



Center for International Forestry Research

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For immediate release

## New global study shows high reliance on forests among rural poor

LONDON (June 15, 2011) \_ Income from forests and other natural environments makes a significant contribution to the livelihoods of millions of people in developing countries, according to a six-year global study that has documented for the first time on such a scale the role that the environment plays in poverty alleviation.

“The results underscore the importance of sustainably managing forests and other natural environments in developing countries because they provide income to many of the world’s poorest people,” said Frances Seymour, Director General of the [Center for International Forestry Research](#) (CIFOR), which carried out the study.

The size of environmental incomes, i.e. wood, game, plants, and other resources harvested from the wild, has until now been poorly documented, and is not obvious to most policymakers. Many existing tools for assessing poverty and income – such as poverty reduction strategy plans, poverty surveys, the World Bank’s Living Standard Measurement Survey, and national income accounting systems – fall short of capturing the importance of the income from natural resources, so that its true value in the livelihoods of the world’s rural poor remains largely invisible.

The [Poverty and Environment Network](#) (PEN) study consists of data from more than 8,000 households from 60 sites in 24 countries. The results were released today at the Royal Society in London.

Among those surveyed, forest income – on average – constitutes more than one fifth of total household income, while environmental income (forest and non-forest) makes up more than one fourth, according to the preliminary numbers that come out of the study’s global data base.

“Earlier studies have emphasised the special importance of forest incomes to the poorest households. One surprising finding of this project is that, overall, forest reliance (defined as the *share* of forest income in total household income) apparently varies little with income levels. Hence, forest income is not just for

the poor but for everyone at these sites,” said Arild Angelsen, PEN coordinator and Senior Associate of CIFOR, and professor at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences.

Another surprising finding of the PEN study is that forests do not play a primary role as safety nets among the households in the survey. “Households respond to shocks mostly through other coping strategies, such as reduced consumption, temporary employment, or seeking external assistance. Forests also seem to have a less than expected role in terms of filling seasonal income gaps, e.g. between crop harvests, although they may serve a role as a seasonal gap filler at some of the research sites,” said Sven Wunder, Principal Scientist at CIFOR, who has also been leading the study.

Typically, all members of a household – men, women, and children – participate in the collection and processing of forest products. Contrary to what has been claimed, men bring as much or more forest products to the households as women, although there is a clear pattern of women being more involved in subsistence uses and men in cash-earning activities.

Firewood constitutes the single most important forest product, with about one fifth of forest income on average, followed by timber (10%).

Angelsen also said that more than a quarter of all households surveyed had cleared forest area for crops in the last year.

“We found a strong correlation between income and deforestation. Within each site, on average the top income quintile (richest 20 %) households deforest 30 percent more than the bottom quintile (poorest 20%). There is an even stronger tendency of higher forest clearing in the richer sites. If we look at this deforestation regionally, rates were considerably higher in studies in Latin America, which hold also some of the richer households in the sample. Overall, the results do not lend support to the hypothesis that poverty drives deforestation,” he said.

Each year, more than 13 million hectares (32 million acres) of forests are lost globally, an area roughly the size of England.

The data collection involved a careful recording of all forest and environmental uses, as well as other major income sources. All income data were collected through four quarterly surveys to shorten recall periods and increase accuracy. The study sites were chosen to obtain widely representative coverage of different geographical regions, forest types, forest tenure regimes, levels of poverty, infrastructure and market access and population density. The 32 PEN partners are mainly PhD students that spent a year or more in the field collecting data.

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For more information on PEN, visit its website [here](#).

The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) advances human wellbeing, environmental conservation and equity by conducting research to inform policies and practices that affect forests in developing countries. CIFOR helps ensure that decision-making that affects forests is based on solid science and principles of good governance, and reflects the perspectives of developing countries and forest-dependent people. CIFOR is one of 15 centres within the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.

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