



Fair Fuels?



Between dead end and energy transition:
A social-ecological multilevel analysis of transnational biofuel policy



Biofuels: dead end or energy transition?

The processing of biomass to produce combustible fuels – biofuel or agrofuel – is expanding rapidly at the global level. In view of the finite, non-renewable nature of fossil fuel energy sources as well as the advancing climate change, the production of biofuels is a key element in the effort to achieve a global turnaround of energy production. Biofuels are intended to help transform fossil fuel energy systems and at the same time reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This approach is not only driving up biofuel production in industrialised countries, but also leads to an increased manufacture of biofuels in a number of developing and emerging countries both for export and domestic use.

However, biofuel production comes with a multitude of associated social and environmental conflicts, raising the fear that this fuel supply strategy could lead to a dead end: competition with food crops, land use change, dispossession and displacement of small-scale farmers, as well as conversion of primary forests and other protected land into agro-industrial production areas. Furthermore, questions have been raised regarding the ecological balance sheet for biofuels and the socially unequal distribution of costs and benefits.

Pitted against these issues are hopes that such problems will not only be solved but that the investments will also promote rural development in the producing countries. The arguments include existing land potentials, opportunities for political regulation and steering by means of policy frameworks, e.g., certifications and standards, as well as technology transfer and innovation.

At present there are very few analyses that take an interdisciplinary approach in examining biofuels with respect to cross-conflict and transnational impacts. This is where the “Fair Fuels?” project comes in.

The “Fair Fuels?” project: Main questions and goals

In taking up biofuels, the project group has chosen to analyse an especially controversial element of the present and future energy supply system. Pursuing an interdisciplinary and interregional approach, the project group will investigate the conflicts, potentials, and risks of biofuels; their transnational complexity; and their social-ecological interdependencies. The results drawn from case studies carried out in three different regions of the world will be integrated into investigations of overlying concerns about environmental impacts, political manageability and control, and transnational conflicts.



Main goals of the project include:

- Identification and analysis of the varying social-ecological conflict dimensions of biofuel production at and between different political levels (from local to global) and of affected economic sectors;
- formulation of context-specific assertions on how such conflicts could be dealt with politically;
- methodological as well as theoretical-conceptual contributions to the analysis of social-ecological areas of conflict from a multi-level perspective.

The project team consists of junior scientists and researchers all of whom are pursuing further academic qualification (doctorate, postdoctorate).



Approach

The project is divided into both context-specific country case studies and comprehensive cross-regional contributions. In a concluding section all significant results will be integrated.

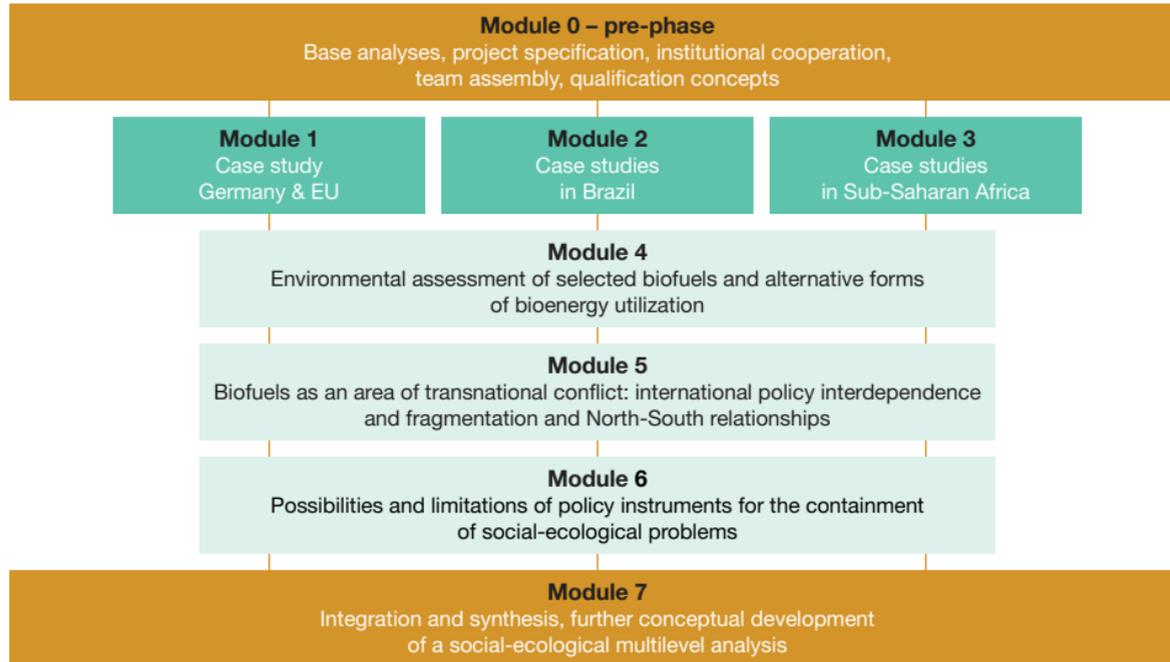
Country case studies:

1. Case study Germany and EU: Analysis of the controversial development of German biofuels policy and its interaction with European climate, energy, agricultural, and environmental policy.
2. Case studies in Brazil: Investigation of the impacts of the expansion of biofuels production on the current conflicts surrounding land use and distribution.
3. Case studies in Sub-Saharan Africa: Analysis of the potential impacts of various forms of agroindustrial biofuel production on rural poverty and food security.

Comprehensive cross-regional contributions:

4. Environmental assessment: Comprehensive environmental assessment of selected biofuels in the case study countries with a particular focus on prevailing methodological weak points, for example, changes in land use and indirect effects.
5. Transnational perspectives: Analysis of the impact of climate and trade policy decisions on local development, shifts in political power structures in the North-South context and social-ecological consequences of these interrelationships.
6. Approaches to policy regulation: Investigation of the social-ecological conflicts as well as certifications and standards, codes of conduct and agreements with respect to impacts, limitations, and potential for improvement.

Project modules



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The project members share numerous years of experience in the analysis of social-ecological problems and conflicts, of energy systems, of international economics and policy relationships, as well as with the selected case study countries.

The project is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research's (BMBF) Social-Ecological Research (SÖF) program.

Project duration: July 2009 – June 2013

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