

Biofuels: solution to climate change or cause of global hunger?

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Many politicians say that biofuels are the answer to our dependency on oil, ensure national "energy security", and claim that they are environmentally friendly. The European Union has set a target that 5.75 per cent of transport fuels should come from biological sources by 2010. George Bush has called on Americans to cut their petrol use by 20 per cent over a decade, mostly through a near five-fold increase in use of home grown fuels, such as ethanol.

The term "biofuels" refers any fuel made from living things, or the waste they produce; most recently the focus has been on ethanol and diesel, made from crops, like corn, soya, sugarcane and rapeseed. Global production of ethanol doubled between 2000 and 2005, with biodiesel output quadrupling.

Studies show that biofuels produce up to 60 per cent less carbon dioxide than fossil fuels. But the environmental benefits depend on how the biofuels are made; for instance, if coal powered electricity is used during the production process, biofuels may result in greater emissions than using oil, not less.

Food versus fuel

Biofuels are also making the headlines through bad publicity because land previously used for food crops are being turned over to biofuels. As Bush rails on about "energy security", a billion people across the globe are demanding "food security". Jean Ziegler, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food, even called biofuels a "crime against humanity", claiming they are responsible for driving up food prices.

Ziegler's statement is misleading. It's true that over the past year global food prices have increased by 43 per cent - but it is not because biofuels are taking what would have normally ended up on our plates. Speculation on international markets is behind much of the increase in food prices and multinational companies such as Cargill, which controls a quarter of all cereal production, have enormous power over the market.

Although biofuel production has not (yet) played a large part in influencing the price of food, there is a future threat that, as countries move to increase biofuel production, this could have an impact on food supplies. While biofuels don't take the food off someone's plate directly, i.e. it is not mainly the same crops used in biofuels as those that we eat, governments' drive to increase the amount of biofuel crops produced has led to massive subsidies, tax breaks and price guarantees for farmers who switch from food crops. For example, government subsidies have fuelled corn-based ethanol production in the US - hardly the untouchable "free market".

To meet the 5.75 per cent EU target would require, according to one study, a quarter of the EU's arable land. That demand on arable land cannot be met in the EU or the US, say the scientists, so the burden is

likely to be shifted onto developing countries and lead to deforestation for monoculture plantations.

"Food versus fuel is not an issue in Brazil," said Marcos Jank, the president of Unica, the Brazilian Sugar Cane Industry Association. Brazil leads the world in biofuel production and use, making about 16 billion litres per year of ethanol from its sugarcane industry. Yet 31 per cent of Brazil's population lives below the poverty line and is hard hit by rising food prices.

Deforestation

But Jank and other Brazilian officials are on shakier ground when they deny that the thirst for ethanol is causing deforestation in the Amazon, as farmers clear trees to plant crops. Because sugar cane is grown in the more fertile centre of the country, they point out, no forest is cleared. But massive investment in the sector - an estimated \$30 billion between 2006 and 2015 - has put pressure on cattle farmers to sell their land south of the Amazon to sugar growers and buy cheaper land further north, on the edge of the forest. Once that land is taken, forest clearances could multiply.

Last month the Brazilian minister for Amazonian development, Marina Silva, resigned citing "increasing deforestation of the Amazon on Brazilian cattle ranchers and farmers". Some do not even have the option of selling their land. In Paraguay, the demand for land and the corporate impunity of large agribusiness firms are resulting in human rights violations. Peasants and indigenous people are being pushed off their farms and can no longer afford to buy food, let alone grow it.

Deforestation can counteract any gains in CO2 reduction gained by biofuels. The journal Science reports that between two and nine times more carbon emissions are avoided by trapping carbon in trees and forest soil than by replacing fossil fuels with biofuels. Plus clearing forests produces an immediate release of carbon gases into the atmosphere, accompanied by a loss of habitats, wildlife and livelihoods.

The biofuels issue affects the whole debate around climate change - raising the question of who makes the decisions around what energy technology is invested in. In order to stop climate change, we need a global shift away from the burning of fossil fuels. Biofuels are not the only alternative; there are other forms of renewable energies that need resources invested in research and development.

Basic survival

More than one billion people are facing starvation yet there is enough food to feed the world. Leaving food production and distribution to the free market is a recipe for disaster. We have to take it out of the hands of the private companies and put it under the control of the billions of workers, farmers, and peasants. The large capitalist agricultural conglomerates should be expropriated with no compensation.

The agrarian question is central to resolving the food crisis, especially in the developing world. The socialist programme is for land to be owned and run by those who work it. This means the nationalisation of large estates under the control of the rural workers, and - in countries with less advanced agriculture - for land to be distributed to the poor and landless peasants who should be encouraged to form cooperatives, with subsidies from the government to develop more productive techniques.

Above all we need an international plan of production to decide what is of the greatest need to humanity, not what makes a private profit. That plan will necessarily address the protection of the natural environment and the need to feed the world as efficiently as possible.

