



World Council of Churches
Conseil œcuménique des Eglises
Consejo Mundial de Iglesias
Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen

General Secretariat

Postal address: P.O. Box 2100
CH-1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland
Visiting address: 150 route de Ferney
Phone: (+41-22) 791 61 11
Fax: (+41-22) 791 03 61
General e-mail: infowcc@wcc-coe.org
Website: www.wcc-coe.org

Geneva, 23 April 2008

Direct dial: (+41-22) 791.62.85
Direct e-mail: uz@wcc-coe.org
Direct fax: (+41-22) 791.65.35

Proposed statement on eco-justice and ecological debt

Excerpt from the Final Report of the Public Issues Committee
(Central Committee Meeting, 13-20 February 2008)

1. The earth, our home, is confronted by unprecedented, massive and intertwined ecological and socio-economic threats. As human beings, we are made by God as part of God's creation. Taken from the earth (*adamah*), we belong to all life. As God sustains us through the gift of all creation, we are called to be stewards of it. Overexploitation of the earth's resources is destructive and constitutes a debt towards other life and future generations.
2. Relevant to the distress of the earth and human misery might be the biblical witness of the prophet Jeremiah who perceives the connection between socio-economic injustice and environmental crises (Jeremiah 14), and Saint Paul who expresses the yearning of all creation, that children of God will be revealed (Romans 8:19).
3. Having called for the cancellation of foreign illegitimate financial debts claimed from countries of the South for many years, the WCC has taken a step further in addressing the ecological dimension of economic relationships through its work on ecological debt, suggesting that many global financial creditors are at the same time ecological debtors.
4. Ecological debt, an increasingly recognized and researched concept, refers to the debt owed by industrialized countries of the North to countries of the South on account of historical and current resource plundering, environmental degradation and the disproportionate appropriation of environmental space to dump greenhouse gases and toxic wastes. The definition of ecological debt has further evolved to include social aspects, such as the disintegration of indigenous communities and the loss of cultural heritage and values.
5. From the early 1970s, the World Council of Churches has worked on the issue of ecological sustainability. At the 1998 Harare assembly, the adverse impacts of economic globalization on people and the environment came to the fore, leading to the ongoing study process on poverty, wealth and ecology. As an offshoot of these important ecumenical reflections and actions, the WCC, in partnership with churches and civil society organizations in Southern

Africa, India, Ecuador, Canada and Sweden, initiated work on ecological debt in 2002, focusing on awareness-building, study and advocacy.

6. According to our understanding, there are clear dynamic linkages between dominant economic systems on the one hand, and ecological degradation on the other. Deregulation has increasingly eroded and transferred government decision-making power to profit-oriented transnational corporations at the expense of environmental protection. In the relentless pursuit of macroeconomic growth, international financial institutions have imposed structural adjustment programmes on indebted countries with ecological consequences. Moreover, the globalizing of economic models based on ever-expanding production to meet the insatiable consumption demands of industrialized countries of the North has further undermined ecological sustainability.
7. Climate change, the pollution of the atmosphere and water systems, deforestation, desertification, the extinction of plant and animal species and a host of other urgent environmental issues have disproportionately negative effects on impoverished nations, small island states, people of the South, especially women, farmers, fisher folk, indigenous peoples who live in close relationships with nature, people with disabilities and future generations. We recognize that these countries and people are the creditors of a tremendous ecological debt, and that these effects occur both within and across national borders.
8. The concept of ecological debt is grounded on transformative justice and an overriding priority for those on the socio-economic margins of our societies. It serves to counterbalance the USD 1.3 trillion financial debts of countries the South, pointing out that industrialized countries of the North are principal ecological debtors, while people of the South are principal ecological creditors. The ecological destructiveness of international trade and financial systems (in colonial and present times) highlights the need for alternative trade and financial policies that place people and the earth at the centre. Ecological debt reveals the unsustainability of energy-intensive and consumerist lifestyles and the dilemma of replicating these lifestyles in Southern countries.
9. Ecological debt arises from various causal mechanisms. Under the current financial architecture, countries of the South are pressured through loan conditionalities, as well as multilateral and bilateral trade and investment agreements, to pursue export-oriented and resource-intensive growth strategies, which fail to account for the costs of pollution. Secondly, many mega-infrastructure projects (e.g. dams) in countries of the South are financed through foreign lending by international financial institutions, with little consideration of their ecological and social consequences. Thirdly, industrialized Northern countries make disproportionate use of environmental space without adequate compensation. Presently, the ecological footprints of Northern countries average 6.4 ha/person, which is substantially higher than the ecological footprints of Southern countries (0.8 ha/person). Fourthly, economic globalization is increasingly linked to militarization around the world. The ecological destruction that is inflicted during war is a major contributor to ecological debt. Finally, human-induced climate change is one of the most critical examples of ecological debt. Industrialized Northern countries are mainly to blame for greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change. Research indicates that countries of the South will bear a bigger burden of the adverse environmental effects of climate change and its socio-economic impacts including: the displacement of people living in low-lying coastal areas; the loss of sources of livelihood, especially among already marginalized groups such as farmers and fisher folk; food insecurity; and reduced access to water. (Further analysis of climate change is offered in the 2008 central committee minute on global warming and climate change.)

10. Applying the ecological debt framework encourages that Northern nations, their institutions and corporations should, as starting points:
 - a. drastically reduce their greenhouse gas emissions within and beyond the United Nations framework of treaties on climate change, based on historical accountability and the principle of “common, but differentiated responsibilities” and according to fixed timelines;
 - b. compensate countries of the South and people for the costs of climate change mitigation and adaptation based on the “polluter-pays” principle, including through financing disaster-management programmes and investing in green technologies of the South; and
 - c. cancel the illegitimate financial debts being claimed from Southern countries (without reducing official development assistance) to free up resources for mitigation and adaptation.

11. At the core, however, the restoration of right relationships between ecological creditors and debtors, and between people and the earth requires deep transformations in political and economic systems, institutions and policies, as well as in people’s lifestyles and values, both in the North and the South. It has now become patent that there are ecological limits to growth and that countries of the South can no longer traverse the same energy-intensive and consumption-driven growth path as industrialized Northern countries without causing irreparable ecological damages. Churches have an important role to play in building the necessary political will and moral courage to effect these urgent transformations.

In view of the foregoing, the central committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, 13-20 February 2008:

- A. **Encourages and supports** churches in their advocacy campaigns around ecological debt and climate change, mindful of the unity of God’s creation and of the need for collaborative working between Southern and Northern nations;
- B. **Calls** for continued awareness-building of congregations on ecological debt through education and ecumenical formation, through study and action and through the production of relevant Bible study materials;
- C. **Urges** churches and church institutions to conduct ecological debt audits, including self-assessment of their own consumption patterns, and specifically the WCC to establish a mechanism to provide for recompense of ecological debt incurred by its gatherings, and to collect positive examples of ecological debt compensation and reparation in partnership with civil society groups and movements;
- D. **Calls** for deepening dialogue and building of alliances for the recognition and recompense of ecological debt among ecumenical, religious, economic and political actors and between the churches in Southern and Northern countries;
- E. **States** the importance of strategically linking with environmental, peasant, women’s, youth, and indigenous peoples’ movements through the World Social Forum and other avenues to design alternative proposals to recompense, as well as to avoid amassing ecological debt;
- F. **Calls** on the churches to encourage their governments to work for the recognition and recompense of ecological debt as linked to campaigns for the cancellation of financial debts;

- G. ***Calls*** on churches to advocate for corporate social accountability within international and national legal frameworks and to challenge international financial institutions to take responsibility for their policies that have caused ecological destruction.