

# Can You Imagine?

Andy White, Beijing, September 24, 2010

Good morning everyone.

First of all let me say what an honor and privilege to be up here with Madame Zhang Lei and Vice Minister Zhang Jianlong and in front of all of you – who've gathered from all over Asia, and indeed from Africa, Europe and the Americas.

Being here with Madame Zhang Lei recalls for me the first time we met a little more than ten years ago, in the year 2000, when we were preparing, with Dr. Xu Jintao, Deputy Zhang Jisheng and other colleagues from SFA Department of Policy and Legislation and FEDRC, what was the first international conference on forest tenure reform and poverty alleviation in China, in Huangshan, Anhui Province. 10 years may seem like a long time for many of you younger people in the audience, about  $\frac{1}{2}$  your lifetime, but for me, and for history, 10 years is not much at all.

Yet it is simply amazing what has changed in China and on forest tenure since that time. What began as demands from peasants, an objective critique by researchers, and an honest look by the Chinese government has blossomed into a full, national program, a priority for the government and a reform that is arguably the largest in the world in modern times.

The reform that China has undertaken since 2003 exceeds 100 million hectares in scope and directly affects over 300 million people, and the research by the SFA and Peking University now conclusively shows that this reform has led to billions of dollars in increased income and billions

of more trees. These are huge, global level impacts towards both the Chinese and global goals of poverty alleviation and carbon sequestration. Your experience has demonstrated what can happen when there is political courage. And indeed that is why we are all here, gathered from around the world, to learn from China, and to share our own experiences.

So it has been a great pleasure for me to be on this journey with you, and to see what can be achieved when local peoples' demands and honest analysis meets forward-looking political courage.

Now let me turn to the question of forest tenure and governance at the global level.

We all are very well aware of the many problems facing forest areas and forest people worldwide: poverty, with often the poorest in the nation residing in and around forests; corruption; lack of government services and recognition; illegal logging; continued deforestation; increasing vulnerability to climate change; and we all know that the list goes on and on. We are also now becoming aware of a new, massive threat, of external forces taking advantage of the poor and vulnerable, and taking their land. And of course these problems are not unrelated to the fact that governments still claim about 70% of the world's forests, and in many countries it's 100% - despite the fact that people have been living in those forests, and traditionally managing those forests for millennia, far longer than current governments have been established.

In 2008 RRI published a report called "Seeing People Through the Trees" and this report projected that, because of the booming demand for food, fuel and wood fibre, and the scarcity of agricultural land, and

insecure land rights, the world was on the verge of “the last global land grab” – where unscrupulous governments and investors would take advantage of the forest poor, who’s land rights were not recognized, or not defended by the government.

It won’t be surprising to you I’m sure, that we argued then that secure local tenure rights will be the determining factor whether these threats will be countered or converted into opportunity, and that the future of forests and forest people pivots on the decisions we will be making over forest tenure in the coming decade.

At that time we counted about 25 million hectares that had been acquired in the 3 years between 2005 and 2008. The new World Bank report on these “land acquisitions” found even more, about 45 million hectares before the end of 2009. And they predicted, confidently that this was going to continue, at least at 6 million hectares a year. Since agricultural land is limited it is very likely that much of this land will come from forest areas.

Of course, the changing markets that are driving the new pressure on forest land can either be a threat or an opportunity. The same markets that might reward the ruthless can enable the poor to prosper. And it is not a foregone conclusion that forest areas and forest peoples will forever suffer from corruption, abuse, poverty, denial of their land rights, their culture and the full benefits of citizenship.

I’ve just come from a meeting of leaders of forest agencies of the largest forested countries in the world – representing about 70% of the world’s forests. We call this informal group “MegaFlorestais” – which means “big forests” in Portuguese. This group actually began here in China six years ago when we conducted an international conference on

public forest reform with Professor Xu Jintao and the Department of Policy and Legislation of the SFA. We've been meeting once a year every year since. And it is amazing how our discussions have evolved since we began.

One of the key findings of our meetings the other day was first stated by our Chinese colleagues: that in order for forest agencies to properly serve their countries, they needed to focus on 2 goals: 1) ensuring sustained conservation and use of forests; and 2) poverty alleviation of forest peoples, and the optimal contribution of forests to their country's social and economic development.

There was also agreement that you can't sustain one without the other. And even further, we agreed that fair and secure tenure was a central prerequisite to achieving both goals, and that fundamental reform was necessary in many countries. That is, ensuring fair and secure tenure is the first necessary step to making progress on any of our other goals, be it sustainable management, poverty alleviation, or even effectively dealing with climate change.

And it is security of tenure that will enable the poor to benefit from the emerging market opportunities of increased demand for food, energy and wood fibre.

And it was clear from our discussions that this idea of tenure reform, as a critical and priority step, is spreading around the world, with leaders from Africa and Asia recognizing that, even though they are formally charged with managing the public forest estate, there is a compelling and urgent need to reform (some use the term "rationalize") publicly-claimed forests – beginning to recognize local rights, and supporting

communities to enable them to sustainably use and benefit from their forests.

I'd like to raise here the question of "what explains why we have the current distribution of forest tenure in the world?" Why is it about 100% state owned in Africa, 100% in Indonesia, the vast majority in India most other countries in Asia, yet only 40% state owned in China, 30% in Mexico etc.? The simple answer is political history.

It was colonialism, revolution and occasionally political reform that set the allocation of rights in a country – not rational, participatory, democratic planning. I think that this is important for us here today to recall this fact – especially since the vast majority of us are technicians and not politicians. It is power and politics that determine the distribution of rights in a country. Tenure is a product of political choice.

Now, we in this room are an educated and sophisticated group, and often think in terms of rationality and technical reason and we generally prefer to avoid the raw and rude terms of politics, power and rights. And we often use rational arguments and research to judge whether we should recognize rights and reform tenure or not, asking whether it will lead to forest conservation or not, etc. Whether it will lift people out of poverty, or not, etc. Of course we know after decades of research and experience that recognizing rights, generally speaking, enhances conservation, incomes, etc.

But I'd like to assert today that I think that this rationalist reason can be a trap. I want to clarify that I said "can be a trap". And that's because it ignores, what I think is the most important reason to reform tenure.

And that is because it is simply the right thing to do. That's right. I'm making a moral argument.

It's the right thing to do for our fellow citizens, for our democracies, for our futures as healthy, vibrant, positive, growing nations. And because recognizing local rights more fully brings our forest people more towards enjoying the full rights of citizenship – and this will ultimately, if indirectly benefit the forest.

It's the right thing for governments to do because it is her citizens that want it, that demand it, and given political history, certainly have a legitimate right to have it. And the first priority of a government is to listen to and serve her citizens.

So this is the primary reason for reforming tenure. We may find lots of other reasons, but this is the singular and the sufficient reason.

And we know that we have a long way to go in the world to recognize local rights and serve our forest-dwelling citizens. We have been on a horrible, destructive path of using forests and forest people for the ends of others – and wealth is often shipped either to the urban areas or offshore.

As I've said, we are making progress in some countries, like here in China, but we have a long way to go. Even our Chinese hosts will tell you this week that though they've made tremendous progress they still have a long way to go. They have an unfinished agenda on collective forests and they have recently begun to consider how to reform the public forests – about 40% of the country's forests.

They will tell you that on collective forests there is a need to: 1) set up the regulatory framework for land transactions – to make sure that the

poor can't be taken advantage of. They have essentially set in motion a private market for forest land but have not yet fully established the regulatory mechanisms to adequately govern that market; and 2) there is a need to reform the regulations governing forest use – shifting from the infamous quota system, which requires local people to get a permit from the government to harvest their trees - to a regulatory system that is simple, fast and fair. It is admirable and I think inspirational to us all that they are working on all of this.

They will also tell you that on public forests they face the challenging task of disentangling the public forest enterprises from the public land management agencies, from the local government, and then also devolving power from the central government to the local – and also figuring out how much public land should be given to collectives or to the provincial authorities. The good news is that they know this and are working on it.

So if China, who's achieved so much in a short amount of time, still has a long way to go it tells us that we are on a long journey, and that 10 years is nothing.

But it also tells us that we cannot wait to get started. Given the pressing threats, of conversion, of conflict, of taking land from forest people, of fires and degradation – we cannot wait any longer. And we also cannot wait any longer to help local people take advantages of new markets and technologies that can help lift them out of poverty. The time to act is now. We do not have time to lose.

I'd like to close with the title of my presentation "Can You Imagine?"

All of us will be discussing the critical issues of tenure reform today and tomorrow: how it is underway, or not, in each of our countries, and what lessons we can share with each other.

While we are discussing and working together I'd like to ask that we also imagine. I'd like for us to imagine forest areas in our countries where our fellow forest citizens are content, happy, and even thriving. I'd like for us to imagine our forest communities where women and children are in school, have big dreams for their future and are proud of their country. I'd like for us to imagine a future of bountiful and beautiful forests – forever.

I think it's important for us to imagine this future, and keep focusing on this future because the steps to get there will be long and hard and require political courage. I also think it's important to imagine the real possibilities that new markets, business models and technologies offer us – if we reform tenure and proactively pursue these opportunities so that they work for the poor.

Finally, I'd like to ask that you to dig deep and find, or refind, that political leader in you – and if you've never seen yourself as a political leader I'd like to ask that you take the big step and imagine yourself as a strong, informed, and passionate political leader, because that is what we will need from you, political leadership.

To dramatically advance reform in the short term we need to reach out to other ministries and bring them on board. We need to build and strengthen links between researchers and community leadership. And we need to proactively explore and promote new business models and technologies that help our forest communities and save our forests. This will all require political leadership – each of you reaching out to

other sectors and agencies to bring them on board and support this critical mission of tenure reform.

Thank you for your time this morning, thank you again to our Chinese hosts, and best wishes to you all in your upcoming discussions. I look forward to being with you all.