

The Issue of Protected Forests and Mining

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The endless debate on protected forests and mining, amongst legislators, some ministries, environmentalists and the industry, reflects an inability to look at the facts and understand the real needs of the people living in underdeveloped and remote areas of Indonesia.

As representatives of the people and the policy makers, our legislators and government should be considering how best to use natural resources in order for ordinary people to receive the maximum benefit. In making choices about resource use, they need accurate and detailed information on what natural resources the nation has. Unfortunately such information is sadly lacking. Moreover, there is no integrated information base on resources that would enable our decision-makers to look at the current reality of each resource use option and decide which one is best.

In forestry, the real issue is not protection vs production; it's the need for good forest management. Only through proper management can the most beneficial results be achieved, whether it is production, protection, or multiple use. Sadly, the sector lacks capacity and capability to manage. Its biggest challenge is to control rampant illegal logging, some of which is even cutting into the heartland of national parks. In comparison, the perceived threat from legitimate mining is very small. Very few exploration prospects get developed, and those that do occupy a very small area of land.

Many of the areas where there are overlapping interests in resource use are remote and underdeveloped. Local people in these places have very few choices for producing an income, other than in illegal logging or illegal mining. Because government lacks the resources and capacity to promote alternative livelihoods, it can only watch as the Nation's forests and rivers are destroyed, as people struggle simply to find the means to feed themselves and their families.

The only way to stop this trend is to provide better livelihood alternatives to the people and to strengthen the managing hand of government. This can only happen if there's new economic activity that provides employment to local people and additional revenues to government.

Commercial mining has the ability to generate substantial income for underdeveloped areas, some of which can be used to protect the environment and provide social benefits. Government

can use their share of the income to ensure that all resources, especially the forests, are properly managed and protected. The environmental destruction that comes from illegal logging and mining can be eliminated as a result of the new employment and livelihood opportunities. A mine site in a remote location is like a new marketplace that will foster new business development, social interaction, information exchange, and the buying and selling of products, goods, and services. If the operation is designed and managed properly, there can be far reaching benefits for society, as well as for the environment.

The current debate about mining in protected forests ignores two essential and interrelated issues. The first is the importance of natural resources to development prospects for poor people living in remote areas. The second is the relative inability of the government to manage natural resources in these areas, mainly because they lack the capacity and means to do so.

On the first issue, in remote areas there often are very limited opportunities for people to develop beyond subsistence living. A well-managed resource project can bring substantial benefits to these areas, improving the lives of local people and providing revenues to government for social programs, infrastructure, and improved government services. It therefore is essential that local people and local government are well informed and are centrally involved in any decision about resource use, especially as there likely will be trade offs between economic, environmental, and social costs and benefits. As it also is essential to protect important biodiversity and ensure continuation of environmental services, accurate information is critically important for everyone to arrive at an informed decision.

Government is responsible for guiding choices on how natural resources are managed, but is seldom able to provide an informed opinion because it lacks the information. In most remote areas in Indonesia there is very little accurate data on physical resources. Many areas designated as 'protected', have already been stripped of their forest cover or are riddled with illegal mine sites. There also have been widespread incursions into national parks. Many maps and data bases do not include this information, let alone more accurate data on soils, biodiversity, and mineral resources.

It therefore is highly questionable how government can provide guidance for choices and decisions about wise use of natural resources. The only way that this situation is likely to change is through a major capacity building effort within the government sector. Human resources have

to be increased, competencies must be strengthened, and staff have to be given the tools and facilities to do their work properly, particularly in the provinces.

How to finance all of this? Ironically, the most likely source of funding is from resource projects, especially ones that can generate a lot of revenue relatively quickly. The best candidates are mining projects because they are much easier to control than other resource-based industries, and their area of impact is far less significant than other industries, such as forestry or agriculture. Commercial mineral deposits are in fact rare gifts of nature that need to be well managed and cared for to ensure that the benefits are maximized, while the negative impacts are minimized.

As this is an enormous task, partnerships and collaborations need to be formed between government, the commercial sector, the local people and NGO's who are seeking real development solutions, rather than those with other agendas.

Above all, and in accordance with the intentions behind autonomy, the local government and people of a region should have a say in determining their future and how their natural resources are developed.