

Poverty, Rights, and Tenure on Forest Lands: The Problem, and Priority Actions for Achieving Solutions

Summary

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Insecure property rights over forest lands and resources are one of the key reasons why forest poverty is so widespread and persistent. Poverty and forests are intimately linked. Many millions of poor people live in forested areas. Forest dwellers make use of forest resources – fuelwood, timber, thatch, forage, foods, medicinal plants – to meet their basic needs. In short, forests are important for their subsistence.

Of the world's 6 billion people, 2.8 billion live on less than US\$2 a day and the income gap between rich and poor countries is becoming progressively larger. Poverty rates tend to be high in dense forest areas. Many of the world's indigenous and ethnic minority communities inhabit forests. For example, 84 per cent of India's 'tribal' people live in forest areas.

There are five main reasons for the prevalence of high poverty rates in areas of dense forest. Poverty rates are higher in rural than in urban areas, and especially so in remote rural areas, where denser forests are located. Remote areas tend to be relatively untouched by modernization. Forest peoples tend to be politically powerless and lack the means to stand up to outside interests who wish to exploit their land. Forests also act as a magnet for migrants, some of whom are poor. Finally, the rate of government investment in remote rural areas is generally low.

Some forest poor will exit poverty through migration away from the forest, conversion of forests to other land uses, agricultural employment, nonfarm income, and through the effects of economic growth. But many others will remain mired in poverty so long as bad governance and the rights of forest dwellers are ignored.

Many believe that transfer of land tenure from governments to indigenous and other local communities will improve the livelihoods of forest dwellers. There is good empirical evidence to suggest that this is the case. A well-designed program of forest-based poverty alleviation requires integration of forest tenure reform in a broader policy package that includes:

- Giving real ownership of forests to forest dwellers
- Rescinding anti-poor laws and regulations
- Assisting the process of establishing forest-based income-earning opportunities
- Improving gender equity
- Integrating forest-based poverty alleviation into broader poverty alleviation strategies; and
- Creating an enabling environment for these policy reforms.