A New Value Chain for Rubber and Inulin Production in the European BioEconomy

Maria Hingsamer1, Martin Beermann1, Gerfried Jungmeier1, Ingrid van der Meer2, Peter van Dijk3, Hilde Muylle4, Jan Kirschner5, Frans Kappens6, Nico Gevers6

Introduction

DRIVE4EU - ‘Dandelion Rubber and Inulin Valorization and Exploitation for Europe’, a European demonstration project sets up a European chain for the production and processing of natural rubber and inulin from Taraxacum kokssaghyz (TKS, Rubber dandelion) to become less dependent on the import of natural rubber. Natural rubber is a sustainable material that is used for more than 40,000 products, e.g. natural rubber is applied in construction (adhesives, sealants), medicine (gloves, tubing) and transportation (matting, tyres) industries. Because of the specific quality aspects of natural rubber in many products it cannot be replaced by synthetic rubber. At the moment natural rubber is exclusively harvested from the rubber tree (Hevea brasiliensis) of which about 90% is grown in South East Asia.

Whole value chain

DRIVE4EU demonstrates the technical, economic and environmental feasibility of the use of Rubber dandelion as a production platform for natural rubber and inulin, the possible product portfolio is shown in Figure 1. The combination of natural rubber and inulin makes Rubber dandelion very interesting as a new European value chain. The main activities in DRIVE4EU are:

1. Rubber dandelion cultivation and harvesting;
2. Rubber dandelion transport;
3. Rubber dandelion (drying &) storage;
4. Biorefinery (including processing of inulin for food and chemicals);
5. Feed production;
6. Biogas production and
7. Bioethanol production.

Economic viability

The economic analysis of rubber and inulin production from Rubber dandelion identifies the putative bottlenecks for the future commercialization. The general economic analysis is based on the consideration of future business cases in “10 years” and “25 years” with rubber and inulin (for food, chemicals, biogas and bioethanol) as main products and co-products: feed and biogas from roots, leaves and pulp. The whole value chain from TKS cultivation to rubber and inulin includes the following 7 main processes:

1. Rubber dandelion cultivation and harvesting;
2. Rubber dandelion transport;
3. Rubber dandelion (drying &) storage;
4. Biorefinery (including processing of inulin for food and chemicals);
5. Feed production;
6. Biogas production and
7. Bioethanol production.

The total costs in the whole value chain are dominated by the cost of the cultivation and harvesting (Figure 3) and the cost for biorefining. The other costs for transportation, storage, biogas or bioethanol production are relatively low. An environmental assessment (LCA) will provide information on the impacts of several environmental impacts, e.g. GHG emissions, land use change.