



September 30, 2025

## COMMUNIQUE: UGANDANS CANNOT TRUST STUDIES AND FINDINGS BY TOTALENERGIES ON OIL IMPACTS ON MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK

### 1. INTRODUCTION

On September 23, 2025, Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO) held meetings with oil-affected communities from Hoima and Buliisa districts. Among others, the meetings discussed the environmental, social and economic challenges faced by communities due to the ongoing oil exploitation activities in Uganda. AFIEGO also held discussions on the aforementioned subject with civil society partners.

The meetings and discussions were organised following an article titled, *Murchison Falls Wildlife Safe from Oil Activities –Experts*, being published in the *New Vision* newspaper of August 28, 2025. In the article, the *New Vision* informed the public that TotalEnergies in partnership with Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), Uganda Conservation Society, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and others had conducted a survey and concluded that oil activities under the Tilenga oil project were not having a negative impact on wildlife in Murchison Falls National Park (MFNP).

Oil-affected community members and civil society groups discussed the above survey and observed as follows.

### 2. OBSERVATIONS

- (a) **Elephant movements:** First, the community members and civil society partners noted that the *New Vision* reported that experts had collared 15 elephants in MFNP in 2020 and monitored their movements. The experts reportedly observed that none of the collared

elephants were seen grazing outside of the park ecosystem, leading them to conclude that oil activities were not affecting the movement of elephants.

- (b) **Community complaints:** The survey came after communities that live near MFNP in Buliisa and Nwoya districts complained about an increase in elephant-human conflicts after oil activities started in MFNP. At a public hearing that was held on the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) for TotalEnergies' Tilenga oil project in Nwoya district in November 2018, community leaders observed that communities had experienced more elephant-human conflicts since oil activities started, which had led to the destruction of croplands.
- (c) **Deaths experienced:** Further, communities in Buliisa district started complaining about increased elephant-human conflicts resulting in death in 2022. Since then, seven people in Buliisa have died due to the conflicts. Two others have been injured. In addition, by April 2025, over 612 claims by community members who lost crops to elephant-human conflicts in only one village in Buliisa district had been filed with village leaders. Owing to all the above, community and civil society members wondered why the survey sponsored by TotalEnergies concluded that oil exploitation activities had not affected the movement of elephants.
- (d) **Skepticism:** The community members and civil society partners expressed skepticism about the independence of the results. They noted that TotalEnergies, which is conducting oil exploitation activities in a critical ecosystem, cannot sponsor parties to undertake studies that present trusted findings. The communities and civil society partners reminded themselves that he/she who pays the piped piper calls the tune. As a result, any study sponsored by TotalEnergies is unlikely to indict the company, saying that its activities have led to a change in the movement of elephants.
- (e) **Maize-loving gentle giants:** The communities and civil society partners took note of the fact that the survey indicates that elephants move out of the park. The collared elephants had not moved out of the park, but others had. To explain this, the survey indicated that this is due to natural factors such as variations in water and food availability. UWA reportedly observed that elephants love maize, and are attracted by the aroma of maize that is grown by communities around the park.
- (f) **Community deaths coincide with oil activities:** On the above, the communities and civil society partners wondered why the increase in elephant-human conflicts coincided with the increase in oil exploitation activities in MFNP. The highest number of deaths arising from elephant-human conflicts in Buliisa occurred in 2024, when four deaths were registered. In 2024, oil drilling and construction of various oil sector infrastructure was ongoing in the park.

- (g) **Elephants moving from oil activities:** The community members and civil society partners reminded themselves that in 2015, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) published findings from an evaluation of the impacts of oil activities on elephants in MFNP<sup>1</sup>. WCS observed as follows, “[evaluations of the impact of] ... oil and gas exploration and seismic surveys on elephants in the Murchison Falls National Park ... shows that elephants are reacting negatively to the oil developments. Elephants were shown to move away from well pad sites while under construction and when they were being drilled as much as 5 kilometres away from the pad.”
- (h) **Difference in findings:** WCS further observed that “Ranges of elephants changed in relation to the seismic exploration and well pad developments and could be predicted 60% of the time by oil activities and only 30% of the time by factors that might normally predict ranging such as habitat and distance to water.” Only one elephant had habituated to the oil and gas activities. The community members and civil society partners that discussed Total’s survey wondered why Total’s survey findings differed from the study by WCS.
- (i) **Need for independent multi-stakeholder committee:** The community members and civil society partners observed that the above question cannot be answered by surveys sponsored by Total or other parties with vested interests. They noted that an incorruptible and independent multi-stakeholder committee comprised of local and international biodiversity experts, community representatives, civil society, religious leaders and cultural leaders needed to be permitted to conduct independent assessments. Permits to conduct assessments are often limited to entities working for TotalEnergies.
- (j) **Biodiversity net-gain?** Away from the above, the communities and civil society partners that discussed Total’s survey took note of the fact that a study to assess the stress levels of wildlife in MFNP had been conducted, and the results were shared by Total. Clinical tests of various wildlife’s fecal matter were reportedly conducted, and these tests showed that the wildlife in MFNP was not stressed. Surveys to ascertain the wildlife population in the park also reportedly showed that there were an estimated 206 lions, 249 spotted hyenas and 71 leopards. This led to Total concluding that they were set to leave the park with more wildlife, contributing to biodiversity net gain.
- (k) **Climate change affecting wildlife:** The community members and civil society partners once again noted the need for an independent assessment of the above assertions. They also wondered why TotalEnergies and its partners did not discuss the impact of climate change on wildlife in the park. They reminded themselves that climate change, which is driven by fossil fuel companies such as TotalEnergies, had affected breeding grounds for crocodiles and the population of hippopotami in MFNP. The community members and civil society

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<sup>1</sup>WCS; *Evaluation of oil impacts on elephants shows changes in their behaviour*: <https://uganda.wcs.org/Admin-Plus/News-Manager/ID/8280/Evaluation-of-oil-impacts-on-elephants-shows-changes-in-their-behaviours.aspx>

partners noted that reports<sup>2</sup> showed that climate-induced flooding that took place in 2020 and 2021 affected breeding grounds of crocodiles after the floods buried the sand where the crocodiles lay their eggs.

- (l) **Reduction in hippo population:** In relation to hippos, the community members and civil society partners recalled that in 2023, UWA reported that the population of hippopotami in MFNP had reduced owing to poaching. Climate-induced floods in the park also saw hippos, which live in shallow waters, lose their habitat when water levels in the park increased.
- (m) **Restrictions on game drives:** Before making recommendations, the communities and civil society partners noted that there were some restrictions for tourists in the park, with some tracks where oil activities are ongoing being closed off to tourists. Moreover, while the aforementioned survey sponsored by Total showed that the population of various wildlife species was healthy, some tour operators and tourists who visited the park observed that it is sometimes much harder to sight some wildlife in the park.
- (n) **Harassment, intimidation, and arrest:** Amidst the above, those who speak out about the biodiversity risks and social impacts of oil activities suffer harassment, intimidation and arrests. Over 222 people were arrested between 2021 and August 2025 because they were either critical of oil activities, or they protested against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP).

### 3. CALL FOR ACTION

At the end of their meetings and discussions, the following recommendations for action by government and its agencies were made:

- i) **Government should urgently establish a multi-stakeholder monitoring committee to oversee the operations of TotalEnergies and its subcontractors in MFNP.** The committee should be comprised of the following people or groups: one civil society member, one Uganda Law Society senior lawyer, one Senior Engineer, two credible retired judges, one Inter-Religious Council member, as well as two government officials from UWA and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA). These should have clear terms of reference to monitor the compliance of oil companies with ESIA certificate conditions.
- ii) **Government should commission independent studies** by working with the above committee. The study or studies should investigate the impacts of oil activities on wildlife and other biodiversity in MFNP. The studies should also assess why elephant-human conflicts are increasing in communities around MFNP, why there are

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<sup>2</sup> The Elephant; *Climate change flooding affecting reproduction rate of the Nile Crocodiles:*  
<https://theelephant.co.ug/climate-changeflooding-affecting-reproduction-rate-of-the-nile-crocodiles-at-murchison-np/>

complaints by some tour operators and tourists on more limited sightings of wildlife in the park, the impact of oil roads in the park on wildlife, the impact of the Victoria Nile Pipeline crossing which is in the area of influence of a Ramsar site and others.

- iii) Stop all oil activities in MFNP:** While the committee is being put in place and the study or studies are being undertaken, government should stop all oil activities in the park. If government wants to develop tourism and increase tourism sector revenues to USD 5 billion by 2040 as per the National Development Plans (NDP) IV, government must stop all oil activities in MFNP.

## **SIGNATORIES**

1. Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO)
2. Fridays for Future Uganda (FFFU)
3. Youth for Green Communities (YGC)
4. Environment Governance Institute (EGI)
5. Centre for Environmental Research and Agriculture Innovations (CERAI)
6. African Initiative on Food Security and Environment (AIFE-Uganda)
7. Oil Refinery Residents Association (ORRA-Uganda)
8. East African Crude Oil Pipeline Host Communities (EACOPHC)
9. Strategic Response on Environment Conservation (STREC)
10. Friends with Environment in Development (FED)
11. Initiative for Green Planet (IGP)
12. Nature Talk Africa (NaTA)
13. Youth for Nature Conservancy (YNC)
14. Youth Concern on Environment and Development (YCED)
15. Liberty Pro Bono Initiative (LPI)
16. South Western Institute for Policy and Advocacy (SOWIPA)
17. Women on Environment Mission (WEM-Uganda)
18. Youth for Environmental Justice and Climate Action (YECA)
19. Civic Response on Environment and Development (CRED)
20. Tasha Research institute Africa
21. Health Equity and Policy Initiative
22. Buliisa Patience Alliance Group (BUPAG)
23. Environmental Conservation Agency Group (ECAG)
24. Buliisa Natural Climate Conservation Agency (BUNCCA)