

# To cut carbon emissions, give communities rights to forest land - report

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A man from Kayapo tribe observes an Arara in front of his house on the second day of a medical expedition in Kikretum community in Sao Felix, northern Brazil, on April 22, 2011. REUTERS/Ricardo Moraes

LONDON (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Giving forest communities secure rights to their land is an effective but underused way to limit carbon emissions from deforestation, a report showed on Thursday.

Communities are far more likely to stop trees being cut down than governments or business, found the [research](#) issued by the World Resources Institute (WRI), a U.S.-based research group, and the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), a global forest policy coalition.

Rural communities and indigenous peoples have legal or official rights to only about one eighth of the world's forests, around 513 million hectares. Those forests store 37.7 billion tonnes of carbon

dioxide and other greenhouse gases - 29 times the annual emissions from the world's passenger vehicles.

"Although governments claim ownership over most of the world's forests, the real stewards of much of these areas are indigenous and local communities with deep historical and cultural connections to the land," the report said.

"With deforestation and other land uses now accounting for about 11 percent of annual global greenhouse gas emissions, weak legal protection for forest communities is not just a land or resource rights problem. It is a climate change problem," it added.

The authors used new high-resolution mapping data to analyse 14 heavily forested countries, including Brazil, Indonesia, Colombia and Peru.

Where governments have enhanced and enforced forest rights, communities have been more successful at stopping loggers, extractive companies and settlers from illegally destroying forests, which capture climate-changing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, the report said. They are also better at maintaining high-quality forest, and reforesting degraded areas.

Deforestation rates inside community forests are dramatically lower than in forests outside those areas, the research found. In part of the Mexican Yucatán, the rate is 350 times lower; in Guatemala's Petén, 20 times lower; in the Brazilian Amazon, 11 times lower; and in the Bolivian Amazon, six times lower.

#### 'GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY'

WRI president Andrew Steer described strengthening legal recognition and government protection of community forest rights as a "golden opportunity to address climate change" - but one that has often been overlooked.

Andy White, coordinator of RRI, said there were other development benefits too. "The recognition of indigenous peoples' tenure rights is also a powerful solution to some of the other major crises the globe faces, including poverty, loss of biodiversity, threatened water supplies and abuse of women," he told journalists.

But he conceded that ensuring indigenous people and other forest communities have the legal right to their land would take time, and may be complicated where governments and companies are already using the land for other purposes, such as growing oil palm or mining.

The report offers "cautionary tales" of what happens to forests when governments undermine community rights.

In northwest Peru, for example, three legally recognised indigenous lands - Huascayacu, Alto Mayo and Shimpiyacu - lost between a quarter and half of their forest from 2000 to 2010, some of the worst deforestation in the Amazon. Government allocations of indigenous lands to mining, oil and

natural gas concessions are a major cause, the report said, noting that oil and gas concessions cover nearly 75 percent of the Peruvian Amazon.

Indonesia also has problems, the researchers said. Out of at least 42 million hectares of indigenous community forests, only 1 million hectares are legally recognised by the government, which routinely allocates indigenous community forests for oil palm concessions, industrial timber plantations for pulp and paper, and other conflicting land uses.

## U.N. CLIMATE TALKS

Brazil, on the other hand, is held up as an example of doing things right. From 1980 to 2007, it legally recognised about 300 "Indigenous Lands", giving indigenous people the right to exclude others, and to manage and use the forest sustainably, with the government retaining formal ownership.

WRI analysis found that, from 2000 to 2012, forest loss was only 0.6 percent inside the Indigenous Lands compared with 7 percent outside.

RRI's White said providing secure community land tenure is one way for countries to curb their carbon emissions while U.N. climate talks inch forward on setting up a global market for carbon credits generated by projects aimed at Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+).

Steer said that, as countries come forward with their national offers of action for the new global climate deal due to be agreed in Paris next year, "the willingness to give and enforce (community forest) rights will be a great sign of seriousness about addressing climate change".

Tony LaVina, lead forest and climate negotiator for the Philippines, said the REDD+ scheme was created because it is well known that deforestation is a big part of the climate change problem.

"What is not as widely understood is how effective forest communities are at protecting their forest from deforestation and increasing forest health. This is why REDD+ must be accompanied by community safeguards," he added in a statement on the report.