

# Slowdown Reported on Indigenous Rights

Source: Voice of America

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February 5, 2014



Two new reports say there's been a dramatic slowdown in recognizing the rights of indigenous people to tropical forest land and resources. The Rights and Resources Initiative says it's happening despite favorable court rulings and statements by corporations and governments.

The Rights and Resources Initiative says the slowdown comes "as the global hunger for food, fuel, water and mineral wealth continues."

"Our main concern is that there are indigenous peoples and local communities around the world who have customary rights before us – but often those rights are not recognized legally by governments. And we have seen some progress over time in the legal recognition of those rights, but in fact our most recent research is showing that there's been a slowdown in the recognition of rights since about 2008," said Jenny Springer, the group's director of global programs.

The reports find that land tenure laws passed since 2008 are "weaker and recognize fewer rights than those passed before."

Springer said over the last 20 years or so, Latin America has led the way in recognizing indigenous land rights in tropical forest nations.

“At this point, about 39-percent of the forests in Latin America are either owned or designated for use by indigenous peoples and local communities.”

Indigenous people have not fared as well in some other regions.

Springer said, “A couple of the areas that our analysis shows where the forests are still largely controlled and administered directly by governments are Central Africa. About 99 percent of the forests are directly administered by government -- and also peninsular Southeast Asia.”

More countries are discovering they're rich in natural resources, such as oil and minerals. But Springer said that does not mean those countries automatically will be exploited. In some cases, she says, there's been a positive effect.

“Local communities, including in Africa, are often the best stewards of their forests and the wildlife in them. So, for example, I spent some time in the Democratic Republic of Congo. There's an area around a place called Malabo where there are still very well functioning and traditional governance systems of the local communities. They have done a very good job in conserving the forests in their area and also a species of bonobos – a primate species that at this point is only found in DRC,” she said.

But the global demand for resources, she said, does increase pressure on tropical forest land.

“So we see a lot of corporations, a lot of investors, moving into rural areas in developing countries --and the governments want to encourage foreign investment. They want to have revenues and have a means for economic development. But often these large-scale land acquisitions – these industrial concessions – are overlaid right on top of indigenous peoples and community lands.”

The Rights and Resources Initiative reports that “At least one out of every three hectares licensed to natural resource development overlaps with land inhabited by indigenous peoples and local communities.”

Springer is encouraged, though, that some corporations are making statements about protecting rights.

“We think it's really just the beginning – that there's a lot more than needs to be done. There's more that needs to be done in terms of turning verbal commitments into real action – into implementation. And there's more that needs to be done in terms of spreading these kinds of approaches more broadly across global and local private sector actors,” she said.

The issue of land rights is expected to be addressed in September at the World Conference on Indigenous People at the U.N. Also, the next climate change conference, COP 20, will be held in December in Peru, where there are disputes over land rights in the eastern Amazon.