
Indonesia's forests in flames

At the same time as the Indonesian delegate sat at the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests –a UN body aimed at the sustainable use of the remaining world's forests- the Indonesian forests in Sumatra and Borneo were going up in smoke. As many other country delegates in international fora –both Northern and Southern- the Indonesian delegate spoke about sustainable forest management as if it were something that was really happening or about to happen in his country. He even stressed the need for NGO participation in Indonesia!

One thing that is actually sustainable in Indonesia are its forest fires. They are not accidents, nor are they simply the result of droughts due to the El Nino phenomenon. They are the end results of an economic policy based on the over-exploitation of the archipelago's natural resources and the corruption entrenched in Indonesia's forestry industry.

Indonesia has the world's third largest area of tropical rainforest, but its forests are being depleted at a steady pace. In the 1960s, over 80% of the land was covered with forest; today forest cover is estimated at only 55%. The remaining 100 million hectares of forests are being destroyed at a rate of 1 million hectares per year.

Forest fires are not a new cause of forest destruction. In 1982-83, huge fires in Kalimantan destroyed 3,5 million hectares of forests. The causes are both internal and external and the process is roughly the following: a logging company cuts the most valuable trees; plantation companies (particularly oil palm and pulpwood) cut the remaining trees and burn the brush and other debris (as the cheapest method to clear the land) and the fire extends (assisted by drought and the peat soils) to other forest areas which thus become available for further plantations.

The fires bring death and destruction to forest peoples and wealth to plantation owners and industrialists, among which important members of President Suharto's family. Oil palm and eucalyptus plantations are actively promoted by the government to supply external markets with palm oil and cellulose. Indonesian exports of palm oil and palm-oil products expanded to more than US\$1 billion in 1996 and giant pulp mill projects are spreading throughout the country to supply export markets. Affluent countries' overconsumption fuels –as in many other cases- these fires and external investors reap the benefits in association with their Indonesian counterparts. The delegates of all the countries involved sit together and pretend to discuss ways to achieve the sustainable use of forests. In the meantime, the forest destruction process continues.

Sources: Down to Earth press release: "Suharto fiddles while Indonesia's forests burn", September 1997; Cohen, M & Hiebert, M. "Where there's smoke", Far Eastern Economic Review 2/10/97; Harrison, D. "Fire in the East, Storms in the West. Who said greed is good?". The Observer 28/9/97

