

# SEEING PEOPLE THROUGH THE TREES: SCALING UP EFFORTS TO ADVANCE RIGHTS AND ADDRESS POVERTY, CONFLICT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

## KEY FINDINGS

- Rapidly growing world demand for food, fibre, and bioenergy could lead to a global land grab, with severe consequences for many of the world's poorest people, particularly those occupying forest lands.
- Recognizing and strengthening the property rights of forest-dwelling communities, including indigenous peoples, is the first and most important step towards averting the social and environmental disasters that a global land grab could invoke.
- There is tremendous scope for investments aimed at mitigating and adapting to climate change that strengthen local land rights, reduce rural poverty and conflict, protect remaining natural forest areas, and restore degraded forest areas.

## THREATS TO FORESTS AND PEOPLE

The world is arguably on the verge of the last great land grab. As world demand for food, fibre, and bioenergy escalates, so too does the value of land. By 2030 the world is likely to need 515 million more hectares to grow food and biofuels, twice the amount of additional land that will be available. It is quite possible that, over the next several decades, investors and governments will take advantage of the unclear and insecure property rights prevailing in many rural areas, ignore the customary ownership and protests of local people, and divvy up and lay claim to the remaining public forest domain.

Should this scenario unfold, the world's poor will be unable to hold on to their only real capital asset—their land. The risk is high that millions of forest-dwelling people will be pushed further into poverty and conflict and that distinct cultures will be forced into extinction.

How tensions over forest lands play out will influence the severity of climate change, the course of wars and civil conflicts, and the ecological health of the planet. Yet few development interventions in forest areas have worked in favor of either the forest dwellers or the forests. A new approach and urgent action are needed.

## **LOCAL RIGHTS**

Recognizing and securing land rights, strengthening civil rights, and introducing more democratic governance systems in forest areas are critical not just for moral reasons but also for achieving national and global social, economic and environmental goals. They are fundamental to any viable strategy for dealing with the biggest challenges of the 21st century: climate change, poverty, conflict, and environmental degradation.

For many forest-dwelling communities, however, property rights are undermined by inappropriate regulatory frameworks that either fail to uphold the principles of rights, or impose rules and bureaucratic processes that are burdensome to communities and counterproductive to the enforcement of their rights.

## **REASONS FOR HOPE**

Despite the obstacles, forest dwellers and other rural peoples are organizing themselves and gaining strength—both to advance their political and social agendas and to engage more effectively in economic activities that enhance their wellbeing. These steps are aided by improved communication and transparency and the availability of new rural mapping tools.

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Some governments are beginning to recognize the territorial rights of local communities and to clarify the property rights of households and individual citizens. Over the last two decades, local communities and indigenous people have won back rights to an increasingly large area of forest land.

## **LIMITED RIGHTS = POVERTY, CONFLICT AND LOW ECONOMIC GROWTH**

But even where indigenous and traditional land and property rights are recognized, such rights rarely provide the same level of protection as other private property. Private rights, including to

private property held by groups, are more robust and less easily controlled or expropriated by governments or more powerful actors. Communities that hold private rights have more leverage when negotiating with governments or outside investors than those communities with only long-term access rights to publicly held land.

### **Poverty**

Insecure or limited property rights over forest lands and resources create and sustain poverty because they discourage customary owners from putting their assets to best use. Moreover, the poorest in many communities are unable to protect their interests against outsiders and local elites, who can take advantage of insecure customary regimes to privatize commonly held resources and otherwise capture benefits.

### **Low growth**

A recent analysis of economic growth in 73 countries over the period 1960 to 2000 found that countries with inequitable initial land distribution grew at less than half the rate of those countries with more equitable land distribution.<sup>1</sup> Low economic growth in forest areas, therefore, is perpetuated by the continued preference of governments for industrial concessions and indifference towards community claims. Secure property rights, on the other hand, would give landholders the confidence and motivation to make investments, enable them to obtain loans by using land titles as collateral, and encourage external investment.

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### **Conflict**

Grievances over the allocation of natural resources frequently lead to violent conflicts, many of which have their roots in the colonial and post-colonial appropriation of land from local communities. In mid 2008, at least 71 violent conflicts were underway worldwide, around two-thirds of which were driven by contested land rights claims.<sup>2</sup>

## **CLIMATE CHANGE AND LOCAL RIGHTS**

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change articulates two approaches for addressing climate change: *mitigation*, or reducing emissions and increasing carbon

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<sup>1</sup> Deininger, Klaus. 2003. Land policies for growth and poverty reduction. Washington DC: World Bank and Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Alden Wily, Liz. 2008. Current Conflicts around the World. Forthcoming.

sequestration, and *adaptation*, or adjusting to the changing climate. Forest management will play a key role in both.

There is tremendous scope for making climate-related investments in a manner that strengthens local rights, reduces rural poverty and conflict, protects remaining natural forest areas, and restores degraded forest areas. Properly devised participatory forest projects would be a low-cost option for reducing emissions, sequestering additional carbon, and increasing adaptive capacity.

Two sets of action are required. The first would focus on securing ownership and civil rights for forest communities and indigenous people. The second would focus on the creation of governance structures to enable local people to effectively use and benefit from their property rights.

Neither is easy. Decisions on property and broader human and civil rights are challenging in the best of circumstances. In forest areas, the circumstances are usually far from optimal. Forest agencies are often captive to conventional ideas and overwhelmed by challenges that lie beyond the bounds of the forest sector. Overlapping jurisdictions between governmental ministries and departments can paralyse initiatives. Bureaucratic efficiency can be further crippled by a lack of funds and low capacity, and well-intentioned efforts can be distorted and undermined by poor governance and corruption.

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## **STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS**

In coming decades, governments and the private sector will spend billions of dollars on energy, food, and climate-related projects in or near forest areas. Those projects will only be effective and long-lasting, and will only avoid contributing to resentment and conflict, if they help repair the system of governance and restore rights to forest communities.

To ensure the greatest possible positive impact, the global development community should, in the near term, pursue the following strategic directions.

**Prioritize big emitters:** Brazil, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Peru and Zambia account for two-thirds of global emissions from land-use change. Some of these countries are also taking important steps to address forest tenure and therefore should be targeted for the first wave of serious investment in

reforming property rights and governance. Success would not just be symbolic—it would make a substantial difference to forest carbon emissions.

**Support vulnerable countries:** International forest-related support to very poor forested countries, such as Benin, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria and Zambia, should focus on: securing land rights for forest-dependent populations; the introduction of climate-resilient forest management systems; and ensuring a fair share of investments on forest-related climate mitigation measures.

**Ensure transparency and accountability in financial arrangements to deal with climate change:** Donors are making major commitments to combat climate change. It is imperative that the global community, supported by forest communities, civil society, and developing country governments, devise effective ground rules and monitoring systems for the deployment of these funds.

**Ensure that carbon markets and other environmental service compensation mechanisms strengthen rights and governance and support forest communities:** The carbon market will work most effectively if: there is secure forest access and ownership; regulatory barriers to the equal and full participation of smallholders are removed; and smallholders are involved in policy negotiations. The donor community should provide supplementary funds to help ensure that these conditions are met.

**READ MORE:**

Rights and Resources Initiative. 2008. Seeing People Through The Trees: Scaling Up Efforts to Advance Rights and Address Poverty, Conflict and Climate Change.

Washington DC: RRI.

Available at [www.rightsandresources.org](http://www.rightsandresources.org)

*The Rights and Resources Initiative is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC, USA. Please visit [www.rightsandresources.org](http://www.rightsandresources.org) for more information.*