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## Indonesia: The impacts of oil palm plantations on women

Twenty-two women from provinces throughout Kalimantan and Sumatra gathered in Bogor from 22nd to 24th May to discuss the effects that oil palm plantations have had on their lives.

### Women and development

Why women? It is obvious that Indonesian women are stakeholders who have been marginalised by the development process, including the establishment of large-scale oil palm plantations.

Women are rarely decision-makers in developments initiated by the government and companies. They are usually only seen as the 'hands' rather than the 'brains': as the means of implementing measures once decisions have been taken, rather than being actively involved in the planning, control, supervision and evaluation stages. However, women tend to see themselves as survivors and are often a tower of strength when communities oppose plans that threaten their way of life.

The creation and expansion of oil palm plantations have had a number of different impacts on women, both direct and indirect. For example, in traditional societies, women have important roles in managing natural resources and maintaining sustainable livelihoods which support their families. These are lost once plantations replace the forests and agricultural land (see DTE 63: 1, <http://dte.gn.apc.org/63WOM.htm>).

Companies are still gaining access to communities' land by just taking it and paying thugs to intimidate people. Those who resist, including women, are forced to flee their homes because they are accused of damaging company property. The police threaten them with arrest should they return to their villages. People are frequently detained by the police without any proper authorisation. Also, witnesses too often become suspects. For these reasons, most villagers are afraid to take any action against companies that violate their rights.

### Women's voices

This is what happened to Yana, one of the participants from South Sumatra who has not been able to go back to her home for fear of detention by the authorities. Another participant, from Indragiri Hulu district in Riau, told how a woman in her village had died from shock after her husband was detained by the police for alleged criminal damage of plantation company property. When women from the village of Hajak Dusun Sikui in Central Kalimantan tried to reclaim their agroforestry plots, the company accused them of illegally occupying the land; the case is currently being processed by the police.

Environmental pollution and health issues are also serious areas of concern for women living in and around plantations. In the village of Keladi, in the Ketapang district of West Kalimantan, people are beginning to experience a shortage of clean drinking water because the river they use for their supplies is downstream of a large oil palm plantation. Children have developed rashes after bathing in the river. A woman from Long Ikis in Pasir, East Kalimantan described how the River Soi has

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turned black and is no longer suitable for collecting drinking water. It is impossible to find fish in the river even one kilometre from the plantation. Apparently the problem is due to the company disposing of waste from its palm oil processing plant directly into the river when the waste tanks are full.

Several participants related how they were provided with agrochemicals by companies who did not provide adequate safety instruction or equipment. Women often had no idea about the possible effects of the pesticides they used, especially during the early stages of pregnancy. Women who were weeding were sometimes accidentally contaminated with sprays used by other workers nearby. Pesticides and fertilisers stored in people's homes presented hazards, particularly to women and children who could not read or understand the labels. Empty pesticide containers were occasionally used for domestic purposes and pesticides stored in containers such as old water bottles.

Other problems for women associated with oil palm plantations are those of poverty and debt. Many companies pay women lower wages than men on the grounds that they get easier work. A woman from the village of Wirano in Southeast Sulawesi complained that no processing plant had been built six years after the plantation was established, so villagers just have to throw away ripe palm fruits. Meanwhile, the plantation company is still demanding repayment of loans it provided for their co-operative.

Many young women from West Kalimantan decide to go to neighbouring Malaysia to look for work. Their main reason is that they no longer have any land to farm or rubber plantations to tap since the whole area where they lived has become oil palm plantations. Often they return to their village as unmarried mothers. It is common for such women to open a café with rooms at the back, which are used for prostitution. The presence of such cafes, which exist in most plantation villages, further increases the numbers of children born out of wedlock. They also cause problems for married women in the community: customary fines for infidelity are said to be rising.

Plantations have made women's lives harder in other ways too. Women have to go much further to find firewood for cooking once the forests have been cleared to make way for oil palm. There is no grazing for livestock close to the village once it is surrounded by plantations. And women have to carry clean drinking water longer distances.

#### Demands for action

The burden for women is likely to increase with the further expansion of large-scale oil palm plantations. So some participants from this workshop went on to meet representatives of the National Commission for Women and the national parliament in Jakarta. In their written statement, the women urged the Commission to:

- Support communities in their struggle with oil palm plantation companies;
- Push the government to resolve conflicts between communities and plantations;
- Carry out field studies to investigate the negative impacts that oil palm plantations have on women who live in and around them.

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