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Ideals that don’t make money

Written by Laurens Bakker

During a visit to East Kalimantan in 2004, I met a young man, I shall call him Muhammad, who was an active and enthusiastic staff member of a small indigenous people’s and nature conservation nongovernment organisation (NGO). As the NGO only had a permanent staff of four persons due to financial limitations, Muhammad’s workload tended to be far heavier than he had time for. He travelled throughout the region, and even though he and his wife lived with her parents, he brought home very little money – if any at all.
Muhammad, his wife and his in-laws all told me how they supported the same ideals and how important it was that NGOs such as Muhammad’s existed to mobilise the population against corporate threats to their lands and natural resources. Muhammad seemed tireless when it came to attending meetings and could deliver impressive spontaneous speeches. In short, he seemed to be firmly launched on a career of social activism.

Returning to his home district of Paser two years later, I noticed that Muhammad was no longer present among the members of the NGO. His colleagues maintained that they had no idea of his whereabouts but were annoyed when I informed them a day or so later that I had learned that Muhammad was in fact at home, a mere four kilometers down the road.

It turned out that Muhammad had switched his allegiance and had gone over from NGO activism to working with the regional government and one of the region’s main oil palm entrepreneurs, for whom he negotiated land access with local village populations. Muhammad’s past prepared him well for the job. He knew the villages and their inhabitants, was aware of local power relations and potential sources of conflict, and he had a feeling for how interested villagers might be in participating in new plantations.

Villagers need to live too

Meeting Muhammad a few days later, he told me that tensions among the NGO staff and his personal disagreements with its policies made him decide to leave. ‘The NGO is too strict and does not realise that these villagers are farmers who need to use natural resources in order to live. They want to make money, and are happy to have part of their land used by companies who will pay them’, he told me. He was more useful, he felt, when facilitating a good deal for these villagers than when clinging to rigid and unpopular conservation dogmas.

In villages throughout the region, people were planting their own palm oil trees with the intent of selling the harvest to nearby plantation companies. Villagers set up communal oil palm schemes in which a company provided seedlings, fertiliser and farming advice. In exchange, the villagers would sell their harvest at a fixed price to the company for a set number of years. Both sides, Muhammad felt, stood to profit from such arrangements and actively sought each other out. His assistance in the process benefited the communities directly, something he felt he could not say about his conservation work.

Muhammad’s story is not common, but neither is it unique. Last year, in 2010, the former secretary of the Lembaga Adat Paser – a moderate but popular organisation arguing for customary (adat) rights to land and other resources – proudly showed me the new luxurious air-conditioned house he had built for his family and the new car he had bought. As the family used to live in a two-room wooden house next to a noisy saw mill, and he used to ride an old moped, the change was remarkable.

Muhammad had also changed his activities. Before, he used to plead with companies to pay out compensation for the adat land they were using. He also wrote critical articles about the regional government’s environmental and natural resources policies in the local newspaper. But now Muhammad has retired from the NGO, frustrated by its lack of success and he has entered the prospecting business. He uses his contacts among the people to find out where the mining companies have been doing exploratory research and his contacts in the regional government to find out the results.

Borrowing money from investors in Jakarta (whom he first got to know through meetings at seminars and the Ministry of Forestry), he registered claims to several of these plots. Because of his
background, he ensured that he paid the local population a larger than usual sum for the use of their land. But the money that flowed back to him from mining allowed him and his family a lifestyle that they could never have obtained from his previous role as an activist.

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I have no idea how many activists turn from opposing natural resource exploitation to working with the companies doing the exploiting. It must be tempting for some of them to use their networks and knowledge to benefit financially themselves and, at least to some degree, to benefit the communities they previously assisted.

**Adhering to ideals costs money**

Environmental and conservation NGOs face the difficult task of urging communities to conserve their forests, for which they can offer precious little money or other benefits. ‘Adhering to ideals costs money’, an environmentalist lawyer from Balikpapan observed, ‘and quite a few people nowadays prefer the money to being an idealist.’

There are cases where change takes place the other way around. The example of a very proficient poacher in the East Kalimantan area of Samboja who joined an internationally sponsored conservation outfit springs to mind. But such an instance of remorse causes less of a stir in environmental circles than the turncoats who move in the opposite direction.

A major issue in these examples is of course the position of the communities whose lands are being conserved or developed. Most of the villagers I spoke to over the years confirm that they believe that conservation of the forest is important in order to ensure that their children will benefit from its fruits, timber, wildlife and other products. However, many also pointed out that not all of the forest need be conserved and that there is little harm in setting up small plantations or allowing mining. They are ready to allow these things in exchange for ready cash, a commodity that is as popular with highland farmers and self-reliant peasants in Kalimantan as it is in the rest of the world.

Most villagers quite like the idea of owning a motorbike, a cell phone – even if there is no signal in the mountains – a television and a DVD player. And if the cash they need to obtain these goods can be acquired by accommodating a plantation or mining company, or engaging in these industries themselves, many communities and individuals are happy to use part of their lands and labour to do so.

**A new source of funds for forest communities?**

Nature conservation may have an answer to all this in the new REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) scheme and REDD+ policies, which could mean that part of the funds paid to Indonesia by other nations in exchange for carbon emission reduction might actually reach the communities using the forests that are to be preserved. Yet cash income through conservation could also lead to ‘bidding wars’, or even to betting on two horses. ‘I know what our village should do’, a villager told me with a mischievous grin, ‘take the money for the conservation but continue laying out our little plantations at the same time. We might get rich that way.’

The idea that rural communities need access to land and natural resources in order to meet their daily needs is as valid as ever. But these communities, used to dealing with forces beyond their control, have a businesslike way of viewing these daily needs and deciding on how their land and resources should be used to meet them. ‘It is simple’, a village elder pointed out, ‘If it is mango
season, you harvest mangoes and sell them. Outside of the season or if the crop fails, you have no mangoes, no money. Nothing you can do about that. Now it seems to be mining season all the time. We have coal in our land, so why not sell part of that to get the cash we need?’

Conservation is needed as well, he added, for coal will get depleted whereas mango trees produce fruit every year. But why, he asked me, would the village communities not be entitled to some of the ready cash that mining can bring? With this idea taking root in rural communities and among some local activists, the notion that conservation must include the welfare of local communities as much as the preservation of the environment has assured itself a place in the spotlight. The two interests need to work together in order for conservation to succeed.

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