

Ten Years of MegaFlorestais

A Public Forest Agency Leaders' Retrospective

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Just over a decade ago, several forest agency leaders from around the world met in Beijing, China at a conference convened by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), the State Forestry Administration (SFA) of China and the Chinese Center for Agriculture Policy (CCAP). Some of us were already present and discussed the challenges and opportunities associated with public forest tenure reform.

As leaders—from Brazil, China, Mexico and the USA—we reflected on how few opportunities existed to learn from one another to discuss forest issues in an informal atmosphere outside of the protocol-laden, jurisdictionally-defined sessions we commonly attended. We wondered whether there was a better way—whether it was possible to have safe conversations where difficult issues, struggles and mistakes could be raised, acknowledged and learned from.

From this first conversation, MegaFlorestais was created: a self-governing group of public forest agency leaders with RRI serving as the Secretariat and main funder. By deliberate design, the group was expanded to comprise of representatives from the largest forested countries in the world: Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, DRC, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Sweden, and the USA. These countries collectively represent about 70% of the world's forests.

Collectively, we bring unparalleled governance insight into some of the greatest environmental, economic and social challenges in the world. Who better equipped to have integrated conversations on the impacts of climate change, volatile forest products markets, securing sustainable investment, deforestation, forest land conversion, efficiency, and improving forest governance than public forest agency leaders?

In Peru in 2015 we held MegaFlorestais' 10th anniversary meeting. By being members for over a decade, we affirmed the value of sharing ideas, discussing challenges, and learning from one another in an informal, honest and safe environment—one not dictated by politics or political correctness. But is the "value" of MegaFlorestais merely intrinsic? The period of

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2005-2015 brought changes in forest governance, the status of forest ownership, the health of the world's forests and the global context within which forestry decisions are made. But much has remained the same. Was MegaFlorestais a factor? What can be learned from reflecting on these changes in a decade?

EARLY CONCERNS—2005

In Beijing, the early conversations focused on the rapid pace of change, on how to position our agencies to react more effectively/less traditionally; to be adaptive, nimble and resilient. Deforestation was attracting global attention and forest agencies were not prepared for or actively addressing the problem. A number of us were beginning to feel pressure from outside our own countries.

Many of our agencies, created a century ago or longer, were not equipped to deal with rapid change, growing social awareness and the global nature of the emerging issues. What had been effective for

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decades—

established systems and norms, well-defined and recognized stakeholder groups, command and control approaches, and strong cultures of organizational isolation—no longer worked.

Challenges like corruption or unclear, overlapping tenure and rights were not only continuing; they were growing as demands on the land base increased. Many of our forest agencies were contemplating reforms to our respective land or forest laws, and in the case of Brazil, seeking to create a Forest Service. We were looking to other countries for ideas and support. There was a growing awareness of the need to broaden governance approaches to include all forest land in the country, not just public land. Developed and developing countries were attempting to change their forest regulations to more effectively respond to emerging issues and an ever more active, engaged citizenry.

Technology was a challenge. NGOs and industry often were better resourced and had early access to technological advances. Our agencies found themselves behind at every turn. Satellite imagery and geographic information systems created the possibility to tell real time stories about deforestation and forest incursions. Smartphones and internet technology instantly changed how legal and illegal forest products were marketed; how citizens around the world communicated and shared information; how communities could map and monitor activities in their territory. Innovations like bar codes on tree trunks served as more effective compliance tools and promoted transparency. Forest regulations were not keeping up.

On the economic front, major market changes were emerging. Questions arose: would forestry in the “North” gravitate to the “South” where operations were more affordable and supply plentiful? What role would carbon pricing and rising fuel prices play in markets? How would the interest of the private sector in forest policy development evolve? What about consumers, who were demanding and

driving new approaches like forest certification and payment for environmental services? Would new partnerships with industry to push for sustainable forest management (SFM) actually mature? How about partnerships in the energy sector, where investors envisioned bio-fuels as a critical new product?

From the outset of MegaFlorestais, there was an emerging awareness that all of these pressures and changes could not be answered in the absence of a clear, transparent framework of rights and responsibilities. **Forest tenure was critical to forest governance, economic investment, sustainability and social equality.** As forest leaders, we had to be prepared to deal with fundamental issues of ownership and rights, and recognize that Indigenous Peoples had legitimate claims to forests that were held in the public domain. In order to address poverty and environmental issues we needed to engage communities in decisions that affected them. In 2005, Indigenous Peoples and local communities already owned 18% of forest lands in low and middle income countries, and this number kept increasing since. Their rights also got international recognition in 2007, with the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the General Assembly.

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Governance was clearly more expansive than government; consequently, our agencies had to learn more collaborative approaches to forest management. Emerging from these early discussions, “community forestry” surfaced as a strong approach to manage forests. Experiments in community empowerment and tenure surfaced around the world (Mexico, Nepal, USA). As forest agencies and leaders, we struggled to understand our responsibilities outside the public forest lands. What was our obligation and responsibility to recognize indigenous and community land rights? How could we position our agencies as progressive, positive players in government? How could we reform and modernize our agencies to respond to these emerging challenges?

Climate change, or “global warming” as it was then called, was surfacing as we witnessed changes in forests around the world; fire, drought, pests, and ecological stressors were appearing in many countries, but in 2005, few agencies had developed specific strategies to address the issue. In some cases, other ministries/departments/government agencies led the response and the role of forest agencies was not defined or updated. Emerging from international agreements and commitments, climate change was driving new approaches to solve both carbon sequestration and deforestation, with promises of improved forest management and poverty alleviation. Forest certification systems became increasingly popular and a new global tool—REDD, and then REDD+¹—surfaced as a promising approach to address climate mitigation around the world, especially in South America, Africa, and Asia.

Finally, illegal logging and the failures of conventional approaches to address it had its requisite counterpart in new ideas surfacing from the EU-FLEGT Action Plan.² This was followed later by the Lacey Act in the US³ and the Illegal Logging Prohibition Act in Australia,⁴ empowering trade as a tool to combat imports of illegal wood. *Legality* was becoming a focus in formal international forestry policy and trade discussions.

A decade ago we were anxious to set a new path forward. To effectively address the suite of urgent, critical issues facing the world's forests. To reverse a diminished reputation that arose, fairly or unfairly, from years of public denigration for overharvesting and clear-cutting forests, from corruption, from not effectively involving citizens in decisions. Staff were torn and demoralized. Many of us faced significant budget cuts, mostly due to the economic crisis and reduction of official development aid (from USAID,⁵ DFID,⁶ etc.), and had to ask staff to do more with less. Yet we were proud of our profession, aware of the possibilities and wanting to forge a role for public forest agencies that would affect real, positive change.

TEN YEARS LATER—REFLECTIONS IN 2015

Much has changed, but much remains the same. Most of the issues surfaced by leaders in 2005 have evolved significantly, due in part to specific interventions of countries and leaders, and in part to changes in the global context that affects forest policy.

Forest products markets shifted dramatically.

- Tropical forests continue to struggle with illegal logging, sustainable forest management, budgets, and insecure tenure—all of which are driving down investment. Thus, the markets did not shift to the “South” as was the worry in 2005. The “Northern” countries managed to reposition themselves, not only by showing stability in the market environment that the “South” was unable to provide, but also by investing in innovation and, surprisingly, even partnering with companies operating in the “South” to support their growth and innovation.
- Demand for forest certification schemes increased and almost 30% of the industrial round wood production now comes from certified forests. However, 92% of certified forest lands are located in the Northern hemisphere, which is mostly due to the lack of resources and technical capacities in developing countries.⁷
- The global economic downturn in 2008 stalled housing in the USA, reducing wood demand in both the USA and Canada, with numerous consequences: less harvesting of trees, less pressure on forests, but less value associated with traditional products. Many North American companies already struggling lost ground or closed. Added to this, new tax laws in the USA resulted in divestiture of forest lands by timber companies, rolling those lands into real estate investment corporations, leaving great uncertainty as to the future of private industrial lands in the country. Meanwhile, in Western Canada and the USA, the mountain pine beetle spread with warmer temperatures and killed millions of hectares of trees, ultimately reducing the supply of soft wood.
- In China and other developing countries, an expanding middle class created new markets and demand, but then retracted, leading to market uncertainty.
- Overall global demand for fiber is still expected to grow. Land base pressures and public awareness has increased demand for legal and sustainably harvested wood. The extent of illegal logging became more widely recognized, due to greater transparency, a consumer driven market, and increased policy controls through Voluntary Partnership Agreements (under the EU FLEGT) and the Lacey Act in the United States. On the private sector side, corporate support for *no deforestation*

and cleaner commodity supply chains increased over the years and culminated with the broad endorsement of the New York Declaration on Forests (2014).⁸

- Internet and requisite computer technology forced forest products markets away from print media, causing cascading effects on the industry for those countries whose forest product markets were anchored in this work.
- Anticipated large new markets in wood energy were dashed by new technology in gas production (fracking) that contributed to the steep drop in oil prices, as well as by significant risk and uncertainty associated with public policy. However, significant investments were also made in developing emerging technologies which may help transform the forest products industry in the future. These include new ways of producing bio-fuels, bio-chemicals and novel bio-materials.
- More broadly, new capital was coming into the sector, looking for safe investment opportunities; demand was recovering (though Europe has still not recovered from the economic crisis).

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Forest tenure and rights issues have magnified in importance.

- The global picture has changed for land tenure and rights, with increasing pressures on decision makers to recognize the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to own and benefit from their forests and resources. At least 125 million hectares of forests were legally recognized as owned or designated for Indigenous Peoples or local communities' use between 2002 and 2013. This represents 30% of forests in the developing world.⁹ But after 2008, rights recognition happened at a much slower pace and risks of rollback increased with the continued pressures from the extractive industries, infrastructure and agriculture. As a result, strife and violence over land rights are growing and the number of land activists killed over the world has reached unprecedented levels.¹⁰
- New research from RRI and the World Resources Institute showed that community-owned and managed forests have lower deforestation rates and greater carbon storage where comparable data existed, and that strong community rights could prevent 27 million hectares of deforestation by 2050.¹¹ "Rights recognition" is emerging as an effective climate mitigation tool.
- Private sector actors are now aware of the financial risks of insecure land tenure which can result in an increase of operating costs as much as 29 times above the normal baseline study scenario, and even lead to outright abandonment of functional operations.¹² New tools are now available to guide them in identifying and managing the tenure risk.¹³

While progress has been made on deforestation, the results are uneven.

Over the past 25 years, the rate of net global deforestation has slowed down by more than 50 percent,¹⁴ which is no small thing. However, significant differences exist between countries and forest loss in the tropics actually rose by more than 200,000 hectares every year from 2000 to 2012.¹⁵ Brazil is a great

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example of that trend: deforestation in the Amazon decreased by 80% since the 2004 peak but it jumped 16% again in 2015.¹⁶

New efforts to reduce deforestation emerged. Payments for environmental services expanded, as did voluntary carbon markets. New partnerships with the private sector (e.g. New York Declaration on Forests, pledges for zero-deforestation policies) illustrated that changing the economics of deforestation drivers is the most powerful tool in reducing deforestation.

Even as efforts ramp up to address illegal harvesting and deforestation, the pressure on the forest land base grows: increasing populations seek new places to live; more land is being converted to inefficient agrarian practices; exotics disrupt ecological systems; and climate change is stressing many forests and causing people to relocate in response to drought and anticipated sea level rises.

Global attention to climate change and forests remains high, and keeps growing.

- International commitments to REDD accumulated over the decade, building hopes and expectations. For numerous reasons, these expectations have not been met and in many countries, especially in Africa, this has created deep resentment against those countries that promised great financial returns from climate mitigation activities.¹⁷
- Subnational governments are now often taking the lead on climate change: 13 states of the Governors' Climate & Forests (GCF) Task Force signed the Rio Branco Declaration and pledged to reduce deforestation 80% by 2020 provided they have adequate levels of financial support.
- At the national level, the USA and China have recently moved aggressively forward on climate policy and committed to reducing their carbon emissions. Many other countries made similar commitments in their nationally determined contributions. Collectively this led to a promising Paris Agreement where the world's nations agreed in principle to limit global warming to well below 2°C. The role of forests in mitigating climate change was acknowledged, with renewed hope for advancing REDD.
- Forests are now more broadly recognized as one of the most direct victims of climate change. Wild fires, for example, are bigger than ever before and, across the world, fire weather season increased by almost 20%.¹⁸ On the other hand, forests are also recognized as a crucial part of the solution to mitigate climate change: not only are they the lungs of the earth, but also its sweat glands. Forests are inextricably connected to the hydrological cycle and the moisture they generate helps keep the planet cool. If deforestation continues, we will see a shift in precipitation patterns and temperature that will have dramatic consequences all over the world.¹⁹

New approaches in forest governance are promising.

- Forest agencies are viewing forests as far more than producers of timber and beginning to incorporate this view into laws and policies that acknowledge the importance of forests for all of the ecosystem services they provide to society—both urban and rural.
- Governments increasingly see that resource issues must be addressed in a cohesive manner, working with all stakeholders, across all sectors of society, and across traditional organizational silos. Agencies are developing new approaches to engage citizens collaboratively in decisions that affect them, using technology and social media to more effectively connect with people.

- The awareness of the role of forests in providing clean water is growing daily, especially as droughts begin to severely affect growth and development around the world. The promising policy emerging with the Peruvian National Superintendence of Sanitation Services (SUNASS) is a great example of how forests and green infrastructure investments can positively impact water quality and quantity. Water regulators across South America are looking to this example.²⁰ Forest agency leaders are beginning to engage in discussions over forest tenure and rights, and forest laws and policies are encouraging this, as we have seen recently in Peru. More forest agencies are actively supporting tenure reforms that recognize Indigenous Peoples' land rights and trying to develop programs to support forest management by those communities.²¹
- Governments, especially in tropical regions where the pressure on forests is greatest, are necessarily rethinking what development models can best address the world's challenges today. Many have benefited from official development assistance (ODA) which has been increasingly dedicated to forests and natural resources, as part of an effort to secure longer-term, more sustainable investments. Yet ODA delivery mechanisms remain complex and cumbersome.
- New models of public administration of forest areas have surfaced, as in British Columbia, Canada, showing that cross-ministerial collaboration is possible.

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CONCLUSIONS

We have witnessed incredible change over the last decade. The importance of the world's forests has grown. So too has the importance of collaboration, learning and working together to navigate through an increasingly linked, complex and demanding world.

We have come to recognize the imperative we have in developing governance structures necessary to nurture this collaboration, address new trends and build on successes. As the meeting concluded in Peru in April, those leaders at the table—very few of whom were there in the beginning—reinforced the importance of MegaFlorestais as a source of learning. They recognized the power of informed leadership and confirmed MegaFlorestais as a focal point for informed and honest exchange; a good source of non-biased information on emerging ideas and trends; a place of ideas, innovation and adaptation that could help them frame strategies forward for their countries.

Managing public forest agencies—proposing and implementing forest policies, supporting community and private forest owners, and managing public forests—is not easy, nor should it be. Every year the task gets more complex and challenging. Ever-more sophisticated skills and knowledge are required and the social science side of the forest equation has grown in importance. Public forest leaders need to understand and use the most advanced technology, to collaborate and build multi-dimensional collaboration in a genuine and effective way.

If the past decade of dialogue has shown us anything, it is that dedicated people and good leadership are key to healthy forests. We need to attract and build good leaders. We need to broaden our definition of who those leaders are. We need to have processes like MegaFlorestais that can help us build, share, and disseminate skills and knowledge.

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- ¹ Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) is an effort to create a financial value for the carbon stored in forests, offering incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low-carbon paths to sustainable development.
- ² The European Union Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan was established in 2003. It aims to reduce illegal logging by strengthening sustainable and legal forest management, improving governance and promoting trade in legally produced timber. See more on <http://www.euflegt.efi.int/about-flegt> consulted on January 29th, 2016.
- ³ The Lacey Act is a 1900 United States law that bans trafficking in illegal wildlife. In 2008, the Act was amended to include plants and plant products such as timber and paper. This landmark legislation is the world's first ban on trade in illegally sourced wood products.
- ⁴ The Australian Government has passed the Illegal Logging Prohibition Act 2012. The Act criminalizes the importation into Australia of illegally logged timber and any product made from illegally logged timber as well as the processing of domestic raw logs which have been illegally logged.
- ⁵ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is the United States Government agency primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid. USAID operates in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.
- ⁶ The Department for International Development (DFID) leads the UK's work to end extreme poverty.
- ⁷ See article on forest certification available at <http://globalforestatlas.yale.edu/conservation/forest-certification>.
- ⁸ The New York Declaration on Forests is a voluntary and non-legally binding political declaration which grew out of dialogue among governments, companies and civil society, spurred by the United Nations Secretary-General's Climate Summit held in New York in 2014. Read the full Action Statement: <http://www.un.org/climatechange/summit/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/07/New-York-Declaration-on-Forest-%E2%80%93-Action-Statement-and-Action-Plan.pdf>. Consulted on January 29th, 2016.
- ⁹ Rights and Resources Initiative. 2014. What Future for Reform? Progress and slowdown in forest tenure reform since 2002. Washington DC: Rights and Resources Initiative. Available at <http://www.rightsandresources.org/en/publication/what-future-for-reform/>.
- ¹⁰ The number of environmental activists killed due to their political stances has increase since 2009 due to the highest pressure on commodities. See more on Global Witness report "Deadly Environment" published on April 15, 2014. Consulted on <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/deadly-environment/> on January 29th, 2016.
- ¹¹ Stevens, Caleb, Robert Winterbottom, Jenny Springer, and Katie Raytar. 2014. Securing Rights, Combating Climate Change. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute and Rights and Resources Initiative.
- ¹² The Munden Project. 2012. The Financial Risks of Insecure Land Tenure: An Investment View. Washington, DC: RRI. Available at: http://www.rightsandresources.org/documents/files/doc_5715.pdf.
- ¹³ The Interlaken Group developed an operational guide to help companies comply with the Voluntary Guidelines on the Governance of Tenure (available at www.interlakengroup.org), and TMP Systems developed two free and open source tools to help investors and risk analysts identify (IAN: Risk) and respond to (IAN: Diligence) the risk of tenure-related disputes with local people (available at <http://www.tmpsystems.net/ian-risk/>).
- ¹⁴ FAO, "World deforestation slows down as more forests are better managed". News article published on September 7, 2015. Available at <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/326911/icode/>.
- ¹⁵ Research showed that Brazil's recent crackdown on deforestation was negated by rising destruction in other tropical countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Source: M. C. Hansen, P. V. Potapov, R. Moore, M. Hancher, S. A. Turubanova, A. Tyukavina, D. Thau, S. V. Stehman, S. J. Goetz, T. R. Loveland, A. Kommareddy, A. Egorov, L. Chini, C. O. Justice, J. R. G. Townshend, "High-resolution global maps of 21st-century forest cover change" in *Science*, Vol 342, Issue 6160, 15 November 2013. Consulted on <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/342/6160/850> on February 8th, 2016.
- ¹⁶ Rhett Butler, "Amazon deforestation jumps in Brazil, but remains historically low" in Mongabay, on 27 November 2015. Available at <http://news.mongabay.com/2015/11/amazon-deforestation-jumps-in-brazil/>.
- ¹⁷ Some conservationists are even concluding that REDD came to an end, see more on Lang Chris "REDD is dead. What's next" in Redd Monitor, on 4 February 2016. Consulted on <http://www.redd-monitor.org/2016/02/04/redd-is-dead-whats-next/>.
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- ¹⁹ Rhett Butler, "Tropical deforestation could disrupt rainfall" in Mongabay, on 18 December 2014. Available at <http://news.mongabay.com/2014/12/tropical-deforestation-could-disrupt-rainfall-globally/>.
- ²⁰ See more details on <http://www.sunass.gov.pe/fiar/index.html>; consulted on February 8th, 2016.
- ²¹ Rights and Resources Initiative. 2016. Closing the Gap: Strategies and scale needed to secure rights and save forests. Washington, DC: RRI. <http://www.rightsandresources.org/en/publication/closing-the-gap/>.

MEGAFLORESTAIS

MegaFlorestais is an informal network of public forest agency leaders dedicated to advancing international dialogue and exchange on transitions in forest governance, forest industry, and the roles of public forest agencies. Created in 2005, the group includes the heads of forestry agencies of the largest forested countries in the world, and provides the opportunity for these leaders to share their experiences and challenges in a frank and open manner. The process aims to foster stronger relationships between forest agencies, collectively strengthening their abilities to play leading roles in addressing forest governance and sustainable forestry issues. For more information, please visit www.megaflorestais.org.

Currently, members of the MegaFlorestais network are Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Sweden, and the United States.

THE RIGHTS AND RESOURCES INITIATIVE

The Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) acts as the Secretariat of the MegaFlorestais network.

RRI is a global coalition of 13 Partners and over 150 international, regional, and community organizations advancing forest tenure, policy, and market reforms. RRI leverages the strategic collaboration and investment of its Partners and Collaborators around the world by working together on research, advocacy, and convening strategic actors to catalyze change on the ground.

RRI is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. For more information, please visit www.rightsandresources.org.

SUPPORTERS

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