

**13th Regional Dialogue on Forests, Governance and Climate Change:
Harmonizing Tenure and Resource Policies in Central and West Africa's Changing Landscape
Yaoundé, Cameroon
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Closing Remarks
Andy White, Coordinator, RRI**

First I would like to say thank you, to our hosts, the government and the people of Cameroon, and in particular the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife, and in particular Minister Ngole; it has been a great pleasure to be with you this week, and we all appreciate your hospitality and your welcome. I would also like to thank COMIFAC, who has a very important role of promoting coherence of policies across the region, a task that this conference again agreed was crucial and urgent.

And I would like to say a particular thank you to IUCN, and in particular to Anny and Chantal. They have been on the front lines of organizing this conference, and I think we can all appreciate the challenges of trying to coordinate between RRI, the Ministry, COMIFAC, and the Palais des Congrès, and all of you, from almost 20 countries. So thank you, Anny and Chantal. We know it has not been easy.

And finally, my thanks and gratitude to all of you who have come from the region and across Africa. This has been a rich discussion because of you. And here I would like to say a special thank you to the representatives of the land and mining ministries who have demonstrated some courage and tolerance by spending almost a week with this forestry crowd. I think we have taken an important step towards integrating the concerns, interests and risks faced by these different sectors – and all together taken the all-important step of making sure that all of these sector policies are based on the rights of your citizens.

I would like to share with you what I think I have learned over these last three days. And I will try to respect the same rules that we gave all of the working groups: no more than five recommendations and no more than five minutes to speak.

My first finding is that Africa is indeed in a pivotal historic moment regarding “who owns the land” and by extension “who owns Africa”? The allocation of land rights is proceeding very fast; it has long-term impacts; and in most cases it is practically irreversible. We are learning that once a government gives land away to a large-scale investor it transforms the land and the people, and is very difficult to ever get it back. And for this reason governments should be acting with extreme caution and care.

We also learned that all of these new pressures of mining, infrastructure, agribusiness, oil palm and biofuels are happening at the same time – making a tremendous challenge for local people to defend themselves. And our discussions made it also very clear that without the recognition of local rights, transparency of deals and decisions, and mechanisms to ensure accountability of governments and investors, there is a race to the bottom – and the unscrupulous investors will always find the weakest link, the country with the weakest governance to exploit. So it has become clear that now is the moment when African countries will decide just what kind of country they will become.

My second finding from the week is that our forest institutions don't produce change. Our system of ministries of forestry, continuing up to the forestry sections of the FAO, the World Bank, and even our set of environmental NGOs, and yes even RRI – don't produce change – at least not of the nature and the speed necessary. We are extremely conservative and are more protective of the past than able to deal with the future.

Natural systems constantly adapt and evolve, but ours don't. The climate has changed, the market has changed, the knowledge, needs and expectations of our citizens have changed, but we are using the same institutions and development models that we have been using for the last one hundred or more years. And this is true even in developed countries. In my country, the USA, we recently celebrated the 100th anniversary of the US Forest Service, and while the forests are dying and burning due to climate change, the forest agency is hesitant to rethink how it works. Our institutions were built for another time.

So our forest institutions are resisting the change and urgency needed, and trying to use the same models that got us into this crisis in the first place to get us out of it; tweaking on the margins rather than making the fundamental changes necessary. I think this conference and your recommendations provide the kind of new thinking that is needed, but I think it is only a start. We have much more to do.

So my third finding is that we really need to rethink, at a fundamental level, our institutions for owning and governing our natural resources. Our current stock of organizations is not delivering the change our people and our forests need.

My fourth finding from the week is that whatever we do, in terms of changing our institutions, the reforms have to be based on the human, civil and political rights of our citizens. That has to come first. Examples from the week show that enhanced coordination between ministries of mining, forestry and land will help, and is a good step, but will not succeed if it is not based on respecting the rights and cultures of our citizens.

And here I would like to thank Samuel Nguiffo of CED and UNESCO for bringing a human face to our meeting, by showing us the film on the Baka last night. I think we were all shocked and dismayed by what we saw. The systematic destruction of not only human lives, but of a culture, and the legitimate owners of the forest, is a human rights tragedy on a massive scale, and a shameful demonstration of our failure as a sector to protect our own people. Nothing can be more important to governments and development organizations than protecting our people, but in forestry we have failed at this basic task, and continue to do so. We all have to do much better.

My fifth and last finding is that we all have to figure out how to leverage the immense wave of private sector investment that is planned in our forest areas to assist us in addressing and resolving our land and governance crisis. We just completed a new study at RRI and found that there is at least \$18 billion dollars of planned investment in the agribusiness, forestry, mining and infrastructure sectors – and

already over 10 million hectares of forest land committed to concessions in Cameroon alone. These mines, railroads and new plantations will transform our forests and our people – but they do not need to destroy them.

Governments want and need revenues and local people need and want jobs, schools and clinics, and this investment can be an opportunity rather than a threat. We need to figure out how to shape and guide this investment so that it can help us save our forests and our people. We need these investments to promote new kinds of business and development models that respect human rights and local land rights, and also produce sound social and economic development. This is an opportunity to overcome and correct some of our own failed models of the past.

All of these investors face tremendous financial risks, and will lose a tremendous amount of money if the local people do not support their projects. They have a strong interest in reducing these risks, and so we need to get them to become allies, and join our cause. They have the power and the money to push the land reforms we need, and we will succeed when we mobilize them and harness their interests.

So those are my personal findings from the week.

I have enjoyed being with you all and I appreciate your dedication to this issue and your work to bring about the change we all need. Thank you all for leaving your homes and spending the week here with us. And I wish you all a safe journey home.

Thank you.