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SPOTLIGHT

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## Evidence linking community forest rights and improved forest condition inconclusive

There is an assumption that there is a correlation, possibly even a direct cause and effect relationship, between the devolution of forest governance and improved forest condition.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was interested in testing that hypothesis to assess its impact on global climate change mitigation and adaptation.

To that end, a group of researchers at Michigan State University was tasked with reviewing, summarizing and commenting on the empirical evidence supporting that conclusion.

In their review of the literature, they found the assumption deserves, at best, a “maybe.”

“Even though some prominent examples provide illustrations of the links between tenure content and/or security and forest outcomes, major weaknesses remain in the evidence generated,” said review team leader Dr. Runsheng Yin of MSU. “There is not enough conclusive evidence to prove a direct link between community forest rights and improved forest condition. Therefore, we urge caution in universally accepting the assumption that community control of forest resources improves forest condition.”

The basic challenge is to broaden the research on linkages between forest tenure and forest condition. Most research to date has been too narrowly focused. A lack of funding, a lack of coordination and weak research capacity have contributed to that, he said.

The literature review can help address that challenge, Dr. Yin said.

Right now, he said, “there is much international interest in reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from forest degradation and deforestation and in increasing carbon stocks by enhancing forest regeneration and management.



Photo by A. Jhaveri: Shifting Cultivation Plot in Heingyu

“At the same time, the effective implementation of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) requires a broad set of policies, including institutional reforms in the areas of governance, tenure, decentralization, and community forest management.

“And reforming forest tenure/governance systems is increasingly viewed as a key factor in fulfilling a whole host of development and environmental goals predicated on managing forest ecosystems sustainably,” he added.

With those things in mind, the literature review can benefit policy makers, businesses, researchers, international donors and many other organizations by improving their understanding of the complex linkages between devolved tenure systems and forest conditions. This, in turn, will assist them to better design their (REDD+) and Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) policies and programs, Dr. Yin said.

In addition, he said, the literature review and possible subsequent research can contribute to practical knowledge on how mitigation and adaptation interventions can be delivered to strengthen resource tenure and property rights to help reduce vulnerability and increase the resilience of people, places and livelihoods in the face of global climate change impacts and promote resource use practices that achieve mitigation and development objectives.

The literature review has been published as a four-article special feature in Forest Policy and Economics. The articles review and synthesize the literature on the empirical linkages between devolved tenure systems and forest conditions, identifying knowledge gaps and study needs as well as deliberating on how best to move research in this area forward.

The special feature can be found at: Forest Policy and Economics 73: 271-299  
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/13899341/73>

*Dr. Runsheng Yin of Michigan State University (MSU) is the Coordinator of IUFRO Working Party 9.04.02 – Valuation of ecosystem services and carbon markets. The Department of Forestry of MSU is a Member Organization of IUFRO.*

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