

Draft Vision Paper JADES

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Recognising Ecological Debt a step forward to environmental and social justice and Sustainable Development

Introduction:

Working on Sustainable Development, is trying to get a global and coherent vision on what's happening in the world. It implies the study of the links between poverty, environmental degradation, but even so the link between wealth problems and social isolation. Sustainable Development is based on a harmony between social, environmental and economic analyses and interests. More and more activists and scientists, NGO's and Universities, are developing tools which helps us to understand our reality. Tools that are broader then the traditional socio-economic analyses, where economical growth and employment are the basic issues and objectives. For a lot of people environmental issues are just luxury problems, and they believe that those problems will be solved if there is enough economical growth.

But economical growth will not exist if there are no natural resources (petrol, gas, trees, land, water, air, biodiversity). And natural resources are not unlimited, so economical growth neither.

To become social and environmental justice it is necessary to manage and redistribute the natural resources in a way that guaranties an equal possibility in economical activity and welfare.

In Canada, two scientist Wackernagel and Rees, developed the concept of the ecological footprint. This is an instrument to measure the surface in hectares that one individual or country uses to live. It includes the place one uses for housing, food production, energy exploitation etc. They calculated a fair share of the world for everybody living on this planet, and that is 1.7 hectare per person. In that case the pie would be divided on fair way. But reality shows us different facts!

The industrialised countries use much more than the fair Earth Share. For example: Belgium (average per person) 6.7 hectare, USA 9.7 hectare, average per person in Europe 5 hectare. That means 3 to 5 times more than the part that belongs to them. And if you appropriate something from others, you are building a debt. That's what we will call the ecological debt.

The accumulation of ecological debt did not start recently. The way the Northern countries exploited and misused their colonies, doesn't need illustration. We all know very well the way how the Spanish colonialists plundered the South American continent. The gold and silver they robbed, the indigenous people they killed, the diseases they left. How

the Belgians dominated and appropriated the people and richness of the Central African countries. Trade of slaves, directed by the Dutch and so on, and so on. Citizens of the Northern countries have to realise that the way they live nowadays is based on the richness that their forefathers have stolen during that colonial times. And that the poverty where most Southern countries live in, is also due to that plundering. Of course, there are more reasons, but the historical ecological and social exploitation is an important one.

But, after those colonial times the accumulation of the ecological debt did not stop. The facts which the ecological footprint show us that the North is still very dependent on the Southern countries to maintain their lifestyle. If they cannot use the land for the fodder crops for their cows and pigs, they cannot continue eating meat as they do now. The same for a lot of their vegetables and fruit. But is not only about the unequal distribution of worldwide arable land, but also about the consequences that monoculture (export agriculture) often has in terms of ecological damage.

Even so for their supply of energy. Gas, oil, even uranium for nuclear energy they become from the South. The problem is not that those countries are dependent of the South, if they pay fair prices and let the Southern people free in what they want to sell (considering their own needs), it can be positive. There is nothing wrong with mutual dependence. But of course the problem is that Southern countries do not set the price, do not regulate the environmental and social conditions of the exploitation. It is worse than that: it is the Northern half of the world that still dominates the world economy (and boundary conditions). That means that colonial times still exist, and that black page of history is not turned around.

This is not the only part of the ecological debt the Northern countries are causing. Besides the overuse of the natural resources (and bought with prices too low to cover the production costs), there is also a huge cost that the North causes to Southern countries, with the emission of carbon dioxide. The so called carbon debt. Climate change is very negative for the whole world, but especially for the poorest countries. The consequences are hardly to bear by them. If you look at Bangladesh, a country that is threatened very hard by the raise of the sea level. If the predictions of the IPCC come out, that country will suffer from floods in a big part of the country. That means a loss of productive grounds, but most of all that millions of people, families have to escape and will loose house and social networks. And, what about the losses of agricultural production, caused by climate change, the diseases, the insecurities for the small farmers. Who is going to pay for it ? Not the Northern countries, no, the people from the South. While the industrialised world is causing that kind of costs.

And then of course the dumping of nuclear waste, and all other kind of things we want to get rid of (export of in Europe forbidden medicines, pesticides, etc). But poor countries do not have the negotiation power to say "NO".

The concept of ecological debt is not a goal by itself. It is an instrument that allows us to measure (more or less) in monetary terms or other terms (Carbon dioxide emission, hectares, ..) what and where we have to change the global patterns of consumption and production. It is a tool for campaigning in North and South, but also for policy work. If you have strong arguments, it is easier to convince politicians and other policymakers.

In essence, ecological debt is a new way of looking at past and present relations between countries. As there is:

- ? A different *political perspective*: countries can be in a creditor-debtor relationship on the basis of physical-ecological relations. Through the concept of ecological debt industrialised and developing countries stand in another relationship: the

North as debtor, the South as creditor. Southern movements sometimes formulate this as 'empowerment' of the South and Southern peoples in international relations.

- ? A different *economic perspective*, especially in the field of trade: ecological debt shows that trade has often not been mutually beneficial, neither in monetary terms, nor in ecological terms. This points to the need for different analyses and perspectives on trade, which are not to be found in neo-classical trade theories, nor in current trade policies.
- ? A different *ethical perspective*: ecological debt points at the collective responsibility of industrialised countries for past violations of the right to a clean and safe environment in other countries, especially in the South
- ? A different *ecological perspective*: ecological debt is another way of revealing the impossibility of continuing our lifestyle and the impossibility of copying this lifestyle in the South.
- ? A different *legal perspective*: ecological damage and (unequal) appropriation of global goods has to be recognised, and it must be possible to bring a charge against the offenders. This can be a country or a MNO.

Recognising Ecological Debt

The ecological debt of the North towards the South should start playing a major role in discussions at international level and in several ongoing negotiations, e.g. negotiations on sustainable development, trade, climate change, biodiversity, external debt ... To study the issue of ecological debt and to look for an effective approach to stop the yearly accumulation of ecological debt and thus violations of human rights, the JADES-workshop proposes the introduction of the concept at the different policy levels.

A recognition of ecological debt by Northern countries would create an entirely new context for dialogue between countries. The political act of international recognition of ecological debt may herald a new system in which North and South enter into negotiations on a more equal footing: power relations will change and the negotiating position of Southern countries will be stronger.

This implies e.g. that the imbalance between commercial and financial interests on the one hand and social and ecological considerations on the other, has to be straightened out. The dominance of IMF, the World Bank and WTO has to be broken and instead, within the framework of the United Nations, an international architecture should be outlined which offers real chances for 'Global Governance for Sustainable Development'.

Rights-based approach to implement Sustainable Development.

As stated, ecological debt is a question of Northern countries causing environmental destruction in the South and occupying a disproportional amount of the planet's environmental space. But ecological debt is more than just a question of reaching biophysical limits. Ecological debt has enormous human rights consequences, since people all over the South see their basic rights compromised by the continuing accumulation of ecological debt. The right to a clean and safe environment should not be denied on the basis of race, class, ethnicity or position in the global economic system.

The approach of environmental space includes the focus of resource impacts, its emphasis on consumption, rather than population and technology, and its integral incorporation of the equity principle. It also relates the concepts of 'sufficiency' and demand management. Analyses that focus predominantly on outputs (waste and pollution) tend to lead to prescriptions based on end of pipe and efficiency measures to

reduce these outputs. Environmental space's input orientation tends to prioritize end of pipe measures. It also emphasizes sufficiency measures, which seek ways to directly improve quality of life by consuming less. Environmental space is a rights-based approach that conceptualises sustainable development in terms of access for all to a fair share in the limited environmental resources on which healthy quality of life depends (Duncan).

The environmental degradation and exploitation of the world's resources by industrialised countries is then an illegitimate violation of human rights, since it undermines the life chances and quality of life of Southern peoples. Ecological debt is thus an example of environmental injustice at global level.

A rights-based approach implies equal per capita entitlements to natural resources for all people. Sustainable development implies developing economies which take into account the earth's carrying capacity and based on fair shares for all the people and other living species on earth.

Concepts like ecological debt, environmental justice and human rights are cited as possible languages which will promote and implement sustainable development.

Some history

The concept of environmental justice originated in the United States in the 1980's. The traditional definition of environmental justice is "that certain minority populations are forced, through their lack of access to decision-making and policy-making processes, to live with a disproportionate share of environmental 'bads' - and suffer the related public health problems and quality of life burdens". Minority populations are usually understood as people of colour. The environmental justice movement is then the organized movement against what is called 'environmental racism', or the disproportionate allocation of environmental problems to Latino, African-American and Native American communities. The movement has been highly influential in redirecting the environmental debate in the US, which no longer only focuses on the efficient and sustainable use of natural resources and the cult of wilderness and conservation of nature. In 1991, the movement adopted a list of 'Principles of Environmental Justice'. The environmental justice movement has its roots in the civil rights movement; from which it has adopted a frame and a language - emphasizing values such as individual rights, equal opportunities, social justice, human dignity and self-determination - which allow it to articulate concerns and demands.

The movement has several important characteristics. First, it analyses environmental problems and conflicts in terms of power. "Who gets what, how much, when and why?" are some of the central questions of environmental justice. The concentration of power - financially, structurally, culturally - is at the root of choices from companies and governments. Second, the rights discourse is a central theme: the right to a clean and safe environment is explicitly defined as a human right, and furthermore a right which can be guaranteed through the recognition of civil rights such as the right to free speech, the right of association and the right of access to information. Third, the environmental justice movement is a grass roots movement, informally structured, organised bottom-up, with a crucial role for women and social networks. Fourth, the environmental justice movement is locally rooted, and treats environmental problems from "real people in real places".

What does this mean for the world ?

An important question is whether the lessons learned in the US and the strategies followed, can be instructive for cases of environmental (in)justice elsewhere. According to Martinez-Alier, the greatest achievement of the movement is that by emphasizing racism, environmental justice emphasizes incommensurability of values, i.e. pollution cannot simply be compensated for by money when it is also a question of human dignity. At the same time he stresses that "the environmental justice movement is potentially of great importance, provided it learns to speak not only for the minorities inside the USA but also

for the majorities outside the USA (which locally are not always defined racially) and provided it gets involved in issues such as biopiracy and biosafety, or climate change, beyond local instances of pollution. The civil rights heritage of the environmental justice movement of the USA is also useful worldwide because of its contributions to non-violent Gandhian forms of struggle.” Martinez-Alier uses the broader term *environmentalism of the poor* or *ecologismo popular* to refer to a growing, new current of environmentalism, which grows out of ecological distribution conflicts and which refers to, amongst others, peasant and indigenous groups who defend their livelihoods. Martinez-Alier thinks this current will grow, since industrialised countries become more and more dependent on the South for raw materials, thus advancing the frontiers of exploitation of oil, gas, aluminium, copper, eucalyptus and palm oil, shrimps, gold, transgenic soybeans into new territories.

Ageyman stresses that different contexts and worldviews will generate different interpretations of, and approaches to, environmental justice. The base line is that people all over the world see their basic rights compromised by environmental devastation. In this view, the right to a clean and safe environment is an essential human right that should not be denied on the basis of race, class, ethnicity or position in the global economic system. The environmental degradation and exploitation of the world's resources by industrialised countries is then illegitimate and a violation of human rights, since it undermines the life chances and life quality of people elsewhere.

Building on an article of Duncan McLaren ('Environmental Space, Equity and the Ecological Debt'), Ageyman argues that the concepts of sustainability and justice are linked through the concepts of environmental space and environmental debt. In sustainable development and environmental space, the weight is primarily on intergenerational equity. In environmental justice and ecological debt, the weight is on intragenerational equity. Environmental space and ecological debt “provide a robust analytical framework through which to study the essential *reactivity* of the environmental justice project, and the *proactivity* of the sustainable development project”.

Historical injustices and restitution

Within the context of debt and the question of how it should be dealt with, it might be instructive to look at some real cases of historical injustices that have been subject of so called restitution. Joan Martinez-Alier refers to this point when he comments on the objection that debts are recognised obligations arising from contracts and, thus, a non recognised debt such as the ecological debt, does not exist. He argues that ‘there are cases in which debts have arisen without a contract’ and refers to the obligation for Germany to pay reparations after the war and the German payment of some sort of indemnities for infringements to human rights (in this case, with the agreement of most citizens of the country)

Also John Dillon touches this aspect, albeit in a negative way, where he refers to the UN Conference on Racism held in Durban where ‘Northern governments fought tenaciously against any language in official declaration that implies an obligation on their part to pay reparations’. Restitution, in the broad sense, has to be understood as a mosaic of different levels of acknowledging (historical) guilt.

Keeping in mind the notion of ecological debt, we may conclude that restitution in the strict sense is out of question as most of the resources taken from the South – at unequal terms of trade – were meant for consumption in the North. Neither can the North give back the environmental space it illegitimately used from the South, although it might free up environmental space in the future. The questions of reparation and apology are certainly at stake.

Analysing a few of the most recent restitution cases, Barkan concludes that apologies are (only) the first step. At the very minimum, apologies and a recognition of historical and ongoing injustices lead to a reformulated historical understanding and it creates new rights within an unequal world. Moreover it provides a space to negotiate agreements. It

is therefore that all campaigns on ecological debt demand at least the recognition of ecological debt.

Environment for sale?

Another point which has been raised in the debate on *restitution*, is about the fundamental question of the incommensurability of values. Barkan states that a strong case for restitution is the fact that it would underscore a moral economy that 'calculates' and 'quantifies' evil and places a price on amending injustices. Such a theory of justice would obviously suffer from all the shortcomings of utilitarianism that have been exposed over the last two hundred years.

The same critique has been expressed towards the claim for the actual collection of an ecological debt. Can you put a price on nature? However, one could argue, as Barkan does, that a demand for a fair *compensation*, which can be negotiated, is not the same as putting a price on it.

But one of the most important goals is the *restoration* of the environmental damage in the South caused by Northern countries and/or multinationals.

Ecological debt and financial debt

A lot of developing countries are confronted with a huge external debt. Those debt are considered as illegitimate, and have those countries unnecessarily in their grip. They see themselves obliged to stimulate an export oriented economy, where social and environmental aspects are undermined. Governments are forced to welcome big multinationals who are exploiting their natural richness for low prices, most of them meant for consumption in industrialised countries. A lot of environment degrading and labour intensive activities are outsourced to developing countries. The obligation of paying external debts is mostly the motor for building more ecological debt.

It will be never the purpose of putting the external debts against the ecological debts. You cannot pay off the ecological debts by money transfers, and certainly not when we are talking about dubious external debts. The main goal is to stop the mechanism that leads to more ecological debt. And recognise the ecological debts.

So rapid repayment of ecological debt may not be feasible, but immediate action to cancel financial debts could be linked to a more gradual repayment of the ecological debt.

Another economy gives more sustainable trade and less ecological debt

Another world is possible! For that we need a revolutionary change in traditional economic thinking, where they do not take into account that natural resources are limited. In most neoclassical economic analyses the free market organises the input and price of labour and capital. Environmental space and natural resources were considered as free and unlimited. Ecological costs have to be internalised in the price, for example. But that is not enough, because environmental problems and degradation will not be solved by putting a price on it. It needs a good management as well. Governments have to be strong and legal frameworks as well.

In ecological economics the economy is seen as embedded in the ecosystem. The economy is also embedded in a structure of property rights on environmental resources and services, in a social distribution of power and income, in social structures of gender, social class or caste, and this links ecological economics to political economy and to political ecology.

Moving from only economic distribution to ecological distribution too, one can say that no production decisions will be taken unless there is an agreement or a customary arrangement on how to get the natural resources and what to do with the waste (Included

transport - CO₂-emissions). For instance: is it sustainable to consume fruit and vegetables from other continents, when you can produce it in your own country? Or worse: because of low income countries a lot of products travel around the world for their processing. Their, so called, ecological backpack is very huge. If externalities would be internalised in the prices, this would be avoided because of negative economical profit. Costs will be different for the firms concerned; production decisions will also be different. Consumption and production will be more in the direction of Sustainable Trade and Development.

The JADES workshop

The JADES workshop is composed of activists and academics from Asia, Latin America, Africa and Europe of different background and profession who have been working together for over ten years.

JADES recognises other existing initiatives and groups working on environmental justice and ecological debt. It will support and link up with them. The issues of environmental justice and the ecological debt are transversal to the issues of trade, agriculture, industrial ecology, climate change, external debt, poverty and livelihood, gender and the economy,

The JADES workshop is part of the Workgroup on Solidarity Socio-economy (WSSE) of Alliance21. More information at www.socioeco.org

Definition of Ecological Debt

"The ecological debt of entity/actor A consists of (1) the ecological damage caused over time by entity A in other countries or in an area under jurisdiction of another country through its production and consumption patterns, and/or (2) the ecological damage caused over time by entity/actor A to ecosystems beyond national jurisdiction through its consumption and production patterns, and/or (3) the exploitation or use of ecosystems and ecosystem goods and services over time by entity/actor A at the expense of the equitable rights to these ecosystems and ecosystem goods and services by other countries or individuals."

Definition of Environmental Justice

The principle of Environmental Justice affirms that all people are entitled to a healthy environment and must share the planet's natural resource on a fair and sustainable way. Unavoidable environmental risks and degradation must not be distributed disproportionately among sectors of a particular society and through the different societies and regions that are part of the human family.

Environmental Justice may be seen as a matter of distribution, and also as a human right. Environmental Justice refers sometimes to the distribution of environmental burdens. Thus the US environmental Justice movement complains against the disproportionate allocation of pollution to areas where poor people and/or racial minorities live. Environmental justice also refers to the fact that nobody should be deprived of the natural resources and the clean environment necessary for human life. This is existential justice, a matter of dignity, a human right.

The JADES Project

MAIN GOAL

To achieve the recognition of Ecological Debt (ED), its restitution, and the prevention of further accumulation of ED through research, debate, advocacy and communication as a contribution to environmental justice and Sustainable Development.

SPECIFIC GOALS (SP)

To establish the concept of ecological debt (ED) on the international law system, the judiciary, and other policy institutions, and the global system of governance.

To promote the recognition of ED within social movements and other civil society organizations, and to support the activities of all social groups around the world already working on ED recognition, restitution and/or prevention.

To mutually strengthen transversality among all Alliance 21 workshops, as well as other groups working on ED issues, through knowledge sharing and information exchange.

To develop communication and diffusion strategy on the importance of the concept of ED for environmental sustainability and social justice.