Facing the biofuel rush: Land must be used to feed people, not cars

The present eagerness of the European Union to favour the use and import of biofuel as an alternative to fossil fuels has risen serious concerns among those who are aware that global warming should be tackled globally and demand drastic changes in the current Western consumer, commercial and production patterns.

On last January 10th the EU commissioners made decisions on the EU Biofuels directive that are critical to the future of many in the Southern nations. A few days before, Latin American networks, which have been long denouncing the serious and irreversible impacts of the industrial large-scale tree monoculture scheme encroaching southern ecosystems and cultures, had appealed to the governments and people of the European Union countries to seek solutions that do not worsen the already dramatic social and environmental situation of the peoples of Latin America, Asia and Africa. They claimed that “it is time for food sovereignty”, and “land must be used to feed people, not cars”.

“The increasing use of individual automobiles and their associated oil consumption as one of the main causes of global warming, makes fossil fuels use grow day by day. In this context, the use of biofuels would appear to be a positive alternative. However, everything seems to indicate that this will generate serious negative impacts, especially on the people of the South”, says the letter, since “energy crops will be grown in Latin America, as well as in Asian and African countries, at the expense of our natural ecosystems.” While Europeans maintain their lifestyle based on automobile culture, the population of Southern countries will have less and less land for food crops and will loose its food sovereignty, having to base their diet on imported food, possibly from Europe. (See their open letter “We want food sovereignty, not biofuels” at http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/biofuels/EU_declaration.html)

On January 26, the Indonesian organization Sawit Watch (Oil Palm Watch) also sent an open letter to the European Parliament, the European Commission, the governments and citizens of the European Union, claiming that “oil palm plantations are a major cause of deforestation, forests fires, land and water pollution, and are being imposed on local communities and indigenous peoples without concern for their rights, livelihoods or welfare, and managed with insufficient concern for the rights and welfare of plantations workers and smallholders.” They also denounce the “extreme concentration of land and natural resources in the hands of only a few business people from the oil palm plantations and palm oil industries.” “It is therefore unavoidable that, as a consequence of Europe's biofuels policy, the land rights of indigenous peoples and local communities will be relinquished further, and that food security will be undermined and lands for agricultural purposes and subsistence livelihoods will diminish,” says the letter. They eventually call on the EU “to take corrective and effective measures by adopting policies and declaring a commitment to global justice which will lead to real changes which will benefit local communities and indigenous peoples in Indonesia. It is time to make markets, governments, and companies accountable”, since “Development without justice is not development, it is exploitation!” (The full letter is available at: http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/biofuelwatch/message/245)

Echoing the claims, over 160 European organizations and key individuals also sent their own

message on 31 January, expressing their extreme concern by the plans as presented by the European Commission to adopt a mandatory target for biofuel use in transport, which would entail further deforestation, biodiversity losses, and evictions and impoverishment of local communities. They warn, among other things, the “risk of increased climate impacts of biofuels”, and that “biofuels will increase pressure on world food supplies and further erode food sovereignty”. They call on the UE Member States “to reject the biofuel target for transport and halt all other incentives for biofuel production which could encourage in any way the use of biofuels linked to the problems described. Instead, the focus should be on drastic reduction of energy use and support for genuinely sustainable renewables.”

They are collecting more signatures from organisations, local groups and individuals. Anyone who want to sign, please send an email to info@biofuelwatch.org.uk . (The full open letter is available at: http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2007Jan31-openletterbiofuels.pdf)