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EU criteria for sustainable biofuels: Accounting for carbon, depoliticising plunder

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ABSTRACT

The EU aspires to global leadership in developing 'sustainable biofuels' which can substitute for fossil fuels and thus reduce GHG emissions, while also enhancing energy security and rural development. Yet EU biofuel targets provide extra incentives for dispossessing rural communities in the global South, especially through land grabs and agro-industrial production methods. Since 2007 North–South NGO networks have denounced 'agrofuels' for such harm, thus provoking a high-profile controversy. Despite those criticisms, the 2009 Renewable Energy Directive (RED) set a mandatory target for European transport fuel to contain 10% renewable energy – in practical terms, meaning mainly biofuels by the 2020 deadline. In managing the consequent tensions, the EU system has elaborated a prior vision of a feasible, desirable future through sustainable biofuels. This combines several elements: mandatory targets incentivising investment in biofuels, R&D funds stimulating future novel biofuels, techniques commoditising natural resources in the name of protecting them, sustainability criteria homogenising the environment, and rural development models dependent on agro-industrial methods; those elements have become linked through circular reasoning. The EU's political accountability is reduced to carbon accounting; in turn it is channelled into expert debates over modelling methods and uncertainties. Arguments about indirect land-use change (ILUC) became an implicit proxy for wider conflicts over the EU's 10% target. Through the ILUC debate, biofuel critics have been drawn into expert procedures which obscure people's experiences of harm in the global South. By these methods, the EU system can pursue global leadership for 'sustainable biofuels', while depoliticising its global plunder of resources.

1. Introduction

The European Union promotes biofuels through mandatory targets. Under the 2009 EC Renewable Energy Directive (RED), 10% of all transport fuel must come from renewable sources by 2020. In practical terms the main source will be biofuels, which lack sufficient domestic sources to fulfil the target. So the EU has been outsourcing its biofuel production, especially to the global South.

The putative benefits of biofuel expansion became controversial. The EU target was officially aimed at reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from transport fuel. As additional benefits, biofuels were meant to enhance EU energy security and rural development wherever biofuels are produced. Even prior to the Directive, such claims were questioned; the EU target was widely blamed for stimulating land grabs, raising food prices and degrading natural resources. As a main defence, biofuel proponents have envisaged that any significant harm can be avoided through EU sustainability criteria and eventually through future novel biofuels, sometimes known as second-generation or advanced biofuels.

This paper will discuss the following questions:

- What forces and aims have shaped the EU biofuel target?
- How did the target provoke controversy over supposed benefits for GHG savings and rural development?
- How have sustainability criteria selectively accounted for potential harm?
- How has EU biofuel policy reconciled its conflicting aims?
- How has the EU maintained its 10% target despite strong, widespread criticism?

To explore the above questions, the paper links several analytical concepts, as outlined in the next section.

1.1. Research methods

The research focus was EU biofuel policy – its assumptions and tensions – as promoted or criticised by various stakeholders. To identify those aspects, initial analysis drew on documents from several bodies: European Commission, industry lobbies (e.g. Biofrac, EBTP), scientist networks (e.g. BioMat Net), expert agencies (e.g. JRC, IFPRI), development NGOs (e.g. Econexus, Oxfam, ABN, FIAN, Nyari/RAINS) and environmental NGOs (BirdLife, T&E, FoEE, IEEP).

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Document analysis provided a basis for interview questions about the wider rationale for promoting or opposing specific policy measures – e.g. the EU's 10% target and specific criteria for carbon accounting. Interviews were carried out with nine individuals who have an organisational responsibility for biofuel sustainability issues; seven were in five different units of the European Commission (for Energy, Research, Climate Action, EuropeAid within DG Development, and JRC) and two from environmental NGOs (FoEE, T&E). Interviews informed the selection and interpretation of documentary material cited here. An earlier draft paper was circulated to several NGO staff members; some provided comments via email or discussions.

2. Analytical perspectives: accounting for carbon, imagining societal futures

To explore the above questions, the paper links several analytical concepts: dispossessing rural communities; accounting for natural resources as a means to commoditise and legitimise their usage; and imaginaries of societal progress through technoscientific innovation. Hence the literature survey that follows.

2.1. Dispossessing rural communities

When rural communities lose access to their means of subsistence through land grabs, e.g. enforced by contractual arrangements and/or by violence, this extends a long-term commoditisation of natural resources. The entire history of capital accumulation has depended on a dispossession process, subordinating labour and natural resources to capital. In his concept of primitive accumulation, Marx referred to 'the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production'. Entire populations were 'forcibly torn from their means of subsistence', thus expropriating agricultural producers from the soil (Marx, 1976: 875–876).

That concept has been extended to 'accumulation by dispossession' – an ongoing process privatising commons or common resources by various means (Himley, 2008: 443). This trans-historical concept draws present-day analogies with early capitalism: 'All the features which Marx mentions have remained powerfully present within capitalism's historical geography up until now' (Harvey, 2003: 145).

Extending the historical dispossession process, agro-industrial systems have appropriated good fertile land, e.g. through monocropping and chemical-intensive methods. In addition to degrading vast land tracts, such systems have pushed small-scale farmers into more marginal land, forest and/or cities. Partly through new technology, corporate power has become more concentrated and production has shifted towards global markets. This agenda promotes 'secure land tenure', i.e. property rights which undermine collective, informal access to land and water (Borras and Franco, 2010, 2012). In such ways, multinational corporations have appropriated 'a multitude of new spaces that could not previously be colonised either because the technology or the legal rights were not available' (Paul and Steinbrecher, 2003: 228–229).

Such appropriations have been called 'land grabs' – an ambiguous concept as regards what aspects are historically new or illegitimate. Some 'land grabs' are illegal but are later legalised through formal changes in land tenure. According to an NGO coalition, land grabs are acquisitions or concessions which violate specific normative criteria – e.g. respect for human rights; free, prior and informed consent of affected land-users; consideration of social, economic and environmental impacts; and transparent contracts (ILC, 2011). In their view, such violations have recently gained a faster pace and extent, dispossessing especially those communities who have no clear tenure over land (Anseeuw et al., 2012).

Although capital accumulation has been dispossessing rural communities for three centuries, recent land grabs have a novel combination of drivers, namely: greater control over land and other associated resources such as water in order to derive economic benefit; large-scale land acquisitions and/or capital investment; and capital accumulation strategies responding to a convergence of multiple crises – food, energy, climate and financial (Borras et al., 2012: 850–851). Unlike traditional rain-fed agriculture adapting to seasonal rainfall, the recent shift to high-value crops via irrigation systems has stimulated water grabs; this shift enhances some livelihoods while undermining others (Woodhouse, 2012: 783–784). Land grabs have targeted fertile land with high-productivity potential (De Schutter, 2011). Land grabs often depend on violence, either threatened or actual:

> Enclosure, territorialization, and legalization processes, as well as force and violence (or the threat of them), all serve to control land... [violence] frequently shapes access to and exclusion from land (Peluso and Lund, 2011: 668, 675).

More generally, capital accumulation has depended upon 'the endless commodification of human and extra-human nature' (Moore, 2010: 391). Industrialisation is popularly associated with technological innovation, as if this were the crucial driver.

> And yet every epoch-making innovation has also marked an audacious revolution in the organization of global space, and not merely in the technics of production.... This dialectic of productivity and plunder works so long as there are spaces that new technical regimes can plunder – cheap energy, fertile soil, rich mineral veins (Moore, 2010: 405).

Thus the profitability of technological innovation depends on reorganising global space for plunder, thus accessing cheap natural resources and labour.

2.2. Accounting for carbon, making resources legible

Commoditisation of resources has been naturalised as obvious, even linked with environmental protection. Theorised as 'neoliberalising the environment', this process can pre-empt or marginalise dissent. Environmentalism has been recast and incorporated into market models of societal progress. Such incorporation 'has done far more to smooth the "roll-out" of neoliberalisations than attempts to dismiss or reject environmental concerns outright' (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004: 279).

Neoliberalisation takes many forms – privatisation, marketisation, deregulation, reregulation, etc. As an environmental problem, for example, GHG emissions are turned into a carbon-pricing system for a global market in carbon credits, so that major polluters can pay for the right to pollute the climate or even gain subsidy to do so. By supposedly protecting the environment, this process can incorporate critics: 'it involves the privatisation and marketisation of ever more aspects of biophysical reality, with the state and civil society groups facilitating this and/or regulating only its worst consequences' (Castree, 2008: 142–143).

Ecological fixes are devised in the name of remaking nature in order to conserve and/or expand natural resources. There arises an apparent paradox: 'nature's neoliberalisation is about conservation and its two antitheses of destroying existing and creating new biophysical resources' (Castree, 2008: 150). Indeed, similar biophysical resources can be both conserved and destroyed by processes of accounting for them.

Moreover, accounting measures have long defined and even shaped resources. In the 19th century Germany developed a