



Ecological Debt

The vast sums of natural resources that have been moving from the Global South to the Global North since colonial times to today constitute an immense ecological debt. Ecological Debt refers to the ever-increasing liability that the wealthy nations of the Global North owe to the Global South for decades of resource exploitation including environmental and human resources, dumping of waste, over consumption of the world's resources including the air and biosphere and the piracy of ancestral and indigenous knowledge. The Global North, which is home to 20% of the population, consumes 80% of the world's resources. The majority of these resources are taken from the impoverished nations of the Global South to maintain the life style of residents of Northern countries at the detriment of the citizens of Southern Countries. This consistent transfer of resources is not simply the movement of goods from one place to another. One must take into account the millions that are displaced from mining projects, the workers who are exploited to make products for Northern consumers, the loss of bio-diversity as forests are clear cut and the loss of traditional lands inhabited by indigenous peoples. Ecological debt encompasses all the social and environmental costs associated with the Global North's exploitation and over consumption of the world's natural resources.

What sorts of things does Ecological Debt refer too?

Ecological Debt refers to a historical debt, intellectual and ancestral knowledge piracy, over use of natural resources such as soil, air and water, carbon dioxide debt, as well as the subsequent harm done to the people of the Global North.

- **Historical Debt:** Part of Ecological Debt is the idea that industrialized countries of the North owe a great deal to the Global south for the devastation and destruction that occurred during colonialism. Death and enslavement of millions of people was the result of colonial powers using the human and natural resources of the Global South to secure economic gains for there nations.
- **Piracy of ancestral knowledge:** For centuries indigenous peoples have perfected seeds and seed knowledge and refined the use of medicinal plants. Ecological Debt also takes into account the illegitimate and illegal appropriation of this knowledge by transnational corporations for use in large agro-business and biotechnology. The origins of the knowledge they are patenting are in the ancestry of people and communities that use the knowledge for survival. No royalties are paid to the purveyors of this knowledge. In some cases the patenting has worked against these communities. Large seed companies like Monsanto, have patented corn seeds developed by indigenous communities and now charge them to use the seed!
- **Over use of natural resources:** The United Nations estimates that 20% of the worlds population lives in the Global North, yet Northern nations consume 80% of the worlds resources. Each year tons of lumber, minerals, oil, and other resources are extracted from the global South for consumption in the North. To maintain the life styles so many of us are accustomed to whole forests are destroyed and rivers killed to ensure we have the wood to make our kitchen cabinets and metals to make our microwaves. Yet for all the wealth that these resources bring to those who own the companies the majority of the people of the Global South still live on less then \$1.00 a day. Global South has transferred more then 700 billion dollars in resources to the North. But the people are left with strip mines, polluted rivers, clear cuts, loss of small subsistence farming and low paying factory work. Ecological debt includes taking stock of the over use of human energy to mass-produce for the insatiable appetite of Northern economies.

- **Carbon Debt:** The Global North owes three times what Southern nations owe in terms of carbon debt. This comes from the idea of the “atmospheric commons”. The air we breathe is part of a globally shared atmosphere. Northern countries are overwhelmingly responsible for the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere weakening the ozone and make the air dangerous to breath. This release of carbon into the air has lead climate change, change that is predicted to get worse as the earth temperature increases. Internationally there are carbon quotas that estimate how much carbon each nation should emit into the atmosphere. Even the most efficient Northern nation uses up its quota by March of each year. Historically and in terms of per-capita, Northern nations have racked up quite a carbon debt to the Global South. Christian Aid estimates that the debt is around 13 trillion dollars per year. The World Bank helps in creating a market for carbon emission by facilitating the trading of carbon emission among nations and companies. This allows countries to exceed carbon quotas and prevents any meaningful reduction in carbon emissions globally. Further this debt removes the moral justification that wealthy nations use to force impoverished nations to pay back their debts. In fact it is the South that is the creditor.
- **Human Exploitation and harm:** In this process of resource extraction people loose lands, livelihoods, access and control over natural resources in their countries and often face violence and intimidation if they work to stop environmental exploitation. Human energy is over used and exploited as more and more people in the South must turn to low paying factory or assembly line work making goods for consumption in wealthy countries. They work long hours for very little pay often in hostile and unsafe working conditions. In the mines and in the forests workers toil with little or no labor protections and in unsafe and often toxic conditions.

How does Ecological Debt relate to external debt and the World Bank and IMF?

The World Bank and IMF both perpetuate Ecological Debt through their continued use of Structural Adjustment Programs, their undying financial support for oil, mining and gas projects, and their continued demand that it is the Global South who is the debtor. World Bank and IMF policies that force countries to focus on exports drive the continued exploitation of natural resources in the Global South. All the while maintaining a strangle hold on their economies through massive and unpayable financial debts. Often these debts were incurred to facilitate the extraction of natural resources. But since poorer nations are subject to the policy wishes of the World Bank and IMF they often do not have adequate environmental protections in place as they may deter foreign investment. The Global South is owed a great deal by the Global North for its continued exploitation and over consumption of the world resources. It is fair to say that the South does not owe the North anything; it is the North that owes the South.

For more info see:

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