The past decade has witnessed a range of opinions and reports about the potential and use of biofuels as an alternative energy source. The phrase “Food vs Fuel” has hovered over many of the public debates, smothering virtually any nuance, and has led to increasingly entrenched views about its potential role in transition to a more sustainable society. An important drawback of this oversimplification has been the dichotomous framing of a single issue that dominates the debate and has not really contributed to a greater understanding of whether biofuels have the potential to serve society in the shift to a more sustainable way of living.

This simplistic framing fails us miserably in its inability to accommodate the complex set of questions that must be asked and considered regarding any possible response to the complex problem of identifying and developing sustainable energy sources. Serious consideration must engage with the multiple dimensions of both the problem and possible solutions. Consequently, when the public debate becomes stuck on one issue and is reduced to a single question, much is lost in our ability to find appropriate solutions.

When a possible solution is discussed or framed in such a way that dismisses or disregards scientific developments and technologies, then a major disservice is done to all stakeholders by the continued predominance of a simplistic dichotomous, and scientifically outdated, framing. The almost reflexive response of “fuel vs food” to the very mention of biofuels is now entirely predictable. Yet, while it directs attention to one consideration, in a single phrase, it dismisses all other considerations, some of which are equally critical and, depending on the technology, more relevant (given that some current and contemplated biofuel sources present little or no competition with food sources).

This dilemma highlights the issue of responsibility for public understanding of scientifically informed debates, especially given that the public sometimes is sometimes not sufficiently well-informed to evaluate the merits of various arguments (Nisbet and Mooney, 2007). To be sure, this is not a new concern, but in the context of developing sustainable energy sources, it is a concern that has widespread effect, and one in which considered, well-informed views should be the gold standard.

As a result, what questions we ask and how we discuss the merits of potential solutions become critically important. Even as we recognise each person’s right to his or her own view (as well as articulation of these views), these views may ultimately inform policy and will surely inform individual and collective action. Framing has arguably played a pivotal role in the public discourse on biofuels, and given how much relevant information is sidelined by the fuel versus food inquiry, at the very least, civic responsibility requires that we devote some attention to the work of framing and the possible need to deliberately re-frame certain highly important co-opted public debates.

The popular use of a frame, like food versus fuel, is a way of organising ideas and defining a
controversy such that it “resonates with core values and assumptions” (Nisbet and Mooney, 2007). However, as a heuristic, this particular widely-used frame has potentially enormous implications for future policy and practice. This work suggests a normative approach to re-framing, including when (e.g. when current frame results in a disservice to society) and with what goal. Identifying appropriate heuristics that are accessible to the public arguably present one possible strategy toward the re-framing of socially important issues when current framing detracts us from being able to serve our own best interests, through directing the inquiry in such a way that it burdens neither freedom of speech nor fundamental principles of a liberal society such as allowing persons to develop their own conceptions of the good. The biofuels debate provides an interesting vehicle for exploration of reframing and operationalising a normative approach both for its scientific complexity as well as for its polarising initial frame.

Societal perspectives about how we as a national or global society achieve our sustainability goals may range the gamut (see e.g. Asveld et al., 2011). As members of liberal societies, we are all entitled to our opinions and values. We are free to decide what is important to us and which trade-offs are acceptable and which are not. However, policy decisions affect everyone, collectively and individually, and this is equally true regarding the use of alternative energy sources such as biofuels. Because of that, a certain civic responsibility arguably rests with all stakeholders, and particularly with policy-makers, to reach a certain level of engagement with the issues, a critical aspect of which is to ask the “right” questions in order to weigh in responsibly on the issues (see Osseweijer et al., 2011 on stakeholder engagement on biofuels). “Food versus fuel” told the public what to consider in developing an opinion about the desirability of biofuels as an alternative energy.

Reframing should not only seek to open doors to accurate information, but also to empower autonomous and informed perception leading to informed choices and preferences. By contributing to a “re-framing” of the issue of biofuels in a responsible way, we can return empower stakeholders with a way of asking the broad range of relevant questions that the issue may implicate.

Biofuels present an interesting case for this inquiry not only because it presents a possible way of achieving our shared sustainability goals but also because of the different technolo-
gies and scientific components involved in their production. That is, in its various iterations, biofuels present substantially different types of issues. First generation biofuels, gave rise to the concerns about food competition. Second generation or “advanced” biofuels present substantial advantages over first generation in this regard in that there are sources and pro-
duction techniques bypass many of the objections associated with first generation biofuels.

These advanced biofuels are converted from biomass that aims to minimise undesirable im-
pacts, e.g. by utilising less land, producing higher yield crops through genetic engineering, or uses processes and techniques designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and involves the use of non-food crops, including crops with capacity to grow on land not suitable for food crops. Most second-generation biofuels aim at sustainability as part of the technological in-
ovation, in substantial part due to the optimised production processes that specifically seek to attend to issues of carbon emissions, land use changes (see e.g. Lynd, 2011), and not compromising food security. In view of this, paradigmatic lenses like “food versus fuel” no longer
serve the debate either as an analytical tool or as a conceptual device capable of facilitating discussion leading to improved understanding of whether and how this technology can serve society.

References


