Indonesia - Interview with Sawitwatch about the impacts of industrial oil palm plantations in Indonesia and the experience with the RSPO

With about 11.5 million hectares in 2011, Indonesia concentrates the biggest area of industrial oil palm plantations globally, followed by Malaysia with about 4 million hectares. This extensive use of land and the continued rapid expansion have provoked numerous conflicts between communities and the companies operating these plantations. Especially the devastating deforestation caused by the expansion of oil palm plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia has led to strong and sustained negative publicity for the companies in the "consumer" countries in Europe and the USA.

RSPO started in 2001 as a response to these conflicts and the related environmental destruction. 12 years on, the many unresolved conflicts between communities, workers and RSPO-certified companies were one of the key issues during the 2013 general assembly of RSPO in Indonesia.

According to the Bogor-based NGO SawitWatch, in 2010 at least 663 communities were in conflict with more than 172 oil palm companies throughout Indonesia, with 106 arrests reported as a result. The National Land Bureau (Badan Pertanahan Nasional) of Indonesia has registered in 2009 some 3,500 on-going land conflicts related to oil palm plantations. (for more info see WRM´s global overview on industrial tree plantations: http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/an-overview-of-industrial-tree-plantations-in-the-global-south-conflicts-trends-and-resistance-struggles/).

Most RSPO company members are active in Indonesia and/or Malaysia. The WRM bulletin talks with Jefri Saragih, the executive director of Sawitwatch about the organization's more than 10 years of experience with the RSPO, to learn more about the impacts of oil palm plantations in Indonesia, the conflicts with communities and the experience with the RSPO.

Question: In Indonesia, what have been the main impacts on communities from the large expansion of industrial oil palm plantations during the past decades?

Jefri Saragih: There are many impacts due to the huge expansion of large scale oil palm plantations. CSOs [Civil Society Organizations] often differentiated the impacts into two issues: environmental impacts (e.g. deforestations, destruction of peatlands, water & air pollution, land degradation, etc) and social impacts (land grabbing, human rights violations, criminalization, partnership scheme, food sovereignty, forced & child labor, etc), although both issues are always linked to each other.

As a social NGO, our focus has been on the social impacts. Since established, we have been working with communities affected by the development of large scale plantations. We have found many land grabbing cases where the local and indigenous communities lost and were forced to give up their lands. Communities are forced to give up their lands because they are being threatened or misled into a fraud in the sense that companies often benefit from the communities' lack of documentations (i.e. land titles). Several companies also use military force in order to force the communities to give up their lands. Expansion has also affected communities' food sovereignty where

they are losing their food producing lands which are being converted into oil palm plantations. Labor has also been an issue which has not been addressed well by government, growers companies or the RSPO. Labor problems include practices of child and forced labor, issues around not guaranteeing minimum wage, daily contractual labor, unfulfilled promises, poor living condition, etc.

Question: Can you identify differentiated impacts on men and women?

Jefri Saragih: With regards to the labor, wives of laborers are indirectly forced to assist their husbands due to the limited time and high targets the laborers must accomplish. With regards to land rights, women do not have rights to their family lands. Land titles are under the husbands' name. Therefore, when their husbands pass away, they often lose their lands.

Question: Has the RSPO been capable to revert the negative impacts of oil palm plantations in Indonesia? Please explain.

Jefri Saragih: With over 50 cases unresolved, it is fair to say that the RSPO has been unable to address the many negative impacts caused by large scale oil palm plantations. From a social perspective, we can see that today there are over 40 cases that have been submitted to the RSPO Secretariat and that have not been resolved. In addition to that there are many additional cases where there are conflicts with communities involving RSPO members but where cases have not been filed.
From the environmental perspectives, we can see that the recent extensive smoke in Riau was caused by the fires that happened in RSPO members' plantations. In addition, there are still many cases involving deforestation, etc.

Question: What has been the experience of communities in Indonesia when they have been using the complaints mechanism of RSPO?

Jefri Saragih: Throughout our experience in assisting communities, only a few of the complaints were resolved. RSPO has an important role to accommodate the conflict resolution process. This means they should also be able to clarify the reality on the ground. This is the role that the RSPO has yet to accomplish. We have been urging the RSPO Secretariat to be able to come to the field to re-check and clarify the information they have received. Unfortunately, they have not been able to implement this role against all the cases that are submitted to them.

Communities are not happy with the lack of progress the RSPO is making in resolving their conflicts. Although SW role as an RSPO member has allowed the communities' representatives to meet with companies during the annual roundtable meetings, most of the communities have not been able to communicate directly with the RSPO Secretariat.

Question: In the past few years, companies and investors active in Indonesia have set up large-scale oil palm plantation projects in Africa and they are also entering into Latin America. In these new expansion areas, they make many of the same promises to local communities as they did in Indonesia like job generation, progress and development. Based on the Indonesian experience, what would be your message to these communities in Africa and Latin America?

Jefri Saragih: Possible affected communities should be more careful in engaging with palm oil companies. They need to strengthen their capacities with regards to FPIC and their rights, e.g. land rights. NGOs and local activist also play an important role, both in assisting communities and running advocacy activities. They should be able to build dialogues with the government to protect the

community's rights to their land and livelihoods.