
Thailand: two approaches to forest conservation

During a high-level seminar on "The Forestry Department Chief's Vision" held in March 21st Plodprasop Suraswadi, Head of the Forestry Department, proposed giving logging concessions to companies to develop degraded forests, arguing it would stem encroachment and generate income for the state. To his view the problem with deforestation was that the government was bound to yield eventually to encroachers' demands and recognise them as rightful owners of forest land. So instead of giving forest land away for the exclusive use of a group of people, a concession should be made available so all sides could benefit. Concessionaires should be large companies with sound financial standing and should have to invest in tree-planting in designated deteriorated forests. The companies should also be required to function as cooperatives, allowing locals to take up a stake and share in the returns when the trees matured and could be felled and processed commercially. Wildlife conservation is supposedly also taken into account by the proposal; for instance, endangered species could be bred in these forests to be possibly sold as pets.

Environmentalists and farmers' groups reacted considering his proposal as "impossible" and "unrealistic". They think that such measures would not solve the issue of forest encroachment, which is actually a social problem, not a business conflict.

Decades of uncontrolled large scale logging have caused that forest lands in Thailand decline from almost 60% to only 25%. Such extensive destruction derived in devastating floods, which in turn resulted in the loss of human lives and the destruction of villages and people's livelihoods. The plantation of vast eucalyptus monocultures to increase "forest cover" was not a solution to the problem. On the contrary it brought many environmental and social problems with it. The national parks policy adopted --supposedly aimed at ensuring the conservation of forests-- focused exclusively on "nature protection" and considered people living in the territories declared protected areas as actors to be excluded and expelled from them. It proved to be completely inadequate both for the forests and for the people.

During the Asian workshop on the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation held last December in Berastagi, Indonesia, a case study on Thailand was presented, that proposed a number of solutions for the three communities studied. They included supporting alternative agriculture, watershed management and networks, and promoting good managing of forests by stopping removing people out of the forest, supporting community forests and allowing local communities and civil society to participate in natural resource management at all levels. We believe this to be an equitable and realistic way of addressing the problem: focusing on the local level, taking into account local peoples' views and interests and having a holistic approach to forests, that are not only wood factories. Unfortunately, Thai authorities seem to prefer to make market-oriented unrealistic proposals.

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