

Crushed under the pillars of 'green growth': whose interests, whose criteria?

Hanneke Mol asks whether to be green is realistically achievable

With its pledge to become 'the greenest government ever', the UK government is on a mission, intended to establish a 'prosperous and thriving green economy' with 'strong, sustainable and balanced growth that is more evenly shared across the country and between industries'. Stressing the view that sustainable development rests on recognition of the interconnectedness of the three pillars of the economy, society, and the environment, the government expresses its commitment to 'enhance wellbeing ... measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life' (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), 2012).

Reading such policy statements – and the overwhelming emphasis on *our country, our lives, and our quality of life* – multiple questions arise as to the assumptions and ideologies underlying the 'green' content of these economic transformations. What does this well-being and quality of life encompass? To whom and what does it apply? What are the implications of incentives to spur 'green growth' beyond a restricted view on the economic opportunities this has to offer UK businesses? This article provides a brief account of one particular component of the UK's green economy aspirations: renewable energy. More specifically, the focus lies with the use of biofuels in a continuously growing transport sector, in a discussion of the social,

cultural, and environmental impacts of biofuels production. From a global perspective, it follows that critical interrogation of the consequences of the biofuels industry for the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the production regions of feedstock for renewable energy, calls into question how 'fair and balanced' (ibid) the UK's envisioned transition to a green economy really is.

Biofuels

In the context of enhancing the security of energy supplies to Europe, and objectives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to combat climate change, EU targets require that by 2020, 20 per cent of total energy use (differentiated according to member state) and 10 per cent of each member state's fuel consumption in the transport sector, come from renewable sources. Whereas the transport sector assumes a substantial share in total greenhouse gas emissions it is also considered a principal engine for economic growth. Hence, the answer to this sector's pollution record is sought not in curbing projected growth levels, which go unquestioned, but in complementing its use of fossil fuels with allegedly cleaner forms of energy.

It is predominantly through bioenergy in the form of biofuels that applicable targets are pursued (DECC, 2012). Herein, domestic feedstock is estimated to assume a 33 per cent share of the total bioenergy supply in 2020, yet towards 2030 this share is expected to decrease to a mere 10 per cent (Howes et al., 2011). To reach set

targets, then, both the UK and Europe are massively dependent on the import of biofuels from the Global South; legitimated by upholding an image of biofuels production as economically, socially, and environmentally beneficial. Even though potentially adverse consequences do not go unmentioned in the UK Bioenergy Strategy, in terms of biodiversity loss, threats to food security, ecosystem degradation, pressure on hydrological sources, and the dispossession of land for instance, overall these are envisioned as 'manageable risks' (DECC, 2012).

The same discourse is discernible in Southern production regions. To illustrate the tensions that as such exist between opposing perceptions of the alleged benefits versus adverse impacts of the cultivation of feedstock for (amongst others) biofuel production, and the extent to which these can or cannot be mitigated or 'managed', I turn to the case of palm oil production in the Colombian Pacific region. In this coastal area, the majority population is of Afro-Colombian descent, followed by a lesser but nonetheless significant presence of indigenous groups; an ethnic composition reflected in a heterogeneity of culturally specific social practices and relations, production and subsistence patterns, and ways of relating to the region's highly biodiverse forest and aquatic environments (Escobar, 2008).

Whilst there are indeed communities that welcome this type of economic activity as a pathway to improved social and economic well-being, others reject and resist the imposition of oil palm cultivation; deemed irreconcilable with the social and cultural dynamics that articulate notions of individual and community well-being, and disarticulating socioecological relations. Such critiques of the threats posed to human and nonhuman life, contrast sharply with depictions of the oil palm as a social and ecological crop (Fedepalma, 2006). Asked about sustainability and development, the response of those opposing oil palm cultivation is that all that is sustained by this

type of industry is *destruction*; putting in jeopardy their physical and cultural survival. The social and environmental harms of deforestation, the loss of endemic flora and fauna species, the contamination of soils, rivers, and groundwater, as well as the depletion of water sources have all been well documented in critical NGO reports and academic works. Fundamental bases of local dietary patterns, food security and economic self-sufficiency are severely affected moreover, as communities are no longer able to hold on to their traditional models of cultivation. Further, the restriction of mobility and routine spatial practice result in an experienced 'symbolic and psychological displacement' (Ventes et al., 2008; Escobar, 2008) that disrupts existing ways and dynamics of relating to the territory.

Green growth?

Yet, if we are to believe the Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman, it is 'in our interests to be green and growing'. Or is it? Whose interests? Where do 'our' interests leave those that are losing their lives and livelihoods? Is green growth in fact commensurate with practices that undermine and dispense with human and nonhuman life, as long as these practices do not readily fit official definitions of crime and comply with top-down constructed sustainability criteria? Moreover, the actual carbon savings of palm

oil and other types of biofuels are highly questionable; the carbon debt of palm oil in effect may range from 30 to 120 years (Gibbs et al., 2008). Note that this still leaves untouched the methane and nitrous oxide emissions to consider, the latter counting with an alleged global warming potential 296 the size of carbon dioxide (Smolker et al., 2008).

It is imperative that any government with ambitions to be 'the greenest ever', takes notice of the cross-boundary impacts that such ambitions may spark. This requires more than attention for (restricted) sustainability criteria and rhetoric of risk management. Rather, it requires that economic-reductionist attitudes to social and natural life are dispensed with. Without genuine cross-boundary social, cultural, and environmental engagement, narrow economic interests will continue to come at the expense of social, environmental, and ecological justice, and the social, cultural and bodily dimensions of existence this ties in with. To think and act green is to think beyond the market (not everything can be solved nor valued through the market), beyond unlimited economic growth, national and sectional interests, beyond species boundaries, and beyond narrow conceptions of human well-being and quality of life. ■

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