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Government of Cameroon Recognizes Importance of Forest Tenure Reform and Community Participation for Economic Development

Yaoundé (25 May 2009)—With growing pressure on forests and farmland throughout the African continent, more than 300 representatives from government, research and civil society organizations today launched a five-day conference in Yaoundé to find ways to accelerate policy reform on forest rights, sustainable forest management, and socio-economic development in West and Central Africa.

Some African countries, including Tanzania, Mozambique, Angola, and The Gambia, have made significant progress on recognizing community-based property rights and giving authority to indigenous and other local communities to manage forests, several speakers noted in the opening plenary.

However, much remains to be done: only 2 percent of African forests are owned by the communities that live in and around them, according to a new report released by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI).

“The questions of land law and forest tenure are a permanent concern of our countries,” said Elvis Ngolle, Minister of Forest and Fauna of Cameroon. “Forest tenure is primarily a development problem because the implementation of social policies first requires the development of a national-level strategy for managing land.”

The five-day “International Conference on Forest Tenure, Governance and Enterprise” has been jointly organized by International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), IUCN Cameroon, the Ministry of Forests and Fauna of Cameroon and other partners.

According to the Minister, forest policy in Cameroon has two main goals, set in the countries’ first forest law in 1994: sustainable management of forest resources, and community participation in the management and conservation of forests.

The Minister said that 238 community forest simple management plans have been approved and 154 community forests management conventions have been signed.

Forest or woodland covers approximately 75 percent of Cameroon. In fact, the forests of Cameroon—estimated at nearly 20 million ha—constitute a significant portion of the Congo Basin, the world’s second largest forest ecosystem after the Amazon Basin in Latin America. According to RRI, only 4 percent are reserved for communities, with the rest allocated to reserves or private commercial timber operations.

Cameroon just announced a process to reform the 1994 forest policy that officially created community forests. Participants from local communities hope that the new law will include customary forest tenure and rights. Minister Ngolle told participants that the Government is open to incorporating the conference’s resolutions, particularly those related to tenure and forestry management, into the legal reform process.

“In the future, demand from the international timber market will focus on wood derived from plantation forests. That can only be achieved in an environment where forest rights have been clearly defined,” he added.

Cécile Ndjebet of Cameroon Ecology, speaking on behalf of Cameroonian forest communities in her opening remarks, applauded Cameroon’s progress in developing community-managed forests, but pointed out challenges to their further development, both in Cameroon and the region. These include:

- Long-standing denial of tenure rights, and limited opportunities for community-driven enterprises.
- Limited access to land and resources for women and Indigenous Peoples.
- New pressures from mining, eco-tourism, and expansion of industrial plantations.
- New pressures on ecosystems from changing climate patterns.
- The fact that the new carbon markets generally do not recognize customary systems of ownership.

One of the main objectives of the Yaounde conference is to push governments toward broader actions that secure land rights for forest communities in West and Central Africa. “The local communities that I represent are convinced that it is not possible to achieve development without tenure security,” said Ndjebet.

“Forest communities are convinced they are able to ensure the sustainable management of forests and natural resources. They want responsibility to be in their hands. They want to be involved and they want to be valued,” she added.

Approximately 800 million people live in or depend on forests for their livelihoods. A large but unknown number of forest dwellers are often not recognized as citizens and hold no land ownership rights. Lack of secure tenure undermines the social identity, security, and cultural survival of Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities.

In addition, forest ownership often determines who benefits from timber, minerals, and other natural resources sourced from forests. Tenure security can also affect whether people protect or destroy forests. Many researchers as well as communities contend that secure ownership is a strong incentive for conservation and sustainable use.

The Yaounde conference was organized in response to calls from African participants of the 2007 International Conference on Community Forest Management and Enterprise in Acre, Brazil. In that meeting African delegates proposed a follow-up conference in Africa to chart the way forward for systemically expanding community forest tenure, management and enterprise in Africa.

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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 .

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.