

Bioenergy – blessing or curse?

Growing energy crops on 480 million hectares could provide enough biofuel to make the world's energy mix sustainable by 2045, according to Reuters. The agency cited a representative of Ecofys, a renewable energy and energy efficiency consultancy, speaking at the World Biofuels 2010 conference held in May.

So surely biofuels must be a blessing? The World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF) supports an expansion of the area given over to biofuel crops. Reuters reported a WWF estimate that 380–450 million hectares (ha) could be sustainably planted for fuel feedstocks, alongside 1.6 billion ha needed to guarantee the world's food supply.

On the other hand, such crops could be a curse. Human rights organisation FIAN is appalled at the area of land they require and argues that any such project would entail the wholesale expulsion of rural populations and exacerbate food shortages on a global scale. The organisation argues that indigenous groups and farming families are already being driven from their

June 2007, Brazil. Sugar cane field fire before hand harvesting. Brazil is the world's largest producer of the fuel ethanol, which is derived from sugar cane.



Photo: laif

land by massive biofuel projects, losing the access to land and water which are their lifeline. In addition to this impact on society, FIAN also objects to the environmental impact of growing energy crops such as sugar cane, jatropha or oil palm. It believes the benefit biofuels bring to combating climate change has yet to be established. Furthermore, single energy crops are farmed intensively over large areas, a practice which damages the environment. FIAN therefore questions why an environmental organisation like WWF has included growing energy

crops on a large scale in its sustainability strategy.

Bioenergy certainly divides opinion! Late last year, the issue of biofuel crops arose again when farmers in Mozambique called for a moratorium on jatropha cultivation. A study conducted by the farmers' organisation UNAC, with the help of an environmental organisation, found not only that growing jatropha failed to help combat poverty, but also that it was edging out food crops (see Rural 21 6/2009, page 6). (ib)

Africa needs its own „green revolution“

Ineffective farming techniques and wasteful post-harvest practices have left sub-Saharan Africa as the region most likely to miss the first Millennium Development Goal: eradicating extreme hun-

ger and poverty by 2015, warns the 2010 UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) Technology and Innovation Report (TIR), published in May 2010.

The report calls for a “green revolution” for Africa that cannot be based on well-publicised farming advances in Asia and Latin America, but built instead on technology and innovation aimed at the needs and capabilities of Africa's millions of smallholder farmers and at coping with the continent's varying climate conditions.

For example, while modern irrigation techniques can increase crop yields dramatically, most of them have been designed for relatively large and fairly sophisticated systems. Now, thanks to alternative new technologies such as



Photo: laif

Small-scale farmers in Africa need technologies and innovations adapted to their capabilities.

low-cost drip irrigation, improved treadle pumps and low-cost plastic water tanks to store runoff, smallholders can benefit from modern irrigation techniques that would otherwise be unaffordable, given the small size of their farms and the limited capital available to them. The report includes similar examples in such areas as biotechnology, fertilisers, pesticides, tilling, and post-harvest technologies. Innovative policies to improve the access of farmers to appropriate technologies are also covered. For example, a policy

of “smart subsidies” to ease access to fertilisers has resulted in staggering increases in maize production in Malawi, demonstrating the key role credit and other instruments can play in enabling farmers to adopt effective existing technologies.

In the medium and long term, making innovation systems more coherent, targeting external support more effectively, and increasing investment in agricultural research and development offer the greatest potential for

improving food security in Africa, the report says. With the appropriate international support and the necessary political will, African agriculture can be transformed through science, technology, and innovation and contribute to broader economic growth and development on the continent, the TIR contends. (UNCTAD/ib)

More information:

www.unctad.org

In brief

■ New fund for agriculture

A new fund designed to reduce global poverty by focusing on food security and agriculture has been created: The Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP). The United States, Canada, Spain, the Republic of Korea and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will together provide about USD 900 million in support to the GAFSP. The World Bank will serve as trustee and host of a coordination unit for the fund, and if requested, as a supervising entity, the World Bank reported in April 2010. The origins of the new fund stem from the G8-plus meeting in L'Aquila, Italy, in July 2009, where leaders pledged more than USD 20 billion to boost food security and agriculture. Leaders at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh

in September 2009 then called on the World Bank to “work with interested donors and organisations to develop a multilateral trust fund to scale up agricultural assistance to low income countries.” The GAFSP will handle some of the funds originally pledged in L'Aquila. (The World Bank/ib)

■ New boost for maize-legume cropping in Africa

The International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (Cimmyt) has launched a programme “Sustainable intensification of maize-legume cropping systems for food security in eastern and southern Africa” (SIMLESA), Cimmyt reports in April 2010. The programme aims to increase household and regional food security and incomes, as well as economic development, in eastern and southern Africa, through improved productivity from more resilient

and sustainable maize-legume farming systems. The overall objective is to sustainably increase the productivity of selected maize-legume systems in eastern and southern Africa by 30 percent from the 2009 average for each target country by the year 2020 and at the same time reduce seasonal down-side risks by 30 percent. The programme started in January 2010. Work is being funded with 20 million US dollars from the Australian Government, and forms part of the Government's new, four-year Food Security through Rural Development initiative. (Cimmyt/ib)

■ Germany: firmer focus on rural development

The German federal government is putting rural development at the centre of its development policy. German Development Minister Dirk Niebel announced the shift in May 2010 in Berlin, Germany, noting that rural development is the key to poverty reduction and to attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. He reaffirmed the promise made by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel that the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) will invest funds totalling three billion US dollars in rural development and food security over the period to 2012, as pledged at the 2009 G8 Summit in Italy. (BMZ/ib)



Photo: laif

SIMLESA aims to increase the productivity of selected maize-legume systems in eastern and southern Africa by 30 percent by the year 2020.

■ Help for pastoralists in the Sahel

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is supporting herders and pastoralists in Niger and Chad, the organisation reported in April 2010. Following the failure of rains last year, an estimated 9.8 million people are now vulnerable to severe hunger in the two countries, with thousands more under threat in the north of Burkina Faso and north-east Mali. In Niger FAO is rolling out eight new projects worth 12.7 million US dollars (USD) that will benefit an estimated 2.6 million people. The projects are funded by the EU, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), Spain, Belgium and the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). In Chad FAO is planning to supply agricultural inputs, seeds, fertiliser and animal feed worth USD 4.5 million, funded mainly by the EU and CERF. Distributions of animal feed and veterinary products to pastoralists in Mali and Burkina Faso are also under way. *(FAO/ib)*

■ UNDP: Tackling energy poverty can accelerate success for MDGs

A new report published by the United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP) stresses the potential of the energy sector in boosting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The report „Capacity development for scaling up decentralized energy access programmes“ draws lessons from two decentralised energy projects in Nepal that brought modern energy services to almost a million people in remote rural communities. The report points out that the key to success was upfront public investment in capacity development. The development impacts of Nepal's energy programme include improved lighting in homes, schools and hospitals, reduced health risks from indoor air pollution, reduced drudgery for women and girls, diversified livelihoods and increased incomes among the poorest segments of Nepalese society. The report can be downloaded at: www.undp.org/energy *(UNDP)*

■ Six million euros for Lesotho's farmers

Soaring food prices and the recent global economic downturn struck Lesotho hard, especially the majority of its 1.9 million people that rely on agriculture. The European Union responded by allocating six million euros (EUR) toward agriculture, as part of the EUR 1 billion European Union

Food Facility (EUFF), the European Union's massive response to increased food insecurity around the world, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations reported in May 2010. Four million EUR are channelled through FAO to swiftly stave off the food crisis and at the same time make a long-term impact on Lesotho's food situation. FAO is working closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (MAFS), keeping its efforts in line with ongoing government programmes. *(FAO/ib)*

■ Ug99: threat to world's wheat crop

Four new mutations of Ug99, a strain of a deadly wheat pathogen known as stem rust, have overcome existing sources of genetic resistance developed to safeguard the world's wheat crop, the Borlaug Global Rust Initiative (BGRI) reported in May 2010. Leading wheat experts said the evolving pathogen may pose an even greater threat to global wheat production than the original Ug99. The new "races" have acquired the ability to defeat two of the most important stem rust-resistant genes, which are widely used in most of the world's wheat breeding programmes. *(BGRI/ib)*

Policies against Hunger VIII: Improving Governance

The slogan of this year's international "Policies against Hunger" conference – the eighth such conference to be organised by the German government – was "Improving Governance for Food Security and Nutrition". More than 250 people attended the event in mid-June 2010, which at the invitation of the German Federal Ministry of Agriculture was held in Berlin. They came to find out how the international community's latest declarations and resolutions on improving coordination and coherence in food security can actually be implemented: what is the future role of the reformed Committee on

World Food Security (CFS) and other existing initiatives and institutions in securing the world food supply? How can national and regional strategies be woven into the global tapestry? And how can the private sector's involvement in food security and nutrition be promoted?

■ CFS as catalyst

Participants expressly and unanimously welcomed the reform of the Committee on World Food Security that was agreed in October 2009. The

CFS will in future form a central component of the Global Partnership for Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition and serve as a global platform for the coordination of scientific knowledge in this area. The intention is that it should include all stakeholders in the decision-making process, especially those who are most at risk of hunger and malnutrition – small farmers, land workers, indigenous and nomadic peoples, fishing communities – and in particular the women within these groups. However, Manfred Konukiewicz, Head of the Global and Sectoral Policies Directorate at the German Fed-

“Good nutrition is not negotiable!” – Closing panel of the conference.

eral Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), stressed that the global level cannot substitute requisite measures at national and regional level. The CFS should play a catalytic role in initiating a multi-stakeholder process at country level. The conference’s final recommendations stressed that national and regional policies on food security should be based on the subsidiarity principle, the right to food being implemented definitely as part of national strategies.

■ Right to food threatened by land acquisitions

Oliver de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, emphasised that the CFS must also address the issue of land rights: the recent growth in the acquisition of land by foreign investors jeopardises the right to food. Many communities are being expelled from their land; foreign direct investment also places small farmers in a position of direct competition with the owners of large plantations – a competition in which, with their lower levels of mechanisation and smaller capital resources, they are at a disadvantage.

Ilse Aigner, German Federal Minister of Agriculture, said that policy-makers must ensure that this foreign investment also leads to higher incomes for poor and marginalised population groups. At the same she stressed that greater private investment in the agricultural sectors and rural areas of developing countries is necessary to promote food security and nutrition. To be certain of creating an environment that safeguards both the interests of investors and those of the local community, investment should be based on



the Voluntary Guidelines on Good Governance on Land and Natural Resources currently being drawn up by the FAO and the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment that the UN is working on. According to the minister, the rights of agricultural workers, the transparency of investment, anti-corruption rules and the involvement of local people must be key aspects of such guidelines and principles. All rules must of course conform to international human rights standards.

■ Putting nutrition in the centre

Delegates repeatedly asked how the necessity of sufficient and healthy nutrition could successfully be enshrined in all decisions on food security. Flavio Valente, Secretary-General of FIAN International, reminded listeners of the complexity of the issue: within the United Nations alone 17 agencies are involved in nutrition, requiring an enormous amount of coordination. It is important to involve women’s rights; in many countries there is no regulation that enables women to take charge of their family’s nutrition. The specialty of nutrition should be linked with the competences of the CFS.

David Nabarro, Special Representative on Food Security and Nutrition of the UN Secretary-General, reminded the audience that nutrition during pregnancy and in the first two years of life is crucial to children’s development.

Undernourished children grow up with stunted brains and do less well in education. Women, however, must often compete with household demand in matters of nutrition. “Nutrition has to be at the centre of all development endeavours”, stated Nabarro. He also pointed out that countries that have successfully tackled malnutrition have made nutrition a cornerstone of their social policy.

■ What about money?

The issue of financing was of course not ignored at the conference. At the G8 summit in L’Aquila, Italy, held in July 2009, 22 billion US dollars were pledged for the development of agriculture in the next three years: is this really “new” money? “Not all that has been pledged is additional”, said David Nabarro. But assurances have been given that the money will be made available for re-programming in relation to nutrition and agriculture. And according to the OECD, 6 billion of the 22 billion US dollars really is “new” money. A large part of the funding is already on the way and is being spent in the countries concerned through international organisations such as IFAD and regional initiatives, said Nabarro. (sri)

More information:

www.policies-against-hunger.de