
The European Union and agrofuels: Making the unsustainable “sustainable”

European politicians want to validate the accelerated introduction of agrofuels into the EU countries establishing supposedly sustainable criteria. However, before making full assessments, consulting with the populations involved and establishing these criteria, the obligatory objectives or percentages of agrofuels to be mixed with fossil fuels have already been fixed. The percentages are so high (5.75% until 2010 and 10% until 2020) that many analyses claim that they are impossible to attain.

An attempt is being made to present a purely commercial activity as the solution to real and serious environmental and climate change problems. Irremediable social problems are created among the extremely vulnerable populations in the producer countries of the South. Palm, soybean, sugar cane and other crops continue to expand at the expense of tropical forests and other fundamental ecosystems. The local indigenous, Afro-Latin American and peasant populations are being seriously affected and dispossessed of their lands and way of life.

Furthermore, the economic sustainability of some industries would seem to depend on a continuous threat to climate and planetary stability. Presently, the environmental and social impacts of raw material production for agrofuels in the countries of the South, in response to demand from the countries of the North, have connotations which are a matter of serious concern to those affected in communities and social and environmental organizations. Not only due to current events, but also because of the possibility that this state of affairs will multiply in an exponential and irremediable way. The prices of land and food are increasing considerably. In order to produce agrofuels, tropical forests are being felled, affecting their biodiversity and the way of life of those inhabiting these ecosystems. Additionally, large amounts of agrochemicals are needed, polluting the population, soils and waters.

The European Union is including among its regulations the condition of sustainability of raw material imports for agrofuels imported from the countries of the South, but presently it has no system guaranteeing enforcement of social and environmental standards. What is more, no social and environmental certification label currently being applied in other similar fields has the initially desired results. On the contrary, the system taken as a reference, the well-known Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) forestry certification label, has given rise to numerous complaints (1) ranging from irregularities regarding environmental aspects to serious violations of human rights, made possible by the critical defects in the certification system structure. On-going initiatives to certify agrofuel sustainability have a predominant participation by governments and other first world institutions, companies and organizations favouring their interests, but that do not consider the present impacts or the concerns of social organizations in the South, or of the potentially affected populations. This is pure “green wash.”

All this leads to the following question: “What sustainability are you talking about?” If the industrialized nations develop sustainability schemes without the intervention of producer countries, the reality and the socio-environmental priorities of the latter will not be reflected. What is more, in many cases, these priorities are unclear, even within the producer countries themselves. In most

cases their policies are strongly influenced by transnational companies and policies supporting them, such as those of the World Bank, IBD, international cooperation agencies, etc. For this reason it is the small farmers, the local population and the poorest people who run the risk of paying all expenses, as at present.

The countries of the North have the obligation to consider the impacts of their agrofuel trade policies on other parts of the world, namely in the countries of the South. But nobody wants to give anything up: the companies do not want to give up a growing business that promises extraordinary benefits; government agendas appear to be dominated by the companies that are beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries in this multimillionaire business succeeding the oil industry, at least with the flippancy with which laws and regulations are being established (though with European frontiers well closed and increasingly closed, heaven forbid that the innumerable displaced people in the Global South should attempt to get into “the home”); the consumers do not want to give up their standard of living which implies an excessive use of energy in their daily lives, including individual transport, responsible for 20% of global emissions of CO₂.

Nobody seems to be suggesting serious and really effective policies for energy saving, nor a drop in the current excessive and exaggerated levels of consumption. It is significant that any of the Latin American countries where a major part of agrofuel commodity production is planned, has significantly lower levels of CO₂ emissions.

In order to clarify all these contradictions, over 190 organizations from the North and South are asking for a moratorium of 5 years for agrofuels (the moratorium text is available in several languages. Text and sign-ons at www.econexus.info). Recently the UN special rapporteur on food security, Jean Ziegler, also alluded in his report to the need for a moratorium.

Presently, there is no common internationally accepted and agreed on by consensus definition of “sustainable agrofuels.” Therefore politicians, citizens of the European Community, let us be honest: What are you talking about when you speak of sustainability for the production of agrofuels? Does it mean that the producer companies are always ensured of a supply of raw material for the production of fuels such as agro-diesel and agro-ethanol? Does it mean maintaining an ostentatious and wasteful way of life? Perhaps it would be more just and human to be concerned about the indigenous and peasant people in the Global South being ensured for ever of their environment and in particular of the last tropical forests left, their food sovereignty and way of life.

Excerpted and adapted from the article of Guadalupe Rodríguez (see full text at http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/biofuels/European_Union_agrofuels.html), Campaigner Tropical Forests and Human Rights, Save the Forest, Latin America, e-mail: Guadalupe@regenwald.org, www.salvalaselva.org

(1) See <http://www.fsc-watch.org>