

In this special agrofuels issue...

We are devoting almost all of this edition to a single topic – the rapid expansion of biofuels across much of the globe. In the process of gathering material from colleagues and social movements around the world, we have discovered that the stampede into biofuels is causing enormous environmental and social damage, much more than we realised earlier. Precious ecosystems are being destroyed and hundreds of thousands of indigenous and peasant communities are being thrown off their land. We believe that the prefix bio, which comes from the Greek word for “life”, is entirely inappropriate for such anti-life devastation. So, following the lead of non-governmental organisations and social movements in Latin America, we shall not be talking about biofuels and green energy. Agrofuels is a much better term, we believe, to express what is really happening: agribusiness producing fuel from plants to sustain a wasteful, destructive and unjust global economy.

We begin with an introductory article that, among other things, looks at the mind-boggling numbers that are being bandied around: the Indian government is talking of planting 14 million hectares of land with jatropha; the Inter-American Development Bank says that Brazil has 120 million hectares that could be cultivated with agrofuel crops; and an agrofuel lobby is speaking of 379 million hectares being available in 15 African countries. We are talking about expropriation on an unprecedented scale.

In the following article, we take a closer look at the way the corporations are using this stampede into agrofuels to extend their takeover of world farming. We are experiencing a veritable frenzy of investment, as companies from different sectors leap on the bandwagon. An unparalleled process of mergers, takeovers and alliances is tightening the grip of a relatively small group of huge interlinked agro-industrial groups. Many analysts believe that the market is heading for a crisis of over-production. Once the bubble has burst, only the most powerful groups will remain, thus furthering the process of concentration.

In the remainder of this Seedling, we then focus on the situation in different parts of the world: Latin America, Asia and Africa. We analyse what is happening and talk to the people involved. The conclusion is pretty much the same across the board: the push for agrofuels amounts to nothing less than the re-introduction and re-enforcement of

the old colonial plantation economy, redesigned to function under the rules of the modern neoliberal, globalised world. Indigenous farming systems, local communities and the biodiversity they manage have to give way to provide for the increased fuel needs of the industrialised world.

The justification for the large-scale cultivation of agrofuels is the need to combat climate change, but the figures make a mockery of this claim. According to the US government, global energy consumption is set to increase 71 per cent between 2003 and 2030, and most of that will come from burning more oil, coal and natural gas. By the end of this period, all renewable energy (including agrofuels) will make up only 9 per cent of global energy consumption. It is a dangerous self-delusion to argue that agrofuels can play a significant role in combating global warming.

As is spelt out in this special edition, the wide-scale cultivation of agrofuels will actually make things worse in many parts of the world, notably South-east Asia and the Amazon basin, where the drying of peat lands and the felling of tropical forest will release far more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than will be saved by using agrofuels.

One of the main causes of global warming is agro-industrial farming itself, and the global food system associated with it. Although it is scarcely ever mentioned, farming is responsible for 14 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. Within farming, the largest single cause is the use of chemical fertilisers, which introduce a huge amount of nitrogen into the soil and nitrous oxide into the air. Changing land use (mainly deforestation and thus linked to the expansion of crop monoculture) is responsible for another 18 per cent. And a large part of global transport, which is responsible for a further 14 per cent of emissions, stems from the way in which the agro-industrial complex moves large quantities of food from one continent to another.

It is abundantly clear that we can halt climate change only by challenging the absurdity and the waste of the globalised food system as organised by the transnational corporations. Far from contributing to the solution, agrofuels will only make a bad situation worse. GRAIN believes it is time to declare unambiguously “No to the agrofuels craze!”

We would like to hear from you. Please do send us an email to agrofuels@grain.org with your thoughts and we will publish a selection: see page 56 for more details.

The editor

