



Tropentag, October 9-11, 2007, Witzenhausen

“Utilisation of diversity in land use systems:
Sustainable and organic approaches to meet human needs”

Transmigration Policies and Rural Development in South Sumatra: Comparative Study of two Villages

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Abstract

Throughout the 20th century, Indonesian governmental migration policies have had serious repercussions on the rural development of thinly populated islands like Sumatra. In the 1980s, the French research institute ORSTOM (now IRD) conducted several studies to analyse the impacts of these population movements on the rural system of the southernmost province of Sumatra, Lampung. This province has been subject to particularly high population flows that varied depending in the geographic location. Whereas the peneplains and the piedmont of the Barisan Range were soon colonized, the colonisation of the mountainous parts was delayed and only accelerated in the 1970s.

This study aimed to understand the influence of this colonisation gradient on rural dynamics, on agricultural activity, and more generally on social and economic dynamics. Two villages were chosen as a function of this gradient and studied.

In Bengkulu, which is located in the piedmont of the Barisan Range, environmental conditions are suitable for production of pepper, coffee and rubber. In Giham, which is located in the upland of the Barisan, a cooler climate allows the cultivation of coffee and European vegetables.

Both villages were settled as a result of two migration flows; a first one of Sumatranese migrants, and the second bigger one of Javanese people, who provided a source of labour for the first. The main differences in the historical changes that took place in the two areas were due to the fact that they occurred in different periods of time, and with varying intensity. But for both of them, diversification appeared as a vital strategy to face increasing land pressure, price volatility of cash crops and pressure from plant diseases.

Diversification was also partly a response to the risk of disease and to the volatility of the price of cash crops. In Giham, some farmers took advantage of market gardening, and the village experienced an important economic upward trend. On the contrary, in Bengkulu, the numerous failures of pepper production no longer enable decent living standards; and the inhabitants of the area are barely in a position to develop new crops, due to the disruption of the social balance.

Keywords: Agrarian systems, Indonesia , migrations , rural economy and sociology