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Biodiversity and livelihoods under attack from industrial 'bio-economy' strategy

The EU is rapidly developing a new type of 'post-fossil fuel' economy, dubbed the 'bio-economy' (as described in the report 'Bio-economies: the EU's real 'Green Economy' agenda?'¹), and numerous countries around the world – including the US, Canada, Japan, Brazil, India, China, Malaysia and South Africa – are already following suit. But the implications of a rapid switch to bio-economies are stark – for biodiversity and forests, for the lives and livelihoods of those that depend upon those resources, and for food production (as outlined in reports such as 'Sustainable Biomass: a modern myth'² and 'Bio-economy versus Biodiversity'³).

What is the bio-economy?

Confusingly, the EU has suggested that its bio-economy strategy will be its main contribution to the development of a global 'green economy'. But the bio-economy approach is not driven by environmental concern: it is a new industrial strategy, supposedly designed to ensure energy security by replacing fossil fuels with biomass. It aims to transform those feedstocks into a vast array of commercial products, including plastics and chemicals, using a range of novel technologies, including genetic manipulation, nanotechnology and synthetic biology.

The bio-economy threatens biodiversity and livelihoods

While the idea of using renewable resources instead of fossil fuels is a good idea in theory, the way in which the bio-economy approach proposes to achieve this goal is at best deeply flawed and inequitable, and at worst downright dangerous. The planet's capacity to produce biomass is limited, and increasing demand for land is already leading to the destruction of forest biodiversity, escalating hunger, and conflict over land. (The impacts of spiraling landgrabbing can be seen in the video 'Stop Land Grabbing!'⁴). Without reducing consumption and demand for energy and products, the sheer scale on which biomass would have to be produced to meet the demands of a global bio-economy, even if waste products were used as a feedstock as well, would severely exacerbate these problems.

Ironically, these expanding bio-economy markets, which are based on the biomass that ecosystems produce, are at odds with equally controversial 'green economy' proposals to create markets in the 'services' that ecosystems produce. Forests, for example, might be targeted as sources of wood for bio-energy by the chemicals and manufacturing sectors, whilst being viewed as carbon-sequestering biodiversity-rich habitats that could generate significant profits for the financial services sector. The bio-economy approach is also being used to promote the development and use of genetically engineered trees which also threaten natural forests. Further violent 'green land grabbing' seems inevitable as competition for land for all these purposes escalates. As described in the report 'Who Will Control the Green Economy?'⁵, the 'green economy' and 'bio-economy' mirages should be seen for what they are: approaches based on bolstering the banking, biotech, manufacturing, agribusiness and energy sectors.



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John Muyisha, a victim of landgrabbing in Uganda. FoEI/ATI Jason Taylor. Flickr.



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Bio-economy as a justification for new and untested technologies

Proponents of the bio-economy argue that new technologies, such as the production of algal oil in aquatic environments, would minimise such pressures. These innovations are uncertain at best, and the commercial production of algal oil certainly looks unlikely at present. Many of these new technologies come with significant risks and promote a further concentration of the power that large multinational corporations currently wield over the world's biological commons, as described in detail in the report 'Biomasters Battle to Control the New Green Economy'.⁶

Reject biomass-based 'solutions', there are real alternatives available

National subsidies for large-scale biomass and other unsustainable, risky investments should be replaced with public funding for sustainable and appropriate wind, solar and tidal energy. Governments should stop subsidising industrialised food production and instead offer effective support to small-scale farmers. Food sovereignty promotes local sustainable agriculture, land reform, and shorter supply chains, and can eradicate hunger and reduce wasteful consumption, while benefiting consumers, agricultural workers and the global environment.

Instead of promoting socially-blind 'green economies' or bio-economies, an alternative world view should recognise and value the bio-cultural approaches of indigenous peoples and local communities, who have long succeeded in developing sustainable livelihoods, a 'buen vivir' in harmony with the ecosystems they live in. Territories and areas conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities, women-driven forest conservation and restoration initiatives, community initiatives that sustain food and energy sovereignty, and the efforts of small peasants to produce food in harmony with our planet, all serve as inspiring examples of ways in which local economies build on the principles of care, harmony with nature, human rights and sovereignty, and contribute to the well-being of both community members and the planet as a whole.

¹Bio-economies: the EU's real 'green economy' agenda?

TNI, World Development Movement, June 2012
www.tni.org/briefing/bio-economies

²Sustainable Biomass: a modern myth

Biofuelwatch, September 2012
www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2012/biomass_myth_report/

³Bio-economy versus Biodiversity

Global Forest Coalition, Biofuelwatch, April 2012
<http://globalforestcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Bioeconomy-vs-biodiv-report-wi-th-frontage-FINAL.pdf>

⁴**Land, Life and Justice** (report and video)
Friends of the Earth International, April 2012
<http://www.foei.org/en/media/land-grab/>

⁵Who Will Control the Green Economy?

ETC Group, December 2011
www.etcgroup.org/content/who-will-control-green-economy-0

⁶Biomasters Battle to Control the New Green Economy

ETC Group, June 2012
<http://www.etcgroup.org/fr/node/5539>

Green Economy: in the light of climate negotiations (summary)

CENSAT Agua Viva-Amigos de la Tierra Colombia, June 2012
<http://globalforestcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Economy%20%20Verde-CENSAT-ENG.pdf>



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