BIOENERGY AND FOOD SECURITY NEED LINKED POLICY, SAYS UN

Biofuels' impact on global food security can be lessened by linked food and energy policies, says a panel of independent experts that is also calling for more research and development.

Biofuels and bioenergy more generally, are plant-derived agricultural sources of transport fuel or of energy for electricity generation, cooking and heating.

'First generation' biofuels rely on food crops, and their markets can help or hinder in terms of whether people have access to sufficient

food — for example by increasing job opportunities and income, or by increasing food prices and land losses.

To assess these impacts, the UN Committee on World Food Security asked the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) on Food Security and Nutrition to draft a report, which was launched last week (26 June).

The report, 'Biofuels and Food Security', calls for coordinated food, biofuel and bioenergy policies that prevent biofuels from compromising international food security.

"It is artificial to divide food and energy policies," says Vincent Gitz, HLPE coordinator.

For example, sugar cane can be used for food or for ethanol fuel. Similarly, molasses can become food or can produce heat and energy for rural homes without access to grid electricity.

“There is not an unconditional message that second-generation biofuels will solve everything”

The report argues that national biofuel policies should sit within a broader combined food security and energy security strategy that uses ratified certification schemes to ensure sustainable production.

It places particular emphasis on ensuring such schemes do not exclude developing world smallholders from financial rewards. In Brazil, for example, those without access to large areas of land have not benefited financially from biofuel crops, it says.

The report also recommends more investment into research and development (R&D) to improve energy efficiencies and establish the viability of 'second-generation' fuels made from cellulose or lignin rather than foodstuffs.

Less than one per cent of worldwide biofuel supply comes from the second generation revolution the biofuel industry promised, Gitz tells *SciDev.Net*.

"There is not an unconditional message that second-generation biofuels will solve everything. We need to know more after commercial-scale projects are rolled out," says Gitz.

R&D into bioenergy for heating and cooking is particularly important for the developing world, as nutrition is highly dependent on energy security.

Cooking a kilogram of rice can require a kilogram of wood in some regions of Africa, yet this is unsustainable.

David Laborde, senior research fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute, agrees on the need for R&D, but has concerns about certification schemes. "Their effects will be limited and transaction costs too high," he tells *SciDev.Net*.

He argues that R&D money should be spent on developing tailored energy feedstocks and processing technologies for individual countries so they can "deal with local conditions and develop local solutions".

"We [also] need coordination of food and energy policies within and among countries. Adding layers of uncoordinated policies is the worst thing that we can do, and is what is done now,"

Source: http://www.scidev.net/global/biofuels/news/bioenergy-and-food-security-need-linked-policy-says-un.html