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Biofuel and Hunger: a false solution for Africa

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Could it be that the FAO is planning to convert chunks of the African continent into bio-energy farms? If this is so, it would still not answer the question raised because at present many African countries are rich in fossil fuels and other minerals and yet their citizens go without food and many still suffer levels of degrading poverty.

Introduction

As the world celebrates another World Food Day it is a good opportunity to pause and ponder the issues related to hunger, food shortages, and the imperative of food sovereignty. **This is particularly urgent when we consider that the theme for this year's celebration is *Investing in Agriculture for Food Security*. We must be careful that our investments are made in the right direction.** Current analysis of the hunger situation in the world today confirms sub-Saharan Africa as the zone most affected by food insecurity. According to a recent report by the Food and Agriculture organization the African region may have a new tool to tackle hunger and poverty in the region: biofuels. Is this new "green" fuel the solution to Africa's big challenges? Can biofuels contribute to alleviate chronic food insecurity?

Questions and answers to Africa's challenges

The prospect for Africa is quite a challenge.¹ Despite the expected improvement in crop yields for 2006/07 floods, erratic rains and displacements due to conflicts continue to be serious hurdles. Although there is good food supply situation in some countries, access problems continue to plague places such as Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Internal population dislocations still affect countries such as Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Other areas with peculiar challenges are the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi (civil strife) and Zimbabwe (hyper inflation expected to reach 4000% in 2007). Somalia's food crisis is expected to persist throughout 2006 and affect an estimated 1.8 million people.

When the question is asked as to whether the world is folding its hands to watch disaster happen we are confronted with programmes and goals set by world bodies and ostensibly dedicated to address the deficits. For example, the first objective of the Millennium Development Goals is the eradication of extreme poverty and hungerⁱⁱ. The Task Force on Hunger has the target of halving world hunger by the year 2015. This target will not be reached for sub-Saharan Africa, on the contrary the predictions indicate a rise in the food insecure people in that region. The means towards reaching that goal have been seen as defective in some sense.

The causes of the problems of sub-Saharan Africa are well-known. Violent conflicts, HIV/AIDS, natural disasters and malaria are at the root of the most chronic food security challenges in the continent. Wrong allocation of resources is one of the causes of these persistent problems. While hundreds of millions go to bed hungry every night, and over 5 million kids die of malnutrition yearly, it has been estimated in the MDG that an investment of a modest \$8 billion for 2005, rising to \$11 billion a year by 2015 is needed to achieve set targets of halving world hunger. With such an outlay, it would be imagined that quick steps would be taken to tackle the situation head-on. Compared to how much is spent in efforts at establishing democracy through military might the cash needed to fight world hunger is really insignificant. It was estimated, for example, that the US military expenditure in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2005 was in the range of \$105 billionⁱⁱⁱ.

Key policies that would advance the cause of providing poor people the secure land rights and tenure, development of local markets for local products, agricultural diversity, improve access to public health services and more support for sustainable agriculture practices are important mechanisms to tackle some of the main problems related to food security.

An inadequate response to the roots of the problem as well as putting forward the wrong solutions can impair the mission of alleviating poverty, and divert resources from other more effective mechanisms. For example the promise of biotechnology is one of the most warped solutions discussed in the media and academic circles in the past few years. Genetically modified crops have been heralded for years as an important means to address hunger in Africa. The UN Millennium Project Task Force on Hunger in its 2004 report looked towards biotechnology as a way out of the hunger situation in Africa.^{iv} The idea of a biotech Africa is the stuff of which the dreams of the industry is hung and to which their future is apparently tied. In a world clearly suspicious of agricultural biotechnology, the industry is hanging on to the tattered ends of the loincloths of the poor and the vulnerable. The outgoing Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Koffi Annan, while announcing the “Africa 21st Century Green Revolution” declared, “we must also not shy away from considering the potential of biotechnology, which can contribute significantly to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.”^v Mr Annan, like some other policy drivers, believes that Africa was left behind by the Green Revolution train and must hop onto the next train. The question is: have they reflected on what destination the earlier train got to? We sincerely hope Mr Annan would have had some reflection on this before writing his handing-over notes to the new helmsman of the UN.

Where does the newly proposed biofuel solution for Africa fit? Is it as ill conceived as the GM crop revolution for Africa or does it have some merits that deserve further consideration?

BIOFUEL to FUEL or cure HUNGER?

While we are marking yet another World Food Day many are still going to bed hungry. As we ponder on what direction global leaders may be heading we are urged to look at the conclusions of the Assessment of the World Food Security Situation prepared for the 32nd Session of the Food and Agriculture organization of the UN's Committee on World Food Security to be held in Rome, 30 October – 4 November 2006. This assessment of the world food security situation surprisingly concludes that biofuel production could be a potential avenue for mitigating chronic food insecurity in Africa.^{vi} It is intriguing that 'although detailed analysis is still required to confirm feasibility' this august body would want to have us believe that biofuel production in sub-Saharan Africa region could possibly be an avenue for mitigating chronic food insecurity. The proposition sounds quite like an *Alice in Wonderland* logic: sentence first, verdict afterwards.

Paragraph 53 of FAO report: "The countries facing food emergencies are mainly from the sub-Saharan African region. Therefore, urgent attention and action is required to tackle the root causes of food insecurity in those countries over the long term. **Although detailed analysis is still required to confirm feasibility, the emerging opportunities for biofuel production in the region could potentially be an avenue for mitigating chronic food insecurity in Africa.** Development assistance, focused on socially and ecologically sustainable biofuel production, could be warranted to meet increasing global alternative fuel demands."^{vii}

Discussions about biofuel have largely been with regard to energy and climate change. The suggestion by the Committee on World Food Security that biofuel production could solve the hunger problem in sub-Saharan Africa is a new and innovative way of distorting the entire biofuel/hunger matrix. Why do we say this?

The stark reality facing the world today is that either we wean ourselves from fossil fuel driven economic model or we must be prepared for catastrophic global warming and related climate change events. It is in presenting biofuel as an option to fossil fuel that the public sees it as a viable option. Indeed biofuel production is already being touted as capable of drawing carbon credits based on Kyoto protocol's clean development mechanism (CDM). Industry has been rather clever in their carbon marketing strategies and through these they keep polluting while still lacing their pockets with cash in the process.

Some of such CDM projects have been in the form of plantations. Corporations in the North would set up plantations in the South and go right ahead polluting because the plantations are expected to serve as carbon offsets. Such tree planting projects have been known to result "in dramatic conflicts between local peoples dispossessed from their land and the big plantation companies grabbing it. These are not merely protracted courthouse conflicts, but at times pitched battles as people are often wounded and sometimes killed trying to reclaim their homes and livelihoods. Monoculture tree plantations such as of the ever popular eucalyptus and pine come with a string of negatives – including depletion of the water table, increased soil acidity, biodiversity loss and pesticide contamination. Some indigenous groups in the Amazon refer to them as 'devil's orchards'...In short, the tree has become for many environmental groups and communities no longer an iconic symbol of the green movement, but often a metaphor for oppression, ecological devastation and misery."^{viii}

Biofuel for bio-energy appear to be the new push in CDM and the marketization of *hot air*. Sources for this energy include agricultural and animal waste (biomass) and crops. A large number of CDM's registered projects are said to be in bioenergy, mostly associated with the sugar, rice, corn and palm industries.^{ix} Food crops such as maize are being used for ethanol production, and sugarcane is widely used as biofuel in places such as Brazil. In Nigeria, statements have already been made about the possibility of cultivating sugar cane and cassava for ethanol production, and it has been argued that biofuel so produced could contribute up to 10% of Nigeria's fuel needs.^x

How could the conversion of agricultural land into bio-energy farms possibly offset hunger among the chronically hungry? The world is already engulfed in open and covert conflicts generated by battles to secure fossil fuel supply lines. The turn into biofuel will exacerbate the conflicts as this will require huge tracts of land which in all likelihood will lead to infringement on peoples' land rights as well as massive deforestation. The huge demand for tropical hardwoods has already led to a high degree of depletion of rainforests. The expansion of lands taken up by biofuel crops will deepen this problem. It is easy to see that sooner than later Africa will be forced into being a net importer of timber and non-timber forest products. This will sound the death knell of Africa's possible agricultural revival.

Based on current experience, bioenergy crops, be it conventional or genetically modified, will be primarily based on a dominant model of intensive large-scale monocropping, 'highly depending on chemicals. This casts serious doubt about any meaningful role in tackling poverty and hunger issues on a general basis as FAO conclusions suggest. It has also been said that the energy required to produce such fuels would be more than the energy they would in turn produce. Apart from the fact that an investment in a venture whose output is less than inputs does not make any sense, it still remains a baffle that the Committee on World Food Security would imagine that this is the way out of the hunger trap.

The EVIDENCE and the VERDICT

The suggestion that investment in biofuel rather than in food production could mitigate hunger is a very interesting proposition. It does appear that the Committee on World Food Security maybe working on an advanced agenda that is yet to be released to the general public. Could it be that the FAO is planning to convert chunks of the African continent into bio-energy farms? If this is so, it would still not answer the question raised because at present many African countries are rich in fossil fuels and other minerals and yet their citizens go without food and many still suffer levels of degrading poverty.

Efforts to sustain the current mode of consumption in parts of the world, using the same machinery but newer fuel types, would obviously not address the climate and socio-economic challenges facing our world today. And suggesting that biofuel will reduce or eliminate hunger is a rather unique spin.

Assessment of the world food security situation

Paragraph 7. Against this background of a mixed outlook but with prices generally firm, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is forecasting an increase in the 2006 world food import bill of over 2 percent compared to 2005... Given their higher share as importers of food and feed, the developing countries' bill is forecast

to grow by 3.5 percent, while that of the low-income food deficit countries is forecast to jump by nearly 7 percent...

8. ...it is expected that Africa will increase its dependence on basic food imports in the medium term, not only of cereals, but also of meat and certain dairy products. The common driving factors are low growth in agricultural productivity;..

9. With almost 14 percent of the world's population, but less than 2 percent of the world's income, Africa, as a continent, is a net importer of all its basic food commodities. It is a significant player in some international food markets, with an almost 30 percent share of the world rice and wheat trade and a 25 percent share of the world whole milk powder trade. Trade shares of other products are lower, at 15 percent for coarse grains and from 5 to 10 percent for meat products. It is expected that these shares will remain the same or increase over the medium term.

10. Import levels for Africa are expected to increase, but output, while growing relatively quickly, is not able to match foreseen demand...

11. Greater import dependence for food items has implications for food security, particularly for LDCs, when international prices increase. While the medium-term projection indicates that prices are expected to remain constant or fall modestly in real terms, recent increases in energy prices, if sustained, could well result in much higher food prices. ... Even so, increased food prices would have an adverse impact on many LDCs, whose populations are undernourished. As the current projection of the Agriculture Outlook² indicates, these countries are already struggling to increase their per capita food consumption.

12. With crude oil prices reaching historically high levels, the global prospects for ethanol fuel use are expanding. ...The growing interest in ethanol fuel is motivated not only by a concern for high oil prices, but also by the need to diversify energy sources, the desire of many countries to meet greenhouse gas abatement targets set by the Kyoto Protocol and the need to stabilize commodity prices and cut down on agricultural subsidies in line with World Trade Organization (WTO) provisions. Advances in technology and policy incentives mean that the ethanol fuel industry is no longer restricted to a few countries (Brazil, Japan and the United States) but is gaining momentum in other countries, including China, India and Thailand. Increase in ethanol use has the potential to create a substantial demand for energy-related agricultural products and to have a further impact on commodity markets.

13. The biofuel industry – including ethanol and biodiesel produced from oil seeds- could have far-reaching effects on world agriculture by offering novel development opportunities to countries with significant agricultural resources, if barriers to trade in biofuels are eased or removed. Africa, with its significant sugar cane production potential, is often cited as a region that could profit from Brazil's experience and technology. The competitiveness of biofuels could be further enhanced through the Clean Development Mechanism under the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol: reductions of greenhouse gas emissions that result from substituting ethanol for gasoline could be monetized in the form of tradable carbon credits.

Source: FAO. 2006. Assessment of the world Food security situation. Committee on World Food Security. Rome, 30 October – 4 November 2006.

Let us consider the findings of the Committee as recorded in some paragraphs of their report to underscore the fact that the conclusion does not sit well with the evidence. The emphasis on increased biofuel production is prodded by the desire to earn carbon credits from a process, which on an industrial basis, does not merit any credit. It is push

by industry to make another scramble for Africa, grab the land and continue with business as usual. The industrial bio-energy push due to increased bio-energy demand will be nothing other than an effort at extending the frontiers of neo-colonialism in its continued march on the back of the fabled market forces. It is a scenario wherein policy makers with wide open eyes agree to believe the lie that CDM can be attained through current energy modes. Little attention is paid to the facts of the totality of what is entailed in the agricultural as well as refining processes of ethanol and other forms of biofuel.

The FAO paper also explicitly mentions that Africa should profit from Brazil experience in the development of biofuels. Which are the lessons that we should take from Brazil? Brazil was able to expand its Pro-Alcohol ethanol production from about 150 million litres in the mid 1970s to about 12 billion litres by the late 1980s, and over 16 billion litres today, through systematically subsidizing the entire enterprise. It is true that Brazil was able to reduce dependence on petrol but it never shifted from the basic automobile model. Brazilian NGOs posit that although this stimulated “the sugarcane economy and generate new employment, while maintaining a transport model based on the automobile. On the other hand, this experience has left indelible scars on the land and society.”^{xi} With the wave of privatization in African countries and the tendency to allow market forces to go on rampage there is little possibility that poorer countries would have the wherewithal to subsidize an obviously not so profitable venture.

FAO analogies between the Brazilian model and the African potential is fundamentally flawed, since the context of our countries does not allow for the development of a Brazilian biofuel type model. Western markets are hungry for biofuel raw materials. The European Union for example has already clearly identified the lack of raw materials as a challenge in its expansion for biofuel.^{xii} The FAO report seems to suggest that the food import deficit of Africa could be balanced by a potential “future” biofuel crop export industry from Africa to the rest of the world. The meaning of this is that African countries will continue to just play the role of exporters of raw material to foreign markets, without developing its national capacity on this and related issues.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY NOW!

It is a generally accepted fact that people are not necessarily hungry because there is an absence of food. Even in countries with food deficits there are many who starve besides food stalls simply because they could not cross socio-economic barriers erected in their way. In concrete terms, it is on record that where there were food shortages in sections of countries like Zambia (2002), Angola (2004) and Sudan (2004) there were food surpluses, especially of alternative food crops, in other areas of those countries. It is also known that a dearth of rural infrastructure negatively impacts on movement of goods and that socio-cultural modification and other factors have worked against the self-sufficiency of African countries. Biofuel production will not change these.

The occasion of the World Food Day is a good time for us all to soberly consider why people remain hungry in a world where many people live wasteful lifestyles and governments waste huge resources in mindless wars and experimentations with our future. At the World Food Summit in 1996, governments committed themselves to halving the number of undernourished people in the world by 2015. We know that the goal set 10 years ago has clearly failed. In sub-Saharan Africa the number of undernourished people has risen, instead of decreasing.^{xiii} The biofuel model suggested by FAO in its world food assessment conclusions is a policy recommendation derived

from the global spin on the issue, rather than a real assessment of the roots and solutions to Africa's problems. Africa's problems have known causes and very well known solutions exist too. Africa's future strategies to fight hunger must be based on such well known solutions and our problems should not be trivialised for the sake of fostering the spin of a new industry that has ambitions to grow at a world-wide scale. At present the "proposed solution" of biofuel for Africa's food security problems, is not only the wrong solution, but its conception is based on an "ill addressed" analysis of the roots of the problems of our continent.

We end this piece by insisting that the way out for Africa rests in ensuring peoples' right to determine what crops they want to plant and how; what foods they want to eat and how. This is excellently captured in the concept of food sovereignty which has been holistically defined by the *Nyeleni* International Forum on Food Sovereignty as "the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture policies; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self reliant; to eliminate the dumping of products in their markets, and; to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production. This system is a form of trade that goes far beyond the restrictive model that easily lends itself to corporate control."^{xiv} Certainly transforming Africa in a biofuel Factory will run against our food sovereignty.

ⁱ See *40 countries face food shortages worldwide*.

<http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000416/index.html>

ⁱⁱ See details of specific goals at: http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/html/dev_goals1.shtml

ⁱⁱⁱ south-north development monitor SUNS [Email Edition]. SUNS #5727 Thursday 27 January 2005. *Development: Cutting hunger in half costs "peanuts", say experts*.

<http://www.sunsonline.org>

^{iv} Friends of the Earth International. 2004. The Millenium Development Goals: The green revolution and biotech

^v For the statement of Koffi Annan announcing the Africa 21st Century Green Revolution, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sgsm9405.doc.htm>

^{vi} FAO. 2006. Assessment of the world Food security situation. Committee on World Food Security. Rome, 30 October – 4 November 2006.

<ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/meeting/011/j8096e.pdf>

^{vii} See full document at <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/meeting/011/j8096e.pdf>

^{viii} Adam Ma'anit. *If You Go Down the Forest Today*. The New Internationalist Issue 391. June 2006. <http://www.newint.org/features/2006/07/01/keynote/>

^{ix} Adam Ma'anit. Ibid

^x Moses Ebosele. *Govt plans alternative to petrol*. The Guardian, Lagos, Friday, July 28, 2006.

<http://www.nguardiannews.com/news/article06>

^{xi} Brazilian NGO Forum. 2006. Summary of discussion among brazilian NGOs as an input for the Bonn Meeting – October 2006. Sao Paulo, October 4.

^{xii} Reuters. 2006. EU Biodiesel output seen growing 20 pct a year. 11 May.

<http://www.planetark.com/avantgo/dailynewsstory.cfm?newsid=36307>; EEB. 2005. EEB position on biomass and biofuels: the need for well defined sustainability criteria. December; Reuters.

2006. Crop shortages could curb European biofuel growth. May 11th.

<http://www.planetark.com/avantgo/dailynewsstory.cfm?newsid=36300>

^{xiii} FAO. 2006. Mid-Term review of achieving the world food summit target. Rome, 30 October – 4 November 2006. <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/meeting/011/j8303e.pdf>

^{xiv} Information note on Nyeleni 2007 , The International Forum on Food Sovereignty



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