
[Southeast Asia: Strengthening resistance beyond boundaries](#)

This is the third regional bulletin of the World Rainforest Movement in the past 10 months. The first regional issue ([WRM Bulletin 224](#)) looks at what is driving land grabbing in the Congo Basin region in Africa. The second regional bulletin, [issue 226](#), is dedicated to how peoples resist a colonial past that persists through imposition and violence across Middle America. In this issue, the focus is on the region commonly referred to as Southeast Asia.

With these regional bulletins, WRM wants to draw attention to resistance struggles in regions particularly affected by forest destruction. The aim is not only to give visibility to the situation and community struggles, but also to support the often challenging processes of networking and movement building among community organizations, activist groups and social movements in the particular countries of each region and across different regions.

Producing regional bulletins has been a good learning exercise. We have noticed, for example, that existing geographical borders delineating the nation states that make up the highlighted regions often separate and isolate communities struggling to defend their livelihoods and forests. Southeast Asia is no exception. Territories today identified as the countries of Cambodia, Indonesia, East Timor, Laos, Malaysia, Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam are usually included under the term South East Asia, but Papua New Guinea, the Chinese province of Yunnan, or the Indian state of Manipur are not seen to be part of this region. The exclusion of the latter reveals that the term Southeast Asia is more a political rather than a purely geographic reference. The current understanding of the term goes back to the relatively recent process when European colonial states started to parcel out the vast region among them. This conquest, while wrapped in differently named agendas and involving a large set of institutional actors, continues to this day.

In November 2016, colleagues and friends from most of the countries in the region gathered in Bangkok, Thailand / Siam, to share stories and feelings from the diverse local contexts of crisis. The gathering centered around a common concern: "what is happening to our forests?" Comparing, discussing and weaving together the similarities in the memories that each participant brought to the gathering, this question immediately revealed a story of Southeast Asia as a region of "forest lost". This perception contrasts sharply with the image of the region of "growth and development" as which it has been falsely presented by political elites and policy-makers in international institutions.

A synthesis of the participants' narratives of crisis has identified a number of commonalities and also uniqueness among the situation of communities in the different countries. One of the commonalities is the experience that the so-called "green growth" framework is the same in each country. It is about the old extractive economic growth doctrine - now with a "green" label. These destructive processes with their new green smokescreen involve many actors, both old and new – and generally not locally-based. At the same time as the "green growth" discourse is advanced, governments in the region are becoming increasingly dependent on extractivism for their political survival. Local people, on the other hand, continue to be falsely blamed for environmental destruction, and their intergenerational dependence on forest lands for their basic needs portrayed as the cause of poverty. The use of

violence and repression against them is increasing. At the same time, communities are increasingly taking charge of their resistance and advocacy, advancing in exposing and reversing the blame strategy.

One of the strongest impressions from the gathering in Bangkok was that the fate of the forests throughout the turbulence and destructive character of "progress" provides the invisible ties that re-connect the stories from the mainland subregion – including North East India and the Mekong - and the islands subregion of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. State and private actors responsible for the destruction that characterizes "development" across the region have had to constantly invent new cover-up stories that present this destruction as "progress" and paint wise agroecological practices and their social fabric within forest-dependent communities as backward, outdated and unproductive. The reality could not be further from this mis-representation.

As a result of this constant pressure, social-ecological unity in and among communities has begun to break down in places while the diversity in forms, institutions and mechanisms of human solidarity became arsenals for divide and rule. Last but not least, murder and plunder were obscured by giving them new dresses and names. To name but a few of them, in the Philippines, extra-judicial killings is "law-and-order crackdown" (1); in Cambodia, laggard official investigation into a brutal shootings has been blamed on the form of the victims' families' report to the Police (2); in Indonesia, funding support to smooth the expansion of oil palm plantation uses keywords such as "Securing Land Rights of Local Communities by Engaging with the Plantation Sector" or "Support Efforts to Protect High Conservation Value/high Carbon Stock Forests in Palm Oil Concessions". (3)

One way of keeping the destruction of forests and the resulting suffering as well as the resistance of communities throughout Southeast Asia silent and invisible has been that those responsible for the destruction have contrasted the damage to so-called "development" plans. The 1986 Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) of the World Bank, for example, renamed destruction as "forest based industrial development", adding expansion of conservation areas as a means to keep destruction in check. Exactly three decades later, the gathering in Bangkok observed that although TFAP has long been shelved, the strange bedfellows of forest protection and forest destruction that they introduced today exist under new names: as policies, programs or frameworks for "green growth"; as "win-win scenarios" for "environment and development", or for "conservation and poverty alleviation"; as carbon credits or "offset" with recognition of rights; as "biodiversity corridors" or "biodiversity offsetting" for "mining with a positive impact on biodiversity". Regardless of the new names, the consequences for forest-dependent communities remain the same as under programmes like TFAP: restrictions on traditional land use practices or even loss of land to new green land grabs.

While the advances of forest destruction always knew no boundaries, the meeting of hearts in Bangkok showed that resistance and healing have the power to unite to communities and peoples beyond borders, in Southeast Asia and across the globe. This bulletin issue is another way to support and spread this message. To support this process, the bulletin – which contains articles on Northeast India, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia and Cambodia, as well as an overview article about the region - will be translated into some of the main languages in the region.

We hope you will enjoy the bulletin!

(1) Philippines' Duterte draws Hitler parallels in war on drugs. AFP, September 30, 2016 and

(2) *Police Blame Family for Stalled Probe Into Lost Boy. The Cambodia Daily, September 2, 2015.*
<https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/police-blame-family-for-stalled-probe-into-lost-boy-93151/>

(3) *Climate and Land Use Alliance Indonesia Initiative. Grants and Contracts List.*
http://www.climateandlandusealliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Indonesia-Grants-List_2017-Q1.pdf