

A critical year for REDD in Indonesia

The new year has begun and the need to deal with environmental degradation, including deforestation, have become more pressing than before, yet the challenges are greater than ever.

For a few decades, Indonesia has paid a high price in terms of economic, environmental and social costs as well as negative reputation for the continued obscurity of policies to curb deforestation and a less than encouraging record in managing natural resources.

As part of efforts to alter this, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2009 stated that his government was devising a policy that would cut the country's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 26 percent by 2020 from "business as usual" levels. A significant portion contributing to this would come from reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+).

To politically and financially back up REDD+ development and implementation in this country, a letter of intent (LoI) was signed by the Indonesian and Norwegian governments in Oslo in late May last year.

The LoI came with a pledged provision of US\$1 billion for Indonesia. This could be considered as the biggest single support any country has given Indonesia to date in the area of environmental management and climate change, and a significant initial step toward saving Indonesia's peatlands and natural forests.

To show that he was serious in addressing the issue of deforestation and giving a boost to the REDD+ platform, the Indonesian President in Oslo also announced his commitment to halting all new concessions for the conversion of peatlands and natural forests in two years, supposed to start in January 2011.

January has arrived and after approximately seven months of continuous public discourses and reviews within the relevant ministries as well as inside UKP4 — a special presidential delivery unit charged with managing this LoI — the government is yet to produce a clear strategy and legal framework to support this initiative.

One sign of progress is the formation of a special taskforce that has a mandate to establish a special agency that will report directly to the President and coordinate the efforts pertaining to the development and implementation of REDD+.

Another recent development following this LoI, which happened just before the turn of the year, was the selection of Central Kalimantan province as a province-wide REDD+ pilot.

However, these moves are far from sufficient and adequate to show that Indonesia has a credible REDD+ platform.

Credibility is a key part of all REDD+ schemes that are being employed internationally. Credibility cannot be achieved without a firm national strategy and clear framework as well as legal certainty that support REDD+.

Furthermore, the absence of these aspects will hinder the development of national monitoring, reporting and verification system for GHG emissions coming from forests and peatlands – as stipulated in the LoI. More importantly, tackling deforestation and land use changes involves different layers of governments and various sectors and actors. These sectors are regulated under different ministries (i.e. forestry, agriculture, energy and mineral resources, and public works) and layers of governments. These institutions are known to have issued overlapping policies on land use and land use changes.

There are cases in which spatial and land use planning at the district level are different to if not contradictory with the planning at the provincial or national level.

Early in December last year, the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) released the outcome of its study on forestry policies and systems. The KPK found an unclear definition of forest areas in Law No. 41/1999 on Forestry and a number of other relevant regulations.

This situation, according to the KPK, has created a legal loophole for illegal loggers and illegal miners to continue their operations and avoid the legal implications.

According to the KPK's findings, the division of authority, roles and responsibilities among different layers of governments remains unclear and problematic, especially in determining forest areas in a spatial planning process.

This situation has led to legal uncertainty, which is a prerequisite for serious investment in sustainable forest management and land use as well as community-based forest managed by local and indigenous people, which would support the country's sustainable development.

It is therefore essential for the government to immediately come up with an initial but clear regulation (e.g. government regulation or higher ruling), strategy and framework that indicate the high level of seriousness to solve the uncertainty of land use systems, planning and coordination.

Substance-wise, this legal backing for REDD+ needs to prioritize the termination of the conversion of natural forests, peatlands and other terrestrial ecosystems that are rich in carbon and have significant ecological and social values, but are at risk of being converted or destructively logged.

The legal framework backing up REDD+ is also required to clearly state that halting deforestation will not hinder development in other sectors.

On the other hand, a good regulation on REDD+ would create the urgency needed for the country to arrive with decisions over conflicting land use that have remained unresolved and have disrupted development, despite the fact that the Forestry Law stipulates this issue should be completed by the end of last year.

This overall process must be seen as a step forward to reform natural resource management of the country.

With or without foreign aid, the country's future depends so much on the development path that we choose today.

Embarking on a sustainable path may be daunting but it is imperative for Indonesia, for the sake of its economy, environment and, most importantly, people.

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