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Growing food and fuel

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Economic Affairs and Development
Rapporteur: Ms Doris BARNETT, Germany, Socialist Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

The fundamental principle that should be observed is that as little energy as possible, of whatever origin, should be consumed. That said, agrofuel production can go some way towards meeting the growing demand for energy, although much research needs to be done in this area. Moreover, the threat that growing plants for agrofuel is alleged to pose to the environment and to food production, whether for animal or human consumption, has probably been exaggerated. It is nevertheless right that the Parliamentary Assembly should call on the Council of Europe member states to be duly cautious when promoting the use of agrofuel as part of their national strategies for renewable energy. In the meantime, member states should promote the more efficient use of renewable energy. They should also encourage the retrieval of the many inventions lying dormant in the European and national patent offices. The current financial crisis presents an opportunity to provide inventors and developers with start-up capital, thus stimulating an innovative economy and creating new jobs.

B. Amendment proposals

In the name of the committee, the rapporteur proposes the following amendments to the draft resolution contained in the report of the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture, and Local and Regional Affairs (Doc. 11790):

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In sub-paragraph 13.1, add at the end: "notably in the light of the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive, as approved by the European Parliament on 18 December 2008;".

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In sub-paragraph 13.4, add at the end: "and the relevant ILO conventions;".

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In sub-paragraph 13.9, add at the end: "notably in the light of the European Union's Directive 2006/32/EC on energy end-use efficiency, which should be further strengthened;".

1. See Doc. 11790 presented by the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs.

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

After sub-paragraph 13.9, add a new sub-paragraph as follows:

> *"encourage the recovery of the many hidden inventions that lie dormant in the European and national patent offices, the current financial crisis presenting an opportunity to provide inventors and developers with start-up capital, thus stimulating an innovative economy and creating new jobs."*

C. Explanatory memorandum by Mrs Doris Barnett

1. The pharmaceutical industry has long exploited plants as a resource. In recent years, research into agronomy and biotechnology has led to a massive growth in the use of plants as a renewable source of raw materials. But we need to guard against overestimating the advances that have been made in the area of renewable resources.

2. In view of crude oil prices that spiked at over US$150 per barrel in 2008, it might seem advisable to turn, as an alternative, to those plants that are suitable for the production of agrofuel of all sorts. If revenues can be achieved and profits can be made in this way, agriculture worldwide will avail itself of this opportunity.

3. The hunger for energy is rising, not only in the so-called developed, highly industrialised world. It has also reached the emerging economies (BRICs) and, of course, the developing nations. It is not without reason that one of the key indicators of a country's progress, productivity and wealth is the amount of energy it consumes.

4. Energy that the industrial nations of the West do not need can be easily absorbed by, for example, China and India, because these countries do not have enough resources of their own.

5. So it is understandable that countries like Brazil, with its production of ethanol from sugar cane, are trying to become "global players" in this field. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil has calculated that he could have one fourth of all of the automobiles in the world running on Brazilian ethanol. In doing this, he could ensure prosperity for his country and create jobs for its people. Of course, it would be important to ensure that the rules embodied in the ILO conventions are complied with, and that the ethanol production is not encouraged at the expense of inhumane working conditions.

6. With respect to land use, it is simply not the case that the use of renewable resources endangers the supply of food for the population. Only a fraction of arable soil is used for this purpose. Moreover, even here in Europe, EU policies have led to wide stretches of arable land being left fallow or used merely for grazing. If we use this land or other untilled, less fertile earth for renewable resources, we would in no way be endangering food supplies, nor would there be any noticeable effect.

7. The question of making use of the opportunities that biotechnology offers in the area of renewable resources has hardly been discussed. With the aid of genetically modified plants, the content of oil or starch, or the percentage of fibre can be increased to the extent that a much higher yield can be realised on a much smaller area of land. Of course, only those plants that have been shown to hold no risk to humans, animals or the environment can be approved for use. It would be very helpful if the Council of Europe member states would act to establish standards, not only in respect of research, but also for the use of such plants. The knowledge gained from biotechnological research is already being applied elsewhere when these plants are superior to others, but not always under the conditions and restrictions upon which we would want to make their use dependent.

8. When considering the question "food or fuel?", there is one error that we cannot let ourselves commit: the world not only has an appetite for energy that could be satisfied in part by renewable resources – the world as a whole is growing hungrier. This is not just due to the fact that the human population is growing and will continue to grow rapidly; but it will also mean that the demand for food in the form of meat will also grow enormously in the future. As a result, there will be a greater need for grazing land – land that was formerly used for other crops or for forests – as well as a need for more water (for both plants and animals). A concomitant rise in emissions of methane, a greenhouse gas, will be the consequence.

9. For these reasons, the report's concentration on agrofuel can reflect only certain aspects of the problem. I am not convinced that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should play referee between the EU Commission, the European Parliament and the scientific community. Science, in particular, can provide little or no confirmed findings, because the necessary research is by no means yet complete. On the contrary, it is just getting started.

10. It is nevertheless right for the Parliamentary Assembly to call on the member nations of the Council of Europe to take due precautions when promoting the use of agrofuel as part of their national strategies for renewable energy.

11. The fundamental principle that must be observed is that the best energy is the energy that does not get consumed. Today, energy for heating can be almost completely conserved by using the appropriate building techniques, and the portion that is consumed (for hot water, for example) can be procured through alternative means.

12. People will tend to become more mobile. The necessary energy can be produced by using new technologies such as hybrid, hydrogen or flywheel propulsion. More funding should be made available for research and development in this area. Mobility must remain an inexpensive proposition if certain sectors of our populations are not to be disadvantaged.

13. Mass public transport (both local and long-distance) must be expanded, especially with regard to frequency. It would be very desirable if mass transportation, especially in regions of urban concentration, might be offered free of charge, to the benefit of both the environment and people's mobility. We cannot, for example, offer mass transport as the answer to the Chinese people's desire for more mobility, when we ourselves continue to insist on individual transport.

14. Finally, we should think about how to retrieve the many hidden inventions lying dormant in the European and national patent offices and put them to work in the search for new sources of energy. It is highly probable that new motors or energy recovery systems have already been invented, but they are not being put to use because their inventors cannot afford the legal, development and production costs. But perhaps the current financial crisis will present us with an opportunity to provide inventors and developers with start-up capital, thereby giving them a chance to stimulate an innovative economy and create new jobs.

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Reporting committee: Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs.

Committee seized for opinion: Committee on Economic Affairs and Development.

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Draft opinion unanimously approved by the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development on 29 January 2009.

Secretariat of the committee: Mr Newman, Mr de Buyer and Mr Chahbazian.