

## Alternative fuels—a political imperative?

*Directly and indirectly, today's high oil prices are putting huge pressures on many of the world's poorest regions. As such, the production of biofuels is being described as a long-term political imperative. Sugaronline hears views from Africa.*

Issues of high oil prices and climate change were once again in the spotlight this week, strangely uniting people from various walks of life.

Last weekend, across Europe, thousands of nudists rode bicycles around city capitals in a bid to draw attention to 'environmental issues,' with slogans written on their backs advocating things like 'bio methanol.'

Meanwhile, some of the world's leading oil producers also brazenly revealed their interests in environmental issues.

Royal Dutch Shell's Brazil unit, for example, said it intended to sell about 150m litres of ethanol to the US this year. BP, meanwhile, said yesterday that it planned to invest around \$500m in coming years in biofuels research.

Clearly with oil prices as high as they are, these companies are responding to the current pressure of the times and market factors.

Meanwhile though, in many countries, alternative fuels are being seriously looked at as a long-term potential solution to their problems.

Africa makes a major case in point.

"Many countries in Africa, today, are not only energy insecure but have their economic and social development frustrated by the high energy prices," Dr Mersie Ejigu, President & Chief Executive Officer of Partnership for African Environmental Sustainability (PAES) and Senior Fellow, Foundation for Environmental Security and Sustainability (FESS), told Sugaronline in an interview.

"They impede economic and social development; worsen poverty by placing an undue burden on the poor; threaten political stability; accelerate forest, land, and water degradation as households slide back to the use of charcoal and fuel wood," he said.

“They also overburden women and threaten social fabrics, as women are forced to spend more time collecting fire wood. Women are perhaps the hardest hit groups of society,” he added.

With this in mind, African countries, with the backing of major institutions like the United Nations, are pinning their hopes on boosting alternative fuels over the coming years.

“There is wide recognition among Africans that developing alternative sources of energy is not a choice but an economic, social, and political imperative,” said Dr Ejigu.

What would the development of alternative fuels in Africa do?

“Create employment opportunities and accelerate rural development; enhance and diversify trade; curtail environmental degradation and help conserve the ecosystem, allow women to spend less time collecting fire wood, reduce health hazards due to indoor air pollution,” responds Dr Ejigu.

So, why isn't more happening sooner?

There are challenges, explained Dr Ejigu.

“Firstly, biofuels need to be affordable,” he said.

“Secondly, biofuels need to avoid competition with the food sector. The biofuels feedstock currently used, e.g., corn, rapeseeds, lentils, etc. are staple food crops to a large majority of the African population. The question is should a grain crop be distilled to make ethanol fuel or should it be used as food?

“Wider production of biofuels on sustained basis would require avoiding such hard choices,” he said.

“Thirdly, biofuels feedstock need to be soil fertility enriching and less water requiring. Because many areas of Africa are either dry or semidry, biofuels production need to be based on less moisture requiring plants,” he continued.

“We need to work on expanding the use of perennials as biofuels feedstock, for example, Jatropha plants, which do well in degraded and low rainfall areas. There is need to expand research both in developed and developing countries to expand the range of biofuels feedstock. This research is at an infant stage and needs greater investment,” he said.

That said, the scope for developing biofuels in regions like Africa is getting increasing amounts of support.

“Many government representatives that I spoke to during my mission to East Africa on behalf of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the UN’s FAO welcome the biofuels idea and expressed strong interest in pursuing a biofuels programme. They underlined the low level of public awareness regarding biofuels both at the level of government and the general public,” he said.

But, according to Dr Ejigu, more needs to be done.

“As I said earlier, the impact of high energy prices is huge and multifaceted. Governments, civil society, and international financial and development organisations all have a responsibility to invest in alternative fuels,” he said.

“Once again, I must say that investment in alternative fuels is a development and political imperative, not a choice,” he added.

**Next week, Sugaronline continues to assess regional developments in sugar and ethanol.**