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For more information:
Radha Friedman
(206) 528-5880
radhaf@rdiland.org

Secure land rights help millions escape poverty in rural India

Rural Development Institute opens fourth office in West Bengal to expand “micro-land ownership” and enhance women’s land rights

Seattle (WA) – The Rural Development Institute (RDI), an international nonprofit working to secure land rights for the world’s rural poor, recently opened its fourth office in India as part of a rapidly developing initiative to provide land rights to millions of India’s poorest citizens. Through partnerships with state governments and international donors, RDI is helping to implement “micro-land ownership” programs for India’s rural poor, especially women.

“Land ownership is a proven pathway out of poverty,” said Tim Hanstad, president and CEO of Seattle-based RDI. “Our ongoing work in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa and most recently West Bengal, all confirm that plots of land as small as one-tenth of an acre can provide a foundation for extremely poor people to build a sustainable livelihood and better economic future.”

With an estimated 15 million landless rural households in India, the majority of which are agricultural laborers earning less than \$1 per day, the need for a more enabling policy environment is crucial. RDI is working with partners including key government actors, research institutions, and NGOs to develop and help implement feasible legislative and policy reforms. The Indian government has included RDI’s recommendation for “micro-land ownership” initiatives in its 11th Five-Year Plan, potentially helping five million people attain land over the next five years.

While India plans to spend \$25 million to purchase micro-plots for rural landless families, RDI receives its funding entirely from private sources, including the Omidyar Network and The Bill & Melinda Gates foundation.

Omidyar Network’s \$4.3 million grant has helped RDI expand its collaboration with the state government of Andhra Pradesh and other partners. RDI supports the state government in implementing the *Indira Kranti Patham* (IKP) – an innovative program to help landless families purchase small parcels of land, and provides legal aid to families who have claims to public land allocated to them in the past. Helping women get secure land rights is a key focus, as women produce the majority of India’s food.

“Micro-land ownership in India has proven to be both politically and financially feasible,” said Darryl Vhugen, state director of RDI in Andhra Pradesh. Vhugen, who previously served as a senior consultant to RDI on land tenure security issues, leads RDI’s India program in Hyderabad, specifically in support of

the IKP program, which has already helped thousands of landless women buy land, and provided legal aid to more than 70,000 poor families.

“In recent years our team in India has conducted comprehensive field studies which show that families with house-and-garden plots of roughly 2,000 square feet or more enjoy greatly enhanced livelihoods,” adds Vhugen. “Such plots, though extremely tiny by developed-country standards, can be intensively cultivated to supplement existing sources of food and income. International donors and local policymakers alike are beginning to recognize the value of secure land rights as a sustainable way to fight rural poverty in India.”

The Bill & Melinda Gates foundation’s \$6.7 million grant will help RDI expand its “micro-land ownership” program. This grant allows RDI to focus specifically on helping women in the Indian states of Orissa and West Bengal to obtain ownership of small plots and maximize the nutritional and income-producing potential of their land.

“Women comprise a disproportionate share of the landless in rural India,” said Hanstad. “We are working closely with our partners to recommend legislation that requires government-distributed land to be granted jointly to husbands and wives, or independently to women. Income from the land, in the hands of women, has a ripple effect – better nutrition for the household, increased food security, better disease prevention, and improved status and bargaining power within the household and community.”

Landlessness and poverty are closely linked in India. But while the country has the world’s highest concentration of landless households, the political will to create a secure legal framework for land ownership is gaining increased momentum. With an expanded presence in the country, RDI’s approach of building close, trusted partnerships with local and state governments in its target geographies, while being a global advocate for secure land rights and “micro-land ownership,” has encouraged Indian policymakers to put land reform issues back on the agenda.

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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 100 million families attain secure land rights. A global pioneer in using law to create land ownership opportunities, RDI’s collaborations with government partners create leveraged, sustainable and generational poverty alleviation. For every dollar contributed, on average, RDI has helped secure land rights for six families. For more information, visit www.rdiland.org.