

# BioSoc: the Biodiversity and Society Bulletin

Research highlights on biodiversity and society, poverty and conservation

## Counting on the Environment: The Contribution of Forests to Rural Livelihoods

The United Nations has declared 2011 the International Year of Forests in recognition of the potential contribution of forests to sustainable development, poverty eradication, and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. However, claims that forest incomes play a key role in poverty alleviation are often based only on anecdotal evidence. CIFOR's Poverty and Environment Network (PEN) aims to fill this gap in knowledge.

PEN is a collaborative research effort started by CIFOR in 2004 that aims to provide solid knowledge to policy makers, researchers, as well as conservation and development agencies to help them achieve better forest management and more pro poor outcomes. PEN is the largest and most comprehensive global analysis of tropical forests and poverty. Its database contains survey data on 8000+ households in 40+ study sites in 25 developing countries. At the core of PEN is comparative, detailed socio-economic data that was collected quarterly at the household and village level by 50+ research partners using standardised definitions, questionnaires and methods. 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.

On 15th June 2011 CIFOR presented some of the preliminary results of PEN at a policy conference at the Royal Society in London. Their findings included:

- On average, more than one fifth of total household income comes from forests – although there is a big variation across sites;
- Forests are almost as important for rich households as they are for poor households - although poor households tend to rely more on forests for subsistence uses, while rich households rely more on cash forest products;
- Deforestation is positively correlated with income (non-poor households deforest more than the poor households), both within sites, and across sites;
- On average men bring as many forests products to the households as women do – although there is a strong gender difference across activities;
- Forests do not play a primary role as a safety net, their main role being instead as a regular source of income;
- State-owned forests are the most important source of forest income for all households in the survey, playing a more important role than private or community-owned forests.

Even these preliminary findings highlight the importance of this global analysis. They provide evidence to support claims that have long been made by the conservation and development community (e.g. rural households heavily rely on forest products for their subsistence). But at the same time they offer unforeseen insights (e.g. forests are not as important as insurance or seasonal gap fillers as we thought).

As strategies like REDD and climate change adaptation take the centre stage in international debates, and as governments worldwide are asked to commit a large chunk of their budget to the protection of forests, understanding the complex links between forests and poverty is more important than ever. As observed by David Kaimowitz, Director of Natural Resources and Sustainable Development at the Ford Foundation, in his closing remarks to the CIFOR's conference, "(The PEN dataset shows that) if you do

anything significant to change (people's) access (to forests), that will probably have a pretty important effect on people's income, so we need to be careful when we make decisions". Processes like REDD need to be pro poor and solid evidence like the one provided by the PEN dataset can play a key role in informing the policy making process and ensuring pro poor outcomes are achieved.

Alessandra Giuliani, July 2011

More details on **CIFOR's PEN Initiative** can be found at: <http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/pen/>

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