

THE HUMAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL COST OF EU'S BIO-ENERGY OPTION – A PERSPECTIVE



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On February 07, 2018, AEFJN along with some notable Civil Society Organizations in Europe launched [a new report](#) that x-rays the socio-economic consequences of the rising global pattern of palm oil consumption. I pay particular attention in the report to the European Union consumption pattern and its potential negative consequences for Africa's food sovereignty, ecological impacts, socio-economic upheavals and the unprecedented migration to Europe.

The European consumption of palm oil has doubled in recent time hitting a record 6.5 million tons in 2016, making the EU the 2nd largest importer and 3rd largest consumer in the world. The European consumption of palm oil is worrisome because of the final product. While other consumers mostly employ it in the food and cosmetics industries or house finishing and cleaning agent industries, the EU uses hers mainly for bio-diesel. The aim of the EU parliament to [have 10% of the transport fuel of every EU country come from renewable sources such as biofuels](#) means that her consumption is bound to continue to increase in the coming years.

Although there are alternative sources of vegetable oil to palm oil, the fact that palm trees thrive only in certain regions of the world like East Asia (Indonesia and Malaysia who supply 85% of the present global Market), Amazonia, the great lakes of Africa and some other regions of Africa, the preferred marketplace for Europe is Africa. The reasons are not hard to figure out. First of all, it is relatively cheap to produce palm oil with higher output per hectare of land than other sources of vegetable oil like soya which thrive in Europe. Secondly, for historical reasons, the EU looks towards Africa to meet its growing demand for bio-diesel.

The thought of Europe making Africa its choice market is like an ominous cloud over the African continent which is still struggling with the previous economic exploitation of its natural resources. What is the new fear here? Africa's population is growing rapidly. At present, it is about 1.2 billion and could be, according to some estimates, over 4 billion in the year 2100. Additionally, there is the likelihood that climate change will affect Africa more than any other region in the world. The anticipated consequence is that dryness will make agricultural production impossible in some areas of the continent. With this emerging scenario, putting more

pressure on Africa's agricultural lands and forests to produce palm oil for European bio-diesel consumption with its negative socio-economic consequences on Africa will worsen the migration of people within Africa and towards Europe on a scale that could threaten the political stability of Europe. The impact is already taking its toll on the Great Lakes Region of Africa as a result of heavy deforestation to make way for palm oil production.

Once again, this is a cause for concern! It calls into question the various development co-operation initiatives between the EU and Africa that facilitate land grabbing in Africa for so-called agricultural development; it also puts a question mark over the use of European development finance in Africa and the gap between the EU policy intentions towards Africa and the impacts on the lives of people, especially the most vulnerable. Without a doubt, the fact that bio-diesel is renewable does not suggest that it is sustainable. Sustainability makes sense only in the context of the sustainability of the entire ecosystem. The EU option for biofuels is good for the planet but the choice of Africa as the raw-material source raises some questions. Perhaps, the most important question is whether the destruction of the African forests to make room for palm oil plantations is a genuine way to reduce the carbon footprints of Europe? Obviously, it is more of the transfer of the cause of global warming to a weak region that is already very vulnerable to the impacts. There is also the other long-time effect of forcing Africans to migrate for survival; curiously, Europe has become the choice destination.

From an ethical viewpoint, the choice of the personal good (group good) over and above the common good at any policy-making process is a deliberate choice to hurt our shared humanity. Christian anthropology puts the *imago Dei* at the foundation of the socio-economic decisions and so decisions contrary to the status quo represent unfaithfulness to this foundational value. A just and peaceful society is only possible when the respect of the foundational value of the Human person becomes the centre of economic gravity. It is the ethical value that brings clarity to the choice between money as a means and money as an end in itself, and that brings an end to the confusion of virtual reality and reality itself.

In summary, our stance advocates for due consideration to be accorded to all stakeholders. AEFJN supports the EU quest for a reduced carbon footprint through the biofuel options. However, it must be an authentic reduction and not a transfer of burden to the poorer nations. We hold that, given the historical antecedents of Africa as the source of EU's raw materials, the tacit systematic move to replace African forests with palm plantations to support that biofuel drive carries a long-term huge human and environmental cost. It is an opportunity cost that will not affect Europe immediately, but it will in its boomerang effect because it will adversely affect the human capital and the environment of Africa.

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