
Putting the carbon debt on the negotiations table

The external debt is a heavy burden for Southern countries especially for the poorest ones and for the poorest sectors within them. Governments implement IMF/World Bank-promoted structural adjustment programmes in their economies to ensure punctual debt servicing, which divert funds that could otherwise have been devoted to satisfying basic needs of their population, such as food, education, housing and health.

However, many are now posing the question: who owes who? In fact, Northern countries have historically based their prosperity on the exploitation of territories, resources and people in the South, and on the invasion and occupation of indigenous peoples' territories throughout the world. A group of German geographers has accurately described this as "the economy of robbery". The appropriation of the atmosphere by Northern countries to use it as a garbage dump for carbon dioxide is but another chapter in this long and unfair story. Even though the atmosphere is a common good of humanity and every person on Earth has the same right to use it, differences are nowadays dismal. On a per capita basis, the US currently uses twelve times what it should be entitled to, and the UK nearly six times its share. But at the same time Bangladesh --one of the most vulnerable countries to sea level rise and other climate alterations-- is ten times below its quota, Sudan 15 times, Tanzania 22 times, and so on.

According to Christian Aid, "the human economy is emitting approximately 7 billion metric tonnes of carbon per year (1996) and reductions in the order of at least 60% are necessary to achieve a carbon balance, i.e. to 2,800 million. If we assume that the developed (OECD) countries contain around 20% of the world's population then their sustainable quota should be 560 million tonnes. However, they are presently responsible for around 50% of all carbon emissions, i.e. 3,500 million tonnes, a deficit of approximately 2,940 million tonnes." (Who owes who? Climate change, debt, equity and survival, 1999)

It is clear then that industrialised countries have greatly overused their carbon emissions quota, generating a Carbon Debt which is much larger than the conventional debt of the highly indebted poor countries.

If Southern country governments are really interested --as they should be-- in defending their peoples' interests, they should change the current market-oriented discussions going on under the Climate Change process. The issues of justice and ecological rights at the global level should be the priority. Only then economic instruments could be used to negotiate in positive terms. Instead of happily getting on the bandwagon of getting some money from false "solutions" such as tree monoculture carbon sink plantations, Southern country governments should collectively demand the payment of the Carbon Debt generated by the North. Justice should be the starting point of all negotiations.

