
[Energy plantations: Another huge new threat to our planet](#)

Problems arising from the social and environmental impacts caused by industrial timber and pulpwood plantations have been well documented over the past 20 years. Now there is ample evidence that the temporary financial benefits generated by monoculture plantation projects which mostly accrue to affluent consumers of their artificially cheap products, the corporate plantation owners and their banks, are heavily outweighed by the costs of their negative environmental and social effects, which are long-term or permanent.

Nevertheless it seems that this knowledge has done little to discourage further investment in more of the same destructive industrial monocultures. Instead there has been a rush to expand the area under such plantations, with the ill-informed encouragement of United Nations bodies such as the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) and of course the World Bank. One of the factors motivating this trend is the assumption being promoted by the UNFCCC (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) that tree plantations are effective in reducing carbon dioxide (CO²) emissions, despite the fact that they are just a temporary timber crop that will be logged and, earlier or later, converted into even more CO² emissions on a continuous basis.

This nonsensical notion has been further justified by the “Clean Development Mechanism” (CDM) of the Kyoto Protocol, which has approved the ‘Afforestation/Reforestation’ methodology as a way for polluting industries in the North to be able to continue emitting greenhouse gases whilst destroying biodiversity, water resources and local subsistence economies in poor Southern nations. What makes this part of the CDM even crazier is that the invasive alien tree plantations that are being established in functional grasslands, severely degrade the environment and in fact cause the release of CO² and methane into the atmosphere. This is in addition to the problems created through the displacement of sustainable small-scale agricultural communities, excessive water consumption by the plantation trees, and the loss of topsoil and permanent damage to the fertility of the land that they cause.

However, the greed and convoluted thinking that has been used to legitimise this system has also been employed to find new ways to prop up and to perpetuate the wasteful consumption of energy in so-called developed countries. This latest false climate change solution is generally misrepresented as ‘renewable energy’ from biomass, which can take the form of liquid fuels such as soybean or rapeseed oil, or ethanol produced from sugar cane or sugar beet, otherwise known as ‘agrofuels’. A worrisome aspect of this approach is that while it appears to be based on noble intentions, in reality it seeks to maintain high levels of wasteful energy use by simply replacing fossil fuels with biomass-based fuels. Thus, under the guise of the biggest scam of the 21st century, known euphemistically as the ‘green economy’, these energy plantations give those countries that have already done the most damage to ecosystems and to the global climate, license to continue plundering the resources of Southern nations.

African countries are particularly vulnerable to this onslaught, with land and resource grabs taking place with increasing frequency. Vast areas are being targeted for ethanol crops, especially sugar

cane, whilst massive timber plantations for the production of woodchips to be burned in former coal-fired power stations in Europe and the UK are in the pipeline. Though huge new discoveries of fossil gas and oil deposits in Africa will help feed the global energy juggernaut, it is very unlikely that the greedy grip of old and new colonial forces on African land, minerals and water will just go away.

The Threat of Energy Plantation Stupidity in South Africa

Most of the Energy-from-biomass projects being planned or considered in South Africa are aimed at increasing total energy consumption rather than for reducing the production and consumption of fossil fuels. There is an unwelcome prospect of even more fossil fuels being consumed via the use of shale gas obtained by 'fracking' for which the South African government has issued a number of exploration permits.

The main drivers of plans to use biomass-based energy derived from large-scale crop or tree plantations are a mandatory biofuel blending policy of the government, and the desire of various polluting industries to green-wash their excessive energy-consumption by making small token changes to the mix of energy used in their factories, such as by adding small amounts of wood-waste to the coal they burn. These pathetic efforts have also been inspired by the ridiculous notion that a dirty polluting pulp mill can earn carbon offset credits under the CDM by making dubious emission reductions on one level, whilst in fact increasing overall emissions!

However the biggest threat to rural communities and to the natural environment in South Africa is the ambition of the sugar industry to establish huge new industrial plantations on un-transformed community land, in order to produce the ethanol required to meet the petrol-ethanol blending target set by the government. This will destroy hundreds of thousands of hectares of communally-owned natural grassland areas, and will also cause the displacement of low-input traditional food-farming by extensive agro-chemical and irrigation based cropping of sugar cane and sugar beet.

However, apart from all the industry hype and propaganda, how these actions can contribute in any meaningful way to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, or even help to mitigate global warming and climate change, remains a complete mystery!

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