

The Indonesian deforestation moratorium: The devil is in the details

Indonesia has promised to become a world leader in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In 2009 the president committed to a 26 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 to below business as usual levels. Of this total, 14 percent would have to come from reducing emissions from deforestation or forest degradation (REDD+). External investments in REDD+ are expected to raise total emission reduction from 26 percent to 41 percent. While international negotiations on rules for REDD+ are slow but ongoing, the Indonesian and Norwegian governments signed a letter of intent under which up to US\$1 billion is available to assist in setting up a REDD+ system that also addresses peatland emissions. Part of the agreement is that Indonesia will implement a moratorium, or “two year suspension on all new concessions for conversion of peat and natural forest”.

Promising as this may sound, the devil is in the details and a lot depends on how peat and natural forest are defined. Strong lobbies from the forest and tree crop plantation industry argue that the economy will be harmed if business as usual is interrupted. According to news sources, definitions of natural forest and peat differ between drafts prepared by the REDD+ taskforce and by the Ministry of Forestry. Some of the key issues that need to be resolved are: First, if the moratorium is limited to the “kawasan hutan” (Forest Estate), one-third of current emissions from change in woody vegetation will remain unaccounted for. The institutional mandates and types of permits issued by the government differ between “kawasan hutan” and the “other land uses” category, however.

Second, the draft of the Ministry of Forestry aims to allow for new plantation concessions in logged forests, where tree planting or conversion into monocultural tree plantations is presented as forest improvement. The Ministry proposes a moratorium limited to protecting primary forests, and defines these as “natural forests untouched by cultivation or silvicultural systems applied in forestry”. Part of Indonesia’s logged-over (secondary) forest still has high carbon stocks and is important for biodiversity conservation. It would help if a map of Indonesia can clarify where the moratorium applies. Third, peatlands are immense storage houses for carbon and their protection from drainage and fire play a crucial role in the reduction of carbon emissions.

Peatlands occur both within and outside of the forest estate and are source of emissions whether forested or not. The Ministry of Forestry draft excluded any new concessions on peatlands deeper than three meter – which in fact already are illegal. A challenge is that existing maps of peat-depth are not very accurate. All three issues come together in a place like the Tripa swamp along the west coast of Aceh where a block of high C-stock swamp forest on peatland, with high orangutan population density, is threatened by conversion to oil palm. Part of the permits for such conversion exist, and the land status was changed a decade ago from “watershed protection” forest to “other land uses”.

If conversion to oil palm takes place, it will be widely seen as failure of the moratorium and the international commitment of Indonesia. Recent studies by the World Agroforestry Centre and PanEco/YEL provide details on the case. Although it is a challenge to resolve all the above key issues in a country the size of Indonesia we believe progress requires that: a) the goal of reducing carbon emissions while supporting human well-being is kept in focus, b) the moratorium is clear and operational and c) it goes beyond restating existing regulations that have not prevented the “business as usual”.

This leads to several recommendations. First, forests irrespective of their location and land status should be included. Second, logged forests should be included and protected under REDD+ because they still contain high carbon stocks and biodiversity values. Third, all peatlands should be included, irrespective of their depth. Fourth, the definition of forest should be made relevant to its purpose under REDD+, which is to reduce carbon emissions by avoided change in woody vegetation. A simple rule could be that the moratorium applies to new concessions on all lands except those with an above ground carbon stock of less than 35 tC/ha that are on non-peatland. This would be relatively easy to map and monitor. It would set clear rules to move forwards for now. It would buy time to think through the issues that relate to the lands that are included in moratorium and refine rules in future as needed.