

A mother of five children, Ana Berta, who is a member of the Maja community, could only shake her head when asked about the forest carbon scheme called REDD, which is currently the most popular issue in the air-conditioned negotiating rooms of climate change talks.

She simply said that the forest “is the land of the Maja people. We have stopped slashing and burning”.

“There are no longer forest fires, at least in the last four years,” she told a reporter from The Jakarta Post on a field trip to the Maja jungle on Wednesday (Thursday morning in Jakarta).

“Forests are very beautiful. If we protect them they will give us cleaner air. We feel very happy to be involved in forest protection.”

There are 1,110 people living in the Maja jungle in a total of 214 households. Many earn a living from the agriculture and forestry sector.

The Maja community has tenure rights over the forests where they reside, granted under the Mexican forestry law.

With the help of local environment activists, the area has been designated to host a pilot project of the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) scheme.

The Maja community together with its leaders first set up territorial planning to break the forest into a combination of conservation area, agriculture land, restoration and permanent forest. They agreed to set aside 17,525 acres of its forest for the planned REDD projects.

Maja community leader Erasmo Colli Cach admitted that it was not an easy job to engage community members to be involved in managing the forest.

“It takes years to raise awareness of the role of the community in forest protection. But support from the community to manage forests is now in place,” he said.

Ivan Zuniga Perez, a member of a local environment group, said that involving the local community would be far more effective for developing REDD pilot projects.

He said the local community would be involved in many aspects of the the REDD projects, from the design phase to the monitoring systems put in place once in the project was up and running.

“The planned REDD will not be the same as most of the pilot projects developed in other countries where most of them focus on combating deforestation,” he said.

He explained that the communities would still be able to cut down older trees since they could absorb less carbon.

“It is just like humans; the older ones will eat less,” he said.

Ivan said carbon produced from the REDD project would be traded only to local companies operating in Mexico with the money provided as financial incentives to the Maja community.

“We are not looking for public or voluntary markets. We plan to trade the carbon only for local companies interested in preserving forests,” he said.

Negotiators in the Cancun climate talks have yet to settle fundamental terms of REDD.

Bolivia, for instance, disagrees with the involvement of a voluntary market in the scheme, saying the money should be from the public market of rich countries' governments. Indonesia, having the world's third-largest forest area with 120 million hectares of rain forest, wants the Cancun conference to make a decision, at least on when it would be legal for nations with large forest areas to run REDD pilot projects.

There are currently dozens of REDD pilot projects ready to be developed, such as one by the Australian government in Kalimantan.

Indonesia has also signed a US\$1 billion REDD deal with Norway.

But activists have repeatedly warned over the uncertainty of tenure rights for local people or indigenous groups for forest, saying the REDD would create conflicts in forest areas.

The forest law stipulates that all forests belong to the state.