

# Researching why forests matter to the poor

“The data will provide new insights on ‘hot’ policy issues such as the relationship between community-based forest management and poverty alleviation, and the impact of market liberalisation on forest use and poverty.”  
Arild Angelsen

We know that forests provide hundreds of millions of people with food, medicinal plants, fuel wood and many other things. We also know forests are crucial for the livelihoods of the forest-dwelling poor. But can forests help to lift people out of poverty? And if they can, then what sort of forest products, and what management regimes and policies, do most for poverty alleviation?

If policy-makers are to be convinced of the importance of forests, we need to find answers to these questions. These answers need to be backed up by hard data, yet we have surprisingly little systematic knowledge about the precise relationship between forests and poverty. That is why CIFOR and the International Foundation for Science (IFS) established the Poverty and Environment Network (PEN) in 2004. The network uses PhD students to gather information, in return for which the students receive guidance from CIFOR scientists, and others with expertise in their field, and modest financial assistance.

By 2006, 24 PEN partners were gathering household and village data on topics such as the harvesting of forest products, household incomes, market access and village institutions. “We expect to have data from some 6,000 households which have been interviewed every quarter during the course of a year,” explains Arild Angelsen, a senior research associate at CIFOR and PEN coordinator. “This will eventually constitute the most comprehensive data base on the subject.”

Using a prototype questionnaire developed by PEN, the researchers are investigating a wide range of subjects, from the resilience of Brazil nut production in Amazonia to the role of bamboo in alleviating poverty in China; from the economic value of eco-tourism in Cameroon, to the impact of decentralisation on forest use in Senegal and Uganda.

José Pablo Prado Córdova, a Guatemalan student at the Faculty of Life Sciences, the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, believes that his association with PEN has been very useful. “It has been intellectually challenging, and it has helped me to come up with a sound strategy for analysing my data,” he says. Although the PEN questionnaire created considerable extra work for him in the field – he is studying the links between an endangered fir, used as a Christmas tree in Guatemala, and peasant economies – he says that it gave him a sound backbone for his household research.

Miriam Wyman, from the University of Florida, has been conducting research on the impacts of conservation initiatives on land-use decision-making and riparian forest cover in villages in Belize. The demands of the PEN questionnaire, which requires four visits to each household, have meant that she has spent longer in the field than anticipated. Nevertheless, she has found the exercise rewarding. “It’s an interesting and exciting project to be involved with, considering the amount and types of data from different parts of the world that are being collected for the global database,” she reflects, “and the questionnaire required me to ask questions which I might never have asked otherwise. These have led to some very interesting findings.” She has also appreciated the opportunity to seek advice from CIFOR staff and other international scientists.

There is no doubt that the database will shed new light on the relationship between forests and poverty. Angelsen thinks the research will contribute to research and policy formulation in three ways. First, we will get much better and more representative figures about how important forests are, in what ways and to whom. Second, the data



PEN partner Miriam Wylam conducting an interview in Flowers Bank village, Belize. Photo: Miriam Wyman