

North Owes South Huge Ecological Debt

FACT SHEET - the ECUMENICAL TEAM for the WSSD
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Acknowledging Ecological Debt

We all owe a debt to the Earth for its life-giving sustenance and for the damage we have inflicted on it. The peoples of the North owe a special debt to the marginalized peoples of the South who are the first to suffer from environmental degradation.

Ecological Debt refers to the debt owed by Northern, industrial countries to Third World countries on account of historical and ongoing resource plundering, environmental degradation and the disproportionate appropriation of environmental space to deposit toxic wastes and greenhouse gases. The external financial debt owed by countries of the South to Northern creditors is much smaller than this ecological debt.

Ecological Debt has accumulated for centuries through:

- the looting, destruction and devastation carried out by colonial powers;
- the extraction, without the permission of the peoples most affected, of natural resources, such as petroleum, minerals, forest, marine and genetic resources, by processes which destroy ecosystems and the bases of sustenance for Southern peoples;
- the transfer by developing countries of their ecological capital to Northern creditors in payment of the growing burden of external debt, leading to further depletion and degradation of the sources of their future wellbeing;
- ecologically inequitable terms of trade whereby goods, such as crude petroleum, are extracted at great social and environmental costs and exported at lower prices than the cost of producing sustainable alternatives;
- the appropriation of traditional knowledge of seeds and medicinal plants by groups

such as the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) that make specimens available to biotechnology, pharmaceutical and agro-industrial corporations that turn around and demand royalties from the original guardians of biodiversity;

- the use and degradation of the best lands, water, air and human energy in the South for export crops such as flowers or monoculture

tree plantations, putting at risk the food and cultural sovereignty of local and national communities;

- the contamination of the atmosphere by industrialized countries' disproportionate emissions of gases causing climate change and ozone depletion;

- atmospheric transfer of toxic substances which negatively impact on all life forms far from their place of origin;

- the dumping in the South of toxic wastes and the sale of pesticides banned in the North.

Ecological Footprints measure the average per capita human consumption of food, forest products and fuel in a given geographic area. The ecological footprints of people living in industrialized countries far exceed the sustainable carrying capacity of the Earth. These ecological debtors constitute 23.4% of the world's population but occupy 67.2% of humanity's total footprint. By contrast the ecological creditors, the peoples of the South whose ecological footprints are smaller than the world's population but occupy only 32.8% of humanity's ecological footprint.

Assessing Ecological Debt

In September of 2000 the **Southern Peoples' Ecological Debt Creditors' Alliance** (1) was launched at a forum in Prague. The alliance brings together

representatives of countries that are owed the Ecological Debt in order to establish the responsibility of the Northern industrialised countries, transnational corporations and International Financial Institutions for the environmental destruction of the Global South.

The Ecological Debt Creditors' Alliance demands **the restoration and repair of damages caused by the exploitation of natural resources** and recognition of the illegitimacy of the external financial debt which is much smaller than the Ecological Debt. In Ecuador, Nigeria and elsewhere ecological creditors have occupied oil drilling and mining sites to stop the destruction of ecosystems on which their livelihood depends.

Recently, ecological creditors won a major victory when the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) demanded Nigeria undertake a "comprehensive cleanup of lands and rivers damaged by oil operations."

Farming and indigenous communities are owed compensation for the crop varieties and medicinal plants they have protected for centuries before their appropriation by bioprospectors and biopirates working for universities, genebanks like CGIAR and transnational corporations. Past appropriations of medicinal plants from the South contribute at least US\$30 billion a year to the North's pharmaceutical industry.(2)

Carbon Debt refers to the overuse by industrialized nations of the carbon dioxide absorption capacity of the world's oceans, vegetation and soil, and the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. When the impacts of the resultant climate change are assessed, it is clear that "industrialised countries are now responsible for a larger and more damaging ecological debt than any conventional foreign debt ever incurred by a developing country." (3)

The annual carbon debt owed by Northern countries to Southern carbon creditors who are among the first to suffer the consequences of climate change is estimated at US\$59 billion.(2)

In summary the people of the North who disproportionately abuse the biosphere, transgress ecological limits, and enforce unsustainable patterns of resource extraction through over consumption of non-renewable resources owe a huge ecological debt to the peoples of the South. Restoring right relationships between ecological creditors and debtors, with the Earth and among all its inhabitants requires radical changes to systems of production, distribution and consumption in order to restore the Earth's capacity to sustain life for all.

Immediate cancellation of the financial debt owed by developing countries to Northern creditors is an obvious starting point. This is only the beginning, however, since Ecological Debt cannot be reduced to a financial equation. It also has historical, political and ethical dimensions. These demand that Northern countries accept responsibility for making radical changes to production and consumption patterns that are destroying the Earth.

Notes

- (1) For information on the Southern Peoples' Ecological Debt Creditors' Alliance, visit [www.cosmovisiones.com/Deuda Ecologica/](http://www.cosmovisiones.com/Deuda_Ecologica/)
- (2) For more information on the estimates cited in this fact sheet see the report "Ecological Debt: South Tells North 'Time to Pay Up'", available at www.kairoscanada.org
- (3) Andrew Simms, "Ecological Debt – Balancing the Environmental Budget and Compensating Developing Countries", IIED Opinion paper, 2001.

This fact sheet was prepared by KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, in consultation with the Ecumenical Team.

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