

Report on the ‚Werkstattgespräch‘ on „Indigenous Land-use Systems: Danger or Chance for Climate Change mitigation?“

28 May 2015, Afrikahaus, Berlin

The workshop-dialogue on indigenous land use systems with a focus on rotational farming and the experiences of the indigenous Karen people from Thailand took place in the evening of May 28th in the Afrikahaus in Berlin. The event was part of a series of events, seminars and dialogues carried out by INFOE in cooperation with other organizations, in this case the Association of Friends and Funders of the Department for Rural Development (Verein der Freunde und Förderer des Seminar für Ländliche Entwicklung-SLE), to further disseminate and discuss the findings of the INFOE study on the participation and respect for the rights of indigenous peoples in forest conservation and climate protection projects funded and/or carried out by German institutions. With a view to address the shortfalls of these projects identified in terms of effective participation and the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights as well as effective contribution to forest and climate protection, the study looks into the potential of other approaches. Rights-based approaches and traditional forest and resource management systems, including community-based forest management, bio-cultural community protocols, indigenous and community conserved areas, Amazonian Indigenous REDD (RIA) and shifting cultivation and their main characteristics in terms of rights and participation are presented.



The workshop-dialogue focused on rotational farming and its cultural, social and economic significance for indigenous peoples as well as its potential risks and opportunities for reducing carbon emissions. We also wanted to explore whether instruments being developed at the international level such as REDD+¹ are useful in protecting indigenous land use systems such as shifting cultivation or rotational farming.

After a welcome by Gabi Beckmann on behalf of the Association of Friends and Funders of the Department for Rural Development a brief introduction into the context and objective of the dialogue was given by Sabine Schielmann from INFOE. This was followed by the presentation of Dr Silke Stöber from SLE on the dynamics of shifting cultivation in Southeast Asia. Silke Stöber provided information on the basics of shifting cultivation from an agricultural perspective, on where shifting cultivation is practiced and by whom. She referred to the values of shifting cultivation as well as the drivers causing changes to the traditional practices and often threatening their further practice.

¹ REDD+ stands for „Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries“, a mechanism supposedly for forest and climate protection being developed under the UNFCCC.



This was followed by the central presentation of the evening from Dr. Prasert Trakansuphakon, a Karen representative from Thailand. Prasert Trakansuphakon gave a visually impressive presentation on the practice of rotational farming as it is embedded in the culture and daily life of the Karen people. He informed about the significance of rotational farming for the food security of the communities, for biodiversity and its potential for sequestering carbon. He also spoke about the negative image of indigenous peoples and rotational farming in Thailand and other Asian countries where it is seen as backward, causing climate change and deforestation. With a view to change this image, studies have been carried out by different scientists and organizations in cooperation with Karen communities to measure the carbon stored

through the diversified and integrated practices of the Karen people with rotational farming, tea gardens, paddy fields, agroforestry and standing forests. The results show that rotational farming does not cause net carbon emissions but, calculating over a period of 10 years, the integrated practices of the Karen people account for negative emissions mainly due to the long fallow periods.

Wolfgang Kuhlmann from ARA (Working Group on Rainforest and Species Diversity, NGO) then briefly introduced the instrument REDD+ currently being debated at the international climate change negotiations. REDD+ is a mechanism of compensation usually paid by industrial countries to mainly countries of the global south for carbon that is not released into the atmosphere through conserving their rainforest. This mechanism however, follows the logic of no threat no REDD, meaning that it does not pay for communities who have been conserving their forest and continue doing so through their sustainable forest management practices as they do not pose a threat to the forests. On the other side, REDD+ will not pay for improvements in shifting cultivation because the carbon savings are just too small and less than 10 % of price per ton will reach the ground. Furthermore, the basic logic and objective of REDD+ is the focus on carbon neglecting the multifold cultural, ecological and spiritual significance of shifting cultivation and other traditional practices to secondary co-benefits.

Following the presentations and some brief exchanges among the panellists, the audience was invited to join in the discussion. One of the main issues mentioned were the limitations of shifting cultivation or rotational farming underlining that this system does not only have advantages. Among the limitations mentioned were: growing population density, over exploitation, lack or insecurity of land rights and the women being left alone with the hard work. It was widely accepted that there do exist limitations or unsuitable conditions which threaten the sustainability of rotational farming in particular in the context of climate change and the respective debates and developments to respond to it. However, most agreed that the response to that is not to blame the system and the swiddeners practicing it or the eradication or forced change of rotational farming but to work on improving the conditions and addressing negative factors. Any process of transition or change of existing practices must be lead by the communities concerned who make their own decisions for a self-determined development.

Participants also asked whether REDD must be seen as a failure or whether it could have positive impacts if safeguards are properly respected. As mentioned before, the mechanism with its focus on carbon is not appropriate to protect traditional managements systems and support indigenous and local communities. Great part of the potential benefit is likely to go to consultants and institutions engaged in the REDD+ and not to the concerned communities. The discussion on indigenous peoples' rights and safeguards in the UNFCCC debates were important milestones in the negotiations process. However, current trends in this process give rise to doubts that the recognition of rights and safeguards will have be meaningful or even compulsory part of any future Protocol. Another serious shortfall is the fact that the real drivers of deforestation are not sincerely addressed, giving the impression that forest conservation and mitigation of climate change is not the main objective of the decision-makers but rather to go on with business as usual and gaining economic profit out of the situation in any way possible.

In conclusion, the opportunity to get first hand information on the experiences, significance and challenges of rotational farming and to exchange perspectives with others engaged in the issue was greatly appreciated by both, panellists and the audience. Contacts were established and the discussion was continued in a working meeting the next day.

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Text: Sabine Schielmann

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