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Forum to Focus on Women and Land Rights as Key to Reducing Global Poverty

Rural Development Institute Sponsors Event to Mark International Women's Day

Seattle – Land rights represent the single greatest asset to help the world's rural poor escape extreme poverty. Yet while women comprise 51 percent of the world's population and are responsible for 60-80 percent of the world's food production, they own less than 5 percent of the world's land. The Rural Development Institute (RDI) is working to change that.

In honor of International Women's Day (IWD), RDI will host a panel of internationally known law experts on March 22 to discuss gender biases in property rights systems and offer solutions to improve the land rights of women. Celebrated internationally on March 8, IWD's aim is to connect all women around the world and inspire them to achieve their full potential. IWD celebrates the collective power of women past, present and future.

"Raising awareness of the need for women to have secure land rights is a critical component of our ability to change the landscape of global poverty. RDI's event is a great opportunity for us to come together to learn more about what we can do to help," said Kavita Ramdas, president of the Global Fund for Women and a member of RDI's International Women's Day Advisory Council.

"Typically, laws in developing countries develop from age-old cultural norms, so it's no surprise that land ownership and benefits in developing countries continue to be accorded only to men," said David Bledsoe, program director for RDI's Women and Land initiatives.

"Lack of land ownership among women in developing countries is a crucial hurdle preventing their journey out of poverty," Bledsoe said. "Excruciating poverty in these countries is compounded and perpetuated by very high rates of divorce, abuse, gender discrimination, abandonment, polygamy, HIV/AIDS and other issues that leave women fending for themselves and their children."

RDI, an international non-profit headquartered in Seattle, is a recognized global pioneer in using the law to design innovative strategies that create land ownership opportunities, helping to lift the world's rural poor out of poverty. Over the past 40 years, RDI has worked in more than 40 countries, helping more than 400 million people secure land rights. It was founded by Roy Prosterman, professor of law emeritus at the University of Washington.

Today, RDI is engaged in a number of land rights projects globally, including an ambitious "micro-land ownership" program with the governments of three states in India, one of the world's most populous and impoverished countries.

"Our research has taught us that it only takes a little bit of land to make a big difference in lifting people out of poverty. We have found that plots of land as little as 1/10th of an acre, or less, can provide a foundation for extremely poor people, especially women, to build a sustainable livelihood and a better economic future," said Bledsoe, who joined RDI in 1998 after an 18-year career as a senior manager and attorney with CH2M HILL, a global environmental engineering firm.

Since joining RDI, Bledsoe has participated in field research and consulting on land reform, farm reorganization, land registration, land market development, land and violent conflict, expropriation, and common property regimes. He has completed assignments in Ukraine, Albania, Kyrgyzstan, China, Angola, Rwanda, and Uganda. He currently is working on land projects for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Angola and Rwanda.

"When women are excluded from land ownership and decision-making processes, they and their families are left desperate and foundering," says Bledsoe, who stresses that RDI only begins its in-country work at the invitation of the country's government.

"RDI evaluates laws and cultural norms, and then helps the country's leadership find a new perspective on the proven correlation between land ownership and improving economic status and better living conditions for all," he explained. "When women acquire property, they first find pride, hope and status and then proceed on a progressive cycle of growth that includes nutritious crops to feed their families, engagement in their communities, access to micro-finance to start a small cottage industry and continues on to build wealth with a new security against economic disasters – they always have the land. That launches them towards opportunities that improve their lives."

Bledsoe observed that land ownership, coupled with health, education and access to credit, provides long-term, sustainable and generational poverty alleviation.

"The land route out of poverty offers systemic change, not short-term relief," Bledsoe said.

Bledsoe will be joined on the panel by Deborah Espinosa, RDI's program attorney for Africa; Radha Friedman, RDI's associate director for Development and Communications; Renee Giovarelli, a consultant specializing in international land rights for women; and Jennifer Potter, executive director of the Initiative for Global Development. The panel will be moderated by Penny LeGate, KIRO-TV news anchor and reporter.

The Advisory Council for the event includes Rosemary Aragon, executive director of Pacific Hospital Preservation and Development Authority and past district governor, Rotary International; Phyllis Campbell, president of the Seattle Foundation, retired Congresswoman Jennifer Dunn, member of the HELP Commission and senior policy advisor at the global firm DLA Piper; Sally Jewell, president and CEO of REI; Penny LeGate; and Kavita Ramdas, president of the Global Fund for Women.

The breakfast forum will be held at 7:30 a.m. at the Westin Hotel, Seattle. Reservations at \$35 can be made by calling 206-528-5880.

For more information about RDI, please visit www.rdiland.org.

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