

Our Common Responsibility to the Global Environment: The Europeans' Ecological Debt

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TEMAS FUERTES ASOCIADOS: Medio ambiente y responsabilidad .

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A new concept to be publicized

Everyone knows more or less what the debt Third World countries is: a financial debt. This is not true for the ecological debt, a new concept that was coined by South American NGOs in the early 1990s.

In its current conception, as used by South American activists, the ecological debt is a debt that is due by the industrialized countries of the North to the Third World countries, once colonies, as per the environmental impact entailed (still today) by the exploitation of their resources by the countries of the North, and as per "imported" environmental impacts (waste dumped on their soil, etc.). The organization Acción Ecológica defines ecological debt as the responsibility of the industrialized countries for the "damage caused over time" of the planet by their "production and consumption patterns." [1]

In a broader conception, it is an ecological debt caused by country A, through its production and consumption patterns, on other countries or on territories beyond their national jurisdiction. It could also refer to the exploitation or use of ecosystems by a country A, at the expense of the equitable rights to these ecosystems or ecosystem goods and services by other countries or other individuals. In all cases, the "cause" of the debt is country A (usually an industrialized country) and the victim (the creditor) is the planet. Following this conception, the ecological debt can take the form of a debt of the population of the whole world to future generations for their improper exploitation of resources, which leads to the appearance of global environmental threats.

Examples of ecological debt brought about by the industrialized countries

The problem of climate change entails an ecological debt of all the above types. The problem is in fact mainly due to CO₂ emissions, which cause environmental damage and overexploit the capacity of the atmosphere to absorb CO₂. This results in a "historical carbon debt" among countries due to the emissions accumulated in the past and a "carbon debt" owed by us all to future generations. The calculations made by the Sustainable Development Center of Ghent University, in Belgium, estimate the carbon debt accumulated by Belgium between 1900 and 2003 at 58 billion euros. [1] The debt of other industrialized countries can be evaluated according to the same methodology. Researchers at the Center reached the conclusion that some countries have not accumulated a carbon debt; instead, they have a "carbon credit," which they have evaluated for the period 1950-2000: a 726-billion-euro credit for India and a 38-billion-euro one for Congo.

An example of an ecological debt between two countries is that accumulated through the extraction of natural wealth (oil, ore, forests, marine and genetic resources, etc.) in view of export, which has jeopardized the development possibilities of the peoples involved. This type of trade is ecologically unfair, given that the goods are exported without taking into account the social and environmental damage that their exploitation generates, imperiling the food and cultural sovereignty of the local and national communities. [2] A specific example is given by the organization "Acción Ecológica" in Ecuador, where the Texaco oil company has extracted over the past 20 years more than a billion barrels of oil. During this period, it provoked the deforestation of a million hectares of tropical rainforest, provoked leakage of polluting crude oil and oil residues that ran into the Amazonian rivers, burned very large quantities of gas, and built more than 600 sites to bury toxic waste.

A brief history of the concept

It was the institute of political ecology of Chile that, in the early 1990s, describing the skin cancers provoked by the thinning of the ozone layer, challenged the rich countries for their production of CFC gases, which are responsible for the hole in the ozone layer. [2] The concept was mainly used in awareness-raising campaigns targeted at the general population.

In 1992, in Rio de Janeiro during the Earth Summit, groups of environmentalists adopted a "position paper" in which they linked the external debt due by the South to the North to the ecological debt, the debtors of which are the citizens and companies of the rich countries, and the creditors of which are the populations of the poor countries. In 1999, in Johannesburg in South Africa, an international campaign was launched for the recognition and claim of the ecological debt. One year later, in 2000, some NGOs from countries of the South met to form the Southern People Ecological Debt Creditors Alliance (SPEDCA). The objectives of the SPEDCA are threefold [1]: first, it aims to obtain international

recognition of the ecological debt, both historical and current. Then, it demands that external debt be recognized as illegitimate, "as made evident by ecological debt." Finally, it formulates a manifold of demands aiming at reparation for the historical ecological debt and preventing ecological debt from increasing in the future.

At the institutional level, the concept of ecological debt now appears in official texts. The Federal Plan for Sustainable Development in Belgium clearly refers to it by declaring that Belgium intends to study the concept of ecological debt and the practical perspectives of its application in its international-cooperation policies. [1]

To date, only a few scientific articles have been published on the subject. It seems that there is a general understanding of what the ecological debt is, but not a definition accepted by all. In addition, there is no established methodology to calculate the ecological debt, either in physical terms or in monetary terms. Another indication that the concept is still in the process of being developed is the fact that the discussion on what it should be used for has been very limited. The prominent demands are the "recognition" of the actual existence of the ecological debt, the "compensation" for or "reparation" of the damages provoked by the ecological debt of the past, and "avoiding new accumulations" of an ecological debt in the future by restructuring production and consumption patterns in the industrialized countries. [1]

Promoting sustainable policies from an environmental and social point of view

The reality to which the concept of ecological debt refers cannot be denied: there is abundant and well-documented literature on the environmental damages provoked by the industrial countries on other countries or on the global ecosystems, as much in the past as in the present. Beyond that, the concept has features that can potentially transform it into a powerful tool to place the debate on relations between the North and the South on a new basis and to question current sustainable-development policies.

The research results of the Ghent University team lay out a series of implications for environmental policy. (1) The ecological-debt aspect that refers to environmental damages can lead to setting up policies for the evaluation of historical responsibility. Its aspect referring to "the use of ecosystems and ecosystem services at the expense of the equitable rights to these ecosystems or ecosystem goods and services by other countries or other individuals" can lead to policies for the prevention of the accumulation of debt in the future. Climate and energy policies are fields where the point of view of historical ecological debt can be easily introduced. Ecological debt can also become an additional argument in discussions on the cancellation of the financial external debt.

A development-cooperation policy can identify cases of accumulation of ecological debt in partner countries then promote and set up projects to stop this accumulation. International-trade policies could be reformed with a view to avoiding unequal terms of trade between countries in ecological terms.

Even in cases where it is not currently possible to calculate the ecological debt precisely, it would be important to identify the impacts of the policies of industrialized countries outside of their borders and to try to decrease these impacts. This point of view should be an integral part of a sustainable-development policy, even without explicitly referring to the ecological debt. Ignoring this dimension and concentrating exclusively on sustainable-development issues within Europe will create the illusion that "all is well," while the external effects of our forms of production and consumption are transferred to other countries and future generations. In this sense, the methodology developed for the ecological debt can become a tool to enlarge the discussion on what sustainable development really means.

Evaluation of the ecological debt in monetary terms

Some economists and NGOs consider the ecological debt to be an economic concept and aim to evaluate it in monetary terms. Objections from the world of NGOs argue that this approach is tantamount to putting a price tag on nature and on the right to pollute. Proponents of this approach respond that calculations in monetary terms are highly influential on decision makers and public opinion. It is the kind of language that is best understood in the countries of the North. The monetary quantification of the ecological debt can then serve during negotiations on the financial debt of the Third World as an argument for its cancellation. It can also serve to take into account the "external environmental costs" in the evaluation of any type of production (agricultural, industrial etc.), in view of promoting sustainable-development policies to ward off an increase of the ecological debt in the future.

Despite the fact that the economic approach can constitute an important tool, we consider that the ecological debt cannot be reduced to its monetary dimension. It is related to policy issues and its consideration requires above all a true change in the patterns of development.

Our responsibility for the ecological debt of the European countries - the ENRED network

The ecological-debt concept is connected to the problem of the environmental deterioration of the whole of the planet and at the same time to the question of poverty at the international level. The people and NGOs that support this concept underscore that worldwide, the gap between the rich and the poor has been built upon the ecological debts of the colonial countries, which the poorest populations are now being required to pay. The ecological-debt concept is advanced mainly to introduce the concept of responsibility in the mentalities of the citizens of the countries of the North,

who are also those who waste the most natural resources.

A European network of NGOs from a number of European countries aiming to have the ecological debt recognized, the ENRED (European Network for the Recognition of the Ecological Debt), was set up during a meeting of the European Social Forum in Paris, in November 2003. It is an open network, independent of any party or religion. It aims to contribute to the recognition of the ecological debt that we, as European countries, contracted toward the countries of the South. It also aims to promote strategies to ward off an accumulation of the ecological debt in the future. [3]

Its action aims concretely, on the one hand, to contribute to raising the awareness of the European population, whose lifestyle is responsible for most of the ecological debt. On the other hand, it aims to put pressure on political decision makers and other key actors (international agencies, transnational companies, etc.) to make them implement policies to reduce this debt. To do so, the ENRED sets up and supports campaigns and actions, European and worldwide.

ENRED has organized and participated in many meetings in order to spread the ecological-debt concept among Europeans:

- ▶ in April 2004, in Italy, at a seminar on the theme, "Canceling the debt for an economy of rights";
- ▶ in May 2004, in Belgium, at a seminar on the theme, "The concept of the ecological debt: its significance and the possibilities for its application in international policy";
- ▶ in October 2004, at the 3rd European Social Forum, in London, in a workshop on the theme, "Environmental Justice, Ecological Debt and Sustainable Development."

In Europe there are several organizations and groups implementing thinking-and-action projects on this same theme. In September 2001, Friends of the Earth Scotland started an educational project on the ecological debt, financed by the Department for International Development. This project aims to promote public awareness of the concept of ecological debt in Scotland through educational seminars addressed to groups of local communities. It also aims to explore strategies for the restitution of the ecological debt of the European countries. Friends of the Earth has developed educational materials that can be used by educators to promote the concept. This material is accessible through the organization's Web site. [4]

Awareness among civil society

For the concept to accomplish its role in setting up sustainable policies from an environmental and social point of view, it will be necessary to promote the awareness of the general population on our common responsibility to the global environment. We need awareness among politicians and civil society as a whole. We need pressure actions at different decision-making levels, more thorough scientific research, and the development of civil-society networks between the North and the South.

[1] Paredis E. et al., 2004, Elaboration of the Concept of Ecological Debt, VLIR-BVO project 2003, Final Report, Centre for Sustainable Development (CDO) - Ghent University, Belgium (search possibility on the Web site of Centre for Sustainable Development of Ghent University: <http://cdonet.rug.ac.be/>)

[2] Bourinet S., 2004, "Faire reconnaître la dette écologique des pays du Nord envers les pays du Sud", text written for the summer university of the CRID, Angers, Belgium, July 10, 2004.

[3] For further information, please go to the ENRED Web site: <http://www.enredeurope.org>

[4] For further information, please go to the Web site of Friends of the Earth Scotland: http://www.foe-scotland.org.uk/inter/inter_index.html