

**Hasyim Widhiarto, The Jakarta Post | Thu, 07/14/2011 9:53 AM**

*In an effort to tackle rural poverty and widespread forest destruction, the Forestry Ministry announced in 2007 that every year until 2004 it would designate 500,000 hectares of forest as community forest areas. Under the program, the ministry provides permits to residents to manage critical areas in production and protected forests, on the condition that they form groups to carry out forest conservation. Forestry Minister **Zulkifli Hasan** spoke with The Jakarta Post*

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**Hasyim Widhiarto**

*about the program. Excerpts follow:*

**Question:** *In 2010, the Forestry Ministry successfully established 630,000 hectares of community forests in the country. What is your target for this year?*

**Answer:** This year, we are targeting to establish another 700,000 hectares of community forests, especially in Java. Our data shows that around a half of the 40 million cubic meters of wood consumed in the country last year came from that island [Java], meaning that it has successfully provided a significant amount of wood products despite its lack of natural forests.

Currently, Java has 2.7 million hectares of community forest. By creating more community forests on the island, the government will be able to persuade wood-based industries to reduce massive deforestation in Kalimantan and Papua while at the same time help local residents earn additional income by working for their factories.

*How do you intend to achieve the target?*

We have so far established 8,000 community-based nurseries and are targeting to build 10,000 this year and 15,000 in 2012.

Each nursery, which receives an initial fund of Rp 50 million (US\$5,850), will create jobs for around 15 families and produce up to 50,000 plant seedlings.

As a tropical country, we also have several natural advantages, including plenty of sunlight which makes most of the trees we plant grow relatively faster than those planted in other countries. So, theoretically, the program target for this year is still feasibly achievable.

*What are the obstacles?*

One of the biggest obstacles is changing the mind-sets of local people. Our field officers in Bangkalan, for example, reported that several years ago it had been difficult for them to persuade villagers to participate in the establishment of community forests in their area. Some villagers would uproot seedlings planted by our field officers to show their reluctance to the program. Many of them preferred to see nearby critical forests untouched.

Many community groups also still have problems in handling paperwork. We, for example, have encouraged groups managing community forests to apply for forest certification which will allow them to sell their wood to any country in the world.

However, many villagers have found it difficult to meet the conditions set by the certification agency since they have a lack of knowledge on completing the necessary documents and dealing with the agency's thorough and exhausting procedures.

*To what extent will this community forestry project help the government reduce unemployment?*

We should not undermine the role of community forests in tackling poverty. Once a community forest is established, it will help local residents earn additional income from various low-skilled jobs, including planting and seeding, outside that earned during the harvest time.

The project, however, can only bring about significant improvements for the locals if they can achieve consistency in preserving their community forest and no longer cut down the trees excessively.

In Probolinggo, East Java, for example, I have met many farmers living around the Krucil community forest who had gone on a hajj pilgrimage just a few years after joining a cooperative which had been granted permits to manage the forest.

These people have since been locally known as Haji Sengon or Haji Jati (teakwood) since they could afford their pilgrimage to Mecca after harvesting their sengon or teak trees.

This community forestry project will become a program that the government will be able to rely on in the near future to reduce unemployment, especially in rural areas.