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Seattle non-profit and Indian Government partner to lift 90 million rural poor out of poverty with micro-land ownership

Seattle— The Rural Development Institute (RDI), an international non-profit working closely with four Indian states to implement micro-land ownership programs for the rural poor, said the government's 11th Five-Year Plan initiative to spread micro-land ownership across all states has the potential to help 90 million people – or 18 million families – secure land over the next five years.

“It is exciting for RDI, after three years of intensive research and assistance to state and national policy-makers, to see the national government embrace key RDI-proposed reforms of micro-land ownership,” said RDI President Tim Hanstad, who is living and working in India to oversee RDI's micro-land work here. RDI, which has field offices in Bangalore, Beijing and Jakarta, is headquartered in Seattle, Washington, USA.

“Our research shows that a little bit of land goes a long way to alleviating poverty,” Hanstad said. “Our ongoing work in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and, most recently Orissa, all confirm that plots of land as little as 10 cents can provide a foundation for extremely poor people, especially women, to build a sustainable livelihood and a better economic future.”

With landlessness the best predictor of poverty in India, the 11th Five-Year Plan aims to reduce poverty by 10 percent. Land and agriculture are a key component of the Plan, with micro-plots adopted as a core strategy. The Plan aims to allot micro-plots the size of 10-15 cents to all landless families in India.

RDI began working in India in the 1990's. Since then, its research has shown that micro-land ownership yields significant benefits to families, including improved shelter, better nutrition, increased income, access to credit, improved health and education, enhanced status of women and much more.

“Kerala has a scheme of providing micro-plots of land to each landless family and this has had a notable impact on poverty reduction in the State,” according to the Plan. “Similarly, in 2005, the Governments of Karnataka and West Bengal initiated schemes to give homestead-cum-garden plots to landless families. These experiments should be generalized across all states.”

“The Plan also shows particular wisdom by emphasizing the rights of women to land,” said Hanstad. “In India, women comprise a disproportionate share of the landless and women and children often bear the brunt of poverty.”

“When women own land,” he explained, “generated income is more likely to go towards improving the welfare of the entire family. Through our work we strive to ensure the rights of women are upheld and actively work with our partners in India to help them develop the tools and policies needed to achieve this.”

The Plan calls for tactics, often used by RDI, to improve women’s rights to the land, including putting the property in the name of the wife and giving priority to female headed households.

Recently, RDI worked with Andhra Pradesh to provide landless women up to one acre of irrigated land. Through this new program, designed by RDI, the government has helped more than 5,000 women secure more than 4,000 acres of land. In addition, RDI regularly conducts policy workshops focused on how to increase women’s rights to land for other states in India.

The Plan calls for spending about \$25 million to help implement micro-land ownership. RDI will not receive any of those funds; its work is supported primarily from private sources, with about two-thirds granted by foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation of Seattle.

“Over the last 40 years, RDI has worked in more than 40 countries, helping more than 400 million people achieve secure access to land,” Hanstad said. “For every \$1 RDI receives in donations, we have helped six families secure land.

“As one of the world’s largest countries, India’s efforts to improve land rights for the rural poor will have an enormous impact, lifting millions of people out of poverty. This is an incredibly exciting time for the country and we are thrilled to help support their efforts.”

About the Rural Development Institute

RDI is an international non-profit working to secure land rights for the world's poor. Over the past 40 years, RDI has worked in more than 40 countries, helping more than 400 million people attain secure land rights. A global pioneer in using law to create land ownership opportunities, RDI’s work creates leveraged, sustainable and generational poverty alleviation. For every dollar contributed, on average RDI has secured land rights for six families. For more information, visit www.rdiland.org.

For more information about its work in India, www.rdiland.org/OURWORK/OurWork_India.html.

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