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Jatropha Fails to Deliver in Burma

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blog by Guest, January 29, 2011

This post was contributed by an anonymous intern on ERI's campaigns team.

Despite rich endowments of energy resources like oil and natural gas, Burma continues to struggle with electricity shortages. Back in 2006, the junta decided to try to address these shortages by requiring all farmers with at least an acre of land to plant jatropha, a physic nut that can be used to create biofuel. Proponents of jatropha say that the plant has many advantages. It's not edible and therefore doesn't compete with the food supply, they claim, and can also survive in harsh climates with little water. The promise of jatropha has led to numerous investments in plantations in Asia, South America and Africa.

But since the jatropha craze started in the mid-2000's, there's been increasing skepticism from both industry insiders and observers about the merits of jatropha. The Food and Agriculture Organization noted that despite increasing investment and policy decisions on jatropha, there was "little evidence-based information" to inform these actions. A major recent report on jatropha production by Friends of the Earth, entitled "[Jatropha: money doesn't grow on trees](#)," challenges some of the most fundamental motivations for growing jatropha, including its ability to thrive in harsh and dry climates and its lack of competition with the food supply.

According to the report, jatropha may in fact be less efficient for producing biofuels than other currently available plants. One study cited in the report suggests that jatropha actually needs *more* water than any other biofuel crop to produce the same amount of oil (FOE report, p. 6). Its ability to thrive in harsh climates also appears overstated, [according to Rob Bailis of Yale University](#). He said that "if you plant trees in a marginal area, and all they do is just not die, it doesn't mean you're going to get a lot of oil from them." Despite claims that jatropha won't compete for arable land with food crops, plantations across Africa and Asia have sprung up not on marginal lands, but on land previously used for food crop farming.

Yields from jatropha plantations worldwide have also failed to live up to the expectations of investors. Numerous plantations have been closed, and multiple companies that invested in jatropha have gone bankrupt. Oil major BP pulled out of a jatropha growing joint venture last year. Sources within the jatropha industry have echoed the report's skepticism. "Jatropha is not the miracle crop that many people think it is," [said Dominic Fava](#), who works for D1 Oils, a producer of fuel from jatropha.

These problems, and a number others that the report notes, have been evident in Burma's jatropha sector. Plantations in Burma have often used lands formerly used to grow food crops, displacing much needed food production. Jatropha growing has led to significant loss of biodiversity and habitat, especially in the remote Hukawng Valley in Kachin State, [where the world's largest tiger reserve is being bulldozed to plant crops](#) including jatropha.

Jatropha production in Burma has also been plagued by mismanagement and other problems. Despite significant investment in growing jatropha, the government failed to build enough infrastructure to process the harvest, leaving much of the crop to rot. Planting has often been haphazard, resulting in crop failures as high as 75% on some plantations, according to the Ethnic Karen Development Forum's report entitled "[Biofuels by Decree](#)." The same report also notes how the government has, without compensation, forced teachers, students, children, farmers, nurses, civil servants, and prisoners to plant jatropha along roadsides, at school, hospital and religious compounds, and on farmland formerly producing rice. And the government also requires that every family by jatropha plants from the government to plant, placing an additional burden on the citizens of Burma.

The challenges that accompany jatropha for local communities in Burma are in many ways reminiscent of the negative impacts of the oil and natural gas projects that ERI has worked on for years. The projects have little, if any, benefit for local people, and often result in forced labor, threats, land confiscations, and the degradation of people's livelihoods. And much like Burma's other energy projects, jatropha may not in the end benefit the people who shoulder the negative consequences of its development. Despite promises to use jatropha to provide power for people in Burma, [the government signed an agreement in 2008 to export jatropha oil](#) to South Korea.

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