
Biofuels: A potentially positive solution turned into a serious threat to the South

No one in their right mind can accuse President George W. Bush of overly concerning himself with climate change. In this respect, his curriculum is spotless and both his unreserved support to the oil industry and his oil wars have implied significant inputs to global warming. And if any doubts were left, his persistent refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol has made him the undisputed leader of those making the largest contribution to the destruction of Planet Earth's climate.

For this reason his recent interest in biofuels is most astonishing. In fact, during his recent visit to various Latin American countries (Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico) this was the clearest point on the agenda of a trip that was defined by some media as "ethanol diplomacy." What is more, before starting his trip he visited the installations of a company associated with ethanol production where he made reference to "technologies that will enable us to convert wood chips into fuels that are running automobiles."

Bush's sudden attentiveness to an issue seemingly so distant from his interests and concerns serves to better understand the reasons behind the fact that so many Northern governments and agencies are promoting the development of biofuels in so many Southern countries.

Contrary to other Northern government representatives, Bush does not even try to present himself as being "green." The reasons he puts forth are basically strategic and economic ones. He affirms that the promotion of biofuels is "a very important national goal, to become less dependent on oil from overseas, thereby ensuring that our national security interests are better intact and our economic security interests are better intact". Regarding economic reasons he states that "It makes sense to be able to -- as the price of hydrocarbons goes up- ... that there be alternative sources of energy coming to the market as quickly as possible."

Most probably the governments of most of the countries of the North – and particularly the European ones – have come to the same conclusions, making us doubt the "greenness" of their intentions.

From the viewpoint of many governments of the South, biofuels are simply perceived as a new product to be exported, as an "opportunity." This, added to the manifold support they are receiving from cooperation agencies and multilateral organizations, has given rise to the adoption of policies and concrete measures for their promotion in dozens of countries, without considering the possible social, political, economic and environmental consequences.

In contrast, grassroots organizations in the South see biofuels as a serious threat to subsistence. In fact, government plans imply that millions of hectares of land that today produce food, are going to be given over to the production of fuel to feed automobiles. Crops such as maize, soybean, sugarcane, oil palm and many others are going to be converted into ethanol or biodiesel. In the words of Bush himself, wood-chips will be converted into ethanol, implying the threat of even more monoculture fast growing tree plantations to feed cars. All this will be done to the detriment of lands producing food and of forests.

In this context, the recent meeting held in Mali on food sovereignty with the participation of delegates from over 80 countries, clearly declared itself against “the ‘Green Deserts’ of industrial bio-fuel monocultures and other plantations.” (see 1). The women meeting there also supported this position in their declaration on food sovereignty, emphasizing that “Monocultures, including those dedicated to agrofuels ... have a harmful effect on the environment and on human health...” (see 2)

In a different context, the Peoples’ Permanent Tribunal (formerly the Russell Tribunal), at its recent meeting in Cacarica, Colombia included serious accusations against companies producing palm oil in its declaration. Among other things, it accused them (and the Colombian Government) of having planted oil palm on “the collective territories of Afro-Colombian communities, an operation that was possible thanks to the commission and impunity of over 113 crimes of Lese Humanity, 13 forced displacements, 15 cases of torture, 17 arbitrary arrests, 19 ransacking of settlements, 14 para-military style raids, aggressions on the humanitarian zone, 4 murders or extra-judicial executions and the so-called ‘demobilization’ which has enabled the development of further death threats and control over the population.” (see 3)

Of course this would not have overly concerned the Colombian and US Presidents when they recently met, as both have been – and continue to be – partners in the massacre taking place in Colombia under the name of the “Colombia Plan.” The final result will be positive for them: the production of bio-diesel from oil palm. However, it is fitting that the future consumers of this fuel reflect on the evidence of a women who told the Tribunal that “oil palms are fertilized by the blood of our brothers and sisters, friends and family members,” adding that “we have nowhere to work as the territory is covered by oil palm trees.”

This is the true face concealed behind the so-called “biofuels” in the South. Bio means life. However, the cultivation of these fuels means death. Death of entire communities; death of cultures; death of people; death of nature. Be these oil palm or eucalyptus plantations, be these sugarcane or transgenic soybean monoculture plantations, be they promoted by “progressive” or “conservative” governments. Death.

What could have been a positive solution (replacing fossil fuels by fuels from biomass) has become, by the grace of certain Northern interests, one of the most serious threats to the survival of millions of people in the South. For biofuels to become a positive solution the approach must change completely. It must change from production for a global market to production for local supply, from monoculture plantations to diversity, from monopoly to decentralization, from socially and environmentally destructive to respect for people and nature. This is not in the minds of the companies, but it is possible to find it in the minds of people, both in the South and in the North. We appeal to them all to protect life and to help stop this process which – under an “ecological” mantle – is a synonym of death.

(1) The full declaration is available at:

http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/WSF/Nyeleni_2007.html

(2) The full declaration is available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/women/Nyeleni_2007.html

(3) The full declaration is available in Spanish at:

<http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Colombia/biodiversity.pdf>

