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Collective Action

Natural resources are public goods. On paper, sustainable development policies aim to protect the public's long-term right to share in the benefits resulting from the use of these resources. Such policies define who has rights to use which resources, for which purposes, under which conditions and for how long. But when and where resource decisions are made by powerful parties with short-term interests, the wider population, particularly rural poor communities, are often powerless to negotiate their rights to an equitable share of the benefits. They may be further disadvantaged where political elites and the landed class are linked, if not the same.

Strong community associations and well-organized networks can equip poor men and women with collective influence and security. This is even more essential where land grabbing and intimidation is common. Collective action cannot only empower the poor to gain and

maintain their land rights, but also to access rural finance, technology, training, markets, and legal services. Collective action can also produce environmental benefits through the creation of territorial land management and by uncovering valuable local knowledge that can expand the rural economy and improve policy formulation.

Added to deeply entrenched and historic challenges, the poor must now confront the forces of globalization, with the demand for land policies favourable to direct foreign investment. Unless rural poor households are represented in policy debates by institutions under their control, their already fragile livelihoods may fall into further risk. Already documented cases of conflicts involving transnational and extractive industries provide advance warning of the need to protect the resource rights of rural communities. While foreign investment may be very important, it should be neither at the expense of

the poor, nor be allowed to affect the long-term sustainability of the resources upon which current and future generations depend.

As this edition of *Advancing Together* reports, the desire to participate in public debate is illustrated in Mali, where farmers and small-scale producer associations voiced their positions in a People's Forum (page 6) on globalization and land rights. The right of peoples' organizations to freely organize and engage in public debate without intimidation and violence by state or private institutions, is fundamental to good governance, as is the right to represent their resource rights and claims. The Land Coalition is aware of many situations where basic human rights have been violated, including the loss of life of indigenous peoples and farmers. The right to participate and the rights of free assembly are essential to the public dialogue needed for effective land policy reform.

One of the Land Coalition members also reminds us that "*freedom does not come from charity but from equal partnership in the building of society*". Indeed, collective action is often manifest in efforts to forge partnerships across institutions, as in Zambia (page 10), where a civil-society alliance worked with the government to organize district meetings so that community men and women could directly present their points of view on the proposed reforms.

Effective partnerships require that all partners not only respect each other's rights to participate in civic life, but also support their access to information so that they can participate in full awareness of the implications and consequences