

## 5 QUESTIONS FOR...

Posted on April 11, 2008

### **Tim Hanstad, President/CEO, Rural Development Institute**

*For forty years, the Seattle-based Rural Development Institute has worked to obtain legal rights to land for the poor in developing and transitional, post-Communist countries in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Founded in 1967 by University of Washington law professor Roy Prosterman, RDI applies democratic approaches to land reform and works primarily with governments, foreign aid agencies, and other partners to accomplish its goals. Recently, PND spoke with RDI president and CEO Tim Hanstad about RDI's work in the land rights arena, its commitment to create an international center for women and land, and what it is doing to raise awareness of land rights issues in the philanthropic community.*



**Philanthropy News Digest:** What is micro-land ownership?

**Tim Hanstad:** Micro-land ownership is a tool for poverty alleviation in numerous countries where even a fraction of an acre can provide a landless person with a livelihood; most of their fruit, vegetable, and dairy needs; and enough extra income that allows the children to get out of the fields and into the classroom. For the last eight years, RDI has focused on micro-land ownership in developing countries, particularly India, where the problems of landlessness and poverty are so interconnected.

The issue isn't just about giving land rights to people; it's about giving them the ability to transfer those rights — to mortgage or lease their land. This is a particular problem in many of the former countries of the Soviet Union that are "privatizing" land formerly owned by the state. Our research has found that the right to transfer land is what really gives land its value.

**PND:** How do you enlist support from policy makers, government officials, and foundations and other donors?

**TH:** We've concentrated our efforts on policy makers and government officials because we need their support to achieve our mission. We make them aware of the land rights issue by sharing the findings and implications of our research as well as the research of others. But, frankly, we haven't done as good a job communicating this information to foundations and

other potential funders. Many of them, we've found, recognize that land ownership and rights are important, but they don't know how to engage with the issue.

Another problem is that large nonprofits may be doing great work internationally in areas such as women's empowerment, education, and health, but they're doing little on land rights issues. These organizations tell us they come up against land rights issues in almost every part of their program portfolios, but they don't have a designated piece in their portfolios for land — or any staff with expertise in that area. For foundations, it's often the same thing. It's unfortunate, because land rights provide for leveraged, sustainable, and generational impacts.

**PND:** What is RDI doing to raise awareness in the philanthropic community about land rights issues?

**TH:** Thanks to a three-year grant in support of our Global Homestead Program from the John Templeton Foundation, we have developed a strategic campaign. Our original proposal included a small communications component, but Arthur Schwartz, who was director of Templeton's Solutions for Poverty Alleviation program at the time and is now the foundation's executive vice president, saw communicating the importance of micro-land ownership to the international development community as crucial. Our situation is not unlike that of microcredit two decades ago. Back then, very few people knew what microcredit was, but effective communications efforts and lots of hard work have really put it front and center on funders' radar.

Before the Templeton grant, RDI's way of "doing communications" was by sharing our latest research report with policy makers in countries where we were working. Those efforts weren't highly leveraged. We're a bunch of lawyers who don't know a lot about communications, and our assumption had been that a good idea will sell itself. But, unfortunately, that's not always the case. Today, we have a strong communications package, a cohesive communications strategy, and a new culture. So the Templeton Foundation didn't just give us money; it helped us grow.

**PND:** At the third annual Clinton Global Initiative last October, you made a commitment to create a Global Center for Women and Land that recruits, trains, and mentors a body of professionals to address the challenges of improving poor women's access and rights to land. How did the idea for the center come about, and where does that effort stand?

**TH:** About ten years ago, RDI developed its Women and Land Program out of what we saw as the need to focus specifically on gender issues around land, which have long been ignored. Some of our lawyers have taken the issue on, but RDI will never be able to drive the effort by itself unless we can build capacity within the field. We strategized about the options for doing so, including a formal graduate program at Yale, the University of Washington, or another institution of higher education — we even had preliminary discussions with different schools as to how we might partner — but ultimately we decided on-the-job training is really what's needed to build capacity in this area. So, drawing on our expertise and that of others in the field, we developed a plan, with a fundraising goal of

\$3.67 million, to set up a center devoted to securing equal land rights for women that would be associated with RDI.

Research in this area is absolutely crucial. We know that deeply rooted cultural norms in third-world countries won't be changed overnight; but a lot can be done just by changing policies and laws to create political and legal space for women to assert their rights and become pioneers in this field in their respective countries. It's also important to listen to what women want, not impose Western values on these societies, and provide legal education on the laws that are already in place.

I think we've finally started gaining momentum in our effort to create a center for women and land because world leaders and governments are beginning to understand that inequity in land rights is stunting their economic growth and needs to be addressed. Of course, the Clinton Global Initiative's decision to highlight the center at the conference was a big help.

**PND:** What are the challenges you face in creating the center and accomplishing other goals related to land rights issues?

**TH:** RDI had a limited ability to fund portions of the center with money we've already raised. To accomplish the entire goal, the project will require partnerships with donor agencies, foundations, corporations, and large international development groups that would be willing to fund fellowships for professionals on their staffs to work and study at the center and gain some experience in the field. Currently, we have one small partner — International Development Consultants in Princeton — as well as some support from the Sisters Fund in New York City. And we recently put together an advisory council of eighteen world leaders who helps us raise awareness about initiatives.

On International Women's Day in March, the Nike Foundation announced the Nike Fellowship to fund a team of attorneys led by Robin Neilsen of RDI. This group will annotate current research and the impact of land-inheritance and poverty alleviation issues on adolescent girls and make recommendations to enhance outcomes. Also, the new Jennifer Dunn Memorial Fellowship, honoring the late Congresswoman [R-WA] and HELP Commission member, will provide a projected \$1 million to support attorneys doing research and other work in the area of women and land initiatives.

The good news is that halfway into our current five-year strategic plan, we're on pace to surpass projected revenue growth. This year alone, in fact, we expect to double in size. So now we have to figure out how to build our capacity and grow from an organization of twenty-five people and \$2 million a year in revenues to an organization that's ten times as big. At the same time, we want to focus on building capacity in the entire field of international development. Together with our partners, we've accomplished a lot, but there's so much more we can do to leverage the growing interest in land issues and help foundations, large nonprofits, and governments figure out what they can do to help to secure land rights for the poor.

— *Alice Garrard*