

Forest-tenure reform ‘too slow’

The conference background paper found that Africa lags behind other tropical forest regions in forest-tenure reform



On your bike: The slow pace of tenure reform in Africa is suppressing opportunities for poverty reduction *Photo: J. Blaser*

A lack of progress in forest-tenure reform is hindering action to stop deforestation and alleviate poverty among some of the world’s poorest rural peoples, according to a background report prepared for the *International Conference on Forest Tenure, Governance and Enterprise*.

The report found that Africa is moving much more slowly on tenure reform than other regions: less than 2% of Africa’s tropical forests are legally owned or designated for use by forest communities or Indigenous groups, compared to nearly one-third of all forests in Latin America and Asia and the Pacific. Civil conflicts, inadequate governance and a lack of action on land reform put much of the continent’s forest at risk.

“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, RRI’s coordinator.

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

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“There are signs that some governments are starting to move to correct the forest-tenure imbalance and some good examples are emerging. It is now urgent to learn from these and to quickly scale up the level of effort,” said Jeffrey Hatcher, lead author of the report.

“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, for example, is beginning a process to develop a new forest law, which gives it an opportunity to clarify and secure its local ownership rights.

“Recognizing local land rights alone doesn’t solve all the problems, but it is 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.”

Many people worry that the pace of change will be too slow for it to have a significant impact on the current generation of Africa’s rural people. “Big shifts take a long time, and governments will not change overnight,” warned Kyeretwie Opoku of Civic Response, a Ghanaian non-governmental organization.

Ze Meka also worried about the magnitude of the task. “African countries must move quickly to reform tenure,” he said. “Otherwise they will miss out on potential billions in climate-change mitigation funding for avoided deforestation that might otherwise all be directed to Latin America and Asia.”

This article is based on a press release prepared for the Yaoundé conference. The background paper, Tropical forest tenure assessment: trends, challenges and opportunities, is available on the ITTO and RRI websites.