



Governing the Risks and Opportunities of Bioenergy

Workshop Summary Statement 12 October 2007

Bioenergy has become an increasingly important topic for governments, businesses, and civil society. Since the 1970s, large-scale government policies and programs have led to the use of biological resources (wood, sugarcane, maize, soya, etc.) for bioenergy, largely to support the agricultural sector, but recent increases in oil prices and concerns about global warming have encouraged investment in bioenergy and supplemented the motivations for doing so. All this has resulted in greater attention being paid to the effects of biofuel production and their numerous claimed advantages.

Yet bioenergy also has some risks that are receiving inadequate attention. It appears that in at least some parts of the world, policies are being decided before sound scientific support has been generated. This has made the topic of bioenergy of great interest to the International Risk Governance Council (IRGC), based in Geneva. To address some of the risk governance issues inherent in bioenergy, IRGC convened an Expert Meeting in the form of a workshop in Divonne, France, on 18-20 September.

In its early discussions, the workshop began to identify some key themes. First, many different risks are associated with bioenergy – environmental, economic and social – as well as potential opportunities. Understanding and managing these risks will require more analysis and consideration of tradeoffs than they have been given so far. Therefore, policy decisions at this time should provide guidance towards overall objectives and avoid lock-in of capital or policy choices while stimulating new research, case-by-case analysis and innovation. One example might be replacement of fuel-specific mandates with performance standards for low carbon fuels.

Second, the number and variety of individuals and organizations that may face positive or negative consequences of bioenergy development is very large, which creates a complex decision-making arena requiring choices with potentially large equity implications. Third, bioenergy is changing rapidly, including change in the social goals bioenergy policy is meant to achieve, increased recognition of potential negative impacts of bioenergy, and the development of new bioenergy technologies. Thus, it is clear that current bioenergy policies will not suffice and old bioenergy technologies are likely to cause more harm than good if they are simply expanded in scale. The workshop found good reason to be sceptical about current approaches.

Bioenergy incorporates a diverse set of technologies for producing fuel for transport, electricity and/or heat that can be implemented at many scales. Thus, policy must adequately address different situations and should complement existing policy discussions on land use, food security, climate change, biodiversity conservation and energy security. A more thorough evaluation of the tradeoffs between risks and opportunities, and the development and deployment of more advanced bioenergy technologies offer the hope that bioenergy can contribute to sustainable energy supply systems. Of course, energy efficiency and other energy sources will also play key roles and bioenergy must be comparatively assessed against the widest possible set of options for sustainable production and consumption of energy, as well as against current energy sources.

IRGC's project on Governing the Risks and Opportunities of Bioenergy

These summary statements are the preliminary thoughts of a highly diverse group of experts on bioenergy who took part in the first workshop of the IRGC project on 'Governing the Risks and Opportunities of Bioenergy'. The workshop was chaired by Jeff McNeely, Chief Scientist at The World Conservation Union (IUCN) and included participants from international organisations, academic institutions, NGOs and the private sector, covering North America, Latin America, Europe and India.

This on-going project aims to prepare risk governance guidelines and policy options for the production of electricity, heat and transport fuel from biomass. It addresses the key challenges that policymakers face when developing and implementing policies and regulations that address new demands for an expanded production of bioenergy. The project hopes to enable societies to benefit from emerging technologies while minimizing the negative consequences of their associated risks.

List of participants

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