Indonesia: Timber monocultures destroying indigenous' lands and livelihood

Here in Indonesia, ever since a child entered the school, he/she has been familiar with "Merauke" through a patriotic song entitled "Dari Sabang Sampai Merauke" (lit. from Sabang to Merauke – from the westernmost to the easternmost part of Indonesia). The song talks about the unity and glory of Indonesia across its large and small islands reaching from Sabang, the westernmost part, to Merauke, the easternmost.

Unfortunately, present day Merauke is not like it used to be, no longer representing the unity and glory but standing for deprivation of the native peoples' tenurial rights, fear in the midst of giant energy projects and threat of poverty, mixed with food crop corporations' euphoria. Merauke has been changing its face. Officially, since the beginning of 2010, it has been selected by the national government to be 'the food and energy barn' to address the world's food insecurity and energy crises.

The giant project to realize this 'food and energy barn' of Merauke is called MIFEE (Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate), a mega project that integrates production of food crops and energy. About 80 companies, subsidiaries of giant corporate groups, have been granted permission to take part in the project. At least 2.5 million hectares of land has been allocated, of which about 1.2 million hectares is located in forest zones. The designated area spans across three districts (kabupaten): Merauke, Mappi and Boven Digul, 16 sub-districts and 130 villages.

The production will be bound for international markets to meet the global hunger-for-food-and-energy demand. Various land-based commodities have been prepared and processed by the corporations involved such as oil palm, sugarcane, rice and eucalyptus.

Apart from the ambition, placing such a large land-based project with massive high-tech input in the middle of the Merauke peoples, who are highly dependent on 'natural resources', has brought about many acute and multi-dimensional problems. The Merauke peoples are facing challenges that are coming rapidly and that are beyond what their local knowledge can address.

The indigenous Marind People is native to Merauke and their villages are the most numerous. The tribe is composed of six sub-gropus: Kaize, Gebze, Balaigeze, Mahuze, Ndiken and Basik-basik. They have developed intertwined and harmonious management of the land they share. They divide their living space into "sacred places", "water sources", "sago pools" , "ancestors' stopovers", "ancestors' journey", and "conservation of customs". The tribe also has typical names for their forests: "Deg" for old natural forests containing large trees, and "Mamoi" for young natural forests containing mid-sized trees.

"In the past, we never had any difficulty in finding meat as Merauke was home to deer and

kangaroos. It was also easy to collect sago as sago trees grew naturally in sago pools. Fish used to breed in swamps. Nowadays, however, our hunting grounds have been converted into timber estates; our sago forests have been stripped and our swamp fish have gone," said J (initial of an organizer of local communities). "This started to happen after companies came into villages and the MIFEE project commenced," he added.

A sad story comes from the village of Zanegy, where monoculture timber company PT Selaras Inti Semesta (PT SIS) is operating. PT SIS is a subsidiary of the Medco Group, a giant corporation producing energy. For the company that has felled the trees on thousands of hectares of land of the indigenous Marind, these trees only mean ´woody biomass´, it has sent the timber to its wood pellet mill, PT MedcoPapua Industri Lestari (PT MIL). Wood pellets are used as a so called "renewable energy" source. International corporations LG and Y Han International are among the investors in the sector, promoting "environmentally-friendly alternative energy".

The village of Zanegy is located below PT SIS's monoculture estate. The Sakau River flows downhill through the village and is used by the Marind Zanegy peoples for domestic purposes (bath, drink, etc.). "The water tastes different now," told a Zanegy elder. In the village, children have died of malnutrition. Even nowadays the village sees many children with a disproportionately large head, dry eyes, a disproportionately thin body, distended stomach and limp legs. Skin diseases are also prevalent within the community.

"The company only provided compensation for the displaced sago worms; they have deceived us," said AG (initial). "Life has been getting more difficult because the sago pools have been declining in quality; deer are disappearing as their habitats have been converted into timber estates."

Merauke peoples pay the price to meet an unfair global production and consumption model that demands more food crops and "renewable" energy sources at the cost of food sovereignty of entire regions like in Merauke, aiming to maintain corporate profits. Justified by supposed global needs, the mega-project will lead to the destruction of the local Marind Peoples' lives.

The contradictions of the food crop project also can be seen in the districts of Semangga and Kurik. PT Texmaco Group is preparing to establish eucalyptus estates. The concession spans over two districts and 7 villages. It is ironic that such development will threaten the local rice fields – another project to meet the so-called "global food demand" that will lead to the destruction of local food crop estates in the first place.

The MIFEE is the reflection of the world's globalized food and energy governance system that poses a threat of destruction to local living systems and therefore creates hunger and poverty. It is also the story of the expansion of land-based monoculture corporations that grab the lives of and bring a humanitarian tragedy to native Peoples and village communities.

Source: YL Franky, PT. Medco Menguras Isi Hutan Kampung Zanegi: Rakyat Tersingkir dan Menderita Lapar di Lumbung Pangan, 2013 (PT Medco is depleting the forest of Zanegi Village: The community is marginalized and starving in food barns); Koesnadi WS, MIFEE Bukan Proyek Pangan, Laporan Perjalanan Dari Ujung Timur Indonesia Merauke, 2013 (MIFEE Is Not A Food Crop Project, A Journey from Merauke the Easternmost Tip of Indonesia)

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