

REDD+: Opportunities to alter deforestation

Agus Purnomo and Yani Saloh,

The recent Durban climate talks had mixed results and different implications for each country, including Indonesia. On the main issue of reducing emissions from deforestation and peat land conversion, known as REDD, Durban made progress in setting reference emissions levels, measuring emission reductions (including agreements on measuring), reporting and verifying (MRV) of achieved REDD+ outcomes, and the implementation of safeguards to mitigate negative impacts of REDD+ projects.

Agreements on REDD+ are good news, although a decision on REDD+ financing remained elusive. The debate centered on whether REDD financing should come from markets, public funds or a combination of both. Indonesia opted to for a combination of public and private funds, because neither can achieve the necessary mobilization of funds in the next several years on its own.

A failure to mobilize the REDD+ funds will deflate the enthusiasm to implement REDD+ activities on the ground, which means a serious delay of REDD+ implementation at the expense of both the communities that are dependent on forest resources, and the global population from continued destruction of primary forests.

Durban's failure to reach a decision on the sources of long-term financing will create uncertainty for REDD+ funding, and thus undermine REDD+ itself. There is no clarity about how much funding will be available or the mechanisms in place to channel REDD+ funding to local stakeholders. Such obscurity in the future of REDD+ is mainly due to a lack of commitment among developed countries to curb their carbon emissions.

In Indonesia, the government remains poised to implement REDD+ activities and is keen to get the ball rolling. The decision in Durban on reference emissions levels, safeguards and MRV, can move us forward to REDD+ implementation at the national level.

Decisions on reference emissions levels should help Indonesia move forward in earning emission reduction credits, to be accounted for under the first and second period of commitments to the Kyoto Protocol. The reduced emissions from REDD+ pilot projects can receive funding to help push the plan forward.

The MRV will determine the number REDD+ credits that can be traded under the EU's emission trading scheme (ETS). The ETS is the largest greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme in the world, though its current demand is insufficient to provide meaningful incentives for REDD+. Without deep emissions cuts by European countries, the demands from EU ETS will only be sufficient for existing Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects, which mostly are industrial and fossil fuels based emissions.

Indonesia has adopted a strategy to cut its carbon emissions by 26 percent based on projected emissions for 2020, while seriously trying to achieve a 7 percent economic growth rate. This 26/7 strategy is expected to deliver low carbon development and contribute to global action to reducing carbon emissions. REDD+ is central to this 26/7 strategy.

Prior to outlining the 26/7 strategy, Indonesia has signed a Letter of Intent (LoI) with Norway to jointly promote REDD. To implement the LoI, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono created an REDD Task Force and selected the province of Central Kalimantan as a REDD Pilot Province.

Central Kalimantan's land area is about 15 million hectares, of which 70 percent is still forested. It also has approximately 3 million hectares of peat land. The province is rich in biodiversity and its forests provide many ecological services, of which carbon storage but one of them. The forest' water catchments provide productive downstream agriculture and serve as sources of energy for downstream communities.

Central Kalimantan has had consistent economic growth of around 6 percent for the last 6 years. Unfortunately, the growth in Central Kalimantan came from unsustainable practices in agriculture and mining. To become a “green” province, Central Kalimantan needs to curb such quick-yielding but destructive activities, and move toward a low-emission development path at the earliest opportunity.

The challenge for the national government in Jakarta, and also for the international community, is to create an enabling environment in Central Kalimantan through sufficient incentives and a supportive policy environment in implementing sustainable development. Such incentives are needed sooner rather than later, and REDD is currently the only scheme on the table for immediate utilization.

Research in has shown that based on current practices, emissions levels in Central Kalimantan in 2020 are expected to be 50 percent higher than emissions in 2005, making it one of Indonesia’s highest emitting provinces with about 17 percent of the total national emissions in Indonesia. Forest fires, palm oil and peat decomposition are the largest drivers of emissions in the province.

The chair of Indonesian REDD Task Force, Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, at an event on the sidelines of the COP-17 meeting in Durban, acknowledged the complexity of land tenure problems in Central Kalimantan.

The province is suffering not only from the continuing impacts of the failed Mega Rice project under president Soeharto’s administration, which has damaged hundred of thousands of hectares of peat land forests, but also from overlapping concessions between central and provincial level authorities, and between different sectors. The fact that indigenous people’s rights have not been fully recognized makes such overlapping concessions a problem of an even more sensitive nature.

The complicated challenges in implementing sustainable development are not unique to Central Kalimantan. However, with a relatively small area to work with, compared to more than a hundred million hectares of forests through out Indonesia, the government can experiment with selected sectoral reforms and integrated approaches.

Simply said, the REDD+ Task Force and the Central Kalimantan government will embark on a review of existing licenses for mining and plantations within a few selected districts, and explore the legal options for honoring the rights of indigenous people. The Central Kalimantan pilot project will allow the world to share lessons learned.

But, our determination can only yield results if the developed countries are serious in both acknowledging their historical responsibility in accumulating CO₂ in the atmosphere and changing their polluting lifestyles.

Though one can be sympathetic to the domestic challenges in the US, Japan, Russia and Canada to support the second period of commitment under Kyoto Protocol, their absence in committing to the only global regime to reduce carbon emissions is a betrayal to more than 180 countries that have worked hard to keep the earth safe for humanity and all other species.

It is also absurd to demand developing countries such as China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia, to commit to reducing emissions, while the advanced economies, with almost half of the global GDP, continue to live in amnesia of their past responsibility and dodge their responsibility to reduce future carbon emissions.

Such ignorance will exacerbate the delays in the implementation of REDD+ activities and further discourage communities and companies to cut emissions from Indonesian forests and peat lands.

The writers are staff members of the presidential office on climate change.