

Summary of report

Biofuels: ethical issues

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Concerns over energy security, economic development and climate change are driving the development of biofuels as one of a number of possible alternatives to fossil fuels for meeting global energy demands.

Current methods of biofuel production have been associated with harms to the environment, threats to food security and human rights violations in countries where they are grown. New types of biofuels, such as lignocellulosic and algal biofuels, could help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions whilst avoiding these problems, but commercial-scale production is some years away.

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics has published a report setting out an ethical framework to guide policy making for biofuels. The Council concludes that current UK and European policies encourage unethical practices and include few incentives for the development of new biofuels technologies. The Council recommends:

- Current European and national biofuels targets should be replaced with a more sophisticated target-based strategy that considers the wider consequences of biofuel production.
- The strategy should incorporate a comprehensive ethical standard for all biofuels developed in and imported into the EU, enforced through a certification scheme. This standard should be based on the following ethical principles:
 - Biofuels development should not be at the expense of human rights
 - Biofuels should be environmentally sustainable
 - Biofuels should contribute to a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions
 - Biofuels should adhere to fair trade principles
 - Costs and benefits of biofuels should be distributed in an equitable way
- The EU should provide financial support and advice to countries that might find it difficult to certify biofuels in this way.
- The ethical standard and associated certification scheme should ideally be applied to *all* similar technologies and products to guide decision making in a wider policy context.
- More research should be carried out on the economic and social impacts of intellectual property related to the development of biofuels.
- Biofuels policies and future sustainability initiatives should not discourage local, small-scale biofuel production, particularly in developing countries that experience fuel poverty.
- Policy makers should incentivise research and development of new biofuels technologies that need less land and other resources, avoid social and environmental harms, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Copies of the report are available to download from the Council's website:
www.nuffieldbioethics.org/biofuels

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