

National Workshop on Biofuel

MELCA Mahiber has organized a National workshop on EIA and Biofuel on September 16, 2008, at Ghion Hotel, Addis Ababa. The workshop was formally opened by Dr. Tewoldebirhan Gebre-Egziabher, General Manager of Environmental Protection Authority. He warned the participants of the dire consequence of biofuels for food security and as a false promise to development. He noted though that the biofuel initiative may have potential if we implement it with due regard to social and environmental sustainability. It was attended by the members of the House of People's Representative of Ethiopia, Head of Biofuel Development under the ministry of Mine and Energy, delegates from Regional Governmental Bureaus, local experts, CSOs, Media and other stakeholders.

The purpose of the workshop was to provide a space for a critical evaluation of agrofuel development in Ethiopia in terms of the proper implementation of EIA, cross-sectoral impacts, impact on agricultural and pastoral livelihood, impact on forest and other biodiversity, benefits and constraints. 3 research papers were presented in addition to the summary of agrofuel development activities of 5 selected Regional states. The main input to the workshop was a rapid assessment commissioned by MELCA to give an overview of the biofuel strategy document of Ethiopia and its implementation in 5 Regions (Amhara, Benshangul, SNNPR, Gambela and Oromia).

The research presentation and the discussion that ensued pointed out that: there is no Environmental Impact Assessment done when land is allocated to investors; the Regional bureaus do not have clear idea as to which land to allocate as they have not done land or natural resources inventory; there is little study on the kind of biofuel crops that are suited to the country. For example, palm oil is promoted as one of the crops but the plant grows in areas which require a lot of rain and currently only the forested areas of Ethiopia get this much rain. The case of Gambela where an investor requested for 40,000 hectares of forested land was mentioned as an example. It was also revealed that 75% of the land allocated for biofuels is agricultural and forest land. There is no discussion over the issue at the regional level and because of this Regions are not aware of the consequences of this large scale development.

So the participants suggested for the reassessment of the strategy/ implementation and, taking the example of the EU where biofuel development was assessed after two years and where questions of land availability, EIA, productivity, social impact, etc., were considered, a step by step development instead of a rush in to the unknown was suggested. Conducting an in depth research of the biofuel crops like Jatropha, which might have a negative impact on the productivity of the agricultural land, was also an issue to some of the participants. The Example of The Amhara Development program was very encouraging as development mostly happened in degraded mountains. The participants have also emphasized the enormous need for researching the economic impact and profitability of household production. . Moreover, most of the participants agreed that the government and other stakeholders should engage themselves in a nation wide debate and discussion to come up with a more clear and integrated strategy which insures the sustainability of our development. The participants requested MELCA to have similar kind of debates at Regional levels.