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An African Call for a Moratorium on Agrofuel Developments

To sign up, please send your
name, organisation and country to:
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We, the undersigned members of African civil society organisations, as well as organisations from other parts of the world, do urgently call for a moratorium on new agrofuel developments on our continent. We need to protect our food security, forests, water, land rights, farmers and indigenous peoples from the aggressive march of agrofuel developments, which are devouring our land and resources at an unbelievable scale and speed.

We call for:

- A moratorium on new agrofuel developments in Africa. Our governments urgently need to stop and think before delivering our continent to the fuel demand of foreign investors.
- No agrofuel targets for Governments in Europe and the rest of the world.
- An international moratorium on agrofuel exports, until the true social and environmental costs can be assessed, and disaster averted.

We have chosen to name this problem “agrofuels” instead of the more common term “biofuels” to make clear that we are talking about the large-scale growing of crops specifically to produce liquid fuels. We are not talking about the use of wood, dung or waste matter. Nor are we talking about small-scale production that is integrated into food production and used for household and local energy supplies. We wish to make clear that the agrofuels push is about large-scale fuel production on massive privatised plantations, driven by the fuel demands of export markets.

Africa is already feeling the impact of climate change, and our continent is likely to be the hardest hit by future changes in our weather systems. We must do all we can to both mitigate the problems and adapt to the coming changes. But the agrofuels push, rather than the seductive “carbon neutral” solution it claims to be, will exacerbate Africa’s climate and food security problems even more.

The agrofuels push in Africa is being termed the next “Green Gold Rush”. Investors are rushing to privatise our land for their plantations, while our governments willingly allocate millions of hectares from the 70% of Africa’s land that is still communally owned. “Jatropha” is being pushed as one of the new miracle crops for African small farmers to produce fuel. But the reality is that the gold rush is firmly controlled by giant transnational companies which are taking over Africa’s land at an incredible pace, and are bringing about disastrous socio-economic and environmental impacts on our communities, food security, forests and water resources.

Some of the impacts that already have been observed in 2007 so far include:

1) Displacing farmers and food security in Tanzania

Thousands of Tanzanian farmers growing rice and maize are already being evicted from fertile areas of land with good access to water, for agrofuel sugar cane and jatropha plantations on newly privatised land. Villages are being cleared, but families have been given minimal compensation or opportunities for their loss of land, community and way of life. Evictions already taken place in Kisarawe District and the Usangu plains, and tens of thousands of hectares in Bagamoyo and Kilwa districts are being given to foreign investors. In addition, the government has identified millions more hectares in at least 10 other districts.

2) Deforestation for agrofuels in Uganda

In Uganda, plans to cut down thousands of hectares of the country's largest rainforest reserve, for a sugar plantation for ethanol have fortunately been cancelled, following civil protest on the issue. Such deforestation can threaten local water cycles, as Mabira Forest is a key water catchment area for Lake Victoria and the River Nile. Unfortunately, however, thousands of hectares of forest on Kalangala and Bugala Islands in Lake Victoria have already been cut down to make way for palm oil plantations.

3) Conservation Areas Threatened in Ethiopia

Millions of hectares in Ethiopia have been identified as suitable for agrofuel production, and many foreign companies have already been allocated land from farmland, forests and wilderness areas. Even protected areas are not safe from the spread of agrofuels. One European investor has been granted 13,000 hectares of land in Oromia state – 87% of which is the Babile Elephant Sanctuary, a home to rare and endangered elephants.

4) A Bad Deal for Out-growers in Zambia

Privatised plantations are not the only model of large-scale agrofuel production in Africa. Some investors in Zambia are choosing to grow crops such as jatropha through huge numbers of out-growers, using contracts that last up to 30 years. These contracts serve to transfer control over production from the farmer to the company, through a system of loans, numerous extra charges and service payments, and prices determined by the company. Under such a system of dependence, farmers are likely to increase their indebtedness to the company, until they may be obliged to hand over their land altogether.

5) Fuel or food in West Africa?

In West Africa, the agrofuel craze is also gaining momentum. Jatropha is already being grown in Togo, Ghana, Senegal, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Niger. Senegal's president Abdoulaye Wade has enthused about an African "biofuels revolution" and placed fuel crops at the heart of an agriculture renewal programme in his country. In Ghana one company is planning to plant one million hectares of Jatropha with support of the government, while in Benin another company has obtained permission to plant a quarter of a million hectares of agrofuel crops. Farmers in Benin and in many other countries in the region have, on the average, no more than 1 hectare to grow their products and the agrofuels are expected to make a serious dent into their food production.

In other words: the agrofuels 'revolution' is geared to replace millions of hectares of local agricultural systems, and the rural communities working in them, with large plantations. It is oriented to substitute biodiversity-based indigenous cropping, grazing and pasture farming systems with monocultures and genetically engineered agrofuel

crops. In addition, the millions of hectares of what the agrofuel-pushers euphemistically call “wastelands” or “marginal soils” are to be turned to ‘productive’ fuel production, conveniently forgetting that millions of people in local communities make a living from these fragile ecosystems. And where there are no indigenous farming systems to replace, one just takes the forests. In the driver’s seat are the multinational corporations that manage these kinds of huge monocultures best and already control the international market for agrofuels.

In Africa, much of the drive for agrofuel developments comes from talk of achieving national energy security. However, in most countries there seems to be a failure to recognise that foreign companies are already controlling the direction of biofuel production, with an eye on targeting more lucrative export markets. Rising global oil prices will determine the price of liquid biofuels, and is likely to price fuel and feedstock out of the reach of the poor, and into export markets in the North.

We simply do not believe that agrofuels offer a genuine solution for climate change or energy security. Scientific studies show that the production, processing and transport of agrofuels, uses more energy than is contained in the fuel product. Other studies show that the cutting down and burning of forests and peatlands to make way for agrofuel plantations, produces many times more carbon dioxide emissions per litre of agrofuel than the equivalent amount of fossil fuel. The current push for agrofuels exacerbate, rather than solve, the problem of climate change.

To address climate change, we don’t need agrofuel plantations to produce fuel energy. Instead, we need to turn the industrial production system upside down. We need policies and strategies to reduce the consumption of energy and to prevent waste. Such policies and strategies already exist and are being fought for. In agriculture and food production, they mean orienting production towards local rather than international markets; they mean adopting strategies to keep people on the land, rather than throwing them off; they mean supporting sustained and sustainable approaches for bringing biodiversity back into agriculture, using and expanding on local knowledge; and they mean putting local communities back in the driving seat of rural development. Such policies and strategies imply the use and further development of agro-ecological technologies to maintain and improve soil fertility and organic matter and in the process to sequester carbon dioxide in the soil rather than expelling it into the atmosphere. Together, such measures would amount to a formidable step in the right direction in the fight against climate change.

Among Africa’s many challenges, food security is one of the most serious. A full car tank of ethanol uses the same amount of grain that can feed a child for a year. We do not understand how our governments can willingly take our food, land and water to meet the fuel luxuries of the wealthy in the North, when we already face problems of food security and environmental destruction at home.

We can ill afford to lose our food, forests, land and water, if we are to meet the challenges of climate change and food insecurity. We therefore ask our African governments and those of the North to stop and think. We urgently call for a moratorium that can protect Africa from the many threats of the new and dangerous Agrofuels stampede.

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