

Fixing forests for the people

The International Year of Forests (IYF) 2011, launched Feb. 2 at the UN General Assembly in New York, did not start with a bang.

It didn't make the news in the Indonesian press and received only scant mention in the world media. The crisis in Egypt, particularly the clash between the pro- and anti-Mubarak demonstrators on the same day, crowded it out.

Yet the message of the IYF is profound. Forests cover 31 percent of the world's land area. The livelihood of 1.6 billion people depends on forests. Trade in forest products was estimated at US\$327 billion in 2004. Forests are home to 80 percent of our terrestrial biodiversity, according to the UN.

The intent of the IYF is to raise awareness of the global agenda for the conservation and sustainable development of all types of the world's forests. The UN resolution making 2011 the International Year of Forests recognized that sustainable forest management can contribute to eradicating poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

The iconographic logo of the IYF depicts a tree. In its bough are the shapes of forest-related flora, fauna and products and a green human figure in the middle, arms and legs outstretched. The logo encapsulates the year's core message: Forests for people.

For Indonesia, this calls to the country's own tropical rainforest and the people who make it their home. Indonesia's land area is 193 million hectares. Of that area, 108 million hectares are forest. But nearly half of it is gone or degraded due to forest fires, illegal logging and land conversion. This loss greatly affects the people indigenous to and dependent on the forests.

Indonesia's population is 237 million according to the May 2010 census. Of that number, 50-70 million or 23-32 percent are indigenous peoples, according to the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN). AMAN defines indigenous peoples as a group of people who have lived in their ancestral domain for generations, have sovereignty over their land and natural resources and govern their community by way of customary laws that sustain the continuity of their livelihoods. Many indigenous peoples in Indonesia live in forests.

"Indigenous peoples have the strongest interest and motivation to protect their forest and territories in order to preserve their sustainable livelihoods. They live a low carbon lifestyle," Abdon Nababan, secretary-general of AMAN, told an Asia-Pacific climate change training workshop in Jakarta in January.

Indonesia's indigenous peoples are numerous. Kalimantan alone has more than 500 tribes and there are also the Talang Mamak in Sumatra, the Kayan in Kalimantan, the To Kaili in Sulawesi, the Baduy in Java.

They have their own traditional knowledge and institutions passed down from generation to generation that preserve their environment. They have their own system of land use and land allocation.

They develop diverse cropping patterns, maintain sustainable communal water management and practice sustainable agriculture and agro-forestry. They talk and sing to the trees, the mountains, the rivers, the animals and plants. These are the people who are protecting the Earth, according to Abdon.

One such people are the Lubuk Beringin people in Jambi, Sumatra. Their grassroots local wisdom helps to minimize climate change impact.

They cut trees only after consultation, avoid growing crops on riverbanks and upland to prevent soil erosion and build watermills on rivers for electricity.

In engaging the International Year of Forests, Indonesia can do two things. One is to conserve existing forests and reverse the loss of forest cover. Second, the nation might maximize forest-based environment-friendly economic and social benefits and advance the livelihoods of forest communities.

For the first point, the Forestry Ministry's "Billion Trees" program, initiated in December 2009, is well-intended. However, it would be more meaningful to protect and conserve the trees that are still standing. They already function as carbon sinks whereas it would take a generation for newly planted trees to grow to serve the same purpose.

For the second issue, the government, business interests and the public at large should respect the rights and sovereignty of the indigenous people of the forests. They live in harmony with nature.

To learn from them and apply their values would place Indonesia ahead of the climate curve and reduce the climate crisis by half.

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