

Preliminary conclusions of the:

“International Conference on Biofuels: Biofuels as a driving force of sustainable development”

São Paulo, November 2008.

A new energy paradigm

* A new energy paradigm is needed and biofuels shall be a part of it. The current financial and economic crisis should be seen not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity for this change.

* Biofuels are not a one-dimensional energy alternative. They can be associated with income generation, job creation, rural development, greenhouse gases emissions reductions, and increased access to energy. Biofuels are at the intersection of several public policies: social, agricultural, economic, environmental, energy and technological.

* The lack of political support for biofuels at the international level is a constraint to be addressed. Public policies that include mandates are needed as part of a long-term strategy to incorporate biofuels in the global energy mix.

Biofuels and energy security

* In face of the current volatility of oil prices, there is a sense of urgency in addressing energy security at national, regional and international levels. The concentration of the energy supply in a few oil producing countries is a threat to global energy security. Biofuels could be produced by at least 100 countries and, therefore, can contribute to the deconcentration of energy, as well as the reduction of unequal access to energy. At the same time, they can play a decisive role in diversifying the global and national energy mixes.

* Different approaches are being proposed to assess externalities of biofuels as compared to oil. Since biofuels are considered as an alternative to oil, policy makers should apply equivalent approaches.

Biofuels and climate change

* Climate change is probably the greatest challenge ever faced by mankind and will require a concerted effort of all countries in the world, according to the principle of common, but differentiated responsibilities. This challenge requires a revolution in the way energy is used in the economy. Biofuels should be an integral part of this revolution.

* There are very few low-carbon energy options for reducing emissions in the transport sector: biofuels are the only option for large-scale use, at affordable costs, of renewable energies in the short term.

* Biofuels cannot be a deforestation-inducing or soil carbon-depleting force. Agro-ecologic zoning shall be an important tool in this regard.

Biofuels and sustainability

* The sustainability of biofuels in their social, environmental and economic aspects should be thoroughly addressed with the participation of all relevant stakeholders.

* 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.

* Sustainability criteria may play an important role in striking a balance between the potential benefits and risks of biofuels. Under no circumstances should eventual sustainability criteria be used as trade barriers.

* 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 should be promoted.

* Recent developments indicate that there is neither a trade-off between food security and the production of biofuels nor a direct relation between those and the prices of agricultural commodities. In any case, biofuels should never jeopardize food production.

Biofuels and innovation

* A substantial part of the potential for expansion of biofuels production worldwide is found in developing countries located in tropical regions. In order to tap this potential, there is a need for the development and deployment of technologies adapted to local realities. Capacity building for scientists and technicians in developing countries should become a priority and receive adequate funding.

* Innovation is an inherent component of the biofuels sector. The distinction between different generations of biofuels based solely on feedstocks and production processes is imprecise. Based on their performance in terms of resource use, environmental impact and greenhouse gas emissions, the so-called "first" generation biofuels should be assigned the same treatment as "next" generation biofuels with a comparable performance.

Biofuels and international trade

* The establishment of a global market for biofuels can contribute positively to address global challenges such as sustainable development, energy security, and climate change.

* Such a market requires a larger number of producers and of consumers, as well as a simultaneous dismantling of existing trade barriers and the exercise of caution in the elaboration of certification schemes, so that they are not transformed into insurmountable non trade barriers. Sustainability criteria adopted in these schemes should be inclusive, transparent, science based and multilaterally agreed.

* Biofuels should be classified as environmental goods within the framework of WTO.

Biofuels and international cooperation

* International cooperation is essential to foster the sustainable production of biofuels in developing countries, especially in Africa and in Latin America. South-South and triangular cooperation should be promoted in this context.

* Developing countries might also benefit from a regional approach for biofuels. In Africa, for instance, a regional approach may be a condition to achieve economies of scale therefore making biofuels a competitive alternative.

* Taking into consideration the accumulated experience in the field of biofuels, it was proposed that an International Center of Excellence be created in Brazil. It would serve to stimulate the exchange of ideas and knowledge, especially among developing countries.

An international agenda on biofuels

* The international community has not achieved so far an integrated approach to energy, in general, and to biofuels in particular. The subject has been addressed internationally in a fragmented way, meaning that different aspects are dealt from different perspectives in different international organizations, each one within its own specific mandate.

* There is a need for more coordination on the subject of biofuels and the United Nations is the only appropriate forum for that. This could be achieved through the strengthening of the inter-agency coordination mechanism UN Energy.

The "International Conference on Biofuels: Biofuels as a driving force of sustainable development" was held in São Paulo, Brazil, from the 17th to the 21st of November, 2008.

The Conference intended to encourage international discussion about the challenges and opportunities posed by biofuels and to provide important occasion for addressing issues related to biofuels, such as energy security, sustainability of the production and use, agricultural and industrial processing, as well as issues related to technical specifications and standards, international trade, climate change, and biofuels' future.

Representatives of governments from all United Nations member states, several international organizations, members of parliaments, the scientific and academic communities, the private sector, civil society stakeholders, and NGOs, took part in the Conference.