Indonesia: The alternative approach of community forest management

The NGO Down to Earth has recently concluded a special report titled "Forests, people and rights", which provides very detailed analytical information on the forest situation in Indonesia. The following paragraphs have been extracted from the chapter "Community forest management: the way forward" and we recommend our readers to access the full document (see details below).

According to the study, forest peoples have been regarded by Indonesia's powerful wood industry and successive governments in Jakarta as an obstacle to the profitable exploitation of the forests and their skills and knowledge were unrecognised, until very recently.

However, community forest management provides an alternative approach which puts forest peoples at the centre of decision-making and sees them, not as a problem to be dealt with, but as a key part of the solution. In Indonesia, the community forestry movement starts from the premise that the domination of the state, the centralised nature of forest management and the state's refusal to recognise adat (indigenous) rights are the major causes of deforestation and forest degradation.

Community-based natural resource management seeks to guarantee access and control over forest resources for people living in and around forests who depend on them for their economic, social, cultural and spiritual well-being. Forests should be managed to provide inter-generational security and increase the likelihood of sustainability. It is based on three principles:

* the rights and responsibilities over forest resources must be clear, secure and permanent;
* the forests must be properly managed so that there is a flow of benefits and added value;
* forest resources must be transferred in good condition to ensure their future viability.

Communities wanting to retain, construct or develop community-based management schemes face major challenges: the wider political and economic imperatives of international financial institutions which prioritise revenues from timber; central government policies entrenched in the past; rampant corruption; the threat of violence and intimidation arising from the weak judicial system coupled with a military and police force which continues to act with impunity.

Forest peoples face internal challenges too. Decision-making within traditional indigenous communities may be hierarchical. Women, the poorest members of the community --particularly the landless or low status families-- and seasonal forest users may not have a say in how resources are apportioned. And they also undergo changes: people who practised subsistence forest farming and had little need for cash even a generation ago now want money to pay for clothing, medical care, outboard motors for canoes (and diesel for them), school uniforms and books. Transport and accommodation costs incurred during visits to lobby local and central government officials are becoming a common budget item for forest peoples.

The forests on which these traditional lifestyles depend have also changed. Large tracts of forest formerly reserved intact as insurance for hard times or as a legacy for future generations have been at best logged over and at worst cleared for plantations. The valuable resins, rattans and forest fruits

which used to be traded are becoming scarcer, as are the medicinal plants used by shamans for traditional healing. As the forests disappear, so do the skills and knowledge of indigenous communities.

Indigenous communities are not the only ones living in and around what remains of Indonesia's forests. Migrants from other areas --even other islands-- peasant farmers dispossessed by plantations and urbanisation, transmigrants and miners are all laying claim to these lands and resources. Some may have lived there for several generations. Negotiations between all these groups must take place to avoid conflict.

Indonesia's forest peoples are well aware of the need to adapt their institutions to a changing world and are discussing such issues as identity, sovereignty and legal representation both within their own communities and with others. They are using new opportunities provided by the regional and national indigenous peoples' alliances (AMA and AMAN) to move these debates forward.

Civil society organisations and a growing number of funding agencies in Indonesia and abroad recognise that consistent support for forest peoples to develop their own strong, dynamic, inclusive and democratic organisations is vital to gain wider support for community-based forest management and effect a shift away from 'the timber-mining' regime that has proven so disastrous until now.

Article extracted from: "Forests, People and Rights", written by Liz Chidley, edited by Carolyn Marr. Down to Earth, International Campaign for Ecological Justice in Indonesia, Special Report, June 2002, http://dte.gn.apc.org/srfin.htm
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- Japan: Sick from monoculture tree plantations

The cloud of pollen that usually covers Japan in the Springtime is disappearing and the Japanese are starting to feel more relieved from their respiratory allergy that leaves one out of six inhabitants of the Archipelago with red eyes and a congested nose. It is even worse in the cities due to the combination of pollen with release of gases from vehicles. In the last 10 years, in Tokyo, the proportion of population affected by allergies has risen from 7% to 20%.

Forty years ago, this did not happen. What has changed? The reply is to be found in forest degradation and loss. The modernisation process has implied a change in the way of looking at the forest. Its spirit, once a source of religious, architectonic, poetic and artistic inspiration has been taken away. Today, turned into merchandise, it is mainly a source of energy and building materials. And of allergies.

World War II swallowed half the forests, and in 1950 a policy for systematic reforestation was installed, centred on the plantation of fast growing conifers, especially Cryptomeria, a species which is more profitable for building. Thus presently there are 10 million hectares planted with a single species of conifer, which is at the root of the Spring pollen cloud.

These enormous monoculture plantations have implied an imbalance that, in addition to having impacts on human health, also have environmental, social and economic consequences. Environmental imbalance is to be seen in catastrophes such as landslides and alteration to the ecosystem, in detriment to the local fauna and flora. From the socio-economic standpoint it has not been much use either. In fact when the Cryptomeria plantations were ready to be exploited, profitability criteria made the logging industry import wood at lower prices. This has implied a loss of

jobs among the rural population linked to the forestry sector, and in turn, promoted rural emigration.

Within this business logic, in spite of possessing enormous volumes of standing trees, Japan is today one of the greatest importers of wood in the world – in the year 2000 it imported 100 million m3 – and has become the major predator of forests in the rest of Asia. In the meanwhile the plantations only seem able to generate allergies. But this is not all. The powerful Japanese industry, a great releaser of carbon dioxide, and therefore responsible for climatic change, is resorting to the new formula of carbon sinks to avoid reducing its releases. And for this purpose it is resorting to the plantation of extensive monoculture tree plantations abroad (see WRM bulletin No. 20). Somehow, it is exporting its own sickness.

Article based on information from: “La vengeance de la forêt”, Philippe Pons, Le Monde, 14 June, 2002.