FUELLING THE FUTURE WE WANT

Biofuelwatch opinion on the role of bioenergy and the meaning of "renewable" in a "Green Economy"

On the Road to Rio

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How we produce energy in the future is key. The current reliance on fossil fuels is clearly not sustainable, but without careful consideration, we may find that the alternatives promoted are no better.

Biofuels and biomass combustion for heat and electricity are among the fastest growing forms of "renewable energy" in spite of mounting evidence that they result in massive increased demand for wood and energy crops, causing more deforestation, biodiversity loss, expanding industrial agriculture, increased use of agrichemicals and fertilizers, depletion of soil and waterways, land grabs and escalating hunger. In total, these negative impacts of bioenergy mean more, rather than less emissions and also undermine many of the goals of "sustainable development".

Public opinion towards biofuels for transportation (corn or sugar cane ethanol, soy and palm oil biodiesel etc) has soured with growing recognition of their consequences. Yet policies including mandates and subsidies were put in place prematurely and now continue to support their development. Investment is flowing into developing new "advanced" biofuel technologies and a suite of other "bioproducts" made using plant substitutes for petroleum. Where is all the plant biomass to come from?

Meanwhile, burning of "biomass" – primarily wood chips and pellets (and vegetable oils) for electricity and heat is among the fastest growing forms of so called "renewable" generation. The UK for example is on track to burn over 60 million tons of wood per year, 6 times the country's annual production of wood. IIED warns in a recent briefing: "As governments in the global North look to diversify their economies away from fossil fuel and mitigate climate change, plans for biomass energy are growing fast. These are fuelling a sharp rise in demand for wood, which, for some countries could outstrip domestic supply capacity by as much as 600 percent."[i]

Burning of wood, garbage, sewage sludge, tires, construction debris, plastics and all manner of other materials to generate electricity and heat is similarly subsidized as "clean and renewable" in spite of dumping massive quantities of toxins into the air.

Large hydroelectric facilities are also considered "clean and renewable", in spite of documented negative impacts on people, waterways, and biodiversity, and massive release of methane from flooded areas. In some cases nuclear power is also classified as "clean and renewable".

It is imperative that we engage in meaningful debate about the exact meaning of the terms "renewable", "sustainable", and "clean". How should a "green economy" be powered and exactly what kind(s) of energy production should answer to the call for 'sustainable development'?

As is the case for many aspects of the "Green Economy", a lack of clarity leaves the door wide open to a global scramble for access to "biomass", and a "Greenwashed Economy" that will fail to deliver anything more than empty words.

[i] Biomass energy: another driver of land acquisitions. Global Land Rush briefing. International Institute for Environment and Development. August 2011