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AFRICA: Food Versus Biofuels Debate Continues

By Mantoe Phakathi

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MBABANE, Dec 1 2010 (IPS) - "We're going to Cancún no better off than we were in Copenhagen," said Thuli Makama, the director of Friends of the Earth Swaziland, as she prepared to leave for the climate negotiations in Mexico.

Makama is worried about one particular proposal for reducing greenhouse gas emissions: biofuels. She feels industrialised countries are promoting the production and use of biofuels to fulfill their energy needs, but this will leave more people in the developing world without food.

"We face the danger of growing food for the machines instead of our stomachs," Makama told IPS. Swaziland faces serious shortages of food, with 170,000 of its million-strong population in need of food aid this year.

Makama and Friends of the Earth campaigned hard against a project to establish biofuels production from jatropha in Swaziland.

A UK-based company called D1 Oils signed contracts with the farmers to grow jatropha for them. An initial agreement with the government planned to put 20,000 hectares into biofuels production, possibly expanding to 50,000. The company website states that there are millions of hectares of marginal land in developing countries that cannot effectively be used to grow food.

"Much of this land is suitable for growing energy crops such as jatropha," says the company, which planned to establish its operations in drought-stricken areas of Swaziland.

FoEI spoke to many of the farmers involved with the project. One of these, Sam Dube, told the environmental campaign group he had devoted all three of his fields to the energy crop, where previously he was growing food on two of his plots, and cotton for a cash income in the third.

He faced a three-year wait while his jatropha matured and he could begin to make a profit.

He could be in trouble. D1 Oils pulled out of the project before it properly took off because, according to the company's CEO in Swaziland, Gaetan Ning, the Swazi government was unwilling to support the project with necessary legislation.

"They wanted us to do a national strategy on biofuels, yet it's not our job to do this but government's," said Ning. After spending more than \$8 million over five years cultivating this crop on private farms, the company called it a day.

"We had hired 500 people to work on these farms and we had to retrench them," said Ning.

Gcina Dladla, spokesperson for the Swaziland Environment Authority, said it was a pity that D1 Oils abandoned the project after being asked to do the Strategic Environmental Assessment.

"We wanted to ascertain factually the impact of jatropha on food security, quality of the soil in response to the outcry by civil society organisations," said Dladla.

Prudent, but environmental consultant Rex Brown, who was working with D1 on the jatropha project, argues that food insecurity cannot be blamed on biofuels. The reasons why people in Swaziland and elsewhere go hungry may include inadequate food policies, food availability, market forces, distribution and logistics and suitable climates.

"What is often critical is a person's ability to pay for his food," said Brown. Cultivating jatropha on marginal land in arid Swaziland, he argues, could provide a steady income for rural people either as farm labour or growers in their own right.

Brown says the jatropha-based biofuels project D1 Oils proposed had the added benefit of capturing and storing atmospheric carbon.



Jatropha berries. Credit: John Bwakali/IPS

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"The role of agriculture, and tree crops in particular, in mitigating climate change revolves around the capacity of the plant to store carbon for extended periods of time," said Brown.

Defending biofuels against charges that widescale cultivation will displace farmers and food crops, Brown said it was a case of criticise one, criticise all.

"Rubber, cotton, cocoa, sisal, for example, are crops grown on large plantations globally," said Brown. "Using the argument put forward by biofuel opponents, we should also question the food security of these crops."

No doubt Elfrieda Pschorn-Strauss, from GRAIN, an international NGO that supports biodiverse, community-based food systems, would question the role played by plantation farming of any type.

Pschorn-Strauss says that biofuels - which GRAIN prefers to call agro-fuels - have already displaced farmers from their land, negatively affected food production and caused the destruction of forest.

"So many promises of agro-fuels like jatropha have not materialised," she said.

She does not want to see biofuels gain wider acceptance as part of a mitigation strategy negotiated in Cancún.

"[The industry] has managed to develop mechanisms and agreements that will allow them to legitimately exploit the environment and people for financial gain," said Pschorn-Strauss.

The answer may lie somewhere between the opposing positions. Researcher David Tilman, from the University of Minnesota in the United States, was the lead author of a paper that outlined the potential bases of sustainable and responsible biofuels production.

To gain the maximum carbon emissions reductions over fossil fuels while conserving forest cover and biodiversity, biofuel feedstock should come from municipal and industrial waste, residues from crops and sustainably harvested wood, and from perennial plants grown on degraded land - already abandoned from agricultural use.

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