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## **Fiddling in Rome while our food burns**

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Rumour has it that the Roman emperor Nero played a fiddle and sang while Rome burned for five days in the Great Fire of 64. Nearly 2000 years later, at the very site where this devastating fire started so long ago, history is repeating itself, only the leaders doing the fiddling are delegates to the 40th meeting of the [UN Committee on World Food Security](#)(CFS). And what's burning is the world's food in the engines of our cars.

Unfortunately, this time, the fire didn't end in five days. Food-based biofuels have been burning for over a decade, the fires are growing in scale and intensity, and there is no end in sight.

It's not as if we haven't seen the warning signs. There have been three food price spikes in the last six years, with a wide range of studies implicating biofuels as a key driver of price volatility. How could it be otherwise? In the United States, 40 percent of our corn - fully 15 percent of global corn supplies - is now diverted to make ethanol, up from just 5 percent in 2000.

The food security impacts are multiple and severe. Because ethanol competes for corn with food and animal feed, it has a direct impact on the cost of food. Indeed, in 2008, global food prices doubled. This hurts poor consumers. Biofuels - from corn, sugar, soybeans, and other feedstocks - compete for land and water, putting added stress on scarce resources.

Most dramatically, biofuels producers have been key drivers of large-scale land acquisitions in African and other developing countries.

This is why the CFS put the issue of biofuels and food security on this year's agenda and commissioned an [expert report](#) to inform the decision. Indeed, the report confirmed the negative impacts of biofuels to date and recommended decisive action. Our own [report](#) confirms that one of the main threats to our ability to feed the world in the future is the continued expansion of first generation biofuels.

No matter. At the CFS the fiddling began. Despite urgent statements from the floor about the negative impacts of biofuels on food security, the small group tasked to negotiate a set of principles and actions came up with weak principles and complete inaction. There was no acknowledgement of the negative impacts of biofuel policies and mandates in the United States and European Union, which have been instrumental in artificially stimulating and sustaining the biofuel industry.

Conflict of interest?

Why the fiddling? Simple: The most powerful countries at the negotiating table were the same ones

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benefitting from the burning of food in our cars. Canada and the US played the loudest, with the EU, Brazil and Argentina playing much the same tune. Only South Africa, a lonely voice, joined with civil society to speak for the victims of these policies.

Of course, the ones choosing the tune were powerful industry interests, from the biofuels companies themselves to the agribusiness firms capturing the benefits of high prices and subsidised demand for their products.

The CFS is supposed to be the principal international agency coordinating global responses to the food price crisis and dealing with the new realities of the rising and worrisome integration of food markets with fuel and financial markets. It has that clear mandate.

But instead of leading, the CFS decided to do nothing. The straightforward proposal that biofuels policies that harm food security should be reformed was categorically rejected. So too, was any mention of the land and water impacts of runaway biofuels expansion.

The world is not waiting for the CFS to lead. Policymakers around the world are beginning to contend with food-fuel competition. The US Congress is under pressure to reform, or even repeal, its biofuels mandate. The EU recently cut its own mandate in half, explicitly recognising the negative impacts of food-based fuels.

Meanwhile the fiddling continues, the biofuels burn on.

More than 80 organisations from around the world signed an open letter urging the CFS to take action. Members of civil society formally involved in the CFS negotiations refused to endorse the resolution. "Small scale food producers have spoken powerfully here about the reality they are confronted with every day: that biofuels crops compete with their food production, for the land they till and for the water that sustains them," they stated in a press release. "[These] recommendations overwhelmingly defend the interests of the biofuels industry and legitimise violations of the right to food."

This is no time for the CFS to fiddle in Rome. Our food is burning. In our cars. And hundreds of millions of people are going hungry.

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