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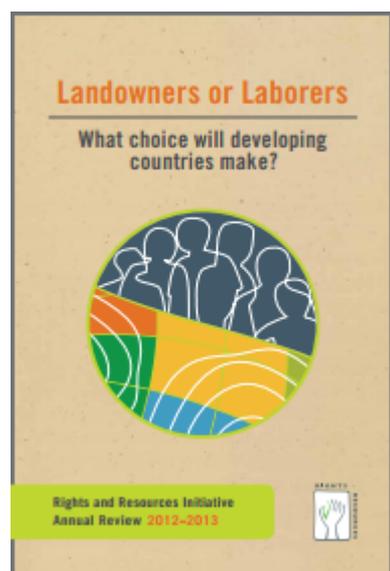
## Landowners or Labourers: What choice will developing countries make?

Resource  
2013

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## External link

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## Summary

During 2012, a key choice facing developing countries revealed itself ever more starkly. Would they choose a development path built on inclusiveness, respect for the rights of their citizens, and the rule of law? Or would they seek a short-cut to development and opt to hand over community land and natural resources to international investors and national elites? Would they turn their rural citizens from landowners into landless laborers? It became clear during the year that many countries were desperate to replicate the recent economic successes of China and Brazil. Many are tired of being poor and are eager to see their economies grow quickly. Countries of sub-Saharan Africa aspire to be “lion economies,” following in the footsteps of Asia’s “tiger economies.” But the parallels are poor. Brazil, China, and Asia’s tigers drove economic development by liberating local enterprises and establishing local property rights. In Africa, nations have surrendered economic and political control of their land and resources, in effect, replicating economic systems created during the colonial era driven by resource extraction and export. The lesson of history is clear. The inequalities and disempowerment resulting from these extractive political and economic systems are replicating the “resource curse,” in which nations become trapped in poverty and are riven by resentment and internal conflict, with growing risks of political turmoil. If countries choose open and inclusive democratic systems they can avoid this fate. But they will need to recognize local property rights and develop strong civil societies that keep citizens informed and hold leaders to account.<sup>1</sup> RRI’s annual review of forest tenure data highlights the different choices made by forest countries over the past decade. Some have chosen to make progressive changes to their forest ownership systems. Yet, others have stagnated and avoided recognizing the full rights of forest-dwelling citizens. In 2012, some developing countries took the first steps to embrace such reforms, but many remain on the wrong track. All face major decisions about what type of country they will become. As we look to 2013, we ask: will countries around the developing world choose to be societies of citizen landowners or landless laborers?

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