New book on impacts of tree plantations in Indonesia

Pulp wood and oil palm plantations expansion in Indonesia has been a direct cause of forest destruction by land clearing. During the 80's the government promoted the creation of large-scale industrial pulp plantations of fast-growing species, mainly acacia, pinus and gmelina to feed the pulp and paper industry. At the beginning of this decade, as timber resources were becoming rapidly exhausted, oil palm began to be regarded by private companies and national authorities as an interesting commodity for export and plantations started to expand. Nowadays Indonesia has 2.4 million hectares (3.2 according to other sources) of oil palm and in the next few years this could reach as high as 5.5 million hectares. The Ministry of Forestry and Plantation Estates stated that the government had allocated 30 million hectares of forests to be cleared for the set up of oil palm plantations. Private companies control most of the recently planted area, and of this, four large conglomerates have about two thirds. The Indonesian government is seeking that the country becomes the major oil world exporter in the world, taking advantage of the fact that salaries and land are substantially cheaper than in Malaysia, Indonesia's principal competitor on the world market. To face the negative social and environmental impacts of this development, a group of Indonesian NGOs created the network "Sawit Watch" in July 1998 (see WRM Bulletins 14, 15, 20 and 21).

'Tree Planting in Indonesia: Trends, Impacts, and Directions', by Leslie Potter and Justin Lee from the University of Adelaide in Australia looks in detail at the expansion of oil palm and industrial timber and pulp plantations in the Indonesian provinces of West Kalimantan, Jambi, and Southeast Sulawesi, as well as issues related to smallholder tree crop production.

In addition to contributing to forest conversion, the authors note that oil palm and timber plantations may have more negative consequences for local communities than previous logging operations. To some extent, communities had managed to co-exist with logging operations but the plantations consume vast areas of land and may displace their traditional activities entirely.

Even if the government and the companies have attempted to involve some smallholders in oil palm production, the results have not been the expected. Recent efforts have been even less favourable for local villagers than previous smallholder palm oil initiatives supported by the World Bank. Under current arrangements, some villagers may succeed in improving their incomes but they lose a large portion of their land and become indebted in the process and the long-term outlook remains uncertain.

You can obtain an electronic copy of Potter and Lee's paper from the CIFOR website, http://www.cgiar.org/cifor.
To request a printed copy write to: cifor@cgiar.org, including your mailing address. Lesley Potter is to be reached at lesley.potter@adelaide.edu.au

Sources: David Kaimowitz, 20/4/99; Potter Lesly and Lee Justin, "Tree planting in Indonesia: Trends, Impacts and Directions", Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Occasional Paper Nr. 18, December 1998, ISSN 0854-9818.