
Indonesia: Gender impacts of commercial tree plantations

The loss of access to forest resources does not only occur with deforestation of primary forest, but also where commercial tree plantations replace primary forests. It is a well known fact that tree plantations of introduced species planted for commercial purposes for local and international markets, do not have the non-timber forest products of primary forests, particularly resources used for housing, household items, food, fuel, handicraft and medicines.

Less well-known are the specific impacts that commercial tree plantations have on women, particularly those related to changes in the availability of resources commonly found in forests and scarce or absent in plantations. A study carried out in Indonesia shows that, among other, these types of impacts on women include:

- Food scarcity. Women are traditional collectors of vegetables found in forests. As primary forests are cleared to give way to plantations, food is no longer available, except in "deep forest" areas where only men can go (and not the periphery or edges of the forest where women have access). As a result, women find it more hard to collect the necessary food resources and become more dependent on men to collect vegetables from the forest.
- Firewood scarcity. Firewood is scarce in tree plantations and collection is restricted in some areas, thereby increasing the hours spent by women to collect less wood than before. As a consequence, women now also rely on men to collect firewood, as men have access to larger areas of forest, which are further away.
- Water scarcity. Some introduced species (e.g. eucalyptus) require large amounts of water and can cause the lowering of the water table and loss of water resources for consumption and agriculture. The same is applicable to commercial teak plantations, that have similar impacts on water resources. As a result, during the dry season women can spend 10-12 hours a day making two trips for water due to the depletion of water resources by plantations, thus resulting in added work burdens for women.

In sum, less food, less firewood and diminishing water resources result in increasing women's work burden while at the same time reducing the amount of resources collected. Additionally, more reliance on men will tend to diminish women's roles and generate further imbalances in decision-making.

Article based on information from: "Seeing the Forest for the People, a Handbook on Gender, Forestry and Rural Livelihoods", Vanessa Griffen, APDC (Asian and Pacific Development Centre), 2001 (Chapter 4. Indonesia - Livelihoods in Teak and Pine/Mahogany Plantations and National Forest)

