

Statement on Eco-Justice and Ecological Debt

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Provisional version as adopted by Central Committee.

The public issues committee proposes that the central committee adopt the following statement on eco-justice and ecological debt:

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12)

1. The era of “unlimited consumption” has reached its limits. The era of unlimited profit and compensation for the few must also come to an end. Based on a series of ecumenical consultations and incorporating the perspectives of many churches, this statement proposes the recognition and application of a concept that expresses a deep moral obligation to promote ecological justice by addressing our debts to peoples most affected by ecological destruction and to the earth itself. It begins with expressing gratitude to God, whose providential care is manifested in all God’s creation and the renewal of the earth for all species. Ecological debt includes hard economic calculations as well as incalculable biblical, spiritual, cultural and social dimensions of indebtedness.

2. The earth and all of its inhabitants are currently facing an unprecedented ecological crisis, bringing us to the brink of mass suffering and destruction for many. The crisis is human-induced, caused especially by the agro-industrial-economic complex and culture of the global North, which is characterized by the consumerist lifestyles of the elites of the developed and developing worlds and the view that development is commensurate with exploitation of the earth’s “natural resources”. What is being labeled and co-modified, as “natural resources” is all of creation – a sacred reality that ought not to be co-modified. Yet the Northern agro-industrial-economic complex, especially in the current era of market globalization, has used human labour and resourcefulness, as well as the properties of other life forms, to produce wealth and comfort for a few at the expense of the survival of others and their dignity.

3. Churches have been complicit in this history through their own consumption patterns and through perpetuating a theology of human rule over the earth. The Christian perspective that has valued humanity over the rest of creation has served to justify the exploitation of parts of the earth community. Yet, human existence is utterly dependant on a healthy functioning earth system. Humanity cannot manage creation. Humanity can only manage their own behaviour to keep it within the bounds of earth’s sustenance. Both the human population and the human economy cannot grow much more without irreversibly endangering the survival of other life forms. Such a radical view calls for a theology of humility and a commitment on the part of the churches to learn from environmental ethics and faith traditions that have a deeper sense of an inclusive community.

4. The churches' strength lies in its prophetic witness to proclaim God's love for the whole world and to denounce the philosophy of domination that threatens the manifestation of God's love. The biblical prophets had long ago deduced the intrinsic connection between ecological crises and socio-economic injustice, railing against the elites of their day for the exploitation of peoples and the destruction of ecosystems (Jeremiah 14: 2-7, Isaiah 23: 1-24 and Revelations 22). Based on Jesus' commandment of love, as expressed in his life and parables, the World Council of Churches (WCC) must broaden its understanding of justice and the boundaries of who our neighbours are. For many years, the WCC has called for the cancellation of illegitimate external financial debts claimed from countries of the South based on the biblical notion of jubilee (Leviticus 23). It has taken a step further in addressing the ecological dimension of economic relationships.

5. Beginning with the articulation of the ideas of "limits to growth" in a Church and Society consultation held in Bucharest in 1974 and "sustainable societies" at the 1975 Nairobi assembly, the WCC has been working deeply on ecological justice for over three decades. At the 1998 Harare assembly, the harmful impacts of globalization on people and the environment came to the fore through the Alternative Globalization Addressing People and earth (AGAPE) process, 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.

6. Ecological debt refers to damage caused over time to ecosystems, places and peoples through production and consumption patterns; and the exploitation of ecosystems at the expense of the equitable rights of other countries, communities or individuals. It is primarily the debt owed by industrialized countries in the North to countries of the South on account of historical and current resource plundering, environmental degradation and the disproportionate appropriation of ecological space to dump greenhouse gases (GHGs) and toxic wastes. It is also the debt owed by economically and politically powerful national elites to marginalized citizens; the debt owed by current generations of humanity to future generations; and, on a more cosmic scale, the debt owed by humankind to other life forms and the planet. It includes social damages such as the disintegration of indigenous and other communities.

7. Grounded on an overriding priority for the impoverished and a deep moral responsibility to rectify injustices, ecological debt lenses reveal that it is the global South who is the principal ecological creditor while the global North is the principal ecological debtor. The ecological debt of the global North arises from various causal mechanisms whose impact has been intensified in the current economic crisis.

8. Under the current international financial architecture, countries of the South are pressured through conditions for loans as well as multilateral and bilateral trade and investment agreements to pursue export-oriented and resource-intensive growth strategies. Ultimately it fails to account for the costs of erosion of ecosystems and increasing pollution. Many mega-development projects (e.g. dams) in countries of the South are financed through foreign lending by international financial institutions in collaboration with undemocratic and corrupt local leaders and elites, without the informed consent of local inhabitants and with little consideration of the projects' ecological and social consequences. Moreover, industrialized Northern countries make disproportionate use of ecological space without adequate compensation, reparation or restitution. Northern countries' ecological footprint (an approximate measurement of human impacts on the environment) presently averages 6.4 ha/person. This is more than six times heavier than the footprint of Southern countries at an average of 0.8 ha/person.

9. Human-induced climate change heightens the relationship of North-South inequity even further. Industrialized countries are mainly responsible for GHG emissions causing climate change (though emerging economies in the South are becoming major contributors to global GHG emissions in absolute terms). Yet, research indicates that the South will bear a bigger burden of the adverse effects of climate change including the displacement of people living in low-lying coastal areas and small island states; the loss of sources of livelihood, food insecurity, reduced access to water and forced migration.

10. In the light of Biblical teaching (cf. Matthew 6,12), we pray for repentance and forgiveness, but we also call for the recognition, repayment and restitution of ecological debt in various ways, including non-market ways of compensation and reparation, that go beyond the market's limited ability to measure and distribute.

11. The central committee of the WCC recognizes the need for a drastic transformation at all levels in life and society in order to end the ecological indebtedness and restoring right relationships between peoples and between people and the earth. This warrants a re-ordering of economic paradigms from consumerist, exploitive models to models that are respectful of localized economies, indigenous cultures and spiritualities, the earth's reproductive limits, as well as the right of other life forms to blossom. And this begins with the recognition of ecological debt.

While affirming the role of churches to play a critical role in lifting up alternative practices, as well as building the necessary political will and moral courage to effect urgent transformations, the central committee of the WCC meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, 26 August - 2 September 2009:

A. Calls upon WCC member churches to urge Northern governments, institutions and corporations to take initiatives to drastically reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions within and beyond the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which stipulates the principles of historical responsibility and “common, but differentiated responsibilities” (CDR), according to the fixed timelines set out by the UNFCCC report of 2007.

B. Urges WCC member churches to call their governments to adopt a fair and binding deal, in order to bring the CO₂ levels down to less than 350 parts per million (ppm), at the Conference of Parties (COP 15) of the UNFCCC in Copenhagen in December 2009, based on climate justice principles, which include effective support to vulnerable communities to adapt to the consequences of climate change through adaptation funds and technology transfer.

C. Calls upon the international community to ensure the transfer of financial resources to countries of the South to keep petroleum in the ground in fragile environments and preserve other natural resources as well as to pay for the costs of climate change mitigation and adaptation based on tools such as the Greenhouse Development Rights (GDR) Framework.

D. Demands the cancellation of the illegitimate financial debts of Southern countries, most urgently for the poorest nations, as part of social and ecological compensations, not as official development assistance.

E. Recommends that WCC member churches learn from the leadership of Indigenous Peoples, women, peasant and forest communities who point to alternative ways of thinking and living within creation, especially as these societies often emphasize the value of relationships, of caring and sharing, as well as practice traditional, ecologically respectful forms of production and consumption.

F. Encourages and supports WCC member 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. Specifically supports the activities of churches in countries that are suffering from climate change.

G. Calls for continued awareness-building and theological reflection among congregations and seminary students on a new cosmological vision of life, eco-justice and ecological debt through study and action, deeper ecumenical and inter-faith formation, and through the production and dissemination of relevant theological and biblical study materials.

H. Urges WCC member churches and church institutions to conduct ecological debt audits in partnership with civil society, including self-assessment of their own consumption patterns. Specifically, the WCC should establish a mechanism to provide for recompense of ecological debt incurred by its gatherings, and to collect positive examples of ecological debt recognition, prevention, mitigation, compensation, reparation and restitution in partnership with civil society groups and movements.

I. Calls for deepening dialogue on ecological debt and the building of alliances with ecumenical, religious, economic and political actors and between the churches in Southern and Northern countries.

J. Stresses the importance of accompanying ongoing struggles and strategically linking and supporting the efforts of peasant, women's, youth and indigenous peoples' movements through the World Social Forum and other avenues to design alternative compensation proposals, as well as to avoid amassing more ecological debt.

K. Calls upon WCC member churches through their advocacy work to encourage their governments to work for the recognition of the claims of ecological debt, including the cancellation of illegitimate financial debts.

L. Calls upon WCC member churches to deepen their campaigns on climate change by including climate debt and advocating for its repayment by applying the ecological debt framework.

M. Calls upon WCC member churches to advocate for corporate social accountability within international and national legal frameworks and to challenge corporations and international financial institutions to include environmental liabilities in their accounts and to take responsibility for the policies that have caused ecological destruction.

N. Calls upon WCC member churches to support community-based sustainable economic initiatives, such as producer cooperatives, community land trusts and bio-regional food distributions.

O. Encourages churches all over the world to continue praying for the whole of creation as we commemorate on 1 September this year the 20th anniversary of the encyclical of His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I, establishing the day of the protection of the environment, God's creation.

APPROVED BY UNANIMOUS CONSENSUS

Prayer

The following prayer is offered as a resource to enable the churches' engagement with the issue articulated above:

Creator and creating God,

in the wonder of your world we experience your providential care for the planet and its people.

We offer you our thanks and praise.

Creator and creating God,

in the exploitation of your world we recognize our human-centeredness and greed.

We confess our sin before you.

We acknowledge our need for each other as part of your global family from North and South

And so we pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors".

Accept our confession O God and offer us your forgiveness

empowering us to transform our lives as individuals, churches and nations, proclaiming your love for the earth and its people,

enacting the principle of 'Jubilee' in our relationships with one another and the earth,

repaying our ecological debts in ways in ways which affirm your justice and shalom.