

# Research through development: A Javanese success story



Planting sengon (*Paraserienthes falcataria*) in Central Java.  
(Levania Santoso)

“Not long ago, the farmers used to look up to the field officers as though they were little gods,” says CIFOR researcher Levania Santoso, “but now they see themselves as equal partners in a collaborative forest management scheme.” The field officers work for Perum Perhutani, the state-owned company which manages almost 3 million hectares in Java, including 600,000 hectares of teak plantations. The scheme is locally known as *Pengelolaan Hutan Bersama Masyarakat* (PHBM).

In recent years, farmers from four Javanese villages involved with Perum Perhutani have benefited from ‘Levelling the Playing Field’, a project managed by CIFOR and the Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD). The project seeks to give local people the skills they need to negotiate successful partnerships with more dominant players, such as government agencies and private companies. The aim is to make forest management not just sustainable, but fair in the sense that it recognises the demands of local people.

“Perum Perhutani had been trying to work collaboratively with local communities for many years, but without much success,” explains Santoso. “The problem stemmed from the fact that the communities had little or no bargaining power and lacked the confidence to say what they thought.” In Indonesia – the project also has sites in Malaysia and the Philippines – researchers from CIFOR, CIRAD and a local university began by encouraging each community to create a common vision and design a micro-project. This didn’t have to be forest-related; the aim, rather, was to help villagers learn how to act collaboratively, communicate better and improve their negotiating skills. Then discussions were broadened to include Perum Perhutani. These focused on how they could manage the forests collaboratively, to the benefit of both the company and the local communities.

In areas where state forests are located within village administrative areas, PHBM partnerships allocate 25 per cent of the profits of timber

harvesting to local communities. In three villages with rich teak resources, The project helped to establish new rules and regulations governing the sharing of the benefits from the forests. As a result, the forests are now better managed and farmers’ incomes have risen significantly.

However, in one village, Glandang, the teak had all been cleared just after the fall of the Suharto regime and the villagers lacked the capital to plant trees. A third party – Accor Indonesia, the hotel group – was encouraged to join the partnership. Accor is now paying for the planting of some 70,000 sengon trees (*Paraserienthes falcataria*) on empty land. When the trees are harvested, in eight years’ time, Perhutani will take 40 per cent of the profits, the Glandang farmers’ group 30 per cent, and Accor 30 per cent. The hotel group will use the profits to set up an education fund for scholarships and for replanting.

But is this any more than a successful, small-scale development project, empowering villagers with the help of an altruistic donor? According to the project leader, Philippe Guizol of CIRAD, it is. “There is a strong research element, which is helping us to develop indicators to monitor environmental mediation in developing countries and get a better understanding of the dynamics of collaboration,” he says. “For instance, it provides interesting insights into a three-way relationship, and shows how the introduction of a third party has helped to reinforce the original agreement.” Now that the villagers and Perhutani see how attractive the project is to outsiders – staff from Accor’s Paris office visited Glandang in 2007 – they are much more appreciative of their collaboration and determined to make it work.

“There are lots of projects in Java doing much the same thing, in terms of empowering villagers,” says Santoso, “but we have established a process which enables communities to develop a sophisticated capacity to run their own affairs. This will help us to develop guidelines which will be applicable elsewhere.”