

International Conference on Biofuels
Plenary Session III – Biofuels and Sustainability

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Summary of the Discussions

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Sustainability issues

- Biofuels are a multifaceted issue. The debates on their sustainability need to take into account environmental, social and economic aspects.
- There is a need to put the discussion on biofuels in the right context, especially in light of energy, climate change and sustainable development related challenges. Recent debates have been emotional and seem to have lost focus. Therefore, continuous exchange of information and knowledge production are fundamental.
- The sustainable production and use of biofuels as an alternative to fossil fuels is a desirable goal. Not all countries, however, are in a position to produce them in a sustainable manner.
- The decision to produce and use biofuels must be an informed and responsible one.
- Countries looking to produce biofuels should learn from both the positive and negative aspects of existing experiences. A successful model cannot be identically replicated elsewhere without taking into account local realities.
- The development of biofuels raises discussions about soil degradation, efficient use of water, biodiversity and food security, *inter alia*. Such concerns do not apply exclusively to biofuels but are related to the whole agricultural sector.
- From an environmental perspective, there are concerns about biodiversity loss and deforestation associated with the expansion of biofuels production.
- Some pointed out that demand for biofuels may lead to direct or indirect expansion over vulnerable areas. Others argued that it is not possible to establish clearly a linear relationship between growth in biofuels production and the expansion of agricultural activities over such areas.
- Some mentioned that biofuels produced from the various feedstocks available have different energy balances and potentials for reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases.
- The need for integration of the productive processes of biofuels, for instance the co-generation of electricity, was also mentioned as a contribution to sustainability.

- Regarding the possible linkages with food security, some pointed out that the production of biofuels might be one of the drivers of the recent price increases. Others considered that there is no such direct correlation, arguing that commodity markets are increasingly speculative and that prices are determined by a series of other factors.
- Participants also highlighted the importance of respecting labour rights as a means to ensure the social sustainability of biofuels production.

Policy-related issues

- Translating society's views regarding the sustainable production and use of biofuels into effective actions is an important aspect of the definition of public policies.
- The development of public policies to enhance benefits and minimize risks of biofuels should take into consideration national realities and needs, especially in developing countries.
- The development of biofuels can combine different elements, such as increased investments, income and job generation, technological advances, and climate change mitigation.
- It was pointed out that overly permissive legislation may be ineffective and raise doubts about the advantages of biofuels as a sustainable alternative to fossil fuels. On the other hand, excessive restrictions can pose great difficulties for the production of biofuels, especially in developing countries, where most of the areas with potential for agricultural expansion are located.
- It was argued that biofuels may, at an initial stage, need incentives in order to be competitive.
- There is a need for a "positive discrimination" for family agriculture, in order to encourage the increased inclusion of smallholder farmers in the market. In this regard, capacity building, technical assistance and access to land and credit are of great importance.
- Several instruments that could contribute to the sustainability of biofuels were discussed, such as agroecological zoning, the development of sustainability criteria and various possible certifications schemes.
- Some mentioned that the best way to strike a balance between the potential benefits and risks of biofuels is through the establishment of sustainability criteria. Others expressed concern that such an instrument might be used as trade barrier. For that reason, it is key that sustainability criteria must be scientifically and transparently set.
- The process of setting up sustainability criteria should allow the participation of the various stakeholders, such as Governments, private sector, and civil society.
- Some pointed out that a mandatory social and environmental certification scheme should be part of national policies for biofuels. Others expressed concern that if the same approach is not taken in relation to fossil fuels, this may eliminate the competitiveness of biofuels as a partial replacement to oil.
- Some expressed the view that certification is a market tool which should be defined on a case by case basis by producers and consumers.

- It was also mentioned that the cost of adhering to a certification scheme may pose obstacles or even bar small-scale producers from accessing markets because of the high costs associated with their implementation.
- Public policies need to address issues such as land use change – not only with regard to biofuels, but to agriculture in general. The fact that the agricultural frontier in some countries, especially developing ones, is still not entirely defined is also an issue to be considered by policy makers.

The need for a new energy paradigm

- A new energy paradigm is needed. Biofuels have a relevant role to play in the partial substitution of fossil fuels for renewable and sustainable forms energy.
- The current crisis presents us with an opportunity to revise standards of production and consumption and boost the development of renewable and sustainable energy sources through research and restructuring of productive processes.
- It was mentioned that there is need to reevaluate current consumption standards without compromising the right to development.
- Some renewable forms of energy, especially biofuels and electricity, are available and ready-to-deploy options towards a cleaner and less fossil fuel dependant energy mix.
- The present moment brings an opportunity in which biofuels may be a driver for a new cycle of rural development, allowing for a real agricultural revolution.
- Developing countries can greatly benefit from the modernization of agriculture, especially in the area of biofuels. In this context, South-South cooperation should be fostered.