

# Rural Poverty and Environment

**A**n estimated 900 million of the world's poorest people live in rural areas. Many still depend on natural resources for their well-being; most want to strengthen and diversify their livelihoods. They have knowledge, rights, and adaptive skills, but a lack of political voice and uncertain land tenure, among other factors, limit their access to resources and opportunities.

IDRC's Rural Poverty and Environment (RPE) program is a global effort that supports research to meet the needs of the rural poor living in fragile or degraded ecosystems in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. Its goal is to strengthen institutions, policies, and practices that enhance food, water, and income security.

## OBJECTIVES

RPE-supported research helps poor rural resource users to:

- plan for and participate in developing and implementing programs and policies for sound environmental and natural resource management;
- uphold their access to and rights over water, land, fisheries, forests, plants, and other resources;
- respond to and benefit from integration with social and economic systems, and the social and economic connections between rural and urban areas; and
- adapt to climate change, environmental degradation, and water scarcity through learning-based approaches to improve local ecosystem quality and productivity.



Community members engage in participatory discussions on local livelihoods and natural resource use in Peam Athit, Cambodia.

LIPA/IDRC: Cambodian Ministry of Environment.

## OUR APPROACH TO PROGRAMMING

RPE's approach combines science and participatory research to build researchers' capacity and to strengthen the participation of decision-makers in multistakeholder processes (from farmers to researchers to government officials). It also promotes policy engagement to build action- and learning-oriented partnerships.

RPE supports innovative action research in four areas:

- **Multistakeholder approaches to environmental governance.** There are sound economic, ecological, and social reasons to ensure that many stakeholders, including marginalized groups, participate in decision-making, and that the resulting policies are informed by field research and meet local needs. Action research on common pool resources is exploring ways to establish successful collaboration among communities, researchers, and governments to manage and conserve resources.
- **Enhancing access and rights of use natural resources.** Effective legal frameworks and traditional systems that govern access and use rights are critical to equitable and sustainable rural development processes. Women's access to land, community forest

rights, and equitable use of genetic resources can be strengthened through rigorous interdisciplinary research.

- **Strengthening integration with economic and social systems.** Understanding the potential effects of global markets and migration on rural communities can help increase livelihood resiliency and improve natural resource management. Research on territorial approaches to development, pro-poor value chains, payments for environmental services, and causes and impacts of migration will provide useful insights for developing and implementing appropriate policies.
- **Social learning for adaptation.** RPE supports action-oriented experimentation with methods, practices and tools, partnerships and organizational changes, and policy formulation in order to try new resource management options.

## SELECTED PROJECTS

### Improving Women's Access to Land in Sub-Saharan Africa

In Africa, women are the primary food producers and play a key role in ensuring food security, especially in single-parent households. However, unequal access to land, production inputs, information, and training constrains their ability to provide for their families. Although national laws and policies regulate women's access and



IDRC: Neill McKee

rights to land and resources, local implementation is complicated and often circumvented by factors such as customary laws, complex gender-based power relations, and traditional land tenure systems. IDRC is supporting action research to find ways to prevent these local and customary constraints from limiting access to land and natural resources. Small grants awarded to local research projects will improve understanding of ways to gain better access to resources and improve women's livelihoods.

### Cambodia Rural Livelihoods and Natural Resources Research Program

IDRC helped pioneer the Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) approach in Asia to improve the sustainability and productivity of resources such as water, land, and forests with the participation and leadership of local people. This integrated project is identifying ways to improve the livelihoods of poor rural Cambodians. The CBNRM Learning Institute, a dynamic non-governmental organization committed to promoting and mainstreaming the CBNRM approach, has become an integral participant in policy development. Three CBNRM research initiatives in fisheries, forestry, and protected area management are providing new policy-relevant insights that promote poverty alleviation, sustainable livelihoods, conservation, good governance, and decentralization.

### Rural Territorial Dynamics in Latin America

Significant differences in rural development between and within regions underscore social inequity in Latin America. Economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability have a territorial dimension. Longtime IDRC partner RIMISP (the Latin American Center for Rural Development), has developed an innovative research program that tackles rural development by integrating disciplines (economics, environmental studies, and social science) and synthesizing the links between development policy and practice at the regional level. Working in 10 Latin American countries, this research-based policy advice and capacity-building program is feeding into the design and implementation of more



RIMISP

comprehensive public policy that will create dynamic rural growth, along with social inclusion, and sound environmental governance.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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*For nearly 40 years, IDRC has worked in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.*

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