

## **STATEMENT OF UNITY**

### **Mekong Regional Conference on Tree Plantations Hor Bunny Hotel, Kratie, Cambodia November 21-22, 2006**

We, people from five countries from the Mekong region including Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, Vietnam and China, and friends from other countries gathered together on November 21-22, 2006, in Kratie, Cambodia, to share experiences and lessons learned on the issue of industrial tree plantations and their impacts on local peoples' livelihoods. We also shared ideas and suggestions to resolve the problems arising from tree plantations.

During our time together, we heard directly from local community representatives from twelve provinces in Cambodia and also from other countries in the region about how their lives, livelihoods and environments are affected by large plantations in their respective areas.

We learned about the importance of forests, lands and other natural resources for the livelihoods and cultures of communities who depend on them for food, medicinal plants, income and spiritual security. Plantations are not forests. When forests are replaced by plantations, the livelihoods of numerous communities who live in and around these forests and protect and nurture them are lost. Plantations impoverish communities and their environments.

We found that there are many common elements in how plantations impact the lives of communities across the region and further a field. In particular:

1. There are close relationships between the companies that obtain forest and land concessions for plantations, and governments at various levels.
2. Plantations severely limit the amount of land available to rural communities for agricultural production. Many plantation concessions allow companies to take prime fertile land away from villages and divert it for mono-cultural production. This has serious negative impacts on local environments, including loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, increased aridity and pollution of local water sources.
3. The application of existing laws tend to favour companies' interests and investments more than those of local communities; in many cases, concessionaires do not respect and follow national laws and are not prosecuted nor penalised.
4. In many cases, there is evidence that concessionaires are breaching their contracts and are encroaching on and appropriating village lands, common/public lands and forests used by communities. Not only does this restrict the abilities of villages to meet their livelihood needs in the present day but also it affects the growth of village communities since there is no land left for future generations.
5. Contrary to government claims that plantations contribute to national economic development and poverty alleviation, plantations have increased poverty by displacing entire communities, destroying crucial livelihood resources and preventing the access of communities to natural resources.
6. Promises made by both companies and governments that local people will be employed in plantations, get roads, schools, health centers and electricity, and

have better livelihoods, were all broken. At first, people believed in what companies and governments told them but were let down by them.

7. In many cases, plantations have come into communities with a certain level of violence; in some cases the violence has been open and obvious as in killings and imprisonments; in other cases, communities are subjected to intimidation and threats in order to frighten people so that they do not take action. The very act of taking land away from villagers is an act of violence. When communities stand up for their rights, they are often repressed by the police, local authorities and even at times, the military.
8. In all cases the only way to create change has been through peoples' struggles. Struggle does not mean violence; it means the different ways that local people adopt to secure and defend their rights.
9. Using the law is very important, but laws alone do not guarantee that peoples' rights are protected.
10. The most effective strategies for peoples' struggles come from the affected communities themselves, not from NGOs and other outside groups.
11. By working together with other communities and finding common positions, people can strengthen their cause.
12. The role of NGOs is to support peoples' struggles, not take their place; leadership has to come from the community.

The social, political and economic conditions in each of our countries are different and we must all find a variety of ways to address the problems caused by tree plantations. At the same time, based on our sharing and learning over the past two days, we identified the following important principles.

1. The people who know most about forests, lands and the negative impacts of plantations are village residents in and around plantation areas; we must listen to them; all policy makers must listen to them.
2. Peoples' security—physical, economic, cultural and political-- must be protected.
3. Learning processes among communities about laws and regulations that can protect their rights, land and natural resources must be supported.
4. The abilities of communities to organise, share information and build networks with other communities facing similar problems must be supported.
5. The terms of plantation concessions and contract farming agreements must be made public and in particular, must be given to affected communities in their local languages.
6. Community and government decision makers must be made aware of the serious negative impacts of plantations and contract farming.
7. Affected communities have the right to determine their strategies to solve problems arising from plantations.
8. Village residents have the right to participate in the formulation of policies that affect their resources and lives.
9. International Financial Institutions (IFIs), bilateral donors and multilateral agencies (including UN agencies) should stop promoting large scale or industrial plantations.
10. Governments must recognise and accept that adequate compensation is due to local communities affected by plantations.
11. Natural resources on which communities are dependent should be protected by law and not destroyed by development projects.

12. Tree plantations that have been shown to seriously affect social, economic, cultural aspects, as well as livelihoods of local communities should be cancelled.

On the basis of the lessons that we have learned from the many different communities represented here and the principles we have developed together, we are stronger in our resolve and can move forward in our struggles. We recognise the importance and value of regional exchanges such as this and we support the creation of further exchanges between people's organisations in the region to continue our learning and develop our strategies. The media can play an important role in exploding the myths about plantations and presenting accurate information to the public, based on the real experiences of local people. We will share our findings and principles with all our movements, networks and governments.

\*\*The Mekong Regional Conference on Tree Plantations was jointly organised by:  
NGO Forum on Cambodia;  
Oxfam Great Britain (Cambodia);  
Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA);  
and World Rainforest Movement (WRM).