
Biofuels: A serious threat masked in green

Replacing fossil fuels by biofuels (produced from plant biomass) may seem a step along the right path to avoid worsening climate change. However plans for their production and use not only leave this problem unsolved but make many others worse.

The biofuels to be adopted are biodiesel (obtained from oilseeds) and ethanol (obtained from fermentation of plant cellulose). Among the many possible crops for this purpose are soybeans, corn, colza, groundnuts, sunflower seeds, oil palms, sugarcane, poplar and eucalyptus trees.

Because the major consumers in the North do not seriously consider reducing their disproportionate consumption of fuels and because in most cases they do not have sufficient arable land to supply themselves with raw material to produce their own biofuels, their governments and companies are planning to promote, basically in the countries of the South, crops to produce biodiesel and ethanol.

It is important to note that in the forest areas of the South, this policy will not imply any change related to oil or gas exploitation, which will only be stepped up as fossil fuels will continue to be the main component of the energy matrix in the countries of the North. However, the biofuel business will add new impacts to those already existing in the forests.

As proof of the above it is enough to mention soybean and oil palm which appear as the main candidates for large scale biodiesel production. The former has become the main cause of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon and in Paraguay, even before it started to be produced for energy purposes. The latter is also the main cause of deforestation in Indonesia and is having an impact on the forests of many other countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Furthermore, technologies are already being developed to convert timber into ethanol (with the use of genetically modified organisms) and thus the biofuel industry will promote an even greater expansion of fast growing monoculture tree plantations both in forest areas – increasing deforestation – and in grasslands.

Both deforestation and the change in grassland use imply releasing the carbon they store. To this are added the emissions from growing, processing and transporting the biofuel itself, mostly done on the basis of oil and other elements releasing greenhouse effect gases: the manufacture of machinery used, the fuel used for its operation, the production and use of chemical fertilizers and agrochemicals, the trucks and ships transporting it to its destination, etc. That is to say, the net carbon balance in areas given up to the production of biofuels may even be negative, thus increasing the concentration of greenhouse effect gases in the atmosphere which is precisely what this change intended to avoid.

Summing up, the use of biofuels in addition to not solving the problem of climate change also implies an adverse effect on equally serious problems.

In fact, dozens or hundreds of millions of hectares of fertile land will be concentrated in the hands of

large trans-national corporations and will produce fuel instead of food – in a world where hunger and malnutrition are already serious problems in themselves.

During this same process they will evict millions of farmers and peasant smallholders who will mostly migrate to shanty towns around the large cities. The forests will no longer ensure sustenance to millions of people who depended on them and will be replaced by soybean, oil palm or other energy crops. Water will be polluted (from the use of agrochemicals) or disappear (due to the plantation of fast-growing trees), local fauna will be seriously affected by the enormous green deserts that will no longer provide them with food, the native flora will be eliminated and replaced by vast monoculture plantations and many local species will be contaminated by the genetically modified crops used in such monoculture plantations, while the soil will be degraded by these plantations and the use of agrochemicals.

It would seem evident that this is not a good solution, either for the people or for the environment. However, it is an excellent business opportunity for large companies operating on a national level and in particular for large transnational corporations. Among them are those associated with the production and marketing of agricultural products for export, biotechnology and chemical industries (that are able to increase their sales of transgenic material and agricultural inputs) the automobile industry (that can continue growing under a “green” mantle), the new companies arising from the biofuel wave and the oil companies that are becoming involved in this new and lucrative business.

For this reason, so many governments, aid bodies, bilateral agencies, multilateral agencies and international experts are involved in the promotion of this absurd solution: in order to serve the interests of these powerful economic groups who dictate global policies in their own favour.

Finally, it should be noted that biofuels in themselves are not a problem. More, within a social and environmentally sound approach they may serve to satisfy part of the energy needs of our countries and, in particular, of local communities. The central problem is the model that they intend to implement, characterized by large scale, monoculture plantations, massive use of external inputs and transgenic crops, mechanization and export to feed the North's disproportionate energy consumption.

It is therefore essential to face this new threat hanging over the peoples and the ecosystems of the South and incorporate the issue of biofuels into the struggle for the defence of forests and biodiversity, against the advance of monoculture and transgenic crops, for food sovereignty and for the peoples' right to decide their own fate.