

Bio-fuelling Poverty

Why the EU renewable-fuel target may be disastrous for poor people

1 November 2007

The road to sustainable transport?

In January of this year, the European Commission published its Renewable Energy Roadmap, proposing a mandatory target that biofuels must provide ten per cent of member states' transport fuels by 2020.¹ This target is creating a scramble to supply in the South, posing a serious threat to vulnerable people at risk from land-grabbing, exploitation, and deteriorating food security. It is unacceptable that poor people in developing countries bear the costs of emissions reductions in the EU. To avoid this, the Commission must include social standards in its sustainability framework, and develop mechanisms by which the ten per cent target can be revised if it is found to be contributing to the destruction of vulnerable people's livelihoods.

The target was agreed in principle by the Council in March, on the condition that it is reached *sustainably*. In response, the Commission launched a consultation in the spring, proposing a definition of sustainability that included some environmental principles but no social principles.² Finally, in September, the European Parliament provided an opinion calling for a mandatory certification scheme which would ensure that biofuels 'do not cause, directly or indirectly...social problems such as rising food prices and the displacement of people'.³ The Commission is now in the process of drafting its legislative proposal, expected on 5 December, that will specify how 'sustainable' biofuels will be defined, and what support measures they will qualify for.

Ten per cent, but from where?

Biofuels are liquid fuels manufactured from organic matter; in the vast majority of cases, crops. They are typically blended with fossil fuels for use in conventional cars. Ethanol can be used as a substitute for petrol, and is produced from starch or sugar

crops such as corn and wheat or sugarcane and sugar beet. Biodiesel can be used as a substitute for diesel, and is usually derived from oilseeds such as rapeseed or oil palm.

The EU's stated reason for increasing biofuel use is to reduce greenhouse gas (carbon) emissions. The actual carbon savings of biofuels vary considerably however, and depend on the type of feedstock, agricultural practices, the production pathway, and the effects of land use change. Life-cycle analyses taking into account these factors show that biofuels produced from feedstocks grown in tropical regions offer better carbon savings and cost efficiencies than those grown in Europe.⁴ Despite this, the EU favours domestically grown feedstocks through a framework of incentives, subsidies, tariffs, and technical rules.⁵ This has resulted in recent criticism questioning the sustainability of current EU biofuels policies and the motives behind them.⁶

Currently around one per cent of EU transport-fuel needs are met by biofuels.⁷ The 2020 target therefore represents a major increase in biofuel demand, firstly because it means increasing the *proportion* of biofuel in the total transport mix by a factor of ten, and secondly because this total is on an upward trend.⁸ To close this gap, the EU will have to import from developing countries where much more efficient biofuel feedstocks such as sugarcane and palm oil can be grown.⁹ Among the countries best placed to plug the gap are:

- Malaysia and Indonesia, which account for about 80 per cent of global palm-oil production, and hope to have achieved a 20 per cent share of the European biofuel market by 2009;¹⁰ and
- Brazil, which accounts for about half of all international ethanol exports, and which expects to increase sugarcane production by 55 per cent over the next six years to meet anticipated demand for ethanol from the EU and US.¹¹

Many other poor countries also appear to be investing in biofuels in the hope of winning a slice of the 'EU biofuel pie'. Southern Africa has been described as having the potential to become the 'Middle East' of Biofuels.¹² Recent reports assessing the biofuel potential of Tanzania estimate that nearly half of the country's land area is suitable for biofuel production;¹³ meanwhile, the government is courting investment from European biofuels companies such as the UK's Sun Biofuels.¹⁴ In Mozambique, nearly 33 million hectares – about 40 per cent of the country's land area – has been identified as suitable for growing biofuels, with Europe singled out as a potential market.¹⁵

Sustainable for whom?

Under the right conditions, biofuels offer important opportunities for poverty reduction by stimulating stagnant agricultural sectors, thus creating jobs for agricultural workers and markets for small farmers.¹⁶ The first biodiesel co-operative was launched in Brazil in 2005: employing sustainable agricultural methods, it has provided improved livelihoods for around 25,000 families.¹⁷ Locally produced biofuels can also increase access to energy for marginalised communities – for example the Brazilian social biodiesel programme targets fuel production for off-grid electricity generation.¹⁸

Unfortunately such conditions, including national and corporate policies with clear pro-poor, environmental, and social objectives, are not evident in the emerging agro-industrial model. Instead, a scramble to supply the European market is taking place in the South, and poor people are getting trampled.

Destruction of livelihoods

The clearance of critical ecosystems, such as rainforests, to make way for biofuel plantations has rightly raised serious concerns from an environmental perspective.¹⁹ But millions of people also face displacement from their land as the scramble to supply intensifies. Those most at risk are some of the poorest and most marginalised in the world. The chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues recently warned that 60 million indigenous people worldwide face clearance from their land to make way for biofuel plantations.²⁰ Five million of these are in the Indonesian region of West Kalimantan (see box below). In Colombia paramilitary groups are forcing people from their land at gunpoint, torturing and murdering those that resist, in order to plant oil palms, often for biofuels,²¹ contributing to one of the worst refugee crises in the world.²² Many of these violent acts occur in the traditional territories of indigenous peoples and afrodescendent communities, directly affecting the most vulnerable groups in the country. In Tanzania, reports are already emerging that vulnerable groups are being forced aside to make way for biofuel plantations.²³

Once people lose their land, they lose their livelihoods. Many will end up in slums in search of work, others will fall into migratory labour patterns, some will be forced to take jobs – often in precarious conditions – on the very plantations which displaced them.

Case study: land dispute in Indonesia

The land in Indonesia under palm-oil cultivation is set to expand from its current six million hectares to 20 million by 2020 – an area nearly five times the size of the Netherlands. Oxfam partner Sawit Watch estimates that there are currently about 400 communities involved in palm-oil-related land conflict. One of the regions experiencing the greatest expansion in oil-palm plantations is West Kalimantan.

Forty-three-year-old Margaretha Yuniar from the village of Kampuh in West Kalimantan is a teacher, and wants her three children to have a good education. Knowing that this would be expensive, in 1996 she and her family decided to earn some income by using their small plot of land to grow oil palms. So they gave palm-oil company PT Ponti Makmur Sejahtera (PMS) their 7.5 hectare plot. In return they were to receive back two hectares to grow oil palms on, and PT PMS was to keep five hectares from which it would pay Yuniar and her family five per cent of the net profit each year. The remaining half-hectare was for housing.

It was not until six years later, in 2002, that Yuniar was given not two but one and a half hectares, and not from the land she originally handed over. To make matters worse, this plot was claimed by its original owner, who would not let Yuniar and her family harvest any palm oil from it. In the meantime, Indonesia had been hit by a crippling economic crisis, and PT PMS had been forced to merge with a Malaysian company, Austral Enterprises Berhad, to form PT Mitra Austral Sejahtera (PT MAS). Golden Hope, one of the largest oil-palm plantation owners in Indonesia, took over the operations of PT MAS in 2005.

In June this year, 800 farmers marched to the office of the *bupati*, the district governor, who is normally responsible for granting companies the land concessions.

‘There were about 50 women farmers on the demonstration’, says Yuniar. ‘We came with our children. From our village of Kampuh, nine of my women friends came on the march.’

Despite meetings and new offers from Golden Hope, the problem of the ownership of the land has not been resolved.

Even if people manage to hold on to their land, their livelihoods may still be threatened by unsustainable practices on plantations which harm the surrounding water, air, and soil. Irrigation systems increase water scarcity, making it harder for

nearby communities to farm the surrounding lands. Soils and waterways can become polluted from mill effluents and chemical run-offs, with devastating results for those downstream of plantations;²⁴ air may become poisoned by agrochemicals or burning practices.²⁵

Indecent work

Labour standards on plantations can be horrific. Sugarcane plantation workers in Brazil are paid according to how much sugarcane they cut – they may earn a little over one dollar per tonne. This piece-rate system systematically discriminates against women who are usually unable to cut as much as men. Workers can live in squalid conditions without access to clean water, and may be forced to buy their food and medicine from the plantation at inflated prices. In some cases, the resulting spiral of debt bonds the workers to the estate, effectively resulting in slave labour.²⁶ Shifts can last for 12 hours in temperatures over 30°C – 14 cutters reportedly died of exhaustion during the harvests of 2004/05 and 2005/06.²⁷

On oil-palm plantations in Indonesia, women are often drawn into unpaid work in order to help their husbands meet production quotas.²⁸ This comes in addition to other responsibilities such as child care, food production, and collecting firewood and water, which, due to the sheer scale of plantations, they must travel much further to find. Indonesian women workers are also routinely discriminated against: estates often pay them lower wages than men simply because they are said to have easier work.²⁹ In Malaysia, women make up about half the workforce on plantations, and are typically recruited as sprayers of dangerous herbicides and pesticides. All too often, proper training and safety equipment are lacking, with serious implications for long-term health.³⁰

Often workers are unable to secure better conditions for themselves because the right to organise or create labour associations is effectively denied. In Colombia, palm-oil trade unionists have been tortured and murdered.³¹ Across other parts of Latin America, effective unionisation is thwarted through obstructive union legislation, intimidation, and a lack of worker rights.³²

In Indonesia, although the right to form a union is recognised by law, the International Trade Union Confederation notes that in practice trade-union rights are seriously weakened by intimidation and lengthy mediation processes which force unions to resort to wildcat strikes.³³ In this context Musim Mas, an Indonesian palm-oil company, last year fired over 700 union members in retaliation for a strike, forcibly evicting the workers and 1,000 family members from their homes, and expelling their children from school.³⁴

Exploitation of smallholders

About 30 per cent of Indonesian palm oil is produced by smallholders, supporting up to 4.5 million people. Most of these are drawn from local communities and indigenous peoples that lost their land to the advancing plantations and were ‘rewarded’ with a two-hectare plot on which to grow oil palms. These smallholders are bonded to the palm oil companies that provide the credit with which the land is prepared and the seedlings procured. This debt accumulates over the first eight years before the oil palms become profitable, and farmers are obligated to sell to the companies to which they are indebted. This, and the fact that the harvested product must be processed within 48 hours, means that smallholders have no choice to whom they sell – they are

price takers. As a result, the payment they receive for their product bears little or no resemblance to the market price, is often late, and is frequently subject to various opaque deductions.³⁵

Food security

Biofuel production creates competition for resources with food and other agricultural products. A recent report by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development predicted global food-price increases during the next decade in the region of 20 per cent to 50 per cent, compared to recent years, citing biofuels as one of the main drivers.³⁶ Of course, higher agricultural commodity prices could be a boon for some of the millions of poor farmers who have suffered from decades of stagnation in global commodity markets.³⁷ But others will lose out.

At the household level, poor people with limited capacity to take advantage of the biofuels market and associated livelihood opportunities are at risk of increased food insecurity. At the national level, low-income countries that rely on food imports are most at risk. The FAO lists 82 countries as Low Income Food Deficit Countries (LIFDCs), over half of which are in Africa. Between them, LIFDCs account for nearly two-thirds of the world's population. The reasons these countries rely on imports to meet their food needs are varying. Some export tropical commodities (such as palm oil) and import food staples. In countries such as these, rising export prices due to biofuel demand may compensate for a growing import bill. But, within these countries, those unable to share in the benefits of rising agricultural export prices will still feel the squeeze of higher food prices.

Other LIFDCs simply cannot produce enough food to support themselves for reasons such as conflict, poor infrastructure, geography, and climate. For countries such as these, biofuels offer no opportunities, only threats.

Perhaps more of a threat than rising food prices is increasing price volatility, as poor people, who may spend upwards of 50 per cent of their income on food, are less able to adapt to shocks. As demand for biofuels grows, food and oil prices are becoming more closely linked. This will result in increasing fluctuations in food prices as volatility is transmitted from energy to food markets.³⁸ Biofuel consumption mandates, such as the ten per cent target of the EU, will only exacerbate volatility by making demand less responsive to price shocks.

Conclusion: social principles urgently needed

Biofuels need not spell disaster for poor people in the South – they should instead offer new market and livelihood opportunities. But the agro-industrial model that is emerging to supply the EU target poses little in the way of opportunities and much in the way of threats. Without the right policies in place among companies, producer governments, and importing governments, the kinds of negative social impacts outlined above will only get worse as the scramble to supply intensifies. The steps the EU must take in order to play its part are set out below.

More flexibility

Ensuring sustainability must come before achieving the ten per cent target, which should not be set in stone. A formalised process, based on annual impact assessments and reviews of food security, must be introduced so that the target can be revised if it is not being achieved sustainably.

Social standards

In addition to environmental standards, the EU must develop social standards which apply to *all* biofuels irrespective of their origin, such that:

- 1 All workers, men and women, enjoy decent work as defined by the International Labour Organization.
- 2 Feedstock cultivation does not adversely impact on local communities or indigenous peoples.
- 3 Men and women smallholders are treated fairly and transparently.
- 4 The right to food is preserved.³⁹

Underlying principles and criteria for biofuels production should be developed as part of an inclusive process involving producer countries and organisations representing those most affected by social standards: men and women plantation workers and smallholders, local communities, and indigenous peoples. These standards should also provide means by which smallholders can seek certification, such as group-certification schemes.

The EU must ensure that transport emissions reductions do not come at the expense of poor people's livelihoods. To do so, it must include the above measures in any legislation. If not, it must accept that the ten per cent target will not be reached sustainably, and therefore should not be reached at all.

Notes

¹ This is on an energy content basis – meaning that ten per cent of transport *energy* should come from biofuels, not ten per cent of transport fuel volume. Because biofuels have a lower energy density than fossil fuels, this means that the volume of biofuels required to meet the target will be more than ten per cent.

² ‘Biofuels issues in the new legislation on the promotion of renewable energy’, public consultation exercise, April–May 2007, Energy and Transport Directorate-General, Brussels: European Commission, 2007.

³ ‘Report on the Roadmap for Renewable Energy in Europe’, Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, Rapporteur: Britta Thomsen, Brussels: European Parliament, 2007.

⁴ ‘An Examination of US and EU Government Support to Biofuels: Early Lessons’, International Food and Agricultural Trade Policy Council, Washington: IPC, 2007.

‘Biofuels – at what cost? Government support for ethanol and biodiesel in the European Union’, prepared by the Global Subsidies Initiative, Geneva: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2007.

‘Transport Biofuels’, Postnote number 293, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, London: 2007.

Note that when tropical feedstock production triggers land-use change such as deforestation or destruction of wetlands, the resulting biofuels will not have a positive impact on emissions reduction. See Note 19.

⁵ ‘An Examination of US and EU Government Support to Biofuels: Early Lessons’, *ibid.*

‘Biofuels – at what cost? Government support for ethanol and biodiesel in the European Union’, *ibid.*

‘Biofuels: is the cure worse than the disease?’, discussion document prepared for the Round Table on Sustainable Development, Paris: OECD, 2007.

‘EU and U.S. Policies on Biofuels: Potential Impacts on Developing Countries’, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington: 2007.

⁶ ‘Biofuels: is the cure worse than the disease?’, *ibid.* And for a succinct summary of recent criticism see: www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=39515; and <http://gristmill.grist.org/story/2007/10/10/112525/55>

⁷ ‘Biofuels Progress Report: Report on the progress made in the use of biofuels and other renewable fuels in the Member States of the European Union’, Brussels: European Commission, 2007.

⁸ Between 1994 and 2004, emissions from transport in the EU 25 increased by 32.2 per cent, based on analysis by the European Federation for Transport and Environment of data submitted to the UNFCCC, available at http://www.transportenvironment.org/docs/Publications/2006/2006-07_ghg_emissions_transport_eea_analysis_2004.pdf

Energy consumption from transport in the EU under a business as usual scenario is expected to increase from 332 Mtoe in 2005 to 405 Mtoe by 2020. See ‘Communication from the Commission: Action Plan for Energy Efficiency: Realising the Potential’, Brussels: Commission of the European Communities, 2006.

⁹ Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson recently indicated that the EU will not meet its target through domestic production www.euractiv.com/en/trade/eu-eyes-imports-quench-biofuels-thirst/article-165289.

A recent paper by the Commission estimated that, assuming second-generation technologies become available at commercial scale, the EU will need to import 20 per cent of its feedstocks.

However, if second-generation technology does not become available, this rises to 50 per cent. (See 'The impact of a minimum 10% obligation for biofuel use in the EU-27 in 2020 on agricultural markets', European Commission: Brussels, 2007.) This analysis assumes the continuation of existing trade policies which restrict access to the EU for producer countries through tariffs, subsidies, incentives, and technical rules. The final extent to which producer countries in the South are able to supply European demand for biofuels depends massively on how these policies evolve.

¹⁰ 'Indonesia: concern grows over palm oil production', Oxford: Oxford Analytica, 2007.

¹¹ 'Brazil's ethanol slaves: 200,000 migrant sugar cutters who prop up renewable energy boom', *The Guardian*, 9 March 2007.

¹² Andrew Owens, CEO of Greenergy at Biofuels Markets Africa Conference, 30 November–1 December 2006, Cape Town.

¹³ For example, 'Liquid Biofuels for Transportation in Tanzania: Potential and Implications for Sustainable Agriculture and Energy in the 21st Century', German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), 2005.

¹⁴ See www.sunbiofuels.com for details.

At the start of this year, the Tanzanian government announced that it is negotiating with 11 foreign companies over investment in biofuels. See 'Dar to grow bio-fuel crops', *Daily News*, 12 April 2007. Available at www.dailynews-tsn.com/page.php?id=6364

¹⁵ 'The performance of EU-Africa Energy Partnership', presentation given by the Minister of Energy for Mozambique, at the International Business Roundtable, 'Business Perspectives on the Africa-Europe Energy Partnership', 27–29 June 2007, Hamburg. Available at www.energypartnership.eu/business/session%201/Minister%20Namburete.ppt

¹⁶ 'Sustainable Bioenergy: A Framework for Decision Makers', New York: UN-Energy, 2007.

¹⁷ 'Agribusiness and biofuels: an explosive mixture', GT Energia do FBOMS, Amigos da Terra Brasil and Fundação Heinrich Böll, Rio de Janeiro: Amigos da Terra Brasil, 2006.

¹⁸ 'The Emerging Biofuels Market: Regulatory, Trade and Development Implications', New York and Geneva: UNCTAD, 2006.

¹⁹ The advance of feedstock plantations may also result in the destruction of biodiversity and natural carbon sinks such as rainforests or wetlands, actually contributing to carbon emissions. See www.unep-wcmc.org/climate/mitigation.aspx for a discussion of these impacts and further references.

²⁰ <http://mwcnews.net/content/view/14507/235/>

²¹ 'The flow of palm oil Colombia-Belgium/Europe: a study from a human rights perspective', Fidel Mingorance, Brussels: Coordination Belge pour la Colombie, 2006.

'Massacres and paramilitary land seizures behind the biofuel revolution', *The Guardian*, 5 June 2007.

²² Colombia has the second largest population of internally displaced people in the world after Sudan, see <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/4444d3ce20.html>

²³ 'Agrofuels in Africa: the impacts on land, food and forests', the African Biodiversity Network, 2007.

²⁴ 'Agribusiness and biofuels: an explosive mixture', *ibid.*

'Greasy Palms: the social and ecological impacts of large-scale oil palm plantation development in South East Asia', Friends of the Earth, 2005.

²⁵ In Brazil, 80 per cent of sugarcane is harvested after burning, and the resulting fumes cause serious respiratory problems for local populations and municipalities – in one area of São Paulo, hospitalisations of children and adolescents with respiratory problems increases by over 20 per cent during burning ('Agribusiness and biofuels: an explosive mixture', *ibid.*)

²⁶ In a recent raid on a sugarcane plantation near Belem, the Brazilian government freed over 1,000 men and women from bonded-labour in inhumane conditions. Despite the government's efforts, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that between 25,000 and 40,000 men and women still work in slave-like conditions in Brazil. See http://news.monstersandcritics.com/americas/news/article_1325583.php/Slave_w and www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/Media_and_public_information/Press_releases/lang-en/WCMS_069168/index.htm

The ILO office in Brazil uses the term 'slave labour' to refer to a crime that restricts the freedom of workers through i) retention of documents, ii) the presence of armed supervisors or 'gatos', iii) through debt bondage, or iv) due to a remote geographical location from which escape is impossible.

²⁷ 'Agribusiness and biofuels: an explosive mixture', *ibid.*

²⁸ 'Greasy Palms: the social and ecological impacts of large-scale oil palm plantation development in South East Asia', *ibid.*

²⁹ 'The impacts of oil palm plantations on women', *Down to Earth* No. 74, August 2007.

³⁰ 'Oil Palm: From Cosmetics to Biodiesel Colonization Lives On', World Rainforest Movement, Montevideo: 2006.

³¹ 'The flow of palm oil Colombia-Belgium/Europe: a study from a human rights perspective', *ibid.*

³² 'Annual Survey of violations of trade union rights', International Trade Union Confederation, ITUC: Brussels, 2007. Available at <http://survey07.ituc-csi.org/getcontinent.php?IDContinent=0&IDLang=EN>

³³ 'Annual Survey of violations of trade union rights', *ibid.*

³⁴ See coverage by the International Union of Food workers (IUF), for example: www.iuf.org/cgi-bin/dbman/db.cgi?db=default&uid=default&ID=3043&view_records=1&ww=1&en=1; and www.iuf.org/cgi-bin/dbman/db.cgi?db=default&uid=default&ID=3106&view_records=1&ww=1&en=1

³⁵ 'Ghosts on our Own Land: Indonesian Oil Palm Smallholders and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil', Forest Peoples Programme and Sawit Watch, 2006.

³⁶ 'OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2007-2016', Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Paris and Rome: 2007.

³⁷ This assumes that international price increases are successfully transmitted to poor farmers in developing countries. There are reasons to suppose that this may not in every case occur, for example due to imperfect local markets, corporate concentration in supply chains, intermediaries absorbing price rises etc.

³⁸ 'Sustainable Bioenergy: A Framework for Decision Makers', *ibid.*

³⁹ The right to food is the right of every person to have access to sufficient, nutritionally adequate and culturally acceptable food for an active healthy life, which both the state and the international community are obligated to protect.

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