



ABN Policy Position: False Solutions at Copenhagen and Beyond

THE AFRICAN BIODIVERSITY NETWORK (ABN) believes that genuine solutions to climate change should not cause unacceptable social and environmental costs. Too many so-called solutions that are proposed to the climate crises that Africa and the world face, fail to consider the impacts on the farmers, forests, indigenous peoples and food security of Africans. Not only are these proposals wrong in themselves, their impact is such that they often make climate change worse.

The ABN believes that civil society, governments, academia, communities and corporations have a responsibility to look for holistic solutions that bring advantages to climate, biodiversity and communities. We hope that the world agrees that genuine solutions need not lead to land grabbing, hunger or loss of livelihoods. Genuine solutions can empower communities, enhance and make use of biodiversity, nurture ecosystems, and increase overall resilience to the challenges ahead.

Agrofuels: Agrofuels (also known as Biofuels) are being touted as a solution to climate change, even though there is overwhelming scientific evidence that they make climate change worse by leading to deforestation and changes in land use from food to resource-intensive industrial crops. There is also widespread concern about the many negative socio-economic and environmental impacts of agrofuel production, as they lead to large scale land grabbing and evictions, rising food prices, and destruction of biodiversity. Most biofuels will be used in developed countries, but they will be produced in developing countries. Claims that agrofuels can be grown on “marginal” lands are misleading, as even crops like *Jatropha* require substantial water and fertile soil.

Agrofuel production must come from somewhere, and therefore needs to replace something: forests, food production, small-scale farmers. It is therefore not possible to produce enough “Sustainable Biofuels” to meet the growing global energy demands, so talking of “Sustainable Biofuels” as the answer to our climate and energy problems is deluded.

Biochar: Traditional production of charcoal has always had its place in the fuel and fertilization practices of African communities. There are now proposals to industrialise this process on a massive scale. The process claims to capture carbon dioxide from the air by growing trees, and burning them to produce charcoal that can be put in the soil, to sequester the carbon and reduce climate change. This process has been called “Biochar”.

There are many unresolved scientific questions about the effectiveness of this process, and it is feared that airborne biochar particles can cause health problems and worsen climate change. The major concern to Africa, however, is that in order for biochar to have any noticeable impact on the Earth’s atmospheres, huge amounts of land will have to be put over to growing these trees for burning. Some are pushing for up to 1 billion hectares to be developed. Africa is being targeted for large-scale biochar production, and implementation is likely to lead to a massive grab of Africa’s communal and forest land on a scale that will dwarf even the biofuels land grab.

GM crops: Genetically Modified (GM) crops are likely to be a disaster for Africa. Patented seeds and inevitable contamination from cross-pollination will spell the end of seed saving, seed diversity, farmers’ rights, small farmers and African agriculture. GM crops require large amounts of agricultural chemicals, which drive up farmers’ costs and poison soil, human health and biodiversity. They concentrate and monopolise control over seed, food and agriculture into the hands of the corporations, and take away farmers’ ability to make choices. They offer no benefits that cannot be resolved through existing methods of breeding or crop management.

“Roundup-Ready” GM crops are engineered by Monsanto to be resistant to a particular herbicide, Roundup. This allows farmers to spray fields with Roundup while the crop is growing, leading weeds to die back and the crop to continue growing. As it reduces the need for ploughing, this version of “Conservation Tillage” is also promoted as reducing the amount of CO₂ released from the soil into the atmosphere.

Not all “conservation tillage” practices are harmful, in fact some are essential in drier climates. However, the GM version is a perverse interpretation of “conservation tillage”. Unfortunately, only projects with high technological and financial capacity are likely to be able to participate in the UN carbon market, and the GM industry will be much better placed to do so than small-scale African farmers. Agreeing to this will endorse and subsidise large-scale GM agriculture.

Intensification and Industrialisation of Agriculture: Some bodies choose to take a dangerously narrow approach to food security, believing that the only way to address a growing global population will be to industrialise agriculture to “increase yield”. This approach is exemplified by initiatives such as the “Alliance for a New Green Revolution in Africa” (AGRA), which promotes fertilisers, pesticides and hybrid seeds as the solution for hunger in Africa.

The reality is that these programmes will create farmer dependency on expensive corporate agricultural products, and will lead to the disappearance of Africa’s seed diversity, complex traditional agricultural knowledge, and the destruction of the soils. The production of oil-based fertilizers is a major contributor to climate change. This approach will only exacerbate the problem, and make farmers dependent on products that are closely tied to rising oil prices. The focus on single-crop “yield” also leads to the disappearance of useful crops and biodiversity that are rarely included in the narrow calculations. Without crop diversity, farmer knowledge and healthy soils, Africa will be more vulnerable than ever to the challenges of climate change.

In addition, there is now concrete evidence that a return to agro-ecological farming has the potential to recapture more than 2/3 of the present excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere through incorporating lost organic matter into soils. It is therefore imperative to move away from industrial agriculture to agro-ecological farming systems.

Reducing Emissions for Deforestation and Degradation: There is universal agreement that the UNFCCC process needs to find a way to motivate governments not to cut down their forests, the Earth’s precious lungs. However, how they go about this is still open to debate, and has the potential to cause many problems if inappropriately designed.

One concern is the need to recognise the rights of Local and Indigenous Peoples living in the world’s forest areas, to prevent their eviction from traditional lands, and the loss of their way of life, culture and livelihoods. There are many other concerns, including the possibility that industrial tree plantations will be recognised as forests (justifying the cutting down of the latter to grow the former). A market-based approach could also encourage countries to sacrifice environmental and social concerns in the race to offer the cheapest carbon credits.

As a network of civil society groups across Africa working on issues of food sovereignty, biodiversity, indigenous rights, traditional knowledge, culture and land rights, we strongly believe that the Copenhagen negotiations and climate solutions should not compromise these values. We urge our leaders to take note and to prevent these false solutions from replacing the real solutions to climate change that we so urgently need.