

Misconceptions about forest-dwellers overturned

Study rejects claims that poor residents cause most deforestation.

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For many, such as these Ugandan Pygmies in Semliki National Park, Bundibugyo, forests are the main source of food. REUTERS/J. Akena

Forests are vital to the livelihoods of millions of people in developing countries, providing on average more than one-fifth of their annual income, according to data presented today at a meeting in London.

The study provides much-needed solid evidence for the importance of forests to the world's rural poor. It also overturns some existing assumptions, showing, for example, that forests provide vital income to whole communities, not just the poorest, and that richer households are most likely to contribute to deforestation.

Income from forests has been largely "undervalued", particularly in assessments of poverty and income such as the World Bank's Living Standard Measurement Survey, says Arild Angelsen, an environmental economist at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences in Aas and a lead author of the study by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) based in Bogor, Indonesia. He presented the findings at the Royal Society, the United Kingdom's national academy of science.

Part of the problem, adds Frances Seymour, CIFOR's director-general, has been that most previous studies looked at anecdotal evidence from single sites. The lack of solid evidence has led to questions over claims that forests are important to the livelihoods of poor people.

Robust data

Angelsen's team collected data from 8,000 households across 24 countries, including China, Zambia and Indonesia, four times a year over a period of six years. This makes the study the

largest and most robust so far on the links between forests and poverty.

The researchers found that firewood accounts for around a fifth of the income that comes from forests, with timber coming in second at 10%.

One unexpected discovery was that the poorest forest-dwelling people do not cause the bulk of deforestation. In fact, the richest 20% of households at each study site caused 30% more deforestation than the poorest 20%.

The work also showed that although the poorest households are reliant on forests for their daily needs, they also look elsewhere — for example, travelling to urban areas — when drastic action is needed to feed themselves or urgently acquire income. "I was surprised that poor people did not rely on forests as a safety net," says Angelsen.

Not just carbon

Researchers hope that the data will inform policies that aim to conserve forests at the same time as reducing poverty. Mike Speirs, an environment and climate-change adviser to the Danish government who was present at the Royal Society meeting, welcomed the study's contribution to ensuring that forests are not seen by governments and the international community as "just stocks of carbon".

But Bill Adams, a conservation and development scientist at the University of Cambridge, UK, says that despite the new data, it will be "difficult to achieve win-win outcomes for forest conservation and poverty reduction".

Attempts to protect forests can be bad news for the poor, particularly if locals are evicted and banned from protected areas, he told the meeting. Moreover, projects attempting to address both conservation and poverty reduction are often expensive, complex to plan and slow to deliver results — and their success is difficult to predict.

Adams argues that forest-conservation and poverty-reduction initiatives, including the United Nations' extended Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) scheme, will work only if they are implemented from the bottom up, with locals involved in decision-making and their access and land rights recognized. "But this does not occur in most places," he says.

The CIFOR study does show examples of how forest conservation and livelihoods can be integrated, but Adams cautions that it suggests "no overarching strategy" for conserving biodiversity while reducing poverty.