

**13<sup>th</sup> 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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Opening Comments  
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Your Excellency, Minister Ngole, Madame the Secretary of State, Secretary General Koulagna, Executive Secretary Mbitikon, traditional chiefs, and all of you distinguished guests from the communities, governments, private sector and civil society organizations from across Africa and the world; it is a great pleasure for me to be back in Africa, and back in Cameroon with you. And it is especially a pleasure because we have gathered here together to address the all-important issue of land rights and governance.

We all know that this topic of land rights is both critical and contentious, and unless addressed correctly it threatens not only the lives of your local people, but the future of your governments; and not only your forests, but the future possibility of social and economic development in your countries. We know that the difference between states that prosper and states that fail is whether, or not, they respect the rights of their citizens and establish inclusive, transparent systems of governance.

So what we are discussing here is not just a question for the Ministries of Forestry, or the Ministries of Land, or the Ministries of Mining. It concerns all of those interests of course, but more important it is about the nature of the state and the relationship between the state and its citizens. And for that reason it is particularly significant that our conference is sponsored by the office of the Prime Minister of Cameroon – an indication of how important this issue is to the whole government Cameroon.

Each year RRI prepares a report on the global status of forest rights and resources. Our report this year, just launched several weeks ago in London, is entitled "*Landowners or Laborers: What Choice will Developing Countries Make?*" We chose that title because after years of progress around the world in recognizing and strengthening the land rights of local people, and moving towards becoming countries of forest land owners, 2012 was marked by many governments considering, if not choosing, a different development model – handing out their citizen's forest lands to industrial agribusiness, mining, forestry and hydropower investors, and converting their citizens – often without their consent – into landless laborers.

Of course these countries want development and governments want their people to have jobs and income, and the world now wants your land, your minerals, and your water, and so there is now a great opportunity for attracting money and wealth.

But this path, we know from history, leads to not only many unhappy local people but persistent conflict, lost money by investors, and what has long been called the "resource curse" – when the

abundance of natural resources leads not to development, but to corruption, inequity and sometimes the collapse of the state.

In fact, this week's *Economist* magazine has a special section on Africa, and I suggest that you read it. It of course discusses the positive economic growth, but they conclude that despite the natural resource wealth "*commodities are potentially the biggest threat to Africa's future.*"

Some countries in the region recognize this threat. Last year the Minister of Agriculture of South Africa said that "*We have no choice but to speed up land reform as a matter of urgency. The economic future of this country depends on how this is dealt with.*" And this statement comes from a Minister from South Africa – a country that has already shown a tremendous amount of growth, but because of the development path they've chosen still faces tremendous inequity and risk of conflict. And of course there are some countries, notably Botswana here in Africa, which have avoided this curse. So we know it is possible.

We are also gathered here because this land and forest tenure crisis is not new to us. Many of us met here in Yaoundé in 2009 – with great foresight some would say – to address this issue. That meeting was also co-organized by the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF), RRI, IUCN and COMIFAC. And I think it's fair to say that it was an impressive and path-breaking event. Leaders from governments, communities, international organizations and NGOs from around the region met for the first time to discuss this crisis, agree on recommendations, and set a common goal – what we called Objective 2015.

That Objective was to dramatically increase the amount of secure community-owned forest land by 2015 in Central and West Africa, and to actively support community-owned enterprises.

So we are here this week to take stock and see how we are progressing on this Objective. And I think it is a testament to the power of that conference and the logic of our common Objective that the Ministry, RRI, IUCN and COMIFAC have come back together to check our progress and hold ourselves accountable.

And I think it is also remarkable that in preparing for this conference all of the co-organizers have reviewed the 2009 conference declaration: its analysis of the problem, the issues, challenges, and recommendations, and found it remains valid, and that we all remain committed to Objective 2015.

So to do this stocktaking we have commissioned two reports as well as invited many experts from across the region to update us on what has changed since 2009, and help us identify what new opportunities, what new threats, and what new lessons have we learned from the last four years.

I think we all know, without even reading the reports or hearing the presentations, that since 2009 we have made some progress, but not nearly enough. The crisis still stares us in the face. Communities remain vulnerable across the region. In some instances there has been important progress in terms of policy, such as the new AU land policy and the Community Rights Law in Liberia, new legal instruments

like the FLEGT and VPA, and there are some new accountability mechanisms such as the RSPO, which has helped by establishing standards and controlling abuses, but overall there has not been nearly enough progress in terms of securing rights on the ground – where it matters most. And unfortunately, the pressures on local people, and the risks of someone grabbing their land, has increased substantially since 2009. So not only have we not made enough progress, but the challenges are even greater than we were last together.

And I would like to say that this limited progress is not due only to a failure of governments to act. There has clearly been inadequate action by governments. But there has also been inadequate attention and progress by donors, NGOs and civil society, including us in RRI. Back then we too committed to develop mechanisms to monitor and follow-up on our recommendations and the Objective 2015, and we have not done so.

And so to conclude I'd like to say that even before we begin our discussions, I am ready to commit RRI to helping you do a better job of advancing these goals and monitoring your progress.

Dear delegates, your people, your forests and your future are all too beautiful to squander. And yet, without much, much bolder action that is what will happen. We all need to act and act much faster.

Thank you, Mr. Minister, and the people of Cameroon, for inviting us back. It is a great pleasure to be here with you all. I look forward to our meeting and to the progress that we will make together.

Thank you.