

[Pace of global land rights reform is slowing, says new report](#)

Change is promised but land grabs continue and 61% of forests are still claimed by governments

Source: The Guardian
By: David Hill



Logging vehicles operate in a concession in Papua New Guinea. Governments still overwhelmingly claim ownership of forest land, the report states. Photograph: Paul Winn/Gree

The amount of land owned or designated for use by [indigenous peoples](#) and local communities is increasing but at a slower rate than past years, according to a report by global coalition Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI).

"[The area of land] increased by a larger amount between 2002 and 2008 than between 2008 and 2013," the report states. "The amount of forest land secured for community ownership since 2008 is less than 20% of that secured in the previous six years."

This is just one of several major claims in the report, titled [Lots of words, little action](#), launched in London last week, and based on a sample of an estimated 85% of forests in lower and middle-income countries.

Other major claims include:

- Over 513 million hectares of forest are held by indigenous people and local communities, but "governments still overwhelmingly claim ownership of forest land ... over 61 percent of the total ... in 2013";
- "24 legal frameworks recognizing some form of community forest tenure" have been adopted in a sample of 27 countries since 2002, but only four of these recognize true ownership, just six were adopted post-2008, and not one of those six recognise ownership at all.

"While there were many encouraging pronouncements last year – from courts, governments, and some of the world's largest corporations – unfortunately, progress on the ground remains very limited," the report states.

Some of these pronouncements are listed in the report and include:

1. A series of major legal victories in courts around the world offering the "potential to reverse the global slowdown in recognition of community [land rights](#). More than any time in recent history, judges supported local communities in securing their land and natural resources in 2013."
2. A "surge in international commitments to community land rights in 2013" made by the G8, UN agencies, the World Bank and the EU.
3. "Unprecedented" commitments to "more ethical standards" and a "more progressive agenda" from "industry leaders", including Coca Cola, Nestle, Unilever, Asia Pulp & Paper, and Wilmar.

The report acknowledges that "this is all good news – but only words." It states that implementing these commitments "may prove difficult" for corporations, and that the "prospects for translating new commitments [by governments] into impacts remained unclear in 2013":

[T]he overriding picture in 2013 remained one of continuing resource grabs by local elites and corporations, aided by governments eager to give away land to investors on almost any terms.

The report features several case studies, including one on the growing "roll call of people killed for their land rights activism" and another on Peru where land conflicts are described as "reaching a crisis" and threatening to "undermine [the country's] status as an honest broker" as the host of the UN climate talks in December this year.

"Peru is in the midst of a series of corrosive and unresolved disputes over forest lands," it states. "Before hosting the global climate talks, Peru should act to prevent forest exploitation, including for hydrocarbons, when such exploitation conflicts with the rights of communities, including the rights of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation."

RRI's Jenny Springer, speaking at [the launch in London](#), suggested that one reason for the slowdown in land rights reform was "the global upsurge in landgrabbing", with increasing pressure on land and natural resources and governments seeking investment.

"It is no coincidence the global slowdown in reform happened at the exact time that the financial value of land, water, and carbon skyrocketed," said

Brazilian lawyer Raul Silva Telles do Valle, from the [Instituto Socioambiental](#), in a prepared media statement publicising the report. "As a result, "land grabbing" has spiked and impoverished countries desperate for an economic boost see forests as a commodity, not as their citizens' homes. These governments need to see the forest as more than just land for exploitation and a collection of trees."

At the launch itself Telles do Valle said that Brazil has made a "lot of progress" in the last 25 years with more than 100 million hectares in the hands of indigenous peoples and other local communities, but at the same time the agri-business sector's power grew enormously and poses a huge threat to further progress. He questioned whether this was a "momentary slowdown" or actually the "apex of the recognition of land rights":

[The agri-business sector needs] land, they need more land. In Brazil the new lands are in the forests, and the forests, of course, are indigenous peoples' land, or local communities' land. We don't have empty land. And so now we are facing a real setback in Brazil. After recognizing 13% of the Brazilian territory to indigenous people, now in the name of this powerful sector that has economic power, that has political power – our presidential regime depends on them, and the Congress – now they are saying, "No. We don't want more indigenous land." So, since the end of the military government in the 1980s we have never had so few new indigenous lands recognized in Brazil as these last three or four years. And now they are wanting to change the Constitution.

Also speaking at the launch was Abdon Nababan, from Indonesian NGO [AMAN](#). He called 2013 "a historic year for us," referring to a ruling by the Constitutional Court annulling the government's ownership claims to "at least 40 million" hectares of forest, but acknowledged that implementing the ruling remains a huge challenge and has been opposed by one government ministry.

Another speaker was [Global Witness's](#) Megan MacInnes, who highlighted the increasing gap between the international regulatory framework overseeing, on one hand, forests and extractive industries and, on the other, agribusiness.

"In 2013 we've seen the EU introduce timber regulations which ban the import of illegal timber," she said. "We've also seen transparency requirements around the revenues paid by oil, gas and mining companies, introduced both into the EU following on from US regulation, whereas, as this report highlights, there is no similar international regulatory frameworks which can be used to help the victims of land-grabbing, or to stop this happening in the future."

Lots of words, little action describes the global slowdown in land rights as "doubly disappointing because, during that same period, a series of international initiatives, including REDD+, committed to supporting rights", and asks if the private sector can "tip the scales."

"Through its global reach and economic importance, an enlightened private sector can, if it chooses, shift the balance decisively away from land grabbing and toward community and indigenous land rights," the report states. "Corporations do not act out of benevolence; commercial logic can push them towards respecting local peoples' rights in a world of growing risk to corporate reputations and global supply chains."

Global Witness's MacInnes said, "To be honest, we're not very optimistic" about the private sector playing such a role but suggested three ways it could do "more to convince us that they actually mean what they say":

The first is that the pledges that they're giving apply retrospectively to current projects which have problems, as well as future agribusiness investments or forest investments. The second is that they are able to prove to us what they're doing to implement these policies through some kind of public reporting mechanism. And the third is that they're scaling up, that they're working with their competitors, with other sectors, to make sure these aren't just ad-hoc, one-on-one commitments to change, but we're seeing cross-sectoral change.

"What we really want to see in 2014," MacInnes said, "is a progression from words to action."