

Sustainable development



Mohamed Mezghani, Head of MENA Office, UITP

Biofuels? Ok, but we can't eat them...



Photo: Xavier Béguin

News reports in recent weeks have been dominated by two events not entirely unconnected from one another: the continued rise in petrol prices (around USD120 a barrel at the end of April); and the food crisis in a number of developing countries, particularly in Africa and Central America.

These two events are the result of the rapid increase in global consumption, driven by economic growth in countries like China and India, which require ever-increasing quantities of petrol and food. Since it is impossible to adapt supply to demand in the short term (and even more so in the long term given the finite nature of oil reserves), the result has been a jump in prices (+75% in two months for rice, +120% in the space of a year for wheat), with the most impoverished being the first to suffer as a consequence. The growth in demand is not really the only reason. Speculation is also a contributing factor. Observers are worried that the ever-increasing amount of land being cultivated to produce fuel is reducing the amount of land available to grow food (for both human and animal consumption).

Biofuels first appeared in Brazil in the 1970s. Back then, they involved the production of ethanol from sugarcane as a supplement for petrol. Today, 20% of fuels are of plant origin, enabling Brazil to reduce its fossil fuel dependency. In Europe, biofuel development started out in the 1980s as an option for land set aside (i.e. left fallow) due to overproduction in farming. Mounting

concerns about the environment then saw biofuels labelled as “green fuels” and able to gain favour with the public authorities. The European Union has set a target for plant fuel use, namely a 10% share of overall fuel composition by 2020. The United States has earmarked 10% of its corn production for green fuel, and this proportion is set to rise to 30% over the next five years. Beyond the uncertainty and doubts surrounding the eco-balance of biofuels in the face of climate change (an issue that is still the subject of debate), speeding up biofuel development would certainly aggravate the food grain shortage and increase food grain prices. The upshot would be a continuation and further deepening of the food crisis.

We are left with a paradoxical situation: one in which we are sacrificing the right to food for millions of people in the name of combating the greenhouse effect. In other words, it is seen as more important to ensure that some members of the population produce less pollution than it is for others to be able to feed themselves. The notion of sustainable development contains three fundamental and inseparable pillars: environmental, social and economic. Promoting biofuels for

some to the detriment of food for others is tantamount to promoting the environment at the expense of the social pillar. As a result, it ceases to be sustainable development. There should be no need to choose one over the other. What urgently needs to be done is to reduce the pace of biofuel development, or actually declare a moratorium on biofuel production and consumption. A solution exists for overcoming this contradiction: public transport. PT offers the sole means of reducing the petrol dependency and environmental impact of journeys without adversely affecting land for agriculture. The expansion of public transport would lead to greater control over energy demand and this would also help check the increase in the price of oil, thereby easing economic tensions.

Contact: mohamed.mezghani@uitp.org