Small farmers victims of forest carbon trading

by Tejo Pramano and Sarwadi Sukiman Friday, 12 December 2008

Testimony of Sarwadi, Indonesian farmerÂ

Sarwadi Sukiman, a small

farmer from Sumatra (Indonesia) is currently sharing his experience in Poznan

during the United Nations climate talks, as part of the Via Campesina delegation. His story shows what happens when plans such as REDD (Reducing

Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) are implemented and what impacts

they have on small farmer's lives. REDD is a new mechanism negotiated in the

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that provides

funding to developing countries to protect forests in order to capture carbon

and stabilise the climate. This carbon trading mechanism is getting a lot of

international support at the Poznan

conference. However, the real impact of such programmes on peasants and indigenous peoples is disastrous.

Sarwadi comes from Tanjung Lebar village in Muara Jambi

regency. In his area, during the eighties, the development of industrial forest

exploitations (for timber, paper...) stole the forest areas from indigenous

people. Private companies logged forests to exhaustion. When their concession

from the government had expired, the companies went away, leaving behind a

devastated area.

In 2002, when the

concession had expired in Sarwadi

village forest, the land remained barren. Peasants and indigenous people

reclaimed it to produce food such as rice, beans and fruits. 1500 families

organised in the Indonesian Peasant's Union (SPI) occupied an areas as wide as

101.365 hectares, where they tilled the land, they built their houses, and

created their territories and communities.

Unfortunately, some local

and international

environmental NGOs established a company named PT Reki who asked the government

the permit to use this area for ecosystem restauration. This consortium of NGOs

consists of Yayasan Burung Indonesia,

Royal Society for the Protection of Bird (RSPB), and Bird-Life International.

They received the permit to manage this areas for 100 years (1).

When the company took

control over the area, peasants

and indigenous people where kicked out of their land, they were intimidated.

arrested and interrogated. They were forced to sign a letter where they agree

to leave the area and to never come back again. Some peasants were sent to jail

and then released. One of them was detained for 6 months for defending hit

community's land.

On November 2, 2008, The

Prince of Wales was invited to Sumatra to see the reforestation efforts made by the

Indonesian government. PT Reki became one of the places visited by Prince

Charles in his campaign to save the rain forest. Using the large media coverage

of this event, Dieter Hoffmann, head of the international program of Birdlife

International, announced that the company was now exploring the opportunities

of benefiting from REDD, the scheme negotiated during Bali Conference on

Climate Change in December 2007. He said that if developed, this particular

forest in Jambi province could absorb as much carbon as the annual emissions of

Manchester.1

Sarwadi along with the

other farmers members of Via

Campesina currently in Poznan

denounce projects such a REDD. This new scheme allows companies to prevent

family farmers to use the land to produce the food that is needed to feed their

communities and their countries. Deforestation, which is one of the main causes

of global warming, is not made by peasants and indigenous people, but by large

companies that are given the right to commercially exploit the forest.

Therefore, forests should not be managed industrially by transnational companies. They should be used by villagers who can manage them in a sustainable way.

The Via Campesina

delegation in Poznan is shocked to see that the climate talks are giving so much attention to the REDD initiative. It means that the

debate is shifting from the obligation of developed countries to reduce their

emissions to the obligation for developing countries to sink carbon.

The main

polluters would simply send some funds abroad and continue business as usual.

The peasants of Via Campesina believe that instead of getting lost in carbon

trading schemes, the conference should focus on implementing new initiatives

aiming at changing the model of production. Local production and people based

protection of resources should be encouraged because it uses less fossil energy

and it maintains livelihoods and local communities. Small farmers around the

world defend food sovereignty as a way to overcome the climate crisis. It is

the people's right to define their own food policies, with a priority to local

food production and sustainable small scale agriculture.

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1. Antara News "11/03/08 12:21, The Visit of the Prince of Wales to Harapan Rain Forest in Jambi-Sumatera

http://www.antara.co.id/en/arc/2008/11/3/the-visit-of-the-prince-of-wales-to-harapan-rain-forest-in-jambi-sumatera/

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2. Jakarta Post, 11/03/08, Prince Charles joins RI forest conservation drive

http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/11/03/prince-charles-joins-ri-forest-conservation-drive.html