

In the event of 'Ecological Debt: we are the creditors'; jointly organized by EquityBD, JS-APMDD, MFTD, SUPRO, Unnayan Onneshan and Voice, 27 July 2009 at National Press Club, Dhaka

ECOLOGICAL DEBT: Who owes whom in the international economy?

1. Ecological Debt: conceptualizing the concept

The principle behind ecological debt is that no one owns the atmosphere – it is a true global commons – yet we all need it. On that basis everyone has an equal right to its services – in one sense, an equal right to pollute. Assuming an equal “right-to-pollute”, it is possible to calculate a threshold for sustainable consumption for each individual. If a country uses up fossil fuels at a rate higher than this per capita entitlement allows, it runs up an ecological, or “carbon”, debt.

The idea of ecological debt has several roots. It is a logical consequence of applying both long-established norms on the equality of people in law, and new scientific knowledge about the natural limits of the world around us. Developing countries make another case – that rich nations have systematically expropriated their natural resources for profit, either without paying at all, as in the case of the “bio-piracy” of plant, animal and human resources, or by paying too little. This case, they argue, is supported by the chronic long-term depression of primary commodity prices in international markets dominated by multinational companies, mostly from the rich Northern countries. Finally there is the issue of fossil fuel use and climate change.

Ecological debt creates a new framework to understand climate change and to design action plans to halt it. Its fundamental principle is that the atmosphere is a global “commons”, in which everyone has an equal share. Agreeing what each person’s carbon dioxide “allowance” should be, and then working out a plan to equalize them, provides the basis for an equitable global adjustment programme to cut greenhouse gas emissions and halt global warming.

2. Evolution on the concept of Eco-debt: looking at the past

The eco-debt debate is not a new one. In the nineteenth century observers of the British Empire noted that “all parts of the world are ransacked for the Englishman’s table.” Britain depended on in other lands to feed their people. Britain required an even larger area of land overseas to meet domestic demand than it had under cultivation at home. Similarly, history suggests that, some descendants of the South American Indians colonized by European powers 500 years ago have also now “reconstructed”, as a loan, all the gold and silver extracted from their hills and rivers and taken back to Europe. Therefore, five centuries of compound interest have turned it into a very large sum-the eco-debt campaigners in the South America is now claiming.

In this backdrop, in the 1970s Ivan Illich in *Energy and Equity* broadened the debate beyond the point that action was needed simply to avoid environmental collapse. He argued that a society based on low energy use and equal access would be more convivial and supportive of democracy. In the late 1980s enquiries into equity and geographical carrying capacity introduced the language of “environmental space” to the discussion – although it failed to form the basis of many conversations outside the Netherlands and Scandinavia. At the start of the 1990s the Canadian geographer William Rees began talking about “ecological footprints.”

3. Ecological Debt Movement: Theoretical premises/arguments

The concept and term ecological debt came from a growing recognition in the 1980’s by

various Southern analysts of external debt, that the repayment of third world financial debt was having a destructive effect on the natural environments of these countries. Jubilee South- Asia Pacific Movement on Debt and Development (JS-APMDD), a regional network in Asia, claimed in their declaration 2000 that industrialized countries are running up a massive ecological debt, while poor, conventionally indebted, countries are actually in credit. Therefore, if the compound “interest” of eco-debt of two centuries of northern industrialization could be calculated, the debt would be astronomical.

Since 2000 JS-APMDD (Jubilee South Asia Pacific Movement on Debt and Development) has been campaigning for the recognition of and reparation for Ecological Debt. In the recent years, movement on ecological debt has made a link with illegitimate debt and demonstrating in south Asia, south east and some Latin American countries.

A variety of examples can be given of ways in which an ecological debt can be accrued. They are outlined briefly below, but for a better understanding of their implications for people’s lives in the South refer to some main features.

- a. **Looting:** In the past, many natural resources such as coal, gold, wood, spices and gems were taken from the South without any payment being made to the country from which they were taken. People in the South are now starting to ask for recognition for the wealth that has been taken from them.
- b. **Damaging Natural Environmentalists:** Many of the things consumed in the North come from the South, be it food or oil or wood. The production and removal of these items often leaves a raft of damaged environments that are never returned to their original state. Moving oil about the world is a clear example; where the oil spills near the point of removal it damages the local environment and so consequently the livelihoods of the people that live in those environments.

- c. **Overuse of Green House Gas Sinks:** Taking the environmental space idea, we are all entitled to a fair share of the capacity of the earth to absorb greenhouse gases. At present, the North is over using its fair share and the effect of this overuse, namely climate change, is being felt by everybody in the world, not just those that are reaping the benefits of the overuse. Additionally, the greatest effects of a warming planet are going to be felt by the South.
- d. **Dumping of Toxic Waste:** Many toxic wastes that are banned in the North are shipped to the South to be disposed of. Once again, the North is benefiting from the processes that create these wastes, but expects the South to cope with the negative outputs.

Ecological debts also include pollution, “theft” of resources and disproportionate use of the environment.

The extraction of natural resources: such as the petroleum, minerals, marine, forest and genetic resources, that is destroying the basis of survival of the people.

The ecologically unequal terms of trade caused by goods being exported without taking into account the social and environmental damages caused by their extraction or production.

The intellectual appropriation and the use of ancestral knowledge related to seeds, the use of medicinal plants and other knowledge, upon which the biotechnology and the modern agro-industries are based, and for which, we have to pay royalties.

The use and degradation of the best naturals like lands, water and air, and of human energy, for the development of export crops , thus putting at risk the food and cultural sovereignty of both local and national communities.

Contamination of the atmosphere by industrialized countries through their disproportionate emission of gases; those are the main cause of Climate Change and make thinning of the ozone layer.

The production of chemical and nuclear weapons, substances and toxic residuals those are deposited in the countries of the Third World.

e. **Bio-piracy:** One of the great wealths of the world is its biodiversity, much of which can be found in the South. Biopiracy occurs when traditional knowledge about the properties of particular plants is used for the development of modern pharmaceuticals. These are subsequently patented, so that any further use of the pharmaceutical brings financial benefit only to those that patented the drug. None of the financial benefits of this process go to the people who had stored the original knowledge about the properties of a plant for centuries.

The above are all powerful examples of the way in which the environments of the South have been exploited for the benefit of the North and in that sense they constitute the ecological debt. The knock-on effect of stopping the processes that underpin these exploitations could have a powerful effect on the capacity for countries in the South to build an economically, and environmentally sustainable future for themselves. At present many countries in the South have very high poverty levels and are being forced into patterns of high export economies in order to pay off rising financial debts, creating ever more ecological debt.

5. Ecological Debt campaign is important before CoP 15 in Copenhagen

The countries which once were colonized and faced extreme level of resource exploitation and again faced also have been facing resource out-flow is now adversely affecting by the impacts of climate change. Country like Bangladesh who has contributed least to the human-induced climate change should accept all the burden and distress. Although the unequal distribution of burdens of the effect of climate changes reflected in the article 3 of the convention (referred to as equity article) and calls the country parties to protect the climate system 'on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, but in the present dynamics of climate change negotiation has been turning

to a business of the Northern countries and supporting the climate impacted countries has been considering as a mercy of the rich countries. For instance, in Bangladesh, climate change adaptation fund that constituted by the DFID and their donor supporters has been proposed to be managed by the World Bank, while the fund might be used as a tool of business for favoring the riches and may not be benevolent for our country. Another example of the irresponsible manner of the rich countries could be drawn from the recently concluded G 8 summit held in Italy while they presents a worrying model of how climate talks will play out in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit in next December. The G 8 countries clearly fail to grasp the scale of the solution required to deal with climate change, larger developing countries are blamed for a lack of ambition. Developed countries now up to the next six months in

Bangladesh: A creditor of eco-debt

Bangladesh was a part of Indian subcontinent and exploited by the British colonial regime from 1757 to 1947. Then again the country exploited by the Pakistani Regime during 1947-1971. During this colonial regime the country was exploited through the repatriated the natural resource which made the benefit of the rulers. An Indian social analyst has shown that the British per capita income has been increased 14% between 1700 and 1760 and 34% 1760 and 1820 and, 100% 1820 and 1870.

This was possible due to resource export from Indian sub continent but development made in Britain. In the following years of country's liberation in 1971, in the name of development partnership, the Northern countries imposed flawed development paradigm with a set of neo-liberal policy approach to continue resource out-flow by their collaborators (IFIs and MNCs). These policies are playing a role to snatch the domestic resource (especially natural and human) and repatriate those ultimately making the countries poor and environmentally harmful. The over exploitation of ecological resources by the Northern countries reduced and even destroyed Earth's capacity to absorb greenhouse gases and also denied equally share to the atmospheric space for all.

the run-up to the Copenhagen summit trying to off-track the negotiation from the rights perspective, doubtless with a good bit of bribery and arm-twisting along the way to the developing countries, helping them to meet the 'ambition' the rich feel that the poor somehow owe them. For instance US Foreign Minister Hilary Clinton in the recent visit to India seeks cooperation of Indian government in dealing climate crisis in their own way, in an bilateral approach, while the US hasn't ratified the Kyoto Protocol yet.

This hypocrisy springs from an inability or unwillingness to grasp the nature of the environmental problem. Meanwhile, networks like JS-APMDD and countries like Bolivia are proposing real solutions, and ones which terrify Western leaders: you can't, Bolivia says, deal with climate change unless you accept that rich countries are in significant debt to the poorest and embrace the concept of redistribution. In this context we should put forward the issue of ecological debt of the rich countries that should pay back as a part of climate justice.

atmospheric space, as well as helping poorer countries adapt to the mess they find themselves in. Environmental justice is little different from other forms of economic justice – redistribute resources so that those who've lost out from a specific model enjoy the same benefits as those who've done well from it.

Of course, achieving a just outcome would not be easy. Predicting the future impacts of climate change is very difficult. Moreover, it would mean big changes to the way those who currently run the world live, and more political vision than we've seen for many decades. But the principles are clear: that the polluter pays for the excessive consumption of the rich, not the poor, and that in civilized society redistribution is a critical way of righting historical injustice.

6. Conclusion

Rich countries need to 'pay' through redistributing a fairer share of limited

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