
Climate change, supposedly renewable energy and biomass

Since time immemorial, human beings have used biomass to produce energy in a sustainable way. In the meantime, industrialization is exhausting the world's reserves of fossil fuels, leading to the frenetic search for other sources of energy. One of these is bioenergy, based on the production of energy from living matter, or biomass.

Biomass is organic material such as trees, shrubs, grasses, grains, algae, microbes and also plant residues.

The Kyoto Protocol and related agreements have given rise to policies in Europe such as the Renewable Energy Directive, adopted by the European Parliament in December 2008. The goal of the directive is to diversify energy sources, but also to open up new globalized markets for European agroindustry. It automatically led to an industrial-scale bioenergy boom in many countries on the continent.

Today, two thirds of the so-called renewable energy consumed in the EU comes from biomass. Other renewable energies – such as solar, wind and hydro power – account for only one third. The European Commission has set a target for 14% of all of the European Union's energy to be generated from biomass by 2020. The raw material will not necessarily be waste – as is frequently claimed – but also wood, as well as vegetable oils and biogas. At the same time, 75% of subsidies for renewable energies are allocated to biomass and biofuels, while the remainder are divided between solar and wind energy.

This is all happening behind the backs of the general public. The information they are provided with is biased towards selling the benefits of the “green economy”, which is merely a means of pursuing the continuation of unlimited growth instead of adopting concrete measures to promote energy saving and efficiency.

“Renewable” means that something is constantly replaced by new growth, while “sustainable” refers to activities that can be continued without a negative impact on the environment. But contrary to the claims that are often made, neither of these concepts applies to the globalized economy and the massive and ever growing use of energy, nor to the environmental and social impacts of this economic model.

The supposed benefits of the generation of electricity from forest biomass are the unlimited availability of wood, the use of forest residues from tree pruning and forest maintenance, and the “clean” or carbon-neutral production involved.

But let's not kid ourselves: there are nowhere near enough forest residues to meet the demand from all of the biomass power plants that are being built. Worldwide production of wood pellets was around 10 million tons in 2008, and this is expected to double in the next four to five years. The UK-based organization Biofuelwatch predicts annual worldwide growth of 25% to 30% in the next ten years. This huge increase in the demand for wood to produce electricity will have a major impact on forests

in Europe, North America and Russia, and will force many countries to import the raw materials from countries in the global South.

The demand for wood for electricity and heat generation is expected to reach 700 million cubic metres annually in Europe. The timber industry (for example, for furniture manufacturing) and pulp and paper production already require 500 million cubic metres of wood annually. This has led FAO to predict that by 2020, Europe will face a dramatic shortfall of some 400 million cubic metres of wood annually.

The demand for imported wood has led to a race for the control and use of productive land, and the displacement of indigenous and peasant communities from the forests to make way for companies that produce wood-based industrial raw materials. The carbon neutrality of this activity is also questionable, since it is not based on any scientific evidence, but rather on calculations designed to serve its interests.

Countries like Sweden, the United Kingdom and Germany are witnessing unprecedented development in large-scale biomass energy production. In the United Kingdom, for example, the demand for biomass will be around 50 to 60 million tons annually to supply the numerous biomass power plants that are either planned, under construction or already operating. But the United Kingdom only produces between eight and nine million tons of dry biomass a year. Conclusion: it will need to import the rest.

What is presented to the public as a benign and beneficial shift from fossil fuel to renewable energy is in fact a global plunder of the South's natural resources for the benefit of the North, which will further deepen injustice and worsen poverty and hunger.

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