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Sustainable Futures

Dec 17, 2007

European biofuel plans could spell disaster

European Union plans to increase the use of biofuels could spell disaster for some of the world's poorest people, warns international aid agency, Oxfam.

EU proposals will make it mandatory by 2020 for 10% of all member states' transport fuels to come from biofuels. To meet the substantial increase in demand, the EU will have to import biofuels made from crops like sugar cane and palm oil from developing countries. But Oxfam fears that the rush by big companies and governments in countries such as Indonesia, Colombia, Brazil, Tanzania and Malaysia to win a slice of the "EU biofuel pie" threatens to force poor people from their land, destroy their livelihoods, lead to the exploitation of workers and hurt the availability and affordability of food.

"In the scramble to supply the EU and the rest of the world with biofuels, poor people are getting trampled," said Oxfam spokesman Robert Bailey. "The EU proposals, as they stand, will exacerbate the problem. It is unacceptable that poor people in developing countries should bear the cost of questionable attempts to cut emissions in Europe."

Biofuels may offer the potential to reduce poverty by increasing jobs and markets for small farmers, and by providing cheap renewable energy for local use, but the huge plantations emerging to supply the EU pose more threats than opportunities for poor people. Oxfam believes the problem

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will only get worse as the scramble to supply intensifies; unless the EU introduces safeguards to protect land rights, livelihoods, workers' rights and food security.

EU member states agreed that the 10% target must be reached in a sustainable manner, but Oxfam warns that the current proposals contain no standards on the social or human impact.

"The EU sets its biofuel target without checking the impact on people and the environment," said Bailey. "The EU must include safeguards to ensure that the rights and livelihoods of people in producing countries are protected. Without these, the 10% target should be scrapped and the EU should go back to the drawing board. Let's be clear, biofuels are not a panacea - even if the EU is able to reach the 10% target sustainably - and Oxfam doubts that it can - it will only shave a few per cent of emissions off a continually growing total."

Published reports show that as much as 5.6 million km² of land - an area more than 10 times the size of France - could be in production of biofuels within 20 years in India, Brazil, southern Africa and Indonesia alone. The UN estimates that, worldwide, 60 million people face clearance from their land to make way for biofuel plantations.

In Indonesia, almost a third of palm oil is produced by smallholders - most of whom lost their land to advancing plantations and were "rewarded" with a two-hectare plot. These smallholders are bonded to the palm oil companies, which provide them with credit, and are required to sell to them - which means they do not get the best price for their oil.

Abet Nego Tarigan, deputy-director of Sawit Watch, which represents communities, farmers and plantation workers affected by palm oil development in Indonesia, said: "Decisions on biofuels made in Europe are directly affecting millions of people in Indonesia. In the relentless pursuit of biofuel gold, big and powerful palm oil companies are callously clearing communities from land they have farmed for generations, workers and small holders are shamefully exploited and we are losing valuable agricultural land to grow the food we need to feed ourselves and make a living. The

proposed EU policy will only make this worse - pushing more people into poverty and concentrating land in the hands of a few."

About the author

Nadya Anscombe is a contributing editor to environmentalresearchweb.

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Could you please provide some sources?

Hi, can the author of the article please provide us with the UN source which says 60 million people will be displaced by biofuels plantations?

The WorldWatch Institute has said biofuels can improve the lives of the 800 million hungry who are farmers.

Biofuels can end global malnourishment, it says, "Biofuels for Transport: Global Potential and Implications for Energy and Agriculture", which can be found here:

shop.earthscan.co.uk...

Oxfam is right in asking critical questions. But it does itself a disservice if it is inventing facts.

Please be more rigorous.

Edited by Liz Kalaugher on Jan 2, 2008 10:14 AM.

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IPS at: www.ipsnews.net...news.asp

RIGHTS: Native People Warn U.N. of Biofuels Disaster

Haider Rizvi

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 30 (IPS) - Growing demand for biofuels by the world's rich nations is propelling attacks on indigenous people and destroying their lands and forests, according to native leaders attending a three-week international meeting here.

"[There are] increasing human rights violations, displacements and conflicts due to expropriation of ancestral lands and forests for biofuels plantations," said Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, chairperson of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Tauli-Corpuz, one of the authors of a new report on the topic, warned that if biofuels expansion continued at the current pace, it was likely that at least 60 million native people would lose their lands and livelihood.

Although you are of course right, that figure has not been used in any document I could find, but is attributable to Tauli-corpuz

www.un.org...climate_change.html

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