

New studies suggest lack of meaningful land rights threaten Indonesian forests

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New research released today at a high-level forestry conference in Indonesia opened by Vice President Boediono suggests that Asia's largest forest nation is paying a high price for failing to give local communities enforceable rights to contested forests, causing significant economic losses owing to its highly undervalued forestland, and leading it to lose out to regional competitors.

"There is ample evidence that communities are reliable managers of natural resources and forests, yet for some reason Indonesia has yet to embrace the concept of local tenure rights with any seriousness," said Dominic Elson, an independent consultant for Trevaylor Consulting. "Until addressed, it will be hard to make more than token progress on the pressing issues facing the land use sector, such as deforestation, conflict and misguided investments that undermine development. This will not only have poor outcomes for the forests, biodiversity and climate change - it will also have profound implications for the economy and long-term social development."

Elson's paper is one of several presented this week in Lombok by the Rights and Resources Initiative, at a major international forestry conference co-organized by the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry, the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) and RRI. The conference brings together researchers, policymakers, and Asian forest community leaders to focus attention on the fundamental role of local control and improved forest governance in alleviating poverty, expanding legal, sustainable forestry, and reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation or REDD, an initiative whose long-term implementation is still in negotiations.

Previous research by RRI and others has shown that where Indigenous Peoples and forest communities are given control of forestlands, they are better stewards than governments. A study

released on Wednesday by RRI confirms this finding, suggesting that granting greater control to local forest communities has been a vital element in the turn-around accomplished by China, South Korea, Vietnam and India, which in the last 20 years have had significant success with restoring vast areas of forest.

"The state remains the predominant actor in the region's forests, but the trend toward local control now emerging is incredibly important," said Andy White, coordinator of RRI, a global coalition of organizations advancing forest tenure and policy reforms. "It's no coincidence that the countries granting more rights to communities and indigenous groups are the same ones making progress toward more sustainable management of their forest resources."

Indonesia continues as outlier in region

A key outlier to this promising trend is Indonesia, home of the world's fifth largest forested area and one of the greatest carbon emitters, in sharp contrast to other major countries in the region, including China, India and Viet Nam, which have large areas of forestland in community hands.

The Indonesian government's acknowledges that there are almost 30,000 villages on land claimed by the government, yet communities have rights to less than one percent of the nation's forests.

For example, the 0.60 million hectares that Indonesia reserved for communities in 2002 appeared to fall to 0.23 million hectares by 2008, according to government figures. The new data shows that in 2010, less than 100,000 hectares had been legally recognized as under local control, far short of the target to devolve at least 500,000 hectares per year.

"At this negative rate of change," said Nonette Royo, Executive Director of the Bogor-based

Samdhana Institute, "Indonesia will continue to fall further behind its tropical forest peers in devolution of land tenure rights, yet for some reason in Indonesia, the state has yet to embrace the concept of locally controlled forestry with any seriousness."

In the absence of meaningful change in forest governance, forest-related conflicts have become commonplace in Indonesia. For example, in a forthcoming report from the Indonesian research organization HuMa, the authors identify some 359 confrontations over forested lands between 1997 and 2003 in six provinces alone. They estimated a 70 percent increase in this rate, reflected in 85 instances of conflict over natural resources in 2010, which encompassed a disputed area of nearly 2.5 million hectares. These conflicts resulted in communities losing access to forested areas, and the imprisonment-and in some cases the deaths-of those who refused to surrender control.

"These findings in particular suggest the need for immediate action, with commitments made at the highest level of government," said Marcus Colchester, Director of the UK-based Forest Peoples Programme. "We need mediation mechanisms to address conflict; we need meaningful progress on recognizing customary rights, and, where people request it, we also need implementation of the laws that are on the books and support for forest peoples' own enterprises. Lives and livelihoods are at stake, and forest communities have been patient for far too long."

Undervalued land encouraging plunder of resources

In his sweeping assessment of Indonesia's forest policy, Elson finds that with its focus on timber extraction and forest conversion to palm oil, the country's approach is overwhelmingly biased toward narrow private interests without delivering economic gains that improve peoples wellbeing. Natural forest has continually been made available for industry at far below its social or economic value, while forest communities have been systematically ignored.

"The presence of a large amount of degraded land-

estimated at 30 million hectares or more-- is a sign that the forest frontier is undervalued, meaning that economically it makes more sense to continue to plunder the frontier rather than develop existing open land," said Elson, a development expert, whom earlier this year authored the study from the UK Climate Change Unit of the British Embassy in Jakarta on shifting Indonesia to a low-carbon economy.

Elson cites the case of 40 million Indonesians who live in treeless areas designated as public forests, yet have no land rights to even such degraded land. "This limits their livelihood options, as the land cannot be used for agriculture, yet in most cases they also cannot get a permit for reforestation, and do not have political power to get a permit for estate crops such as oil palm or cocoa."

But RRI analysts say there are encouraging signs that Indonesia is beginning to change. In the past few years the government has set new targets to reduce deforestation and help mitigate climate change, while promising to speed up transfer of forest rights to local communities.

"The fact that [Indonesia](#) is a co-sponsor of one of the biggest conferences ever held on [forest](#) tenure, governance and enterprise in Asia, by itself says a lot about the realization at very high levels that the status quo is not a perfect one and it needs improvement," said Pak Boen Purnama, former Secretary General of the Ministry of Forestry, and current advisor to the Ministry.

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