
Indonesia: forests are more than land

Deforestation in Indonesia is not only about the loss of forest areas, it is a much more serious matter. A whole living system that evolved into one of extraordinary wealth of biodiversity is threatened with destruction.

For traditional communities, preserving the forest does not only mean to maintain their rights to land and territory but, fundamentally, to protect their civilization, upon which the essence of their culture depends. Communities' culture involves cross-generation adaptation processes that balance life and the sustainability of natural cycles.

When the Ministry of Forestry made an inventory of Indonesian lands as state forest areas, the social and cultural aspects were not part of this ministry's work. Thus, policy formulation and implementation excluded the presence of human beings coexisting with forest's living systems.

As a result of this classification, today, around 33 thousand communities live within so-called state forest areas. This is used by corporations for blaming communities as the disturbers and destroyers of the forests, which in turn, has become a legitimate instrument to expel forest people from their living spaces.

The conflicts with forest communities are then simplified with arguments of economic necessities and by reducing complex living systems to only 'land'. This simplification directs any 'resolution' into efforts of compensation and mediation.

As a matter of fact, these types of 'resolutions' disregard communities' just entitlement to cross-generation memory and cultural dependency on forests. Furthermore, media weakens communities by positioning them as equivalent to corporations during mediation processes. The recognition of the company's presence on communities' territories is, however, essentially reaffirming the violations of customary laws by the state and the corporations.

Actually, when an ecological system is destroyed, the heavy burden to adapt to extreme environmental changes as well as the costs have to be borne by the communities.

For this article, I use the example of one species that has a strong attachment with the culture of indigenous communities in Indonesia. This example illustrates how the devastation of various biodiverse systems in the forest has a huge impact in the loss and destruction of communities' life.

Buffalo is a species that depends on 3 fundamental environmental factors; wide-open space to wander, a variety of herbs for its nutrition and resilience of its body, as well as clean water free of any chemical product. In the past 10 years, the number of buffalos has declined drastically to one million heads due to the expansion of oil palm, timber, and industrial forest plantations.

Without even being noticed by the Indonesian government, the expansion of industrial plantations on communities lands promoted a dramatic decline of the buffalo population - a local asset that in economic terms represented up to 15 billion rupiah (around US\$1.5 billion) that could finance the education of 1 million children as well as health costs. This has also destroyed an important source of food and created collateral damages to traditional farming systems.

It is very important to recognize and protect community-based forest management systems. Not only do they protect the continuation of communities living within different territories, but also they prevent the people and the state from carrying the burden when ecological catastrophes occur.

Decisions over forests in Indonesia are still kept at the level of powerful institutions. Issues of ownership of territories or drivers of deforestation, such as the production and consumption model, are not mentioned at all by the government. These issues are intentionally excluded from the debates in order to avoid the immense responsibility that the state and corporate actors have to pay for their committed crimes.

Currently, life in the communities has become increasingly difficult. The state is forcing communities to live in a commodity-based economic system, in which the money they earn is not sufficient to cover their needs, especially after the loss of various living systems that used to be available in nature. The Indonesian state also has to cover big costs, considering the damage and the rehabilitation processes of the forest and its functions, such as the costs that must be spent each year to deal with forest fires and floods.

While the heavy burden from the environmental crimes have to be carried by communities, whom have to continuously adapt to the worsening environmental conditions, 27 states and 34 companies involved in the global deforestation process, signed the New York Declaration on how to save the world's forests, during the Climate Summit that was hosted by the United Nations in September 2014. The declaration targets 150 million hectares for 'forest restoration' by the year 2020 and up to 200 million hectares by the year 2030. This commitment is based on the fact that 1,6 billion people in the world depends on forests, while deforestation speed rate reaches 14 million hectares each year.

The commitment to reduce deforestation and incite 'forest restoration' will not likely become a reality. This commitment made by governments and a series of monoculture-related business groups is in fact only a strategy to cover up their actual crimes. For instance, in Indonesia, a group of businessmen signed a commitment to reduce deforestation rates. However, they ended up making a deal with the government, targeting 1,1 million hectares of forest for oil palm plantations by 2015 and 5,9 million hectares of forest for industrial forest plantations from the 14 million hectares that are threatened by deforestation.

The New York Declaration on Forests does not only hide the perpetrators of Indonesian rainforest destruction from the public eyes, but it also manages to propagate the next phase of natural resources business in Indonesia. Having survived with no sanctions from a series of environment destructions by extracting oil palm and pulp and paper, now the big corporate groups are riding the climate change issue for their businesses. Concessions to make money with the conservation of biodiversity and carbon have already reached 397.878 hectares in the year 2014, with the target of 2,6 million hectares.

If the government would have wanted to use the summit for truly dealing with deforestation, company groups like APP, GAP, and WILMAR should not have been allowed in the forum. Since 2013, their concessions have been the reason of Indonesia's haze caused by the fires. Walhi also found an

attempt to hide illegal logging by the second layer of WILMAR's subsidiary group, conducted by PT.

Zenzi Suhadi, zenzi.walhi@gmail.com

WALHI, <http://www.walhi.or.id/en/#>