

Agus Purnomo | June 07, 2011, The Jakarta Globe

It has been nearly three weeks since President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono signed a landmark presidential instruction binding Indonesia to a two-year moratorium on the issuance of new licenses for the conversion of primary forest and peatland.

In the intervening period, there has been a fierce debate about the details of the moratorium. Thinly veiled attempts by the environmental movement to reinterpret a done deal is taking the focus away from real and pressing issues. In its quest for the perfect, the environmental movement is attacking the good. The debate about what could have or should have been is delaying the bigger and more important job of reducing deforestation and cutting the nation's greenhouse gas emissions.

One often repeated misconception is that the moratorium could have been a silver bullet for all of Indonesia's natural resource management ills. Such a view ignores the fact that the nation today is very different than it was 15 to 20 years ago.

There have been four presidents since a stroke of pen was enough to move the country. The political realities of today's democratic Indonesia are very different. On issue as large as climate change and deforestation, the president and the central government certainly stakes out the course. But the root causes of deforestation are highly complex. We know that successful implementation of the moratorium is dependent on the support of Indonesia's 33 provinces and 497 districts. It certainly makes implementation more challenging, but regional and local support is a prerequisite for a policy of this scope to succeed in the long term.

The environmental movement has been so focused on the two-year moratorium, specifically which parts of Indonesia's forests are included, that activists have forgotten to look at what's next. In all the excitement around the moratorium, they have lost sight of the fact that it's merely a means to an end. It's a tool to help the government move forward with a broader agenda of sustainable economic growth.

The moratorium is an important step toward a greener growth path that emphasizes leaving something behind for future generations. But it's only the first step. Now that the deal has been signed, we can start the long and difficult journey to reducing deforestation, cutting greenhouse gas emissions and managing Indonesia's natural resources more efficiently.

Geothermal power is a case in point. In the presidential instruction, geothermal power plants are allowed to be established in primary forest. From an environmental point of view it makes perfect sense, but activists cry foul. With 28,100 megawatts of potential geothermal reserves,

Indonesia has the world's largest resources of clean and renewable geothermal energy.

One of the obstacles has been that many potential geothermal reserves are located in conservation forests. The Ministry of Forestry has, until recently, been prohibited by the 1999 Forestry Law to convert conservation forest, and, as a result, power-hungry Indonesia has not seen a single geothermal plant developed for more than a decade. This has prevented it from moving towards a greener economy and reducing its greenhouse gas emissions.

The presidential instruction opens the door for geothermal power development in primary forests, a step that can reduce Indonesia's overall greenhouse gas emissions. The alternatives to geothermal power are coal-fired or gas-fired power plants.

What the moratorium does is quite simple. It creates a pause, allowing Indonesia to start with a clean sheet, and to develop and implement policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in line with international commitments. Specifically, it gives the country the chance to improve forest governance. It is an opportunity to refine regulation of land use permits, establish a database of degraded land, designate land for development and find ways to support companies to move into degraded land.

The moratorium gives Indonesia time to improve agricultural productivity and address land tenure issues related to overlapping concessions and the rights of local communities. It will also provide the opportunity to strengthen enforcement of sustainable logging and mining practices and decrease the use of fire in land clearing.

Each of these issues is difficult, and put together make for a highly complex undertaking. A new approach is needed. It is important to take a step back and stop seeing one green solution as an obstacle for another. While there is no perfect solution, good alternatives exist. Waiting for a flawless solution will only result in more primary forest being lost.

Agus Purnomo is President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's special adviser on climate change.