Biofuels or biofools? By Almuth Ernsting, Biofuelwatch

On 17 September last year, Indonesian elite police forces opened fire on indigenous members of the Orang Rimba community who had collected some palm fruits on an oil palm plantation in Sumatra.

The Orang Rimba, or Forest Nomads, have lived sustainably for hundreds of years in Sumatran rainforests. Today, the forest on which they depend is being cut down, burnt and turned into vast oil palm plantations. Many are forced to beg or take food from plantations where they are vulnerable to violence, and they suffer from hunger and malnutrition.

Tens of millions of hectares worldwide have been converted to grow biofuels (a.k.a.agrofuels), and hundreds of millions of hectares are being eyed by biofuel corporations and lobbyists. The land grab now underway has devastating impacts on food sovereignty and food security.

On the one hand, land on which small farmers, pastoralists, forest communities and indigenous peoples depend for their livelihood is being converted to biofuel monocultures. On the other hand, grain and vegetable oil on the world markets, and particularly in the US and Europe is being diverted to biofuels rather than food, leading to scarcity and rocketing prices.

The situation faced by the Orang Rimba is replicated across Indonesia and many other countries in the global South. According to *Watch Indonesia!* some 45 million people in Indonesia depend on rainforests for their food and livelihoods. The government is planning to convert 35 million hectares of land to biofuel crops, 20 million of them to oil palms. This will mean the end for most of Indonesia's remaining forests, on which tens of millions more people depend than would be employed on the new plantations.

In Argentina, food sovereignty is being destroyed by the expansion of big agribusiness plantations for biofuels. Since the late 1990s, GM soya has displaced much of the country's dairy industry, grain, potato and vegetable production, as well as old-growth forests. Rural and urban malnutrition rates have risen sharply as a result. Up to 100,000 small farmers and their families have been forced off the land (1). Indigenous peoples in the Chaco forest face destitution as their forest is cut down for soya, and deaths from starvation and illness have been reported (2). The government aims to supply 10% of Europe's growing biofuel demand and the rate of soya expansion is increasing rapidly. Adolfo Boy and Jorge Rulli of Grupo de Reflexion Rural in Argentina warn, "Our country has become a laboratory for experiments in rural genocide" (3).

Food prices

Worldwide, 2007 saw the biggest grain harvest on record, yet global food prices have gone up by 75% since 2005, the price of wheat and rice has doubled and prices for soya, maize and oilseeds are at record levels. Meat and dairy prices are rising as grain, previously used for animal feed, is being diverted to ethanol.

Even in richer countries, more people are going hungry due to high food prices. A recent Hunger Survey in the US found that a record 13% of people said that they or a family member had gone to bed hungry within the past month (4).

In poorer countries, impacts are even more catastrophic. A 2001 study showed that for every 1% increase in food prices, food consumption in poorer countries decreases by 0.75%, as more people go hungry (5). In January, the World Food Programme and the government of Afghanistan appealed for food aid for an additional 2.55 million people in Afghanistan who can no longer afford staple food because of the rise in wheat prices.

The World Food Programme warns that it will have to cut food aid, because its budget is not big enough to keep up with increasing food costs. Last October, Jean Ziegler, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, called the diversion of cropland to produce biofuels "a crime against humanity", and called for a moratorium on biofuel production. In doing so, he joined similar moratorium calls made by hundreds of groups in North and South (6).

Agribusiness

Speculation and agribusiness monopolies over 'globalised' food markets play a major role in the food price spike. Biofuels are increasing agribusiness control of food production and markets and aggravating those trends. At the same time, corporate alliances between agribusiness and oil companies are forged which ensure that, as the price of oil climbs, so does the price of food. This, as well as the explosive growth in demand for 'food for cars', explains the scale of today's food price crisis.

Land conversion to biofuel monocultures is being promoted at a time when agriculture is under growing threat from global warming, freshwater depletion and soil erosion. The collapse of agriculture in the Murray-Darling region is mirrored by desertification across ever larger areas in northern China, Afghanistan, northern Africa, Nigeria, Brazil and many other countries. Yet biofuel feasibility studies on which governments' biofuel policies are based assume that the climate will not change and that yields will grow substantially in coming decades.

If climate change, freshwater depletion and soil erosion threaten future food security, then biofuels will greatly aggravate all those impacts. Growing 1kg of corn for ethanol uses between 1,000 and 1,800 kg of water (7).

Through rainforest and peatland destruction, biofuels are one of the quickest way to tip us into runaway global warming. Peatlands in Indonesia and Malaysia alone hold up to 50 billion tonnes of carbon. All are likely to be drained in the next few years, largely for palm oil for biodiesel, committing all the carbon in the peat to the atmosphere. This will almost certainly make it impossible to keep global warming below two degrees, even if the most drastic curbs to fossil fuel burning are made. According to two recent peer-reviewed studies (8), converting temperate grasslands to biofuels or turning cropland previously taken out of production into biofuel monocultures releases considerably more carbon than is saved by burning less fossil fuels.

The clear beneficiaries of the biofuel boom are the agribusiness and oil companies, the car manufacturers, biotech firms and venture capitalists that together make up the biofuel industry.

The global peasant network La Via Campesina warns, "To avoid a major food crisis, governments and public institutions have to adopt specific policies aimed at protecting the production of the most important energy in the world: food!" (9) Like many other civil society groups, they call for a fundamental shift away from industrial agriculture, towards an agricultural system where food production is controlled by small-scale sustainable farmers.

Food sovereignty would not only guarantee the right to food and address inequality and land conflicts, but also reduce greenhouse gas emissions, protect biodiversity, soil and water. Biofuel targets, tax breaks and other subsidies and incentives in countries like Australia, the US and in Europe are rapidly moving us in the wrong direction. Food sovereignty and sustainable farming cannot succeed unless those dangerous policies are scrapped.

More information:

* Biofuelwatch www.biofuelwatch.org.uk
* GRAIN, special issue of *Seedling*, 'No to the Agrofuel Craze', June 2007, www.grain.org/nfg/?id=502.

References:

2) For detailed information see "United Soy Republics: The Truth about Soy Production in South America", Grupo the Reflexion Rural, 2007, www.lasojamata.org/?q=node/91

3) www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/aboriginal-victims-of-argentinas-silent-genocide-395718.html

4) See (2), chapter "Monocrops and monoculture: the loss of Food Sovereignty".

5) www.planetark.com/dailynewsstory.cfm/newsid/45067/story.htm

6) Regmi, A., et al. 2001. Cross-country analysis of food consumption patterns. In Changing structure of global food consumption and trade

7) See list of moratorium calls at www.biofuelwatch.org.uk

8) http://gem.sciences-po.fr/content/research_topics/trade/agriculture_water_approaches_en.htm

9) Use of U.S. Croplands for Biofuels Increases Greenhouse Gases through Emissions from Land Use Change, T. Searchinger et al., February 2008.

Land Clearing and the Biofuel Carbon Debt, J. Fargione et al., February 2008.

10) "Sustainable farming can feed the world", Via Campesina, 18 February 2008, www.viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=484&Itemid=1