

The Role of Youth in Upholding Peasant Rights and Agrarian Reform

SPI-Indonesia

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Lebak Lebung Case

South Sumatra consists of large part of swamp areas called *Lebak Lebung*. *Lebak Lebung* is an ebb tide area; at rainy season water could reach 3 meters height. At dry season the water decrease and create a pond fill with fish. Also during this dry season the farmers could grow rice in the land. This shows how rich the natural resources in South Sumatra. Since ages ago the yields from *Lebak Lebung* provide food and income for the people living there.

During the Dutch era was implemented the auction system on lebak lebung yields, and this regulation was continued by the independent government and since 1983 the auction system is controlled by Local Government at Ogan Komering Ilir (OKI) district where the yields will be given to the auction winner (*pengemin*). For other people who would like to take the fish in Lebak Lebung should pay huge amount of money. For example in Lebak Pasang a person could get a charge of Rp 1 million (around 100 US\$) to have the permit which include one set of fishing rod to catch the fish.

If the person is unable to pay for the permit, they could fishing there with condition that the fish should be sale to *pengemin* with a very cheap price. The person who are not afford to pay usually fishing using traditional fish trap (*penilar*) and sale the fish to *pengemin* with average price 25 percent from the normal price.

This auction system has grabbed the people's rights over natural resources, and it is important to do something about it. Therefore since 1998 SPI struggle to demand the cancellation of auction system over *Lebak Lebung*. On every national farmer's Day, September 24th, SPI members conducted rally, mass action at district or provincial level. In every action the youth is always stands at the front line to struggle for cancellation of auction system.

On November 2008, another mass action is conducted at OKI district followed by around 500 people. In this action the peasants succeed to force the local government to issued District Regulation (Perda) No.9/2008 on

River and Lebak Lebung Management, due to this regulation *lebak lebung* is not put into auction anymore but returned to the local community where the control and management is regulated by District and Village Regulation. Nevertheless not all lebak is returned to the community, only lebak located at residential areas with radius 500 meters from the village or 1000 meter from urban areas can not be put to auction. Still it is a small victory in the long struggle of the peasants including the youth to gain their rights.

Unfortunately this small victory is continuously faced with obstacle. The cancellation of *Lebak Lebung* auction without a good socialization by local authority vulnerable of creating conflicts between communities. Albeit the obstacles it will not stop the struggle of SPI in South Sumatra.

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In the midst of lebak lebung case which still very fragile, occurred a conversion of 26 thousand hectares of swamp areas into palm plantation by PT Waringin Agro Jaya at OKI Districts. It related to the local government regulation which actively support the expansion of palm plantation with the priority to convert the swamp areas.

SPI South Sumatra for sometimes has been actively reject the opening of new palm plantation in swamp areas through mass action. The swamp areas, or lebak lebung is the place for the people to grow food, to tend their cattle and to build their houses.

Box 1. The Impact of Palm Oil Expansion – The Case in South Sumatra, Indonesia

In village of Kuro Bangsal, Ogan Komering Ilir (OKI) district, South Sumatra Province there has been an opening of a new palm oil plantation as vast as 1 million hectares. The opening of this plantation change the irrigation flow that used to watered “*Lebak*” rice farm belong to the peasants. Hence the peasants are unable to grow their rice well.

Since the peasants are unable to grow their rice, which are their main source of income it has create an enormous decrease to the peasants’ income and welfare level. Before the opening of palm plantation averagely a peasant could receive an income around Rp 4,5 million (around 409 US\$) per one planting season, more or less 3 months, but now their income has fall drastically. With the increasing living and production cost lately the peasants’ family has to going through a very difficult time.

The palm plantation which serves for the agrofuel production has destroyed the “*Lebak*” rice system which for generations has becoming the source of living for the peasants. A once fertile and fruitful land now becomes a sorrowful land. The peasants now face not only with the difficulties to provide necessities for their family; they also have to face with the threat and intimidation as a result of their efforts against the opening of palm plantation which serve to provide fuel for cars and industries.

Source: Marda Elius, women peasant member of SPI, 2008

Farm Youth Education

Besides involve with agrarian struggle, the farm youth in South Sumatra is also realizing the importance of education to attract the youth to return to rural areas, to agriculture. It is important to build awareness to the youth that farming is not a terrible work to do.

Youth are the next generation of agriculture, for that reason in South Sumatra SPI established Ibnu Falah school to accommodate the peasants’ children. In this school beside the general curriculum there is also education on agriculture given to the children. The school is still very new; only operate for the past one year.

At national level SPI also held field school of sustainable agriculture in Bogor, West Java followed by youth from several provinces. The field school is conducted for 2 months where the youth are learning and sharing about sustainable agriculture techniques at the same time learning about the organization. These young men and women are expected to be cadres of sustainable agriculture in their villages. During the period of December 2008 to February 2009 there have been 20 young men and women graduated from this field school, and in 2009 hopefully there will be another 2 rounds of this field school.

In the context of Peasant Rights, sustainable agriculture is part of the struggle to Implement the rights’ of the peasant over natural resources, Rights for the Protection of Agriculture Value, Right of Biodiversity, and Right of Environment Conservation. Education is an important step to strengthen the role of youth in the organization as agent of change and struggle.