

# **Becoming Biofuels**

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The messy assembling of  
resources, sustainability, poverty, land use, and nation-states

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## Abstract

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Biofuels have come to represent the will to mitigate climate change by replacing fossil fuels with so-called climate-friendly and renewable plant sources, and to improve rural and poor conditions in the South through biofuel crop production, farm job creation, and smallholder cash cropping. The expansion of biofuels in countries in the South largely pivoted upon ‘the will to develop’, specifically through the oil shrub *Jatropha curcas* L. However, these ‘wills’ have intertwined with other intentions, processes, and relations, and have created new problems, including land grabbing, food competition, displacement of local people, and deforestation. Thus for critics, biofuels produce not simply wins but also losses, and losers.

The purpose of this thesis is not to take sides in this polarised debate but to cut through the debate with an assemblage and governmentality analytics, investigating how overlapping and competing discourses, materialities, technologies, and relationships shape biofuels. Taking an ethnographic and multi-sited approach, it looks at biofuels as a project-in-the-making going on in, and across, various sites, including Zambia, sub-Saharan Africa, the European Union, and the so-called global space. It primarily uses biofuels’ novelty and ‘becomingness’ to render strange more familiar notions, to generate an analytics of how political ecologies and political economies are becoming, and to provide deeper insights into what resources, sustainability, poverty, land, and nation-states actually *are*. This approach suggests that the production of biofuels is complex and ‘messy’, and that outcomes for societies and ecologies are of an uncertain and ambiguous nature.

**Keywords:** biofuels, *jatropha*, assemblages, governmentality, political ecology, political economy, ethnography, governance, materiality, authority, territory, sovereignty, resources, poverty, sustainability, land use change, states, standards, certification, Africa, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, Brazil, EU