

Fuelling World Hunger: How The Global Biofuel Industry Is Creating Massive Destruction

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The global expansion of the biofuel industry – in which agricultural land and crops are used to produce fuel for transport vehicles rather than food for humans – is a major factor driving the dramatic escalation of food prices worldwide.

In a new book, Massive Destruction [2], French author Jean Ziegler [3] shows how the biofuel industry and wider agroindustry are threatening to inflict hunger on the world on an unprecedented scale. This is no blind accident, says Ziegler. It is the deliberate result of policies implemented by governments beholden to powerful agribusiness corporations in their pursuit of private profit. In that way, the resultant increasing levels of world hunger can be described as a form of “calculated murder”.

Ironically, the biofuel industry is being promoted by corporations and governments as a sustainable, “ecofriendly” alternative to fossil fuels. In reality, it is just another form of the same reckless exploitation of resources that results from insatiable elite private profit under capitalist economic production. The biofuel industry stems from a marriage of agribusiness and oil corporations who know full well that this new global enterprise is inflicting massive environmental destruction and human suffering.

Over the past five years, the world has witnessed skyrocketing food prices, which is putting millions more people at risk of hunger – all because they simply can no longer afford to buy food. This is a shocking indictment of an economic system that puts the imperative of private profit above the daily survival of human beings. Chief among the factors causing this inflation in food prices is the stellar rise of the global biofuel industry. So how can such a destructive industry continue to be promoted in the face of its own consequent human suffering? The short answer is because the public is largely unaware of the political and economic practicalities.

The following are excerpts from Professor Ziegler’s book, translated by Siv O’Neall [4], which helps to uncover the realities of the biofuel industry. Three major factors contribute to the scarcity and the ever-increasing price of food commodities.

Land grabbing for the cultivation of sugar cane and other plants, especially in the US, for the production of biofuels (ethanol), is one major cause of the scarcity of food since it deprives the small land owners of their land and reduces the amount of food for everybody. Also the loss of arable land for the production of biofuel has contributed to the scandalous increase in food prices. Less land, less food – so higher prices. Added to that is also the fact that

biofuels even increase the damage to the earth that their advocates so loudly and dishonestly claim to reduce.

The speculation in food commodities as well as in arable land must also be forcefully denounced as a major contributing factor in the dramatic increases in basic food prices that we have seen since mid-2007. Thus, not only are the small farmers deprived of their land, often with no, or very little, compensation, but also, with the skyrocketing food prices, they cannot even afford buying the food they need for survival.

The third cause is desertification of land and soil degradation which is only hastened by the increased replacement of biological farms by huge monocultures for biofuel or for Genetically Modified Organism cultures that demand enormous amounts of water. Rivers and lakes are drying out and an ever-increasing number of people in the world are lacking access to clean drinking-water.

The Lie

“Green gold” has for several years been considered as a magic and profitable complement to “black gold”.

Food-production trusts that dominate the trade in biofuels, in support of new products, make an argument that might appear irrefutable: the substitution of fossil fuel by energy derived from plants would be the ultimate weapon in the fight against the rapid deterioration of the climate and the irreversible damage this does to the environment and humans.

Here are some figures: Over 100 billion liters of bioethanol and biodiesel will be produced in 2011. The same year, 100 million hectares of agricultural crops will be used to produce biofuels. Global production of biofuels has doubled over the past five years, from 2006 to 2011.

Climate degradation is a reality. Globally, desertification and land degradation now affect more than 1 billion people in over 100 countries. Dry areas – where arid and semi-arid regions are particularly susceptible to degradation – represent over 44% of arable land on the planet.

Destruction of ecosystems and degradation of large agricultural areas in the world, especially in Africa, is a tragedy for small farmers and animal breeders. In Africa, the UN estimates that there are 25 million “environmental refugees” or “environmental migrants”, that is to say human beings who have been forced to leave their homes because of natural disasters (floods, droughts, desertification) and who eventually have to fight for survival in the slums of large cities. Land degradation fuels conflicts, especially between animal breeders and farmers.

Transcontinental companies producing biofuels have persuaded the majority of world public opinion and substantially all of the Western states that energy produced from plants is the miracle weapon against climate degradation.

But their argument is a lie. It ignores the methods and the environmental costs of biofuel production, which requires both water and energy.

All over the planet, clean water is becoming increasingly scarce. One out of three persons is reduced to drinking polluted water. Some 9,000 children under ten are dying every day from

drinking water that is unfit for consumption.

According to the WHO, one-third of the world population still lacks access to safe water at an affordable price, and half of the world population has no access to clean water. Approximately 285 million people live in sub-Saharan Africa without regular access to clean water [5].

And, of course, it is the poor who suffer most severely from the lack of water.

However, when you consider the water reserves that exist in the world, the production every year of tens of billions of gallons of biofuel is a real disaster. Some 4,000 liters of water are required to produce 1 liter of bioethanol.

Barack Obama's obsession

Biofuel producers, some the world's most powerful multinational corporations, have their headquarters in the US. Each year they receive billions of dollars of government aid. In the words of President Barack Obama in his State of the Union Address in 2011: for the United States, the bioethanol and biodiesel program is "a national cause," a cause of national security.

In 2011, subsidized by \$6 billion of public funds, US trusts will burn 38.3 % of the national corn harvest, against 30.7 % in 2008. And since 2008, corn prices on the world market have increased by 48%.

The United States is by far the most dynamic industrial power and also the top producer in the world. Despite a relatively low number of inhabitants - 300 million, compared with 1.3 billion and more in China and India - the United States produces just over 25% of all industrial goods manufactured in one year on the planet.

The raw material of this impressive machine is oil. The US on a daily average burns 20 million barrels, or about a quarter of the world production. Some 61% of this volume - slightly more than 12 million barrels per day - is imported [6].

For the US president, this dependence from abroad is obviously a concern. And most worrying is the fact that most of this imported oil comes from regions where political instability is endemic or Americans are not well regarded - in short, where production and export to the United States are not guaranteed.

George W Bush was the initiator of the biofuel program. In January 2007, he set the goal to be reached: in the next ten years, the US had to reduce by 20% its consumption of fossil fuels and multiply by seven the production of biofuels.

Burning millions of tons of food crops on a planet where every five seconds a child under ten dies of hunger is obviously scandalous.

The tank of a midsize car holds 50 liters. To make 50 liters of bioethanol, 358 kg of corn have to be destroyed.

In Mexico and in Zambia, corn is the staple food. With 358 kg of corn, a Zambian or a Mexican child can get enough to eat for one year.

The curse of sugar cane

Not only do biofuels each year consume hundreds of millions of tons of corn, wheat and other foods, and not only does their production release into the atmosphere millions of tons of carbon dioxide, but, in addition to this, they cause social disasters in the countries where the transcontinental companies that manufacture the biofuel become dominant.

Take the example of Brazil.

The struggle of the workers in the *engenho* [7] *Trapiche* is a suitable example. The vast lands that are barely visible in the evening mist were once state lands. They were, just a few years ago, agricultural plots of land, 1 to 2 hectares in size cultivated by small subsistence farmers. The families lived in poverty, but they were secure, enjoyed a certain degree of wellbeing and relative freedom.

Through influential relations with the federal government in Brasilia and their significant capital, the financiers have obtained the “decommissioning”, that is to say the privatization of these lands. The small bean and cereal farmers who lived here were deported to the slums of Recife. The few exceptions were those farmers who agreed, for a pittance, to become sugar cane cutters. And today, those laborers are overexploited.

In Brazil, the biofuel production program is considered a priority. And sugar cane is one of the most profitable commodities for the production of bioethanol.

The Brazilian program for a rapid increase in the production of bioethanol has a curious name: the Pro-alcohol plan. It is the pride of the government. In 2009, Brazil consumed 14 billion liters of bioethanol (and biodiesel) and exported 4 billion.

The aim of the government is to export over 200 billion liters. The Brasilia government wants to increase to 26 million hectares the cultivation of sugar cane. In the struggle against the bioethanol giants, the powerless cane cutters on the *Trapiche* plantation do not have a chance.

The Brazilian Pro-alcohol implementation plan has led to the rapid concentration of land in the hands of a few indigenous barons and of transnational corporations.

This monopolization increases inequalities and exacerbates rural poverty (as well as urban poverty, as a result of migration from rural areas). In addition, the exclusion of smallholders threatens the country’s food security, since they are the ones who can guarantee sustenance agriculture.

As for rural households headed by women, they have less access to land and suffer greater discrimination.

In short, the development of the production of the “green gold” on the agro-export model tremendously enriches the sugar barons but impoverishes the small farmers, the sharecroppers and “the *boiafrio*” [8] even further. It has actually signed the death warrant for small and medium family farms – and thus the country’s food sovereignty.

But aside from the Brazilian sugar barons, the Pro-Alcohol program naturally creates profits for the transnational companies, such as Louis Dreyfus, Bunge, Noble Group, Archer Daniels Midland, and for the financial groups belonging to Bill Gates and George Soros, as well as

the sovereign wealth funds of China.

In a country like Brazil, where millions of people are demanding the right to own a piece of land, where food security is threatened, land grabbing by transnational corporations and sovereign wealth funds [9] is one additional scandal.

To gain new grazing land, large landowners and managers of transcontinental companies burn Brazil's forests. Tens of thousands of hectares each year.

The destruction is final. The soils of the Amazon basin and of Mato Grosso [10], covered with primary forests, have only a thin layer of humus. Even in the unlikely event that the leaders of Brasilia would be seized by a sudden fit of lucidity, they could not recreate the Amazon rainforest, "the lungs of the planet". According to a scenario accepted by the World Bank, at the current rate of burning, 40% of the Amazon rainforest will be gone by 2050.

To the extent that Brazil has gradually replaced the culture of food crops by sugar cane, it has entered the vicious circle of the international food market: forced to import food that it does not produce itself, the global demand has thus amplified... which in turn causes an increase in prices.

The food insecurity, of which a large part of the Brazilian population are the victims, is thus directly related to the Pro-alcohol program. This particularly affects the areas where sugar cane is cultivated, since the staple foods based almost exclusively on imported commodities are subject to significant price fluctuations. Many small farmers and agricultural workers are net buyers of food because they do not have enough land to produce a sufficient amount of food for their families. Thus, in 2008, the peasants could not buy enough food due to the sudden explosion in prices.

In addition, in order to reduce costs, producers of biofuel exploit migrant workers by the millions, according to a model of ultra-liberal capitalist agriculture. They are not only paid pittance wages, but they work inhuman schedules, offered minimal support infrastructure, and the working conditions are bordering on slavery.

Conclusion

If the world is to be saved from the grip of neoliberalism, and from the immense greed and total callousness of the "new masters of the world" [121], we must act now. We have to see clearly with eyes and minds wide open how these predators are rapidly taking the people and the world hostage in their absurd attempt to increase their own wealth and dominate the planet. We must come together and work tirelessly, not losing hope, not losing sight of the goal of saving the earth. We must not be deluded by the deafening propaganda machines. We must stand firm and together. There may yet be a way out of the inferno.

NOTES

[1] Editing, with permission from the authors, by Finian Cunningham for Global Research. The original translated article and footnotes were first posted on Axis of Logic: http://axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/Article_64191.shtml

[2] Destruction Massive - Géopolitique de la Faim, by Jean Ziegler, Editions du Seuil, published 13 October 2011.

[3] Jean Ziegler, a former professor of sociology at the University of Geneva and the Sorbonne, Paris, is member of the UN Human Rights Council's Advisory Committee, with an expertise on economic, social and cultural rights. For the period 2000-2008, Ziegler was the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. In March 2008, he was elected Member of the UN Human Rights Council's Advisory Committee. One year later, the Human Rights Council decided, by acclamation, to re-elect Jean Ziegler as a member of the Advisory Committee, a post he will now hold until 2012. In August 2009, the members of the Advisory Committee elected him as Vice-President of the forum.

[4] Siv O'Neill is a writer and activist based in Lyon, France, who is a regular columnist for Axis of Logic on many international topics. She translated excerpts from Jean Ziegler's latest book for the present article, with the author's permission. She can be contacted at siv@axisoflogic.com.

[5] 248 million in South Asia are in the same situation, 398 million in East Asia, 180 million in South Asia and the East Pacific, 92 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 67 million in Arab countries.

[6] Only 8 million barrels are produced from Texas, the Gulf of Mexico (offshore) and Alaska.

[7] Engenho is a colonial-era Portuguese term for a sugar mill and the associated facilities. The word engenho usually only referred to the mill, but it could also describe the area as a whole including land, a mill, the people who farmed it.

[8] Landless workers (boia = ox ; frio = cold). He'll be working like an ox and he'll be eating cold food.

[9] A sovereign wealth fund (SWF) is a state-owned investment fund composed of financial assets such as stocks, bonds, property, precious metals or other financial instruments. Sovereign wealth funds invest globally.

[10] Mato Grosso is a state in the center-west of Brazil, bordering on Bolivia and Paraguay.

[11] See *Les Nouveaux Maîtres du Monde et Ceux qui leur Résistent* de Jean Ziegler (Editions Fayards), 2005.

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