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**[DRAFT—NOT FOR RELEASE]**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 11:00 GMT ON WEDNESDAY, 3 FEBRUARY, 2016**

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## **Forests on the brink: Six weeks after COP in Paris, new research finds forest peoples losing ground in key nations—despite proof of their role as best guardians—while other countries are poised to deliver on commitments**

***New research to report on pace of land reform for beleaguered rural communities globally; industry at crucial point in recognizing insecure tenure as source of investment risk; analysis will reveal hidden costs of removing local peoples to establish protected lands in DRC, Liberia***

LONDON (3 February, 2016)—New research released by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) today reveals that, despite an international consensus that the world's tropical forests are a bulwark against climate change, the pace of recognition of the rights of forest peoples has slowed. While key countries like Indonesia and India are perched at the cusp of important breakthroughs, both countries face pushback from government agencies and the private sector, threatening environmental and economic ruin.

Additional research from TMP Systems and RRI provide a fuller picture of the many investment risks triggered by insecure land rights, and the underestimated cost of relocating over a million people to establish forest parks in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia.

“The Paris climate treaty showed that every country in the world recognizes the value of forests in the fight against climate change—at least on paper,” said Andy White, coordinator of the Rights and Resources Initiative. “On the ground, many national governments are poised to protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities—the best protectors of the forests. But other nations could soon protect the land and exclude the people, or abandon human rights and forest conservation altogether.”

According to RRI research, Indigenous Peoples and local communities own 24 percent of the tropical forests in low or middle income countries where they live, a small increase over 2008, when their ownership rights extended to 23 percent. Sizable progress has been made since 2003, when they owned only 18 percent, but the slowdown in rights recognition occurred during the same period that Indigenous Peoples and local communities were increasingly recognized—in peer reviewed scientific studies and political circles—as the best guardians for the world's dwindling tropical forests.

The TMP Systems and RRI research analyzes two recently announced proposals that would use funding from Germany to set aside 12 to 15 percent of forests in DRC as protected areas, and funding from Norway to similarly set aside 30 percent of the forests of Liberia. According to the report, as many as 1.3 million people might need to be relocated to empty these areas of inhabitants, and the costs have been grossly underestimated. DRC contains the second largest tropical forest in the world; it is critical that the forest peoples who maintain it not be stripped of their rights.

“Forest conservation should never force a choice between people and parks,” said White. “It’s very similar to how economic development should not displace the people who live in regions to be developed. It has become increasingly clear to the private sector that people cannot be pushed aside with impunity—the conflicts that result have long-reaching impacts—and yet many governments still have not learned this lesson.”

In Indonesia, massive fires in the forests and peatlands brought an international spotlight to the deforestation practices that have impacted millions. While a constitutional court order compelled the government to hand ownership of the forests back to the people who live there, and a national commission followed up and examined human rights, some government officials have pushed back on private sector commitments to end deforestation and respect rights.

“In Indonesia, it seems that the government can inspire hope and despair in one breath,” said Rukka Sombolinggi, Deputy to the Secretary General of the Indigenous Peoples’ Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN). “While some communities are on the verge of regaining ownership over hundreds of thousands of hectares, other communities are still being displaced with colonial era terror tactics. For Indonesia to be respected in international circles, all levels of government must fulfil and protect our rights.”

In India, government efforts to begin implementing the ten-year-old Forest Rights Act would restore ownership rights for tribal communities to millions of hectares of forests. But as in Indonesia and other forested countries, this progress is threatened by the lure of short-term profits, which leads some officials to hand over land for economic development regardless of social or environmental consequence.

In Liberia, the parliament is considering legislation that would establish local communities as the rightful owners of the country's forests and rural lands. Experts estimate that 71 percent of Liberia's land area is held under customary tenure, but commercial concessions cover as much as 75 percent of the country. Conflict often results where these two categories overlap. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has championed the legislation that would resolve this source of strife, and has made clear to Parliament that she expects action. However, her advocacy has not yet had an impact, and the proposed protected areas could become yet another way to force local peoples from their land.

“Our forests and our land are not just commodities to be sold or given away in concessions,” said Constance Teage, Community Land Protection program manager at the Sustainable Development Institute in Liberia. “The livelihood of local communities is tied to their land, and their prosperity can

only be as strong as their rights to the land. If their forests hold value, then they should benefit.”

For those governments and private sector interests working to acknowledge the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities who themselves are a driving force of change, a new array of tools, institutions, and strategies have launched in 2015. These include:

- The [International Land and Forest Tenure Facility](#), a multi-stakeholder institution exclusively focused on securing land and resource rights for Indigenous Peoples and local communities. So far, the Facility is running pilot projects in Panama, Peru, Indonesia, Mali, Liberia, and Cameroon.
- [LandMark](#), the world’s first interactive global platform displaying maps and other critical information on lands that are collectively held and used by Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
- The Interlaken Groups new [guide](#), which offers support for companies seeking to align their operations with the United Nation’s Voluntary Guidelines on the Governance of Tenure.

“We are at a point in time that inspires so much optimism; world leaders are on the verge of so much progress,” concluded RRI’s White. “By just implementing existing policies and laws, hundreds of millions of hectares could be put back into community hands in the next few years - saving their forests and their communities. But the private sector needs to take the lead.”

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The Rights and Resources Initiative is a coalition of 13 core Partners who conduct work in specific areas of their regional and thematic expertise. Their mission is to support local communities’ and Indigenous Peoples’ struggles against poverty and marginalization by promoting greater global commitment and action towards policy, market and legal reforms that secure their rights to own, control and benefit from natural resources, especially land and forests. For more, visit the RRI website at [www.rightsandresources.org](http://www.rightsandresources.org).