



The Rights and Resources Initiative and Forest Tenure Reform in China

The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) has been a significant actor influencing China's forest land tenure changes, among the most important forestry reforms in history.

- + *Through research assistance and consultation, RRI has strengthened the Chinese government's commitment to land tenure and to the transfer of more than 35% of the lands in its collective forest sector to individual households over the past decade*
- + *RRI organized workshops and events that have reinforced the legitimacy and documented the impact of China's forest tenure reform, a significant outcome of the highly-regarded 2006 conference in Fujian that was credited with saving the reforms*
- + *RRI has organized conferences to share lessons learned from China's forest tenure reform, a social transformation that has had a significant impact, leading to the planting of billions of trees and increasing the incomes of millions of Chinese people*

China's forest land tenure program, which began as a small movement among peasants, has blossomed into a full-blown national program that affects about 400 million people and more than 100 million hectares of China's largest and richest forests. It is arguably the world's largest forest tenure reform.

The Chinese Forest Administration's (SFA) reform of the nation's "collective forests" allows communities to reallocate land-use rights and forest ownership, either to individual households, groups of households or to the collective itself. Collective forests account for about 60 percent of China's forest land, with the rest owned by the state. The law makes land rights much more secure for collectives and households.

"With vastly increasing income choices available to rural households, China has developed a thriving domestic market for timber and other forest products" according to experts,* who note that reforms have led to billions of dollars in increased income for local peasants.

RRI has helped China to maintain a commitment to its revolutionary reforms through a multi-pronged strategy. It has sponsored research and used its international reputation to provide a platform for Chinese researchers and advocates to communicate their findings to key decision makers. RRI also has helped to broaden the reform effort and advised key policymakers and government officials as they sought the confidence and expertise needed to make key decisions.

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Professor Xu Jintao
Peking University

“RRI strengthened the ability of Chinese academics to become involved in the political process and to support land tenure reforms with evidence of their environmental and economic impact,” said Professor Xu Jintao, chair of the department of environmental management at Peking University (PKU). “With support from RRI and the Ford Foundation, we were able to conduct research that helped us to influence the legislative process.”

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Li Shuxin
Chinese Forest Administration

RRI helped the Peking University researcher and his colleagues design the first national-level research program on forest tenure reform. Although the findings are still preliminary, Xu reports that the reforms have led to a jump in household income of approximately 10 percent among rural farmers, while reforestation is as high as 150 percent in affected villages—once local farmers are sure that their rights will be respected.

Their findings are included in a document used to train local officials to implement and support tenure rights in their communities. Xu and government leaders maintain that the RRI-organized 2006 conference in Fujian Province led to a strengthening of political support for tenure reform by highlighting their economic and environmental impact. And the research is being presented to global audiences, as well.

“RRI helped our government and local people to realize the importance of tenure reform and to raise the profile of the impact it was having,” says Li Shuxin, an official with the Chinese Forest Administration (SFA). “We were able to raise the profile of the benefits of land tenure through the conferences we organized with RRI. The research that was presented played a significant role in that process.”

Continuing the momentum for change, RRI in collaboration with PKU and the SFA also convened international tenure conferences in 2008 in Beijing and 2010, and a high-level meeting of leaders from the world’s largest forested countries in Wuyishan in 2010. These gatherings allowed Chinese leadership to learn directly from credible, independent authorities and understand the competitive edge being gained by other nations that had engaged in a similar process. The Chinese in turn have communicated their lessons learned with the outside world.

“The reformer is often lonely,” Xu says. “Even after the reforms had become widespread in China, there were still those who had doubts. The international experience provided a peer effect that gave us knowledge and confidence. That process in reverse brought me to India to talk about the Chinese experience. And a few weeks ago, we met with representatives from Indonesia.”

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*excerpted from a Wall Street Journal op-ed Dr. Uma Lele, retired ex-senior adviser in the World Bank’s Independent Evaluation Group.