
Benin: Large scale oil palm plantations for agrofuel

The race for agrofuels has reached Benin. With heavy support from the government and forming a key part of the “agricultural revival strategy” promoted by the IMF restructuring programme, millions of hectares of agricultural and forest land are to be turned over to agrofuel production for export, with no discussion or concern for the impacts that this will have on the Beninese, their food production and their environment.

The research undertaken by Josea Doussou Bodjrenou of Nature- Tropicale exposes how the discussion about new agrofuel developments has clearly been about production for export and maximising profit. Information about specific development plans, land targets, or deals with foreign companies and governments have been difficult to obtain, and there is a virtual vacuum of legislation in which these developments are going ahead.

Benin’s Agricultural Revival Programme will entail significant palm oil developments, as well as the scaling up of biodiesel from *Jatropha*, peanuts, and bioethanol from sugarcane, manioc and other crops.

Oil palm is native to the wetlands of Western Africa. There are already a number of palm tree monoculture plantations in the South of Benin, but these should only serve as a warning against future developments, due to the complications and difficulties experienced by communities attempting to sell their palm products. The community cooperatives that coordinate the palm sales with government have been plagued by a history of corruption and conflict. Into this scenario, private companies have stepped in, offering to buy the oil directly from the communities, at a higher price. But when the communities switched over, and gave their products to the industries, the companies failed to pay. Benin palm oil cooperatives found themselves in trouble, but without sympathy or help from government.

Now, the government aims to find 300,000-400,000 hectares of land in the humid Southern Benin areas of Oueme, Plateau, Atlantic, Mono, Couffo and Zou for oil palm plantations. This zone hosts 50% of the country’s population on only 7.7% of the national territory. This suggests that agrofuels will be competing with food production in the prime agricultural lands of Benin. Much of the food crops will also be used for agrofuel production. Industrial companies will be supported to obtain land for these initiatives. Although policy is not clear on where, or from whom, this land is to come, it is likely that small scale farmers will be excluded where their interests conflict with industries.

Looking at demographic growth rates in Benin, especially in urbanised areas, it is obvious that maintaining food supply will call for an increase in food crops, especially root crops. But it is clear that the production of biofuels will drive farmers to allocate less land to food crops, leading to food insecurity. In Northern Benin, in the Banikoara region, farmers abandoned production of food crops for cash crops: cotton and peanuts. Today, food insecurity is rife. Where once they fed themselves, the World Food Program (WFP) and the Catholic Relief Services now feed populations. Most of the population’s purchasing power is very low, and the increase in food prices due to decreased stocks, will favour imports and distribution of poor quality foods, food aid dependency, and possibly GMOs.

The government of Benin is not openly admitting that they will destroy any ecosystems for biofuel production. But it is obvious that encouraging large-scale industries as well as small-scale farmers to find hundreds of thousands of hectares of land to grow agrofuels, will involve huge increases in land under cultivation, for both food crops and agrofuels as well as expansion into the remaining wetlands, sacred and communal forests, fallow lands and rich biodiverse ecosystems in Southern Benin.

Josea Doussou Bodjrenou notices in his research that Benin differs from some of the other countries in Africa, in that the discussion about biofuels has barely touched on the idea of meeting national energy security needs. Instead, the government is clear that this is about maximising profits for both state-owned and private companies. However, those profits are unlikely to filter down to the rural poor of Benin.

The areas of land that are being talked about are enormous. Although it is not easy to know what portion of the proposed new land in the agricultural revival programme will be for agrofuels, it is planned that 3 million hectares of new land will be found for the scheme by 2011.

The scale of the plans for biofuel production in Benin leave no room for doubt that enormous pressures will threaten the food security, land rights, and ecological habitats of the Beninese. In a country already struggling to cope with the exploitation and poverty brought about by a focus on cotton production for export, a large-scale conversion to agrofuels can only exacerbate the problems facing Benin's rural poor.

Article based on: "Biofuel case study: BENIN", summary of research undertaken by Josea Doussou Bodjrenou of Nature-Tropicale for the report "Agrofuels in Africa –The impacts on land, food and forests", African Biodiversity Network, July 2007.

<http://www.gaiafoundation.org/documents/ABN%20Agrofuels%20Africa.pdf>