

World market, climate change and the hypocrisy of the North

Interview with Pantoro Tri Kuswardono (WALHI)

Pantoro Tri Kuswardono (Torry) has been working for a year as a climate campaigner with the Indonesian environmental organisation WALHI (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia – Friends of the Earth Indonesia). Previously he worked for WALHI's mining campaign. After completing his engineering degree at the Institute for Technology in Bandung, he spent seven years in one of the poorest parts of Indonesia, in West Timor. There he gained many experiences about the impacts of mining and about climate change. Marianne Klute and Fabian Junge talked with him in the Watch Indonesia! office on 11th April 2008.

Q: In the run up to the UN climate conference in Bali the Indonesian government representatives told their German discussion partners in the BMZ (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development) that climate change was not an issue for Indonesian citizens. Is this statement correct?

It may be true that many people do not know the concept of climate change. However, we have long been feeling the consequences and impacts of many decades of environmental destruction. When I was living in West Timor, I noticed that the farmers, whose lives have always depended on the weather, are no longer able to predict it. In the past, they predicted when it would rain by watching the clouds in the sky or the flight of birds, but those indications are no longer reliable today. Suddenly, it does not rain at all, or very heavily, or only extremely briefly and every year it is different. They already suffer from the changes in the seasons and the unpredictable weather conditions which, for example, make it impossible for them to decide when to sow and when to harvest. Fishermen experience the same. One must also remember that Indonesia is an archipelago with 17,000 islands, most of them small or tiny islands. Some 60% of Indonesia's territory is coastal areas. If Indonesia fails to immediately prepare for climate change, the consequences for the people living there will be catastrophic.

Q: Are there any scientific studies about the impacts of climate change in Indonesia?

Unfortunately there is no comprehensive study about climate change on the archipelago as yet. Since the UN climate conference in Bali, UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) has been calling for regional studies since, so far, only global studies about the consequences of climate change exist. Media reporting concentrates on impacts in the Pacific, the polar regions or the Sahara. There is thus an urgent need to study the impacts of climate change on our archipelago.

Q: The people of Indonesia do not only suffer from the consequences of climate change, but also from massive deforestation which, at the same time, is considered to be an important cause of climate change. The World Bank, the FAO and other international organisations say that the main cause of rapid deforestation is the high rate of population growth and the increase in slash and burn farming for food production. Do you agree with this assessment?

The environmental destruction is indeed enormous in Indonesia. The forest is disappearing faster than anywhere else in the world. According to Greenpeace, every six minutes, an area of rainforest the size of two football fields is cut down. The causes, however, are not all found amongst Indonesians. According to WALHI's data, 80% of forest fires happen not where people practice slash-and-burn farming, but on plantation and logging concessions. The main forest destroyers in Indonesia are thus the extractive industries and the plantation companies. Those, on the other hand, respond to the high demand for palm oil, paper, metals and minerals by the industrial nations. In

order to meet those needs, international finance institutions have been exerting pressure for years to ensure that Indonesia invests in deforestation or rather in those sectors which destroy the forest, i.e. in plantations, pulp and paper and in the mining industry. Allegedly, so that those industries can pay the debt which Suharto's New Order has left behind. Ironically, those same finance institutions have been calling Indonesia an environmental criminal since the forest fires of 1997. In doing so, they cover up their own role in this development.

Q Are there not also internal factors in Indonesia which are also responsible for deforestation?

Of course there are. I regard above all the corruption in the forestry sector and the unclear land rights situation as the most important internal problems. The government hands out concessions to national and international corporations, whilst the people end up with nothing.

The consequence of this practice of handing out concessions is that the people lose their land rights and become impoverished. Very often they then have no other choice but to become labourers for the timber mafia or to cut wood for their own needs. The land rights question is also the cause of many conflicts which Indonesia has been experiencing for decades.

Q Do you get the impression that the Indonesian government is confronting deforestation and seriously trying to solve the problems which are linked to it?

Unfortunately not. As a result of deforestation, Indonesia has long been experiencing more and more catastrophes. Flooding, for example, leads to very high costs but nonetheless the government has so far not developed any sense about the environmental crisis. One just has to think of the new Directive PP 2/2008 which permits industrial activities in forests, as long as a corresponding fee is being paid. This allows for mining operations even in protected forests. The directive thus facilitates the destruction of nature conservation areas with the aim of increasing government revenues. The fact that the directive was passed only two months after the UN Climate Conference in Bali, shows all too clearly that the government has no overall concept for confronting the environmental crisis. Statements about the protection of forests and about the climate thus appear to be empty talk.

Q What is Walhi's position and what do you think needs to happen in order to confront the environmental crisis?

Walhi is working consistently for the protection of the forest and we are conscious of the close link between forest destruction and deforestation on the one hand and climate change on the other hand. On the one hand we demand a logging moratorium, especially in sensitive forests, for example peat forests. On the other hand, we point the finger at the forestry policy, work towards different practices towards the granting of concessions and towards an end of corruption in the forestry sector. The Indonesian government needs to demonstrate through serious measures in this direction that it is accepting its responsibility and willing to seriously address the problems. However, at the forefront of our work are social aspects. The people are confronted with fundamental existential problems. We want people to be able to survive despite climate change and impoverishment.

Q What else needs to be done outside Indonesia to stop deforestation?

Deforestation in Indonesia is a global problem. Measures which only address the problem from within the country are thus bound to fail. It will not be possible to reduce emissions from deforestation or land use change (conversion of forest into plantations), unless the countries of the North, which meet their high demand for minerals, wood, paper and palm oil from our country,

reduce their consumption. The countries of the North must not hypocritically call on Indonesia to do its duty whilst continuing to profit from the exploitation of our raw materials.

Q Not just since Bali has carbon trading been discussed as a possible solution for the global climate problems. What is your opinion about this?

I see little sense in discussing which country causes how many emissions. Indonesia ranks third in the list of states with the highest emissions, after the US and China. The emissions, however, are the result of the global production order. From a global perspective, Indonesia is the garden and China is the kitchen. Countries like Indonesia deliver the raw materials, whilst industrial production is happening in countries like China. Most of the consumption, however, continues to take place in the countries of the North. This is why it makes no sense to only address problems in Indonesia. The consequence of such an approach would be a failure to guarantee the survival of poor people. What is missing is a holistic approach, a humane development. Environmental destruction is no longer being caused directly by the industrial nations but by the local industries in the South. Those, however, are being financed by banks and financial institutions from the North. Those institutions do not shy away from investing in irresponsible companies in developing countries. The North, by no longer acting directly but instead financing irresponsible companies, is abdicating its responsibility and avoiding financial and PR risks.

Q Carbon trading offers no solution in your opinion?

Rather not. It cannot be enough to calculate how much carbon is being emitted. One needs to see the connections with global trade. It makes me angry that only market mechanisms are being discussed as a solution. Even Sir Nicholas Stern admits in his report that climate change is the result of market failure. Nonetheless, only new market mechanisms are being proposed to solve the problems, as happened in Bali. I get the impression that international politics is not really willing to find solutions. The real agenda is to create new markets, for the trade in emissions certificates.

Q: How do you think the problem should be approached?

Walhi wants to make it clear to the world that certain groups, which have so far been responsible for environmental destruction, seek to profit from the current situation. We want to reduce the role of those players. The World Bank, with its concept for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD), in particular is not the right institution for saving the forest. After all, it shares the responsibility for CO₂ emissions through its investment in industries which are responsible for deforestation in Indonesia.

Instead of creating new markets, one should rather speak about the link between environmental destruction and global trade. The international trade agreements are advantageous for industrial nations, whilst the developing nations are purely providers of raw materials. But who pays for the consequences? Who takes part in the destruction of the forests of the South? Who profits from it? In short, this is not only about climate change, this is about climate justice.

Q Which concrete demands or proposals has Walhi got with regards to Germany's role?

Germany should push for EU agrofuel targets to be dropped. The EU demands that the tropical nations should do something against deforestation. At the same time, however, the targets promote the demand for 'bio'diesel and thus deforestation. This is contradictory and inconsistent. Not least Germany should be prepared to carry out a true technology transfer to the countries of the South, so that the South can adapt to climate change. It is important for me that technical knowledge is shared and not simply sold to the South.