A threat for Africa?

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Biofuels have been a disaster for Africa’s communities, a new report by three non-governmental organizations says.

According to the NGO’s investigations in Ethiopia, growing biofuels has lowered farmers’ income dramatically and has taken away land urgently needed for food crops.

Too much hope has been pinned on Jatropha, the report Biofuels - Failure for Africa. The succulent flowering plant is a potential candidate for energy crop production because its toxic seeds contain up to 40% oil. It also grows in deserts and is therefore celebrated as the solution to the food-versus-fuel debate. But “while Jatropha plant may survive and even grow in dry lands, without water it does not produce sufficient oily seeds needed for biofuel production,” the report says. The African Biodiversity network, the Ethiopian Society for Consumer Protection and The Gaia Foundation therefore decry the idea that biofuels are a great opportunity for Africa.

The organizations based their report on interviews and field visits with local farmers, biofuel companies and government officials in Ethiopia. As Jatropha performs poorly on so-called marginal land, biofuel companies have recruited small farmers to grow different energy crops like Castor, which the report says – on land where the farmers had grown maize, potatoes, and peanuts before. But the yields of the Castor crops are poor. Thus, according to the report, “small farmers bear the brunt of financial burden” and earn a lot less than before.

As an example for Jatropha’s complete failure, the report gives the UK-based biofuel company Sun Biofuels. According to the study, they gave up on their Ethiopian Jatropha plantation because the yields were devastasting. “That is not true,” says Harry Stouton from Sun Biofuels. “We pulled out of Ethiopia because it was too difficult an environment for operating. Instead we focused on our two other sites in Mozambique and Tanzania. There the infrastructure is much better and government is easier to deal with.” In Mozambique and Tanzania Sun Biofuels still grows Jatropha. But it is too soon to know how good the yields will be, Stouton says.

Don’t give up on Jatropha too soon, warns John Mathews, chair in Competitive Dynamics and Global Strategy at LUISS Guido Carli University in Italy: “If there are difficulties in raising the crops on marginal land, this needs to be addressed by agronomic initiatives,” he says. “After all, it took decades to establish water-based rice cultivation in Southeast Asian countries, after its success had been demonstrated in certain locations initially.” He still thinks that biofuel crops need to start with marginal lands to avoid the charge that they are trading off fuel for food.

Back in 2008, several non-governmental organizations including the Gaia Foundation denied the “existence of vast tracts of wasteland, waiting for someone to put them to good use.” In their statement Agrofuels and the myth of the marginal lands the NGOs claim that these lands have been under communal use for generations: “Land that is marginal to one person may be a vital resource to another.” The briefing also predicted that Jatropha would not produce a worthwhile crop on marginal soil. Harry Stouton of Sun Biofuels actually shares this view: “No plant grows on marginal land and produces a normal yield—that is the reality.”

In Mozambique, Sun Biofuels grows Jatropha on a former tobacco plantation with fertile soil. Nevertheless, biofuels are a “huge opportunity” for Africa, Stouton says: “When the previous operator pulled out of Mozambique, they left terrible unemployment and poverty behind them. One thousand jobs suddenly disappeared.” Four years later, Sun Biofuels turned the site into an energy crop plantation: “We have employed 1200 people there, so the economy is recovering.”

NGOs still oppose of setting up biofuel plantations in Africa: “Many of these communities would prefer to continue to live as farmers, pastoralists and hunter-gatherers,” their statement reads. “A few seasonal and poorly-paid jobs on agrofuels plantations” would not make their lives any better.

However, to economists like John Mathews it is not a question of additional jobs gained by energy crop production. He sees the wider scope: modernizing and commercializing agricultural industries for entry into national and international markets. “Agricultural yields have remained at a depressively low level in Africa for decades,” he says. “And biofuels give the opportunity to improve yields, which would then translate into improved yields across the board, including food production.”

According to Mathews, African countries are a “potential breadbasket for the world”, but protectionist agricultural policies keep the markets in Europe and the North America closed to other countries. Thus, African countries remain “locked in subsistence agricultural practices which reproduce cycles of poverty.” The key, Mathews says, is to open the markets of Europe and North America – and biofuels could achieve that.

But as a matter of fact, biofuels could also become a threat for Africa, just as the NGOs claim, John Mathews says, namely, “if governments allow large foreign oil and energy companies to establish vast plantations that have no forward or backward linkages with the local economy.” That has to be avoided in any circumstances: “A great opportunity would then be squandered.”

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