

Bio-fuel Expansion and Urban Food Supply and Distribution Systems in South Africa

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Bio-fuel production has showed large improvements and development on the African continent in recent years most notably in Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa. A growing number of African countries have further instituted national strategies that promote the development and expansion of bio-fuel industries. South Africa has a very strong and well developed commercial agricultural sector that produces its main staple foods and exports any surplus amounts of food. Since the democratisation of South Africa in 1994 the South African government also introduced a land reform programme that were aimed at redistributing 30% of commercial agricultural land by the year 2014 to people who before 1994 were disposed from land due to policies of racial segregation. Empirical evidence however suggests that 90% of farms that were redistributed after 1994 are today unproductive. This is worrying statistics in a country where food security and lack of the means to secure food is one of the core developmental and societal challenges of its young democracy in the 21st century. South Africa is further rapidly becoming a predominantly urban society. According to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) 61, 7% of the South African population currently resides in urban areas and expectations are that this figure could rise to 71, 3% of the total South African population by 2030.[i]

This paper will thus argue that there are links between bio-fuel production, the unproductivity of agricultural land that is used for the production of food crops and food supply and distribution to urban centres in South Africa. South Africa has the agricultural land resources as well as the expertise to excel in bio-fuel production and against the background of climate change and water resources on the whole African continent that are diminishing, bio-fuel production has become a popular topic. The question however remains whether it will be done at the cost of a South African society, especially the urban population, where the biggest bulk of people live either in extreme poverty or with very low income levels. Literature suggests that more bio-fuel production can lead to an increase in food prices and as urban households have to purchase most of the food they consume this can have a negative impact on the sustainability of livelihoods and food security of households in urban centres of South Africa.

[i] United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT). 2010. Urban Indicators. (<http://www.un-habitat.org/stats/Default.aspx>). Accessed 28 July 2010.