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Food or fuel?

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How can we dedicate land to biofuel production when 25,000 people are dying from hunger each day, asks Alain Lipietz

"We are going to starvation!" That was the title of a book by René Dumont, one of the most respected agronomists of the 20th century and founder of political ecology. Forty years ago, in denouncing a profit-oriented economic model based on 'produce ever more, no matter the logics', Dumont foretold dramatic current events.

Whereas no special 'climatic accident' can be pointed out, 37 countries are currently facing a serious food crisis (according to the latest report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization). Years ago, they renounced their food sovereignty, following injunctions by international organisations. And for two years now, they have confronted a huge increase in food prices due first to climate change, then to the 'conversion to meat' of the new middle classes in emerging countries and, last but not least, to the recent development of agrofuels.

When they proposed (and obtained, in 2003) a target of 5.75 per cent of incorporation of biofuels in motor oil, the Greens in the European parliament thought about the transformation, by fermentation and gasification, of organic wastes from households, agriculture (straws, manure) and industry (sawdust). This gas may be used by special buses or trains for public transport. Today, most of the solar and fossil energy inputs into agriculture turn into unrecycled waste. The Negawatt project (for energy classification of buildings) estimates that in France each year, 30 to 40m 'Tep' could be recovered from waste.

But the Greens never thought at all about growing crops especially for fuel - subtracting land from food production and biodiversity conservation. Yet that appears to be the necessary outcome of the 10 per cent target which is now proposed for 2020. In France, to reach the goal of 7 per cent of agrofuels into motor oil, it would be necessary to devote 12 to 17 per cent of ploughable surface to these crops. In the world, 1.4bn hectares are cultivated. It is still not enough to feed everyone, and 25,000 people are dying from hunger each day. Yet 4 per cent of that land is already dedicated to modern agrofuels. The responsibility of the recent development of agrofuels, in competition with crops for food, is enormous.

Agrofuels not only drive poor populations to hunger. They are also a threat to the rights of farmers' communities on their own lands, to biodiversity, to the last primitive forests, like in Indonesia where orangutans are disappearing, or to the floristically rich areas in the EU. This is the reason why the Greens/EFA group in the European parliament called again on the European commission to decree a moratorium on the 10 per cent agrofuels targets. No binding targets should be imposed in the EU until more research has shown a real reduction of CO2 emissions thanks to agrofuels.

This is currently not true. Some of them have a negative balance. Yes, sustainability criteria and deeper research has to be implemented to attest that agrofuels imported to the EU have a positive impact on both climate change and development of the producing countries. But who is going to be responsible for control outside the EU? Controlling the expansion of agrofuels in developing countries is a challenge. It is not only difficult for the EU, but also for their own governments. Political and economic stakes are too high for these countries to be sure that environmental and food sovereignty are not threatened without a global regulation.

Indonesia is now the second highest producer of CO2 emissions: in order to clear the way to agrofuel production, peat has been burned and hectares of forest cut. In Colombia, paramilitaries produce agrofuels on lands stolen from farmers. In Brazil, the second producer of agrofuels after the US, the government cannot (or doesn't want to) affirm which areas are used for ethanol. Distances between cities and food production spots are another reason for the

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increasing price of food supplies. Indeed, sugarcane fields crowd out land for other products and push cattle and soybean deeper and deeper into the Cerrado, a unique area in terms of biodiversity. Agriculture thus displaces forestry at the margin.

Although the Brazilian government swears to the EU that sugarcane cannot be produced in the Amazon due to weather conditions, some plantations have been discovered in protected areas. The Amazon is currently under threat of an irreversible destruction due to this hunger for fuel. Agrofuels are not a miraculous answer to climate change. They can only be a part of it under certain restrictions. The most effective answer to the end of oil and to climate change remains a low-carbon economy, ambitious energy savings in the transport sector and using energy from waste as often as possible.