

For more information, contact:
Jeff Haskins: +254 729 871 422 or jhaskins@burnesscommunications.com
or Amarantha Pike: +44 (0)7791691485 or amarantha@forestpeoples.org

****UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL MONDAY, 14 JULY 2008, 12:01 AM LONDON****

New Studies Predict Record Land Grab in Poor, Forested Countries, As Demand Soars for New Sources of Food, Energy and Wood Fibre

Without Strong Land Rights, Vulnerable Forest Communities Face Greater Poverty, Violent Conflict, and Few Benefits from Carbon Sales

LONDON (14 July 2008) -- Escalating global demand for fuel, food and wood fibre will destroy the world's forests, if efforts to address climate change and poverty fail to empower the billion-plus forest-dependent poor, according to two reports released today by the U.S.-based Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), an international coalition comprising the world's foremost organisations on forest governance and conservation.

The studies were delivered today at an event in the House of Commons hosted by Martin Horwood, MP for Cheltenham. Sponsored by RRI and the UK-based Forest Peoples Programme, speakers included Gareth Thomas, the UK Minister for Trade and Development; authors of the two reports; as well as advocates for forest communities in Africa and Asia.

According to the findings released today in RRI's comprehensive study, *Seeing People through the Trees: Scaling Up Efforts to Advance Rights and Address Poverty, Conflict and Climate Change*, the world will need a minimum of 515 million more hectares by 2030, in order to grow food, bioenergy, and wood products. This is almost twice the amount of land that will be available, equal to a land mass 12 times the size of Germany.

At the same time, a second RRI study, *From Exclusion to Ownership? Challenges and Opportunities in Advancing Forest Tenure Reform*, finds that developing country governments still claim an overwhelming majority of forests and have made limited progress in recognising local land rights, leaving open the potential for great violence, as some of the world's poorest peoples struggle to hold on to their only asset—millions of hectares of the world's most valuable and vulnerable forestlands.

The studies also report a sharp increase in government allocations of forests to industrial plantations, and suggest that the booming growth in demand for food and fuel is rapidly eating up vast forestlands in the Amazon and Southeast Asia.

"Arguably, we are on the verge of a last great global land grab," said Andy White, Coordinator of RRI and co-author of *Seeing People through the Trees*, a comprehensive synthesis of six ambitious studies of forest tenure, climate change and the impact of the food and fuel crisis on forest communities and forest habitats prepared by RRI Partner organisations. "Unless steps are taken, traditional forest owners, and the forests themselves, will be the big losers. It will mean more deforestation, more conflict, more carbon emissions, more climate change and less prosperity for everyone."

According to Marcus Colchester, Director of the Forest Peoples Programme and one of the authors of the research released today, the success of efforts to address threats to local forest communities and to the global environment will depend on the actions of governments and other influential entities to recognise and strengthen property and other human rights of indigenous peoples and other local communities that live in and around vulnerable forests.

Initial tenure reform experiences, documented in both studies, suggest that implementing democratic processes, which also establish basic conditions for development, can in turn protect the forests and provide significant economic benefits. According to the UK's Gareth Thomas, the findings will be of great interest to all countries seeking to contain climate change and deal with the food crisis.

"The UK has been working with others to help strengthen the rights of indigenous people to stop them being forced off the land," Thomas said. "For example, we are currently helping the Batwa and Bafoto peoples in the Democratic Republic of Congo and will soon be rolling out this work to three other countries in Central Africa."

These new studies should strengthen global resolve to protect the property rights of indigenous and local communities who play a vital role in protecting one of the most outstanding natural wonders of the world."

In the second study, RRI researchers report there has been progress in tenure reform since they last reviewed the topic, six years ago. In 2002 for example about 22% of developing country forests were either owned by communities, or were public forest designated for use by communities. That figure had increased to 27% by early 2008, a small but significant shift. Twelve out of the top 30 forest nations put into place policies that strengthen community rights, leading in many cases to new market opportunities for local people, and providing the means to influence decision makers in the powerful worlds of conservation, industry and politics

"There has been important progress, though many of the fundamental inequalities still exist," said Stewart Maginnis, Head of IUCN's Forest Programme. "More and more governments are recognising that some of the fundamental obstacles to rural poverty reduction are associated with unclear or unfair forest ownership arrangements and are beginning to explore and implement creative solutions to address these."

The authors of the RRI study warn, however, that in most regions of the developing world, "governments retain a firm grip on the majority of forests," adding that "industrial claims on forest lands are increasing sharply, for biofuels production, among other reasons."

Crops that produce biofuels alone will require at least an additional 30 to 35 million hectares (Mha) of new productive land within the next decade or so, the equivalent of 35,000 soccer fields, according to the authors: "High prices are intensifying land speculation, deforestation, and encroachment on an unprecedented scale," they note in their report.

The following are official government projections in just three key producer countries of projected growth in the area to be used for production of industrial crops, including those destined for food and fuel:

- In Brazil, 28 Mha are currently under cultivation for soy and sugarcane. By 2020, soy and sugarcane plantations are expected to cover 88 to 128 Mha of Brazilian land.
- In Indonesia, 6.5 Mha of land are dedicated to oil palm plantations. By 2025, oil palm plantations are projected to require 16.5 to 26 Mha of land.
- In China, biofuel cultivation alone is expected to require an additional 13.3 Mha of land by 2020.

Speakers at the London event noted that many of the billion people who live in and around vulnerable forests will be unable to protect their forests because they lack secure and enforced customary land rights to help resist the soaring demand for land. Furthermore, the reports and discussions make clear that international initiatives to Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) will fail unless there are robust and proactive steps by all actors to secure local land rights in forest areas. Investments in forest areas will only benefit the better off individuals and industries will neither address the causes of deforestation nor encourage sustainable development.

Joji Cariño, of the Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education in the Philippines, called for fundamental changes to recognise and enforce the rights of the people who live in and around the forests. "Unless we initiate such changes," Cariño added, "the next generation will be denied food, medicine and cultural identity, fuelling greater and more violent conflicts, and the destruction of their forest homelands."

Kyeretwie Opoku, an attorney and coordinator of Civic Response in Ghana, lamented that international efforts to address climate change and poverty are only beginning to address "abuse, poor governance and misuse of natural resources in the management of forests, particularly in the forests of West Africa.

"We face a 'deficit of democracy' plagued by violent conflict and human rights abuses," Opoku said. "We must address underlying inequities by consulting and allowing forest peoples to make decisions for themselves regarding the actions of industry and conservation--as empowered citizens with a voice in their own future."

The authors of *From Exclusion to Ownership* provide examples of forest nations that have stopped short of providing meaningful rights to forest communities, noting that their findings have implications for initiatives aimed at addressing climate change and the global food crisis:

- In Peru, the government has violated the protections of collective land titles. The allocation of about 80 percent of the country's Amazon forests for oil and gas exploration affects almost all titled indigenous lands.
- In Papua New Guinea, although forest people are constitutionally endowed with property rights over the forests they live in, politicians and the police have tended to side with the interests of the forest product entrepreneurs.
- In Brazil, where 12 Mha of Amazonian lands have been designated to secure the rights of traditional rubber-tapping communities while promoting forest conservation, the government officials are failing to prevent incursion on extractive reserve lands.
- In five Central African countries in the Congo basin, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon, there are at least 73 Mha of concessions on forest lands for timber and mineral exploitation, compared to 1.6 Mha of forest land legally designated for use by communities.

The RRI studies call for a number of recommendations that donor nations, agencies and advocacy organisations can implement to strengthen rights and to ensure that indigenous and local forest communities participate in and benefit from the carbon markets and compensation programmes for conserving forests. The following are among those that should be considered in designing such initiatives, according to RRI's Andy White:

- Condition all funding for conservation on recognition of customary and equitable land rights
- Develop new capacity to engage in conflict countries to advance tenure and governance reforms
- Make it a priority to support the initiatives of community organisations and other community networks, helping them to build capacity and to fund what they identify as vital
- Help international and civil-society advocates advance transparency initiatives and support the development of freedom of information acts.
- Support information exchanges among key stakeholders to build knowledge and momentum for reforms
- Develop a role for communities in designing, monitoring and auditing the implementation of carbon funds and other conservation measures

"It is clear from the research that the dual crises of fuel and food are attracting significant new investments and great land speculation," White said. "Only by protecting the rights of the people who live in and around the world's most vulnerable forests can we prevent the devastation these forces will wreak on the poor and the poorly governed hinterlands. In the process, our studies have shown that we will protect the forests themselves by recognising the rights of the people with the most to lose if they are destroyed."

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The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) is a new coalition of organisations dedicated to raising global awareness of the critical need for forest tenure, policy and market reforms, in order to achieve global goals of poverty alleviation, biodiversity conservation and forest-based economic growth. Partners currently include ACICAFOC (Coordinating Association of Indigenous and Agroforestry Communities of Central America), the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Civic Response, the Foundation for People and Community Development (FPCD), Forest Peoples Programme, Forest Trends, the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF), Intercooperation, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the Federation of Community Forest Organisations of Nepal (FECOFUN), and the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC). For further information, visit the Web site at: www.rightsandresources.org.

Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) is an international NGO, founded in 1990 to promote forest peoples' rights. FPP supports forest peoples in their efforts to secure and sustainably manage their forests, lands and livelihoods. Strategies to achieve this include promoting the rights and interests of forest peoples at local, national and international levels, providing them with opportunities to have an effective voice in decision-making processes, challenging top-down policies and projects that deprive local peoples of resources, coordinating support among environmental organisations for the visions of forest peoples, supporting community-led sustainable forest management, and publicising the plight of forest peoples through research, analysis and documentation. For further information visit the website at www.forestpeoples.org