[Large-scale biofuels: Good for the power, bad for the people and the climate](#)

The modalities of biofuel consumption and production are already causing a negative impact on food security, rural livelihoods, forests and other ecosystems, and these negative impacts are expected to accumulate rapidly. Large-scale, export-oriented production of biofuel requires large-scale monocultures of trees, sugarcane, corn, oil palm, soy and other crops. These monocultures already form the number one cause of rural depopulation and deforestation worldwide.

Furthermore, the claim that biodiesel is 'carbon neutral' is disputed since it doesn't take into account how, for example, oil palm plantations are developed. Realistic estimates show that making biofuels from energy crops requires more fossil fuel energy than they yield, and they do not substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions when all the inputs are accounted for. Also, rainforests, swamp and peat forests, which are important carbon sinks, are being cleared in order to establish oil palm plantations.

However, the European Union is promoting the use of biofuels as an energy source for transport. The EU has set itself a target of increasing the use of biofuels in energy consumption to 5.75% by 2010. The European Commission is now pressing member states to fulfil their commitments under the 2003 Biofuels Directive. The agriculture council of 20 Feb 2006 held a first policy debate on the biofuels strategy and the EU's biomass action plan. The advantage for these countries is that biofuels like bioethanol and biodiesel have lower prices than oil. Another plus for European farmers is that domestic production of biofuels could offer new income and employment opportunities after the reform of the Common Agriculture Policy.

In Europe, biodiesel is used in Germany, France and Austria in varying concentrations. In Germany, there are more than 1,000 filling stations providing biodiesel. The first German 'biorefinery' is to be built in Emden, with financing from a Dutch syndicate. The plant is intended to turn 430,000 tonnes of palm oil, probably from Indonesia, into more than 400 million litres of biodiesel.

Demand for crude palm oil to generate electricity has increased 400,000 tonnes this year in the Netherlands, of which 250,000 tonnes will be imported. The electricity company, BIOX bv, is reportedly planning to build four new generators using palm oil. The company intends to sell this palm oil-based electricity to several EU countries.
In the United States, biofuels are welcomed as a way to help reduce the country's dependence on oil produced abroad. Biofuels combine patriotism with economic self-interest: farmers love it because biodiesel and ethanol are brewed from agricultural commodities, helping drive up farm-gate prices; and Republican senators love it because federal tax subsidies keep their voting farmers happy.

On quite an opposite stand, in Southern countries, the production of biofuel crops is already having great environmental and social impacts which will become worse in case the North-driven push for new energy sources gain ground. An alliance of human rights and environmental NGOs are campaigning against European countries' use of fuel made from palm oil at the expense of forest ecosystems. In an April statement entitled 'No to Deforestation Diesel!', over thirty German, Austrian

and Swiss groups warn that a palm oil-fuelled biodiesel boom would repeat the pattern of forest destruction caused by the rapid growth of Indonesia's pulp and paper industry.

The groups argue that a fundamentally different approach to energy consumption is required, rather than merely replacing oil with biofuels. This entails promoting of public transport over private car and air traffic, more energy conservation measures and more energy from renewable sources such as solar and wind power. The groups are calling for strict criteria to be applied to the use of biofuel raw materials including: no conversion of primary forests for plantations; no burning to clear forests for plantations; no human rights violations or police or military operations; no certification of palm oil plantations, as a monoculture based on palm oil cannot be cultivated in an ecologically sustainable way and generally leads to problems rather than any enduring benefits for local people; yes to the promotion of organic farming without the use of artificial fertilizers or agricultural toxins; yes to a promotion of agricultural smallholdings in the cultivating countries. The statement also calls for customary rights and land rights to be respected and full compliance with ratified international agreements relating to indigenous peoples, biodiversity, workers' rights, etc in countries cultivating biofuel crops.

Furthermore, more NGOs, Indigenous Peoples Organizations and farmer's movements called upon the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change COP 12 held in Nairobi on 6 - 17 November 2006 to immediately suspend all subsidies and other forms of inequitable support for the import and export of biofuels.

They claimed: "There is nothing green or sustainable to imported biofuel. Instead of destroying the lands and livelihoods of local communities and Indigenous Peoples in the South through yet another form of colonialism, we call upon Northern countries to recognize their responsibility for destroying the planet's climate system, to reduce their energy consumption to sustainable levels, to pay the climate debt they have created by failing to do so until now and to dramatically increase investment in solar energy and sustainable wind energy".

Article based on: "Biodiesel and the expansion of plantations", Down to Earth, Newsletter No. 69, May 2006, E-mail: dte@gn.apc.org; http://dte.gn.apc.org; Resistance Number 60, Oilwatch Network Bulletin, April 2006, E-mail: info@oilwatch.org, http://www.oilwatch.org/doc/boletin/bole60en.pdf; "Biofuels: A Disaster in the Making", alert to the Conference of the Parties of the Framework Convention on Climate Change, http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/CCC/Nairobi/Disaster_Making.html