

## **New Study Finds Slow Pace of Forest Tenure Reform Globally Imperils Response to Climate Change and Poverty**

*Africa Lags Behind Other Tropical Forest Regions with Less than 2% of Forests under  
Community Control Compared to One-third in Latin America and Asia, Report Says*

YAOUNDÉ (26 May 2009)— A new report released today at a major global forestry conference in Cameroon has found that governments retain control over the world's tropical forests globally, hindering action to stop deforestation and alleviate poverty among some of the world's poorest rural peoples. Despite some progress in Cameroon and other countries including Mozambique and Tanzania, the report finds that Africa is also moving much slower on tenure reform than other regions.

The study released today by the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), a U.N. treaty-based agency, and the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), a global coalition of non-governmental and community organizations, has found that less than 2 percent of Africa's tropical forests are owned by or designated for use by the region's forest communities and indigenous groups compared to nearly one-third of all forests in Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific. Previous research by RRI partners show that forest communities are as good or better protectors of forests than governments and industry where their rights are recognized.

While, in Africa, the population density relative to forest area is close to the world's average, the deforestation rate is 4 times the world's average. More than 70 percent of Africa's remaining tropical forests are located in Central Africa's Congo Basin, but civil conflicts, inadequate governance, and a lack of action on land reform put much of the forest area at risk.

The report, "Tropical Forest Tenure Assessment: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities," was presented at a meeting of forest community representatives from Africa, Latin America and Asia, ministers from a number of African countries, advocacy groups, and international organizations. Participants aim to inspire new action on securing forest tenure rights in Central and West Africa by building on recent steps to decentralize governance.

"Inaction on land reform and the separation of forests into national parks or industrial concessions exacerbate civil strife and limit community development and conservation efforts," said Andy White, the coordinator of RRI and advisor to the study. Previous research by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and others has found that in more than 30 countries armed conflicts have occurred in forests over the past 20 years. This includes recent violent outbreaks in the eastern part of Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Stern report by the UK government, and other analyses of the role of forests in climate change, point to the necessity of tenure reform for effective protection of forests and for countries to participate in global carbon payment schemes. In sub-Saharan Africa, the clearing of forest land for agriculture, logging, and other extractive industries represent at least one-third of most African countries' total carbon emissions. Payments for reducing deforestation could be a potential source of income in the region – although without tenure reform, the authors argue, these potential benefits will remain unreachable.

Unless addressed urgently, the report concludes, the failure to ensure land rights for local communities, particularly Indigenous Peoples and women, in the forests of Central and West Africa will impede efforts to stop deforestation.

“There are signs that some governments are starting to move to correct the imbalance and some good examples are emerging from across the region. It is now urgent to learn from the experience of other regions and quickly scale up the level of effort,” said Jeffrey Hatcher, lead author of the study.

The study compared the distribution of ownership in 2002 and 2008 in 39 tropical countries, which represent 96 percent of global tropical forests. At the current rate of reform, it will take the Congo Basin countries 260 years to reach the level of reform achieved in the Amazon Basin. If they move as quickly as the Amazon countries, this change could happen in 16 years.

“The slowness of reform is suppressing a whole range of opportunities to reduce poverty and improve livelihoods,” said Emmanuel Ze Meka, ITTO's Executive Director. “Africa's forest communities already generate millions of jobs and dollars in domestic and regional trade, and in indigenous livelihoods, but current laws keep some of these activities illegal and also undermine opportunities to improve forest management.”

According to the ITTO-RRI report, several African countries, including Angola, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Gambia, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Sudan and Tanzania have all introduced or amended laws to strengthen the land rights of local communities. Cameroon, the country hosting the conference, is now beginning to develop a new forest law, which gives an opportunity to clarify and secure local ownership rights.

“Recognizing local land rights alone doesn't solve all the problems, but it's a necessary first step, so these are certainly positive developments,” said White. “Experience in other countries shows that governments need to follow up by supporting local management and enterprises. There are some countries that have recognized local land rights, but the government still controls the forest, and hands out concessions to industrial loggers – leading to more degradation and corruption.”

In a further sign that Cameroon is concerned about these challenges, the nation is negotiating a legally binding bilateral pact known as a Voluntary Partnership Agreement or VPA with the European Union. The VPA will help ensure that wood products exported from Cameroon to the EU contain no illegally harvested timber and are derived from managed forests that benefit local communities.

Despite such positive developments, some worry that the pace of change is too slow for it to have a significant impact on the current generation of Africa's rural people. "Look, we can't wait 260 years, or even 16," said Kyeretwie Opoku of Civic Response, a Ghanaian NGO. "Fast action is necessary now, both for the people of Africa and the world. Climate change is real and already causing damage to people and forests."

"Big shifts take a long time, and governments will not change overnight," Opoku said. "If in the past governments weren't motivated by poverty or deforestation to change, perhaps now they'll be motivated by climate change and the prospect of new revenue. Moreover, community forest management is happening mostly in forests that the transnational companies or the conservation organizations don't want. The path ahead will be a struggle for rights."

Ze Meka also worries about the magnitude of the task and advocates dialogue, participatory processes—and sensitivity. "The issue of forest land tenure and rights involves sensitive aspects closely linked to African cultures and traditions and sometimes our historical past. Reform will not be easy and must be approached carefully," he said. "Nevertheless, African countries must move quickly if they are not to miss out on potential billions in funding for avoided deforestation that could otherwise all be directed to Latin America and Asia. The need for reform cannot be ignored."

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**The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI)** is a new coalition of organisations dedicated to raising global awareness of the critical need for forest tenure, policy and market reforms, in order to achieve global goals of poverty alleviation, biodiversity conservation and forest-based economic growth. Partners currently include ACICAFOC (Coordinating Association of Indigenous and Agroforestry Communities of Central America), the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Civic Response, the Foundation for People and Community Development (FPCD), Forest Peoples Programme, Forest Trends, the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF), Intercooperation, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the Federation of Community Forest Organisations of Nepal (FECOFUN), the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) and the Samdhana Institute. For further information, visit the Web site at: [www.rightsandresources.org](http://www.rightsandresources.org).

**The International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO)** is an intergovernmental organization promoting the conservation and sustainable management, use and trade of tropical forest resources. Its 60 members represent about 80% of the world's tropical forests and 90% of the global tropical timber trade. More information available online at [www.itto.or.jp](http://www.itto.or.jp).