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At Global Conference, Organizers Call for Doubling the Land Owned or Managed by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

Delegates from 40 countries meet to define and map out the way forward

Interlaken, Switzerland (20 September, 2013)—At an international conference on community land and resource rights, organizers called for doubling the amount of land recognized as owned or controlled by Indigenous Peoples and local communities by 2018. Determining the current amount of land in this category is just as important as doubling it—while the amount of forests or agricultural land has been established, a thorough catalogue of all land types under indigenous or local control has not been a priority until this point.

“Community land rights are a global concern,” said Duncan Pruet, Policy Advisor on Land Rights for Oxfam. “As natural resource development—national and international land transactions establishing logging operations, mines and agricultural plantations—extends to almost every corner of the globe, we need to secure the rights of the people who live on the land. This is an age-old problem whose urgency only increases as the demand for resources skyrockets.”

The conference was held in Interlaken, Switzerland and attended by 180 delegates from 40 countries, with representation from indigenous and other local community leaders, the corporate and financial sectors, civil society and non-governmental organizations, and national governments. The conference was co-organized by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, International Land Coalition (ILC), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Oxfam, and the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI).

“The connection of indigenous and local communities to their land is essential,” said Michael Taylor, Program Manager of Global Policy and African Region for the Secretariat of International Land Coalition. “Land rights are a basis for food security, overcoming poverty and human dignity. Land rights need to be prioritized if equitable and inclusive development is to take place.”

Ownership of over one-half of the developing world’s rural, forest and dryland areas is contested, directly affecting the lives and livelihoods of over two billion people. These people often have no formal title to the lands on which they live and depend, and rarely have the means to defend the rights they do possess. When private enterprises acquire land and/or resources without addressing who lives there, they expose themselves and their investors to substantial risk as some level of conflict or business disruption often results.

To date, most of the data collected on indigenous and other community land rights has been segmented by land type. For forests, approximately 451 million hectares were owned and managed by indigenous and other local communities in 2012. This represents [31 percent of the developing world's forests](#), increasing from 18 percent in 2002.

“The relationship between people and their land and resources flows both ways,” said Gonzalo Oviedo, IUCN’s Senior Advisor for Social Policy. “In today’s world, billions of people benefit directly from their lands and resources for their livelihoods, and they cannot benefit if they live in a state of insecurity and the land they depend on is transformed without respect for their rights. Nature benefits from this relationship with people as well; forests, grasslands and other ecosystems are often better protected under the stewardship of Indigenous Peoples and local communities than if they are set aside and walled off.”

The conference focused on five critical strategies: 1) coordinate global efforts to map and document community lands; 2) legally recognize and advance rights to land; 3) leverage private sector interests in securing these rights; 4) prioritize the intersection of conservation and community lands; and 5) establish these rights as a global priority. Working groups focused on these elements of the land rights agenda. Strategies emerging from these sessions include:

- Produce a global community land tenure map which identifies the population in each particular area and its boundaries. Sharing this data and maintaining its access to all parties is critically important to ensuring the future recognition of local rights.
- Develop and sustain national level conversations between all key stakeholders in clarified land rights, including the conservation community whose goals depend entirely on securing community land rights, land governance, and tenure recognition. Also, increase the dialogue between community land rights and conservation organizations at the global level, at fora such as the World Conference of Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the World Parks Congress.
- Identify and leverage those private sector actors who have come to recognize the importance of clarified land rights, and then promote the best practices of these actors. At the same time, identify and discourage those actors who do not respect community land rights, and work to close the space they have to operate on. One way to do this is to increase the transparency in supply chains and risk assessments, and thus spreading the information about these processes so that the affected communities understand what is taking place.
- Understand that legal empowerment has limited value if the legal system is not functional. Continue to invest in proven methods to strengthen legal systems and local governance – which is just as important as the empowerment itself.
- In developing systems and procedures for recognizing land rights, understand that different cultures and systems of governance may not accept a one-size-fits-all approach. Customizing an approach to securing tenure rights is a key to success.
- Develop ambitious indicators to measure progress on strengthening community land rights, in the context of the current discussions on a new development framework to be launched in 2015.

“Insecure land rights is a global crisis—one most immediate and direct for the millions of Indigenous Peoples and rural communities who risk losing their homes and livelihoods,” said Andy White, coordinator of the Rights and Resources Initiative. “What we—governments, civil society, businesses, and international NGOs—have been doing on this issue is not enough. The

crisis profoundly impacts our ability to confront climate change, address food security, and overcome poverty. Together, we need to do much more.”

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HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation’s development projects are designed to improve the living conditions of women and men from disadvantaged communities in a direct and sustainable manner, to build capacities such that they can take control of their lives and to have the skills, resources and opportunities to secure a decent living. For more information, please visit www.helvetas.org.

The International Land Coalition is a global alliance of civil society and intergovernmental organisations working together to promote secure and equitable access to and control over land for poor women and men through advocacy, dialogue, knowledge sharing and capacity building. For more information, please visit www.landcoalition.org.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature is the world’s oldest and largest global environmental organization. Their mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. For more information, please visit www.iucn.org.

Oxfam is an international confederation of 17 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. They work directly with communities and seek to influence the powerful to ensure that poor people can improve their lives and livelihoods and have a say in decisions that affect them. For more information, please visit www.oxfam.org.

The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) is a global coalition of 13 Partners and over 140 international, regional and community organizations advancing forest tenure, policy and market reforms. RRI leverages the strategic collaboration and investment of its Partners and Collaborators around the world by working together on research, advocacy, and convening strategic actors to catalyze change on the ground. RRI is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC. For more information, please visit www.rightsandresources.org.