

Cars get hungrier and hungrier

The madness of using ever larger amounts of grain to feed animals and, increasingly, cars continues. According to the International Grains Council (IGC), only 35 per cent of the 752 million tonnes of grain consumed by the world in the 2009–10 agricultural year was used to feed people. The biggest share – 43 per cent – went to feed animals. At the moment 6 per cent is used to fuel cars, but their share is growing fast. Biofuels consumed 124.9 million tonnes of grain in 2009–10, rising steadily from 108.9 million tonnes in 2008–9 and 87.6 million tonnes in 2007–8.

The US remains the big biofuel producer: according to the IGC, it will be turning 108.5 million tonnes of grain, almost all of it maize, into ethanol this year. But because the European Union is pushing ahead with its absurd insistence that all transport fuels must contain 10 per cent biofuels by 2020, many new distilleries for producing ethanol from maize are being built.

Even so, the new directive means that EU consumption of biofuels will be so huge that a great deal of the feedstock will have to come from crops other than maize,

with Europe importing large quantities of sugar cane, jatropha and palm oil from developing countries. “Biofuels are driving a global human tragedy. Local food prices have already risen massively. As biofuel production gains pace, this can only accelerate”, said Tim Rice, the author of a report recently produced by ActionAid.¹ “Most biofuels are worse than the fossil fuels they are supposed to replace.”

Both in the USA and in Europe the biofuels industry is viable only because of massive government subsidies. The EU biofuel industry has already received €4.4bn in incentives, subsidies and tax relief, and the amount will rise rapidly as the EU moves towards its 2020 target. Even so, this is far less than the colossal US\$92bn that the US biofuels industry is receiving in the 2006–12 period.²

1 ActionAid, “Meals per gallon: the impact of industrial biofuels on people and global hunger”, February 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/yd8p9cv>

2 Marlow Lewis, “U.S. biofuels subsidies estimated at \$92bn during 2006–2012”, The Facts about Ethanol: Challenging the Biofuel Lobby, 24 October 2007, <http://tinyurl.com/y5xkkpo>

Urbanisation gains momentum

The world’s mega-cities are merging to form vast mega-regions which may stretch for hundreds of miles, according to a recent report by UN-Habitat.¹ The largest of these is the Hong Kong–Shenzhen–Guangzhou region, home to about 120 million people. Other mega-regions are forming in Japan (Nagoya–Osaka–Kyoto–Kobe, expected to grow to 60 million by 2015) and Brazil (São Paulo–Rio de Janeiro, already with 43 million).

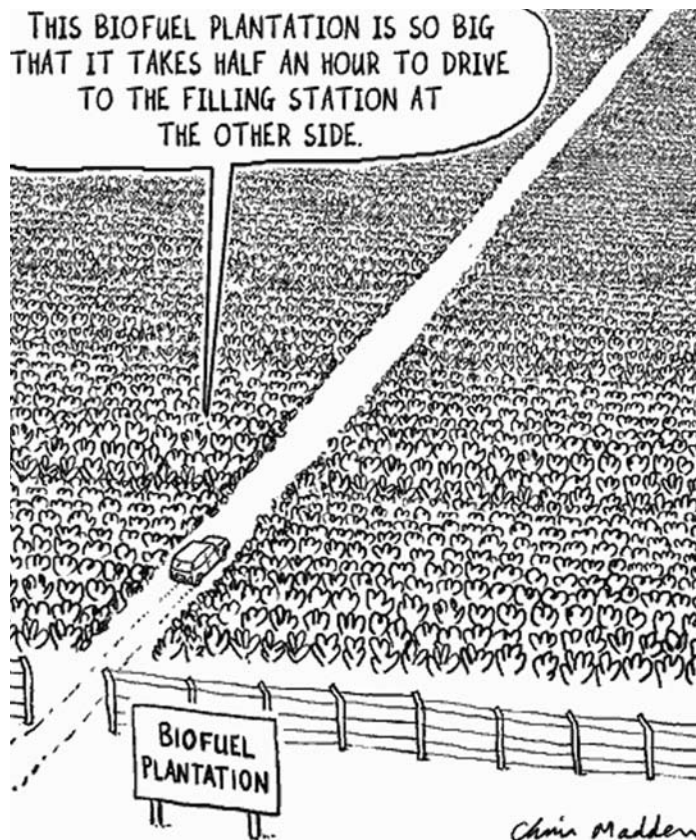
These mega-regions, rather than countries, are driving wealth creation. According to Eduardo Lopez Moreno, a co-author of the report, “Research shows that the world’s largest 40 mega-regions cover only a tiny fraction of the habitable surface of our planet and are home to less than 18 per cent of the world’s population, [but] they account for 66 per cent of all economic activity and 85 per cent of technological and scientific innovation. The top 25 cities in the world account for more than half of the world’s wealth.” This urbanisation is intensifying the urban–rural divide. According to Lopez Moreno, “Most of the wealth in rural areas comes from people in urban areas sending money back.”

According to the report, the harm caused by the creation of mega-regions can be mitigated by planning and regulation. Very often, however, the regions arise spontaneously, as the result of urban sprawl, and exacerbate social problems: “It [urban sprawl] is not only wasteful but adds to transport costs, increases energy consumption, requires more resources and causes the loss of prime farmland.” Lopez Moreno continues: “The more unequal cities become, the higher the risk that economic disparities will result in social and political tension. The likelihood of urban unrest in unequal cities is high.”

1 UN-Habitat. “State of the World’s Cities 2010/2011 – Cities for All: Bridging the Urban Divide”, 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/y7ozr7b>

Funding biotech companies in the name of “food security”

A number of organisations, including Pesticide Action Network, Food First and Union of Concerned Scientists,





Earthquake damage, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, January 2010



are putting pressure on the US Senate to amend a piece of legislation currently under discussion. The Bill, known as the Lugar–Casey Act – after Senators Richard Lugar and Robert Casey – will provide US\$7.7bn for agricultural research and development. USAID would be responsible for implementing the Bill.

In its current form, most of this money will go into the coffers of biotechnology companies because of a clause that mandates that the funds “shall” go to research into the genetic engineering of crops. Monsanto, the leading producer of GM seeds, has been lobbying strongly for the Bill to be passed.

The biotech lobby has received the support of Bills Gates and Clinton, who have claimed that the Bill will help resolve the problem of global hunger. This claim is not supported by the facts. Over the last two decades USAID has spent millions of taxpayers’ dollars on developing GE crops,

with not one success story to show for it. For example, a much touted partnership between USAID and Monsanto to develop a virus-resistant sweet potato in Kenya failed to deliver anything useful for farmers. After fourteen years and an outlay of US\$6 million, local varieties vastly outperformed their genetically modified equivalents in field trials.¹

1 Hannington Odame, *et al.*, “The Role of Innovation in Policy and Institutional Change: The Case of Transgenic Sweet Potato in Kenya”, International Environmental Law Research Centre, <http://www.ielrc.org/content/n0206.htm>

Compounding the horrors of Haiti’s earthquake

Peter Hallward, who has written a powerful book on Haiti,¹ was one of the few commentators to look at the underlying causes of the scale of the suffering in the wake of the earthquake:

“The real impact of this earthquake will be the result of a long-term history of deliberate impoverishment and disempowerment. Haiti is routinely described as the ‘poorest country in the western hemisphere’. This poverty is the direct legacy of perhaps the most brutal system of colonial exploitation in world history, compounded by decades of systematic post-colonial oppression....

“It is this poverty and powerlessness that account for the full scale of the horror in Port-au-Prince today. Since the late 1970s, relentless neoliberal assault on Haiti’s agrarian economy has forced tens of thousands of small farmers into overcrowded urban slums. Although there are no reliable statistics, hundreds of thousands of Port-au-Prince residents now live in desperately sub-standard informal housing, often perched precariously on the side of deforested ravines. The selection of the people living in such places and conditions is itself no more ‘natural’ or accidental than the extent of the injuries they have suffered.

“The noble ‘international community’ which is currently scrambling to send its ‘humanitarian aid’ to Haiti, is largely responsible for the extent of the suffering it now aims to reduce. Ever since the US invaded and occupied the country in 1915, every serious political attempt to allow Haiti’s people to move (in former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s phrase) ‘from absolute misery to a dignified poverty’ has been violently and deliberately blocked.”²

1 Peter Hallward, *Damning the Flood – Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*, London and New York, Verso, 2007.

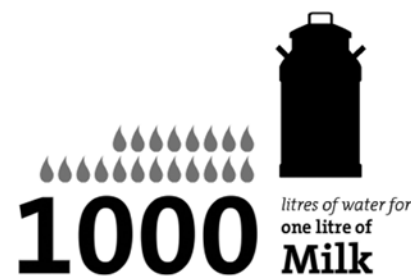
2 Extracted from Peter Hallward “Our role in Haiti’s plight”, Comment is Free, Guardian website, 13 January 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/ykrbcuh>

Brazil: leading exporter of “virtual” water

Because its food exports have been growing rapidly, Brazil has become a huge exporter of “virtual” water, that is, the water consumed in the production of its crops and other food products. Brazil is today the world’s leading exporter of beef, and it takes a remarkable 15,500 litres of water to produce one kilogram of beef. Academics from the university of Campinas (UNICAMP) in Brazil have calculated that Brazil’s exports of “virtual” water, stemming from its three leading agricultural exports (soya, beef and sugar), have increased 17-fold in less than a decade (see table 1).

Brazil should not be hurrying to satisfy world demand by putting commodities on the market that are produced in a way that is not sustainable if we look at the real cost in the terms of land and water resources.”

VIRTUAL WATER



John Anthony Allen, a British geographer who invented the term “virtual water”, has now warned Brazil: “We have long ignored the environmental costs of intensive agriculture and they are not reflected in the market price of food.

Table 1: Export of virtual water, Brazil, 1997–2005
(in billion cubic metres)

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Soya	18.7	20.8	20.0	25.8	35.2	35.8	44.6	43.2	50.3	294.6
Beef	7.6	8.9	10.3	11.5	17.1	14.7	19.2	28.6	34.0	151.9
Sugar	0.8	1.0	1.6	0.9	1.5	1.6	1.7	2.0	2.4	13.6
Total	27.1	30.8	32.0	38.2	53.7	52.2	65.5	73.8	86.8	460.1

Source: Ricardo Ojima *et al.*, “Virtual water, scarcity and management: Brazil as a large water exporter”, *Ambiente & sociedade*, Vol. 4, 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/y35u4z2>