDowell 2000), and a panel of experts drawn from cultural and economic anthropology (Drs. Katherine Homewood and Ricardo Godoy), household economics (Drs. Dean Karlan and Paul Glewwe), and public health (Dr. William Leonard) were consulted (See Wilkie *et al.* 2007 for further details on this study). It is absurd for Schmidt-Soltau to suggest that our attempt to measure the socio-economic impact of protected areas on communities in Gabon ‘exposes people to unmitigated harm just to see how they cope with it’ (Schmidt-Soltau 2009: 47), as though there was an intent to undertake experiments on human subjects.

In the initial paragraph of his response to the Curran *et al.* (2009) paper Schmidt-Soltau (2009: 46) asserts that ‘my critics claim that not a single person was displaced from at least ten of the twelve protected areas covered in our 1996-2007 research’. The issue here is fundamental; what Maisels *et al.* (2007) and Curran *et al.* (2009) state clearly and unambiguously is that there has been no forced or involuntary physical displacement of the type suggested in the numerous papers published by Schmidt-Soltau and his co-workers. This may seem like a semantic detail, and it is clearly an issue which is obfuscated in the Schmidt-Soltau (2009) response to Curran *et al.* (2009), but it underpins the arguments on both sides of the debate. Schmidt-Soltau and colleagues frequently remind their readers of the meaning of the term ‘displacement’ as it has evolved over time, yet they have no qualms about using terms like ‘brutal eviction’ (Schmidt-Soltau 2009: 48) as if they have the same meaning. Through our familiarity with the region (we have over 100 years combined experience actually working in these sites for protracted periods), we can assert unequivocally that the

claims by Schmidt-Soltau of forced resettlement through contemporary conservation efforts in Central Africa are fundamentally untrue. We do not dispute that protected areas have the *potential* to create negative economic impacts for people (‘displacement’ as it is currently defined), but we do not accept that hundreds of thousands of conservation ‘refugees’ are being economically displaced by conservation projects.

Schmidt-Soltau’s claim that ‘governments...hardly know what the NGOs are doing in the protected areas’ (Schmidt-Soltau 2009: 47) is completely baseless. Conservation NGOs do not manage protected areas, governments do. The sites where conservation NGOs work often have multiple government personnel assigned to the protected area management team, and almost universally there are annual planning meetings between government, international NGOs, local civil society, indigenous peoples and other relevant stakeholders. Conservation and development NGOs provide technical assistance to governments in Central Africa, and operate transparently, despite Schmidt-Soltau’s claims to the contrary. Schmidt-Soltau (2009) mentions ‘trade-offs’ in the context of carbon trading, an issue not discussed at all in our paper. We refer to trade-offs as the contrasting and often conflicting issues related to attempting to integrate conservation and development outcomes. This is an acknowledged problem, and a very real predicament for the management of complex tropical landscapes. Indeed the organisation ‘Advancing Conservation in a Social Context’ (ACSC) has a significant programme researching this very problem (see: <http://www.tradeoffs.org/static/index.php>) and is considered to be a pioneer in their attempts at understanding how to make trade-offs between conservation and development more explicit to better reconcile outcomes between the two. In the new CIFOR strategy, one of the six new research domains is ‘Managing the trade-offs between conservation and development at the landscape scale,’ which posits that the issues of conservation, human rights and land tenure are inextricably interlinked. The trade-offs discussed in the context of Curran *et al.* (2009) are very different to those related to forcible relocation of local people in the Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda which Schmidt-Soltau refers to in his response.

Banks, donors and other organisations have clear and unambiguous policies related to dislocation and resettlement, and to suggest that the large conservation NGOs have no similar policies is simply not true. These are clearly acknowledged in the Curran *et al.* (2009) paper with reference to a recently-published CIFOR/IUCN book on conservation and human rights (Campese *et al.* 2009)¹, where Siegele *et al.* (2009) elaborate on ‘who says what’ related to human rights and conservation and provide a comprehensive overview of both legislative frameworks as well as institutional guidelines. We believe in the search for the common ground which can reconcile conservation objectives and local development priorities in a socially responsible fashion, and we intend to continue to pursue those outcomes in conservation projects throughout Central Africa.

Notes

1. See also the IUCN/WCPA/WWF (1996) Principles and Guidelines on Indigenous and Traditional Peoples and Protected Areas: Joint Policy Statement <http://www.worldwildlife.org/indigenous/policies/index.cfm>

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