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Embargoed for Release until Wednesday, 3 May 2006 at 17:01GMT
(or with a.m. papers Thursday, 4 May 2006)

International Coalition Launches Unprecedented Effort to Strengthen Local Rights to Own and Use Forests and Fight Rural Poverty

Group Sees Historic Opportunity to Boost Incomes Among 1.6 Billion Forest-Dependent Poor, Prevent Illegal Logging and Protect Forest Biodiversity

BANGKOK, THAILAND (4 May 2006)—Stating that the ambitious global effort to radically reduce poverty will fail unless it focuses on the 1.6 billion people who rely on forests for their livelihoods, a coalition of organizations has launched an international initiative advocating for stronger community rights to own and use forests and develop sustainable forest-based economies. The group aims to assist communities and governments to double the global forest area under community ownership and management by 2015.

Many people who live in forested regions, which cover 30 percent of the world's land mass, eke out \$2 a day or less, and that includes some 350 million indigenous and tribal people who depend on forests for food, housing, heat, and medicine. The initiative also seeks to reduce by half the proportion of people in forest areas who live in extreme poverty by 2015. This can only be done, the group argues, if these communities have clear rights to own and use forest resources.

The partners agree that it would be impossible for the world to reach the Millennium Development Goals on poverty and environmental protection without addressing the rights and improving the economic status of the 1.6 billion people—nearly one third of the planet's population—who depend on forests for their survival.

Founding partners of the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) include the Indonesia-based Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the Coordinating Association of Indigenous and Community Agroforestry in Central America (ACICAFOC), Washington, DC-based Forest Trends, the Bangkok-based Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC), the Foundation for People and Community Development, Papua New Guinea, and the World Conservation Union (IUCN).

“Most of the world's tropical forests are government-owned and managed, despite legitimate local claims to the forest and the limited ability of governments to protect these

vast resources. Commercial use is often restricted to a few privileged players—too often logging companies that harvest the forests unsustainably—with little payback to rural communities for schools, roads, and services that might spur economic growth,” said David Kaimowitz, Director-General of CIFOR.

Currently, a massive transition in forest ownership is taking place throughout the world where rural people are increasingly asserting their rights to control forested areas and governments are beginning to recognize the benefits of local control. Local communities, including indigenous residents, manage at least 370 million hectares of forest. Local communities are now protecting more biodiversity in forest areas than is currently conserved in parks and other private or government-protected areas. “But significant legal and other barriers persist,” said Achim Steiner, Director-General of IUCN. “This initiative aims to support communities and governments in addressing these barriers on a global scale, building on the momentum that is already underway.”

“It is now apparent that forests can play a big part in boosting living standards of the poor, but only if we can overcome the many forces that prevent the rural poor from owning, using and selling their forest products and services,” said Andy White, President of the Rights and Resources Group (RRG), which is coordinating the Initiative.

“The world’s forest sector is in the midst of the biggest transformation since the colonial era,” continued White. “We’re seeking to encourage and expand the kind of reforms, such as those affecting property rights, that will allow forest communities to progress from barely surviving to thriving.”

Working with the support and collaboration of the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), the Ford Foundation, Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the United States Forest Service, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Rights and Resources Initiative is capitalizing on growing interest—from forest communities, industry, national governments and global development institutions—to shape policies and markets that can make forests integral to poverty reduction.

“We need to help national governments understand how it is in the national interest, economically and environmentally, to improve forest governance in ways that strengthen local ownership and management,” said RRG Board Member Yati Bun, who worked for more than a decade with the Papua New Guinea National Forest Service and now heads the Foundation for People and Community Development.

But changing the status quo will be a complex process. It requires new policies that define clear local property rights so the forest-dependent poor can participate openly in forest markets and forest conservation. There is also the need for new legal and regulatory frameworks that govern such things as subsidies and access – which now disproportionately benefit large industry. And there must be market reforms that level the playing field, giving smaller operators a fair shot at success.

The Rights and Resources Initiative has assembled a global network of organizations across the world, including community groups, NGOs, research institutions, government officials and market analysts in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Informed by what is actually happening on the ground, RRI will marshal the expertise and efforts of these organizations to help advance tenure, policy and market reforms in developing countries. They will also produce and distribute comprehensive data on forest ownership; levels of poverty in forest areas; existing policies, laws and regulations; and key players in the process.

Board member Alberto Chinchilla, head of the Coordinating Association of Indigenous and Community Agroforestry in Central America, believes the situation in many countries is ripe for the kind of assistance RRI can provide. Members of his group now control some 14 percent of Central America's forests. Their progress has been accelerated by targeted policy and technical guidance, such as management plans that offer locally controlled, sustainable use as an alternative to complete bans on commercial activities.

“What we have seen in Central America is that once local groups get their foot in the door, with the right kind of assistance, they can push it wide open and enter into a new era of using forests to achieve economic independence while preserving the forests for generations to come,” Chinchilla said.

In Southeast Asia, communities of farmers conserve large areas of biodiversity-rich secondary forests independently of conservation programs. Village-managed forests in central and southern Africa house diverse species and ecosystems. Forty million hectares of forest in Mexico (seven million in well organized community forest enterprises) and three million hectares of forest in Central America are under community management, with some community timber enterprises investing double the amount for habitat protection as governments in adjacent state-protected areas. Other countries in Asia and Latin America are conserving species and habitat while producing different marketable and locally consumed forest products—be they timber, non-timber, botanicals, fiber products, or organic crops.

The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) is a new coalition of organizations 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 Forest Trends, the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC), the Foundation for People and Community Development, Papua New Guinea, the Coordinating Association of Indigenous and Community Agroforestry in Central America (ACICAFOC), the United States Forest Service, InterCooperation, Switzerland, and the World Agroforestry Center. Development of the Initiative is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization in the USA. For further information, visit the Web site at: www.rightsandresources.org.

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