

“We need real commitments, not empty statements”

Femy Pinto, Asia Director, Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP), Manila, the Philippines

► Do you think that commitments to zero deforestation are good for smallholders?

Commitments from companies are good, but they must be monitored, and have sanctions imposed and enforced if they are broken. We need real commitments, not empty statements or false justifications for exploiting customary forests. But if zero deforestation also means no swidden agriculture, this will affect people’s access to food and the important transfer of cultural practices, traditions and seeds, so we need clear definitions. Company commitments must respect and recognize smallholder tenure and help support indigenous knowledge systems that inherently include sustainable principles and practices.



Zero deforestation commitments can also provide opportunities for companies to build mutually beneficial partnership with communities, and for the joint development of more culturally appropriate and low-emission community-based business models. Importantly, CSOs and smallholder federations must be included in the development of zero deforestation policies and business strategies, even though they often lack the capacity or resources to be actively involved.

PT Wilmar’s No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation policy — although welcomed — has mainly seen progress in forest conservation, particularly of high value or high carbon stock forest. Resolving conflicts related to tenure or land between communities and the company or their respective contractors or suppliers could be one of the biggest challenges. The effective application of such policies often depends on the political realities of a country, particularly in developing and newly developed countries where there is little separation between business and government. Large multinationals such as PT Wilmar have tried to rise above government interference, but so far the same cannot be said for other companies in the supply chain.

► What challenges reduce the benefits to smallholders, and how can these be overcome most effectively?

The risk is that large company investments could push out traditional livelihoods and common property uses. Local communities and CSOs must be included in multi-stakeholder monitoring teams and community-based partnerships. There should be more rights and responsibilities for forest tenure holders, and the management of high conservation value forests and cultural areas should be transferred to local people. As safeguard requirements, zero deforestation commitments should not just minimize negative impacts, but should also ensure that they positively benefit smallholders, such as improving their

capacity for natural resource management, ability to comply with technical requirements, and implementation of benefit-sharing systems. Commitments must be consistent, and should be aligned with national and global monitoring and reporting systems and targets.

► **What can smallholders do to better engage with companies making commitments to zero deforestation?**

Smallholders must organize strong, collective and transparent community-based organizations with strong leadership. They must build capacity, including in-depth understanding of relevant information on the value chains in question, and must develop



strategies on how to achieve zero deforestation and how to have informed engagement with relevant actors.

Involving communities will be beneficial to companies in the long run if these companies can tap into local knowledge

and culturally appropriate technologies, and develop improved strategies to achieve zero deforestation. It is also recommended that multi-stakeholder bodies monitor progress towards the targets and the effectiveness of mechanisms to resolve grievances and conflict.

► **What advice would you give the private sector to better take on board smallholder perspectives and interests?**

Zero deforestation commitments must go hand in hand with a set of holistic company practices that adhere to the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous and local peoples and to their land and forest tenure rights. Strict safeguard policies must be in place as a necessary part of industry frameworks, and must be properly enforced. To sustain CSO and smallholder involvement, companies must demonstrate that they are serious in implementing their no deforestation/CSR policies by resolving environmental and importantly social/tenure conflicts within the areas where they operate. Companies must adhere to strict sustainability standards, not just to legality, since laws do not necessarily protect forests or smallholder rights.

► **What is the future for zero deforestation?**

The cost of implementing and monitoring zero deforestation commitments appears too high for smallholders at present, so it could be just a flash in the pan. To sustain and support zero deforestation, it could be linked to the improvement of ecosystem-based functions and biodiversity conservation. It could be institutionalized, with proper care and rigour in applying enforcement and monitoring. Also, zero deforestation commitments could be made much more widespread, and obligatory, by including them in broader frameworks such as sustainable development and climate actions. We can take our governments and leaders to task for these actions, in order to help save the world's remaining forests and the people who depend on them.