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New Report Says Forest Land Reform Stagnating, Posing Risks to Global Efforts to Combat Climate Change, Hunger and Poverty

Top Forestry Experts at London Event Present Evidence; Warn of Further Displacements and Land Grabs in 2011

LONDON (8 February 2011) —Rapidly-rising food prices and growing demand for all land-based commodities, like palm oil and biofuels, are driving an intensive global land hunt that threatens the rights of hundreds of millions of local people living in tropical forests, according to a report released today by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI).

The growing competition for tropical forests comes as recognition of land and resource rights largely stagnated in 2010—despite new commitments through governments and climate change initiatives to support tenure rights and determined efforts by Indigenous Peoples and other forest communities to secure their lands, according to the analysis presented at RRI's Ninth Dialogue on Forests, Governance and Climate Change in London.

RRI leaders note that the lack of progress in 2010 stands in sharp contrast to the fact that recognition of indigenous and community ownership and management doubled between 1985 and 2000, and then rose about 5 percent per year through 2009.

“The lack of progress at the global level in 2010 was doubly disappointing,” said RRI Coordinator Andy White. “On one hand the necessity of secure rights is now widely promoted by climate change negotiators and development specialists, yet on the other, the rate of recognition is not at all keeping up with the rate of large commercial land acquisitions—so called ‘land grabbing’.”

According to the World Bank, the rate of commercial land acquisitions jumped over 1000 percent in 2009.

“There is a major disconnect between the rhetoric and the recognition on the ground,” said Onel Masardule, an indigenous Kuna and Executive Director of the Fundación para la Promoción del Conocimiento Indígena in Panama. “Without major policy changes that give Indigenous Peoples and forest communities clear and enforceable rights, 2011 could bring even greater conflict, in addition to lost opportunities for conservation and community development.”

The report calls for governments globally to strengthen forest rights and governance as a necessary step both to build a foundation for effective investments in forest-based climate change mitigation and to halt further erosion of land rights that is inadvertently perpetuating corruption and social exclusion.

The RRI analysis, titled “Pushback: Local Power, Global Realignment,” also includes troubling evidence of a backlash—at times violent and repressive—against efforts by indigenous groups and forest communities to assert their rights to lands where many have lived for centuries. The RRI report finds a “disturbing tendency of some governments to roll back hard-won local land rights and, in some cases, to criminalize advocates.” Now that forest lands are increasingly valuable—for agriculture, carbon and biofuels, there is greater pressure from investors and less interest by many governments to recognize local land rights.

For example, in 2010, advocates for forest rights in Peru and Nepal were assaulted and thrown in jail. New regulations enacted in Papua New Guinea have dramatically undermined previously established community property rights. RRI also documented how farmers in the Guangxi Autonomous Region of Southern China lost thousands of hectares of land as illegal and strong-arm tactics were used to establish a huge eucalyptus plantation.

The RRI report did find important areas of progress in 2010. Rural forest communities in Mexico, Kenya and India, for example, scored significant victories in securing greater control of local lands. But the report also shows the need to read the fine print of laws and policies that purport to establish tenure rights. For example, RRI’s analysis of 36 tenure regimes in 15 tropical forest countries found that a third of them do not allow communities to engage in commercial logging. Moreover, RRI found tenure regimes in four Central African countries still allow the state to appropriate lands without offering any compensation.

“The Government is firmly committed to helping tackle deforestation across the globe. As well as forming one of our first and most formidable defenses against climate change, forests provide homes and livelihoods for millions of the world’s poorest people,” said Stephen O’Brien, UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for International Development, a keynote speaker at the RRI event. “We are working with RRI to protect people who depend on forests for their livelihoods by securing their legal claims, working with other governments to develop fair laws, and inform consumers that products like palm oil and soy are not sourced through methods which damage and destroy forests in the developing world.”

Another major issue in 2010 involved the continuing efforts, advanced at international climate talks in Cancún, Mexico, to draft a global accord that could provide a financial incentive for preserving the carbon contained in tropical forests.

RRI praised the fact that more indigenous groups and community forest organizations have been invited to participate in the REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) process, and notes this “seat at the table” is a major step forward for the world.

“We must stop the destruction of forests around the world if we are to solve the threat posed by global climate change, but it must be done in a way respects the rights of people who live in and around these forests,” said Gregory Barker, British Minister of the Department of Energy and Climate Change, who spoke at the RRI event. “That’s why we pressed hard for an agreement on forests in Cancun, and it’s why the UK will use our International Climate Fund to support countries in reducing deforestation emissions under a REDD+ framework that seeks a more inclusive approach.”

The “inclusion of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in the Cancun Agreement signals a major step forward in the recognition of the rights of the world’s Indigenous Peoples at the highest levels,” said Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, Executive Director of

TEBTEBBA (Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education) and member of the Delegation of the Philippines.

Yet implementation of a REDD accord remains a source of concern for many forest communities and the “no rights, no REDD” sentiment continues to be a mantra for many.

For example, RRI points out that in a 2010 agreement, Norway promised Indonesia up to \$1 billion to reduce carbon emissions caused by deforestation. Yet Indonesia’s draft REDD strategy does not recognize the importance of establishing community land rights, even though 50 to 70 million people—about a fourth of the country’s population—live in or around “state forest lands,” most of which have no clearly defined legal status, RRI found.

According to the RRI report, “Indonesian civil society is seriously concerned that unless the core issue of forest tenure rights and safeguards are first addressed, this and other REDD schemes will exacerbate already intense forest conflicts.”

In general, White said, “at the local level, support or distrust of REDD is directly tied to how much control you have over your lands. Community groups in Mexico are very interested in REDD because they don’t think it will prompt the government to come after their lands. But elsewhere, there is concern that REDD will become just another reason for government taking back land and resource rights.”

RRI has singled out Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Congo as bellwethers for achieving land tenure reform in and around tropical forests in 2011. In 2010, both countries signaled a new willingness to address land rights, yet as RRI notes, both have “colonial histories of resource abuses and strong vested interests in industrial logging, the palm oil industry and the agriculture sector.”

Finally, the RRI analysis warns that 2011 could see a decline in the effectiveness of consumer pressure as a way to encourage land tenure reform. While consumers have been successful in pushing major western investors to act more responsibly, the West’s share of the global market is declining, RRI notes. Western interests are being replaced by investors from developing and middle income countries, who are less susceptible to consumer campaigns.

At the same time, the RRI analysis identifies major opportunities for advancing local land rights and livelihoods in 2011. Local forest markets are growing and providing more options for local people, there are new wood processing and communications technologies that can readily benefit local people, and they increasingly have a seat at the table in national and global forest governance. “We need to be doing a better job of taking advantage of these growing opportunities to benefit local people,” said White. “The year 2011 will undoubtedly present threats and potential rollback of rights, but there is tremendous opportunity for progress if we can seize it.”

The **Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI)** is a strategic coalition of organizations dedicated to supporting 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. Partners currently include ACICAFOC (Coordinating Association of Indigenous and Agroforestry Communities of Central America), Civic Response, the Federation of Community Users, Nepal (FECOFUN), the Foundation for People and Community Development (FPCD), Forest Peoples Programme, Forest Trends,

the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF), International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI), Intercooperation, PRISMA (Salvadoran Research Program on Development and Environment), the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC), The Samdhana Institute, and Tebtebba. For further information, visit the Web site at: www.rightsandresources.org.