



Press Release for UN-Day on Combating Desertification (17 June, 2008)

Bio-fuels in Drylands: A threat to the Livelihoods of Pastoralists

On the occasion of the World Day to Combat Desertification that is celebrated on June 17th every year, organisations representing or supporting traditional mobile livestock keepers caution that the livelihoods of millions of dryland dwellers could be threatened by indiscriminate conversion of so-called “wastelands” into bio-fuel plantations.

Some 193 nations have signed the UN Convention on Combating Desertification (UNCCD), committing themselves to supporting sustainable land use in drylands and providing its inhabitants with adequate livelihoods.¹ However, plans to utilize drylands for the large-scale cultivation of bio-fuel, such as *Jatropha* (*Jatropha curcas*), are likely to undermine this pledge.

Promoters of *Jatropha* maintain that producing this plant does not compete with food production, since it grows only in areas which are not suited for the cultivation of food crops.^{2,3}

But such statements totally ignore the fact that these very “wastelands” form the main resource base for mobile livestock keepers (pastoralists) whose herds convert the natural and drought- adapted vegetation of drylands into food, energy, and manure. Ilse Köhler-Rollefson from the League for Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock Development (LPP), emphasizes “Pastoralism provides livelihoods for over a hundred million poor people and has the added advantage of conserving biological diversity.” This is also asserted in a statement issued by the representatives of pastoralist communities and their supporters during the recently concluded 9th meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).⁴

The expressed intention of a country such as India to deploy 11 million hectares of its wastelands for cultivating *Jatropha*, alarms the sizeable pastoralist communities in the arid western parts of the country. Hanwant Singh Rathore, Director of Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS), points out that this move contradicts India’s recently sanctioned Policy for Farmers which places emphasis on increasing and improving access to common property resources, including “wastelands”⁵ Bagdi Ram Raika, president of the Rajasthan Chervaha Vikas Sanghathan (Rajasthan Pastoralist Development Association) also elaborates that pastoralists make their own contribution to the energy crisis by producing draft animals such as camels and oxen. “Prices of camels have risen substantially since accelerating fuel rates make it too costly for many farmers to cultivate their fields with tractors. This development is strengthening the livelihoods of pastoralists.”⁶

Promoters of bio-fuels believe that *Jatropha* will gain acceptance if it can be developed or processed into animal feed. Bayer CropScience, Daimler and Archer Daniels Midland Company (ADM) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to promote research on *Jatropha*.⁷ They hope to repeat the “success story” of soy-bean which initially also contained toxic ingredients but now is a main ingredient in processed animal feed.

However, this may take some time. Currently *Jatropha* is toxic for livestock as Maasai pastoralists in Ngorongoro, Tanzania, found out when they agreed to collaborate on growing *Jatropha* on their lands to produce fuel for local use. “*Jatropha* is a threat to mobile pastoralism as it is poisonous for livestock and destroys livelihoods and culture,” says Mosses Ndiyaine, Executive Director for the Indigenous Heartland Organization (IHO).

The pastoralists now seek to cancel their contract, remarking that they themselves have little need for bio-fuel, whereas livestock is all important.

Civil Society Organisations hope that a currently pending EU Bio-fuel Directive aimed at introducing environmental criteria for the production of bio-fuel will be expanded by social criteria. According to Silke Brehm, Science and Technology Officer of Drynet, an alliance of 14 NGOs working towards greater Civil Society involvement in the implementation of the UN Convention on Combating Desertification (UNCCD), "If bio-fuels can only be sourced from private land, then the danger for pastoralists to be evicted from their traditional grazing grounds will be reduced."

Drylands are sensitive eco-systems that need to be handled with care and introducing mono-cultures to replace the bio-diverse native vegetation could have many negative consequences. Civil Society hopes that the International Day of Combating Desertification will remind nations of their responsibilities to manage drylands sustainably and to the benefit of its local populations.

References

1. <http://www.unccd.int/main.php>
2. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jatropha>
3. http://www.bayercropscience.com/bayer/cropscience/cscms.nsf/id/20080109_EN?open&ccm=400
4. http://www.pastoralpeoples.org/docs/pastoralism_and_biodiv.pdf
5. <http://agricoop.nic.in/NPF/npff2007.pdf>
6. http://us.ft.com/ftgateway/superpage.ft?news_id=fto050220081420562090
7. http://www.bayercropscience.com/bayer/cropscience/cscms.nsf/id/20080109_EN?open&ccm=400

-end-

NOTE FOR MEDIAPERSONS

Photographs of pastoralists and their habitats are available on request.

For further information and interview opportunities contact:

Dr. Ilse Köhler-Rollefson

Project Coordinator, League for Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock Development, Pragerlatenstr. 20, 64372 Ober-Ramstadt, Germany.

Tel.+49-6154-53642. E-mail ilse@pastoralpeoples.org. Website www.pastoralpeoples.org

Hanwant Singh, Director, Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan, P.O. Box 1, Sadri, Rajasthan (India). Tel. +91-9414818564. E-mail lpps@sify.com. www.lpps.org

Mosses Ndiyaine

Executive Director, Indigenous Heartland Organization (IHO), P.O BOX 14995, Arusha, Tanzania

Tel/Fax +255 (0) 27 250 5532, Mobile +255 (0)786 662 525, E-mail ndiyaine@indigenousheartland.org, Website. www.indigenousheartland.org

Silke Brehm

Science and Technology Officer, Drynet, Chaussée de Waterloo 1313D, 1180 Brussels, Belgium.

Tel. +32-23723555. E-mail silke.brehm@skynet.be, www.dry-net.org