

The Progressively Accelerated Degradation of the Environment

Eighteen years after the Paris Agreement and on the eve of COP 28

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I. The explanation for the progressively accelerating degradation of the environment is complex because it is due to several factors. But the root causes lie, on the one hand, in the systematic plundering and destruction of nature - particularly deforestation - carried out on a global scale by colonial powers for centuries and, on the other, in the superfluous and uncontrolled production and consumption of all kinds of objects and products, some necessary and some not. This is the result of what is known in economics as extended reproduction.

Extended reproduction is inherent to the capitalist system. Understanding how it works is essential to understanding and explaining the ecological catastrophe.

Sweezy wrote: "It is inevitable to conclude that simple reproduction involves the abstraction of what is essential to the capitalist: his interest in enlarging his capital. To do this, he converts part - often the greater part - of his surplus value into additional capital. His increased capital enables him to appropriate still more surplus value, which he, in turn,



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¹ ↪ We address these issues in: The role of environmental education in Latin America . UNESCO, 1978. 120 p. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000029861>; And La armadura del capitalismo. El poder de las sociedades transnacionales en el mundo contemporáneo Editorial Icaria. Spain, 2010. We have devoted a paragraph to Environmental Degradation (pages 137 to 152). <https://www.amazon.com/armadura-capitalismo-sociedades-transnacionales-contemporaneo/dp/8498881447>

converts into additional capital, and so on. This process, known as capital accumulation, is the driving force of capitalist development.²

Neurobiologists may be able to locate somewhere in the brains of many entrepreneurs this compulsive need to accumulate. Still, Marx had already studied it in his way: "The capitalist is respectable only in so far as he is the personification of capital. As such, he shares with the hoarder the absolute desire to enrich himself. But in addition, the immanent laws of the capitalist mode of production, which impose on each individual capitalist competition as an external coercive law, oblige him to continually increase his capital to preserve it"[2]. Already in the Communist Manifesto of 1848, we read:

.... "Driven by the need for ever new markets, the bourgeoisie invades the whole world. It needs to penetrate everywhere, to establish itself everywhere, to create means of communication everywhere. By exploiting the universal market, the bourgeoisie gives a cosmopolitan character to production in all countries. Much to the chagrin of the reactionaries, it has stripped industry of its national character. The old national industries are destroyed or on the verge of destruction. They have been supplanted by new industries, the introduction of which involves a vital question for all civilised nations: industries which do not use indigenous raw materials, but raw materials from the remotest regions, and whose products are consumed, not only in one's own country, but in all parts of the globe. In place of the old needs, satisfied by national products, new needs arise, which require for their satisfaction products from the remotest places and the most diverse climates".³

In simpler terms, simple reproduction means that, at the end of the production cycle, the capitalist keeps the same machines, replaces those that are broken or worn out, pays the wages and spends the profit for himself without increasing the capital of his enterprise.

In reality, capitalism does not work like this: to be competitive in the market, the capitalist must improve his production through new investments and, moreover, satisfy his desire to earn more and more. But to achieve this goal, the capitalist has to sell what he produces, including surpluses. Some of the latter (food, textiles, household appliances) are not sold and, in rich countries, are destroyed or recycled. Worldwide, 1.3 billion tonnes of food are thrown away yearly, from production and processing to consumption. This represents half a kilo per day per living human being.⁴

More and more products are produced with real or supposed innovations to attract consumers. Incentive advertising is deployed to target potential consumers using the most sophisticated means available in marketing. Spending on advertising worldwide is gigantic and increasing year on year. In 2019, it exceeded \$550 billion. (<https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/600808/gasto-publicitario-a-nivel-mundial/>).⁵ Financial capital contributes to exacerbated consumerism by facilitating credit. Consumers get into debt until their purchasing power is radically reduced or exhausted, and crises break out, leading to the closure of the least competitive companies and the progressive concentration of production in the hands of a few (oligopolies and monopolies).

² ↪ Sweezy, Paul, *The theory of Capitalist Development*, 1942. En castellano: Teoría del desarrollo capitalista, Fondo de cultura económica, Mexico. 1945.

³ ↪ Marx, El Capital, capítulo XXIV del Libro I, sección séptima, "Transformación de la plusvalía en capital". III - Teoría de la abstinencia". See also, Marx, Tercer Manuscrito de los Manuscritos Económicos y Filosóficos.

⁴ ↪ See https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2018/06/07/le-gaspillage-alimentaire-en-france-en-chiffres_5311079_4355770.html

⁵ ↪ See <https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/600808/gasto-publicitario-a-nivel-mundial/>

The reasons for the existence of extended reproduction persist despite oligopolistic/monopolistic concentration, and capitalists encourage the demand for superfluous and/or useless goods or produce goods (e.g. household appliances) with programmed obsolescence: a household appliance that used to last 20 years is now programmed to last five. The same is true for automobiles.

II. This frenetic production of superfluous and/or useless objects requires an enormous consumption of energy and raw materials for their extraction and a huge accumulation of waste with consequent environmental pollution. Mobile phones and cars are just two examples.

Currently, 130 million mobile phones are sold worldwide monthly or 1.56 billion a year (179 million were sold in 2009 and 720 million in 2012). About 7.7 billion active mobile phones are in use, and 720 million are thrown away yearly. New models are constantly coming out with real or supposed innovations, useful or not, and people buy them at a frenetic pace.⁶

In 2017, 93 million cars were manufactured, and there are about a billion cars on the roads around the world, with all that this represents in terms of energy and raw materials used in their manufacture, environmental pollution caused by the gases emitted and materials from scrapping cars at the end of their useful life, etc.⁷

The international fragmentation of production is known as value chains. Global value chains imply that stages of production, from the design of a product to its delivery to the final consumer, take place in different countries. This organisation has been driven by firms in advanced economies, encouraged by global competition to optimise their production processes through outsourcing and offshoring. Various studies indicate that the average distance travelled by the components of a yoghurt (milk, strawberries, plastics) before reaching the final consumer is 9,000 km.⁸ This illustrates the explosion of road, air and sea transport. The result is an exponential increase in greenhouse gas emissions—an irrational production system aimed at optimising costs for the exclusive benefit of transnational corporations.

III. Deforestation is one of the leading causes of environmental degradation. In addition to the well-known case of the Amazon, many examples can be given. In Central America, for example, forest areas that occupied 60% of the total area in 1960 had been reduced to 30% by 1972. It is estimated that 350,000 hectares of forest are disappearing every year in this region, representing an annual deforestation rate of 1.5%, one of the highest in the world, with serious ecological consequences, such as a water shortage for irrigation and human consumption. This is the result of a process known as modernisation on the one hand and survival strategies on the other. Modernisation has consisted of indiscriminate

⁶ ↪ See: <https://www.planetoscope.com/electronique/728-ventes-mondiales-de-smartphones.html>

⁷ ↪ See: <https://www.planetoscope.com/automobile/76-production-mondiale-de-voitures.html> y <https://www.planetoscope.com/automobile/87-recyclage-de-voitures-hors-d-usage-en-france-vhu-.html>

⁸ ↪ See: (<http://www.linternaute.com/actualite/savoir/07/petrole-yaourt/6.shtml>; www.walmartwatch.org; <https://bbcom21.wordpress.com/2009/11/02/9000-km-pour-un-yaourt-a-la-fraise/>; https://www.lemonde.fr/le-rechauffement-climatique/article/2009/12/10/l-objet-du-jour-le-yaourt-par-terra-eco_1278944_1270066.html; <http://www.etiktable.fr/l'alimentation-responsable/parcours-dun-aliment/>).

logging to sell timber, the extension of pastures to produce meat for export (the "hamburger connection"), the production of bananas,⁹ coffee and cotton, also for export, and mining.

The social consequences have been the displacement of people from their land and the destruction of their livelihoods, the removal of poor farmers and indigenous people from their land, who, when they occupy new land further away, practice survival strategies, cutting down trees to use the wood for fuel and also to sell it. When poor peasants and indigenous peoples resisted the dispossession of their land, repression and killings were not long in coming. The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank financed these "modernisation" processes, which resulted in the concentration of land ownership in a few hands, the enrichment of local elites, huge profits for transnational corporations, and the impoverishment and deterioration of the living conditions of large sectors of the population, in a context of accelerating environmental degradation.¹⁰

At first glance, famines can be attributed to climatic conditions and wars, but a closer look reveals the disastrous role played by European colonisation and recolonisation, which devastated vast tracts of forests to appropriate timber and promote export crops such as coffee, cocoa and groundnuts, the latter with a particularly negative impact on soil moisture conservation. Subsistence crops were marginalised, and the agricultural habits of African peoples were changed, such as shifting cultivation, rotation and bulking, all designed to avoid starvation during periods of drought. Forests were cleared in Africa to provide exotic timber for markets in so-called civilised countries. Between 1930 and 1970, an estimated 25-30% of Africa's tropical forests were destroyed. Particularly in recent decades, this high rate of deforestation with catastrophic ecological consequences (drought and erosion) is largely due to the conversion of forests into land for export crops in a desperate attempt to earn foreign exchange to service debt. In Asia, the situation is no different. Nepal, for example, whose forests contain highly prized timber, also has the unfortunate distinction of having the highest rate of deforestation in the world, at 4 per cent per year.¹¹

In addition to local consequences such as drought, erosion and temperature changes, deforestation can produce climatic effects in neighbouring or more distant regions due to various factors: changes in the direction of prevailing winds, the transformation of wet atmospheric currents into dry ones, the transformation of entire areas covered with vegetation into deserts, etc. The disappearance of huge tracts of forest reduces the phenomenon of evapotranspiration and, thus, the rainfall regime.

Deforestation also leads to physical and chemical alteration of the soil, resulting in erosion and accelerated rainwater runoff. Photosynthesis is the process of transforming inorganic matter into organic matter using the energy provided by sunlight. Life on our planet is maintained mainly by photosynthesis: in the aquatic environment by algae and other plant

⁹ ↪ In the 1970s and 1980s, banana companies in Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica (and many other parts of the world) used a pesticide (nemagon) containing 1,2-dibromo-3-chloropropane, which caused reproductive sterility in some 1,500 workers in these Central American countries. In the 1990s, lawyers from the region, in coordination with lawyers from the United States, filed a lawsuit on behalf of the victims in the 212th District Court of Galveston County, Texas, against the manufacturers and users of the product: Shell Oil Company, Dow Chemical Company, Occidental Chemical Corporation, Standard Fruit Company, Standard Fruit and Steamship Co, Dole Food Company, Inc, Dole Fresh Fruit Company, Chiquita Brands Inc and Chiquita Brands International. They were accused of using an extremely harmful product, deliberately concealing its dangerousness and failing to inform workers of the appropriate protection measures when exposed to it. The judgment handed down in December 2002 in Nicaragua against the companies followed legal channels in the United States. In October 2003, the Nicaraguan ruling was overturned by a judge of the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California. He argued that Dole Food Company Inc. had not been sued correctly because, technically, it did not exist since, in the United States, it was called Dole Food Company Inc. and not Corporation, as stated in the lawsuit. The judge argued that the legal procedures of U.S. law had also been violated and that the Nicaraguan court's decision was flawed.

¹⁰ ↪ See Peter Utting, *The Social Origins and Impact of Deforestation in Central America*. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), 1991.

¹¹ ↪ See Solon Barraclough and Krishna Guimire, *The social dynamics of deforestation in developing countries: Principal Issues and Research Priorities, Discussion paper Num. 16*. UNRISD, 1990.

and animal organisms and in the terrestrial environment by plants, which have the ability to synthesise organic matter (biomass) from sunlight and inorganic matter.

Epidemics and pandemics of zoonotic origin are becoming more frequent, partly because virus-carrying wild animals lose their natural habitat and come into contact with humans vulnerable to these viruses. During photosynthesis, trees and other plants absorb carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen, thus helping to clean the atmosphere. Large-scale deforestation, therefore, has a direct and considerable impact on increasing carbon dioxide pollution in the atmosphere, which causes the greenhouse effect.

Thus, the dominant economic system, on the one hand, produces a massive excess of CO₂ and, on the other hand, prevents its natural absorption by devastating the vegetation cover.

IV. Many workers in various parts of the world suffer the consequences of the violation of occupational health and safety standards. This is due, among other things, to the use of highly hazardous products and materials. See note 3 on banana plantations in Central America.

The transnational company IBM and its subcontractors used glycol ethers (which are carcinogenic substances and cause malformations in the offspring of people exposed to them) in companies in France (IBM in Corbeil-Essones) and the United States (Fishkill, near New York), despite the fact that the *Institut Curie* in France alerted IBM as early as 1988. These products have been banned domestically in France since 1998, but not in industry, where their "controlled use" is authorised. Some victims have taken legal action against the companies responsible. The same applies to other products whose use is dangerous to health and whose domestic use is banned but authorised in industry.

V. In his book *Marx's Ecology*, John Bellamy Foster studies Marx's ideas on the concept of metabolic decomposition, which Marx centred on the (antagonistic) city/countryside relationship, within each country and between industrialised and agro-exporting countries. Foster relates it to the installation of capitalist forms of production in the countryside, from the progressive extension of enclosures, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, to the mechanisation of agricultural work and the massive use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers for intensive cultivation, which led to the depopulation of the countryside and the urban demographic explosion.

The metabolic gap occurs because, with industry development and the urban population's rapid growth, the demand for agricultural products (food for the urban population and raw materials for industry) increases vertically. Meeting this demand leads to the depletion of nutrients from agricultural land, which are converted into urban waste that pollutes urban areas and is not returned to agricultural land. As Marx already pointed out in Volume III of *Capital* (Exploitation of the residues of production), referring to the pollution of the city of London: "The former are the residues of industry and agriculture, the latter are, on the one hand, the residues resulting from the natural physiological changes of man and, on the other hand, the form in which useful objects subsist after their use. Thus, in the chemical industry, production waste is the by-products that are wasted at a lower stage of production; metal shavings that are discarded in the mechanical engineering industry and then used as a raw material in the production of iron, etc. Consumption residues are the organic matter disposed of by humans in the process of assimilation, such as leftover clothing in the form of rags, etc. This consumption waste is the most important for agriculture. The capitalist economy is gigantically wasteful in its use. In London, for example, no better use has been found for the manure of four and a half million men than to use it, at gigantic cost, to turn the Thames into a pestilential sewer". This process, which at first was only internal, became

international, and the metabolic division occurred within each country and between the great industrial and peripheral agricultural countries.

When Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492 on the island he called Hispaniola (Haiti and Santo Domingo), he found a veritable orchard occupied by a large indigenous population living peacefully. From the early 16th century, the Spanish began to devastate the island and decimate its inhabitants through forced labour and repression when they rebelled, to the point that by the mid-16th century, they had to start replacing them with enslaved Africans, who were also savagely exploited and soon rebelled as well. In the mid-17th century, the Spanish abandoned part of the island, which was occupied by the French, who continued the genocidal and devastating work of their predecessors, with good results for them: by 1700, Haiti was the world's leading producer of sugar cane. At the time of the Spanish conquest, 80% of the island was covered with forests of various species: coconut, mango, papaya, mahogany, kapok, ceiba, tamarind and so on. In the 18th century, sugar cane, spice, coffee and indigo growers carried out massive deforestation to make way for their crops. During World War II, the Americans accelerated deforestation to plant sisal and rubber trees.¹²

A current example of the international metabolic divide

Argentina replenishes only 37% of soil nutrients. For every 40,000 tonnes of soya exported, about 4,000 tonnes of nutrients are lost. For specialists, this is the "hidden cost" of Argentinean agriculture. A study by INTA (Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria) in Casilda, Santa Fe, has shown that for every cargo ship that transports soya abroad, thousands of tonnes of nutrients are lost from Argentinean soils and that these nutrients are not replenished. According to Fernando Martínez, head of the INTA unit, "for every 40,000 tonnes of soybeans, up to 8,700 tonnes of fertiliser are exported, of which only 37% is replenished". The specialist Graciela Cordone, also from INTA Casilda, explained that for a ship loaded with 40,000 tonnes of soya, 3,576 tonnes of nutrients are exported. If the cargo is wheat, 1,176 tonnes of nutrients are exported, and in the case of maize, 966 tonnes. Experts agree that the 3,576 tonnes of nutrients extracted - nitrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, potassium and magnesium - correspond to 8,735 tonnes of fertiliser - urea, simple superphosphate, potassium chloride and magnesium sulphate. One tonne of fertiliser costs about \$450, which would generate a decapitalisation of at least \$3 million per ship. Graciela Cordone has drawn up a graph of this loss: "It would take 300 trucks to load the fertilisers containing the exported nutrients onto each ship: for every three units of nutrients, only one is replaced."¹³

Marx was already referring to the imperialist exploitation of the soil nutrients of entire countries, resulting from the metabolic division between man and earth. "England", he wrote in *Capital*, "indirectly exports the soil of Ireland without giving its cultivators even the means of replenishing its elements" (*Capital*, chapter XXIII, The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation, quoted in John Bellamy Foster's article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* of June 2018: Karl Marx et l'exploitation de la nature.¹⁴ When Irish soil ran out, and English soil began to run out, England began to import guano from Peru for use as fertiliser. Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster write: "The international guano trade in the nineteenth century highlights the emergence of a global metabolic rift, with guano and nitrates moving from Peru and Chile to Britain (and other nations) to enrich their impoverished soils".¹⁵

¹² ↪ Teitelbaum, Haití, Ocupación militar, varios siglos de pillaje y superexplotación y algunas semanas de migajas humanitarias- <https://rebellion.org/ocupacion-militar-varios-siglos-de-pillaje-y-superexplotacion-y-algunas-semanas-de-migajas-humanitarias/>

¹³ ↪ See (<http://intainforma.inta.gov.ar/?p=12116>).

¹⁴ ↪ See https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2018/06/BELLAMY_FOSTER/58734 y en Marx Écologiste, del mismo autor, Éditions Amsterdam, París 2011).

¹⁵ ↪ "Brett Clark and John Bellamy Foster, "Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift: Unequal Exchange and the Guano/Nitrates Trade," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50/3-4 (2009): 311-34."

From the 1820s to the 1860s, guano was extracted from the Chincha Islands in Peru. It was exported mainly to the United States, France and the United Kingdom. In 1863, Spain attempted to take control of the Chincha Islands. Peru and Chile joined forces and repelled the Spanish naval forces during the Spanish-South American War, also known as the Guano War. Production from the Chincha Islands reached 600,000 tons per year in the late 1860s. By the time the deposits were depleted, some 12.5 million tons had been extracted. Between 1840 and 1879, Peru's guano generated enormous wealth, as the country, the exclusive owner of the guano deposits, had a world monopoly on this fertiliser. The state granted the exploitation of guano to the peasants but retained control of the trade. Many businessmen amassed enormous fortunes by exploiting this wealth. Most notably, the Frenchman Auguste Dreyfus became one of the wealthiest men in the world thanks to guano.

In 1856, the US Congress passed the Guano Islands Act, still in force in the 21st century, which allows any US citizen to claim any uninhabited island likely to contain guano on behalf of the United States. The island thus becomes part of US territory. In this way, the United States incorporated many small islands and cays containing guano into its territory. Between June 1862 and August 1863, some 1,400 Indians from Easter Island were brought by about 20 ships to work as enslaved people in Peru's guano reserves. Under pressure from France, Chile and the UK, the Peruvian authorities repatriated about 100 Easter Islanders, but only about 15 of them made it to the end of the voyage, the rest succumbing to tuberculosis and smallpox. The survivors transmitted these diseases to the islanders who had escaped from the slavers. In 1877, Easter Island, which had a population of about 15,000 before the events described, had only 111 inhabitants.¹⁶ (<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guano>).

Based on a specific case of the subject of this note, the above paragraph is an exemplary summary of the functioning of the capitalist system: wars, slavery, genocide, appropriation of territories by the great powers and, on this basis, accumulation of enormous fortunes.

Added to this "ecological imperialism", as Clark and Foster call it, is the massive export of toxic waste and the transfer of polluting industries from the most industrialised countries to the most vulnerable periphery.¹⁷ In *Marx Ecologiste*, Foster first shows the topicality of Marx's thought, particularly his method of analysis, and rightly criticises the current dominant tendencies of the ecological movements. In conclusion, the capitalist system and a healthy environment are incompatible.

This is why Foster, Clark and York are right when they write in the last part of their article *L'écologie de la consommation*:

"A true ecology of consumption - the creation of a new system of sustainable needs and the satisfaction of those needs - is only possible by integrating it into a new ecology of production, which requires the destruction of the capitalist system for its emergence".¹⁸

¹⁶ ↪ See (<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guano>).

¹⁷ ↪ Lawrence Summers, who was President Clinton's Treasury Secretary, gained notoriety when, as Chief Economist of the World Bank, he stated in an internal memo that the Bank should encourage the export of polluting industries to the Third World, adding that dumping toxic waste in low-income countries made impeccable economic sense, because the life of a Third Worlder, in terms of life expectancy and per capita income, was worth far less than that of an inhabitant of a developed country (The Economist, February 15/21, 1992).

¹⁸ ↪ See...(Écologie & politique 2011/3 N° 43, pages 107 à 130)

Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General, said in his opening speech at the COP 15-, on 6/12 /2022:

"Multinational corporations are lining their pockets by emptying our world of nature's gifts. Ecosystems have become playthings for profit. Due to our unlimited appetite for unbridled and unequal economic growth, humanity has become a weapon of mass extinction. We are flushing nature down the drain. And, in the end, we are committing suicide by proxy".¹⁹

Unfortunately, this approach is in the minority in the movements and literature of environmentalists, including ecosocialists.

The close link between environmental disaster and the capitalist system explains the repeated failure in the practice of international agreements supposedly aimed at curbing climate change and limiting the use of polluting and genetically modified products, signed by governments that are merely agents and guardians of the dominant system. The few measures being implemented are mostly designed to appease (and hold accountable) ordinary people and are like aspirin to treat an advanced cancer. The worsening ecological disaster affects the vast majority of humanity. Until these majorities understand that ecological catastrophe is inherent in capitalism, environmentalism will not have a solid basis. There is a long and challenging road ahead, including overcoming the shortcomings of current environmentalism to achieve this understanding.

The Drought

The hydrosphere consists of oceans, seas, rivers, lakes and ponds, but water is a fundamental part of other elements. Water is also present in air, land, and all other elements, organic and inorganic, in highly variable proportions of up to 99%. The total volume of water on the earth's surface is 1.46 trillion km³, which in its various forms exists in the following proportions: 97% salt water (seas and oceans); 2.5% freshwater (rivers, streams, lakes, glaciers, persistent snow, groundwater at various depths, subsoil and soil moisture, atmospheric moisture. The remaining 0.5% corresponds to the water cycle: evapotranspiration. Evaporation occurs over large areas of water as well as over large areas of land. Plant cover causes transpiration, the release of water into the atmosphere through its metabolic cycles. The water released into the atmosphere condenses and falls as precipitation on the land surface, either as rain or as solid matter such as snow or ice. The circulation of water over the earth's surface causes flooding and erosion. Humans, 60 per cent water, also participate in the water cycle: an adult living in a moderate-temperature climate loses about 2 to 2.5 litres of water per day through respiration, sweat, urine and other bodily secretions.

The presence of living organisms makes the water cycle a biological and not just a physical phenomenon: plant evapotranspiration is fundamental to the regularity of the water cycle. Among other factors, deforestation dramatically disturbs the natural water cycle. There is, therefore, a close link between the water problem and climate change, which must be tackled together with a multidisciplinary approach: physical, biological, economic, political and social.

Several international instruments - as well as national laws - have recognised the right to safe drinking water for all: the Protocol on Water and Health, adopted in London in 1999; the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes; the Wood Declaration of 17 April 1999 on the sustainable management of water resources; and General Comment No. 15 ("The Right to Water") of 26 November 2002 of the Committee on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The UN Water Conference in March

¹⁹ ↪ See (<https://press.un.org/fr/2022/sgsm21619.doc.htm>).

2023 concluded with the adoption of the Water Agenda, a plan with 689 commitments and \$300 billion pledged to carry it forward. In less than two weeks, thousands of participants gathered, hundreds of events were held, and dozens of world and business leaders participated—a conference that produced no binding documents.

A long list of declarations of good intentions without concrete results can be explained by the fact that the current system and its main beneficiaries, those who hold real power, are incompatible with a rational, coherent environmental policy guided by the general interest. The text by Pedro Arrojo Agudo, Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, deserves a careful reading. Appointed by the Human Rights Council in September 2020, he took office on 1 November 2020.

On the occasion of World Water Day and the United Nations Water Conference, as the UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, I sent an open letter to all governments of UN Member States.

The global water crisis on the Blue Planet

On World Water Day and on the occasion of the United Nations Water Conference, as UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, I have sent an open letter to all governments of UN member states on the basis of the contents of this tribune.

Forty-six years have passed since the Mar del Plata Water Conference and, therefore, this is the first time in almost 50 years that the United Nations has convened a global event to reflect on the current global water crisis, with 2 billion people without guaranteed access to safe drinking water and more than 4 billion without basic sanitation. Most of these billions are not thirsty people without water in their territories but severely impoverished people living next to rivers or in polluted aquifers. This crisis will undoubtedly worsen with climate change as the risks of extreme events, drought and flooding increase.

Facing this crisis requires, above all, understanding water as a common good and, therefore, it must be managed from the logic of the general interest and not from the logic of the market; at the same time, it is urgent to guarantee the sustainable management of rivers, wetlands, lakes and aquifers, anticipating the harsh scenarios that climate change will bring.

Understanding the global water crisis as an opportunity to do business through strategies of privatisation, commodification or even speculative financialisation of water, far from helping to solve it, aggravates it by making the 2 billion people who would become impoverished customers who cannot and will not be able to pay more vulnerable. On the other hand, deepening the overexploitation, degradation and pollution of rivers, wetlands and aquifers in the name of development, far from opening horizons of progress, will make us more vulnerable to climate change, especially people and communities living in situations of poverty and marginalisation.

Indigenous peoples, whose rights must be respected throughout the world, in line with the agreements adopted by the United Nations, from their worldviews that respect nature and rivers, lakes and wetlands, offer us a great example of the ecosystemic and sustainable management that we need to develop in river basins and aquifers. On the other hand, many impoverished peasant communities also offer many examples of democratic governance and collective responsibility from their community management systems, which governments should recognise and support with public-community partnership strategies.

The institutional weakness of the United Nations in the area of water management is worrying, especially if we consider climate change, the main impacts of which are precisely water-related phenomena. At the New York Water Conference, which starts precisely on World Water Day, all States must become aware of the need to face two challenges that are transcendental for the future of humanity: the challenge of making peace with our rivers and aquatic ecosystems, on which life on islands and continents depends; and the challenge of promoting democratic governance of water, understood as a common good and not as a commodity. But for this to happen, it is urgent to strengthen the United Nations in water management.

The Conference must assume the commitment to open dialogue with water defenders, as holders of the human rights at stake, not only to drinking water and sanitation but also to a healthy and sustainable environment, to decent housing, to food, to health and to other human rights deeply linked to water, as the blue soul of life. The United Nations must give due recognition to these defenders of water, rivers, lakes and wetlands, who are often criminalised, repressed and even killed for taking the lead in the global water crisis and defending the rights to safe drinking water and sanitation that the UN recognises as human rights. This participatory approach must actively and effectively promote the equal participation of women, who take on the hardest work to ensure water for their households in communities where it is not available, integrating menstrual health as part of the human right to sanitation.

Indigenous peoples' organisations, social movements, peasant organisations, river defenders, trade unions and workers supporting water and sanitation services, women's organisations, the environmental movement, networks of community systems, municipalities and public institutions responsible for these services, churches and interfaith platforms, universities and researchers, young people mobilising in the face of the climate emergency, and in short, water defenders as rights-holders, have presented their demands to the Water Conference in an unprecedented Manifesto for Water Justice. This manifesto, backed by a veritable groundswell of global support, must be given the utmost attention by the Conference organisers, the UN General Assembly and States.

All UN Member States must fulfil their international commitments in this area, recognising the human rights to drinking water and sanitation in their national legislation and developing budgetary, regulatory and public policy commitments to meet the democratic challenge of guaranteeing drinking water and sanitation for all. Learning from the painful lesson of the pandemic on the need to take on public health as a democratic challenge, leaving no one behind, drinking water and sanitation, the cornerstone of public health, must also be guaranteed as a democratic challenge at global, national and local levels, developing water management models based on a human rights approach in line with the demands of the United Nations.

Finally, Member States must assume the urgency of strengthening the United Nations in the management of water and aquatic ecosystems, promoting an institutional mechanism that allows the UN to address its obligations and functions in the face of the global water crisis, and accelerate the pace to meet Sustainable Development Goal 6 on water, on the basis of promoting dialogue, participation and joint work with water advocates. On the other hand, in line with Unesco's proposals, an IPCC agenda should be strengthened to promote climate change adaptation strategies based on the water transition, together with energy transition strategies that preside over climate change mitigation policies.

Returning to the spirit of the founding document of the UN, which opened by saying, "we the peoples...", I hope that this Water Conference will mark a before and after and open a path of effective commitment of the States and the UN with the people, with the peoples of the world, on an issue as vital as water.²⁰

Energy Production – Nuclear Energy

World energy consumption is skyrocketing. However, hundreds of millions of people are without electricity or face serious supply problems. At present, 80% of the world's energy needs are met by non-renewable fossil fuels, which are running out: oil, coal and natural gas, major sources of environmental pollution when extracted and consumed. The remaining 20% comes from nuclear fission (nuclear power plants), hydroelectricity, biomass, wind energy and solar radiation. The direct polluting effects of renewable (and inexhaustible) sources, in particular solar and wind energy, are virtually non-existent. The latter, accessible anywhere on the planet, individually and collectively, and obviously free of charge, are the least used, unlike fossil fuels, which have to be constantly extracted and transported to feed the power stations that convert them into electricity. Extraction and transport have a high environmental cost and only benefit the large companies that control these industries and services.

Almost all available energy comes from the sun. Solar power generates winds, evaporation of surface water, cloud formation, rainfall and, consequently, waterfalls. Its heat and light are the basis for many chemical reactions essential for the development of plants and animals and, over the centuries, have led to the formation of fossil fuels such as coal and oil. Solar radiation is also of great importance.

Solar radiation intercepted by the Earth is the primary source of renewable energy for other forms of renewable energy, such as wind, wave and biomass, which are indirect manifestations of solar energy.

The amount of solar energy captured by the Earth each year is about 4,500 times greater than the amount of energy consumed during the same period by the planet. Solar energy reaches the Earth's surface in two ways: by hitting sunlit objects, known as direct radiation, or by reflecting solar radiation absorbed by air and atmospheric dust, known as diffuse radiation. The former can be used directly, while photovoltaic cells use the latter.

Despite its abundance, the use of solar energy is mainly conditioned by three aspects: the intensity of solar radiation received by the Earth, the daily and annual cycles to which it is subjected, and the climatic conditions of each location. Solar radiation as an energy source is directly related to the geographical location of the place chosen to exploit it and to variations over time.

There are two types of systems for harnessing solar energy: those that convert solar radiation into electricity using photovoltaic technology and those used to produce thermal energy. More global use of solar radiation, natural light and local climatic conditions can also be considered in building construction through what is known as bioclimatic architecture. Photovoltaic solar energy is captured by photovoltaic cells that convert the sun's rays into electrical energy. It is the most recent of the various types of renewable energy to be harnessed. It has a wide range of applications: from its use in consumer products such as watches and calculators to the electrification of areas without conventional supply, such as isolated houses or agricultural and livestock facilities, to land and maritime signalling, communications and street lighting.

²⁰ ↩ (Published in El País, Spain, on 22/3/2023- <https://elpais.com/opinion/2023-03-22/la-crisis-global-del-agua-en-el-planeta-azul.html>.)

The direct conversion of solar energy into electricity by photovoltaic conversion offers clear advantages in terms of simplicity, autonomy, reliability and operability, which are linked to the high energy content of the electricity produced and the absence of environmental impact and noise in the energy process. For now, the share of photovoltaic energy in the European energy balance remains marginal. Its investment cost is currently higher than that of conventional alternatives. Yet, it is rapidly decreasing, and the European market is expected to grow at 15-25% per year in the coming years.

Solar thermal energy can be obtained actively, thanks to specific elements in which a fluid circulates, absorbing the energy radiated by the sun, or passively, thanks to a series of applications known as bioclimatism. In the latter case, their use is linked to an increasingly popular aspect: optimising the design of buildings to minimise the need for additional heating and cooling.

Active systems are mainly used to cover part of the thermal needs of a building, such as domestic hot water production and heating. This set of applications is known as low-temperature active solar energy.²¹

The harnessing of solar energy offers a wide range of possibilities, from household use for cooking food²² to large expanses of photovoltaic panels to supply electricity to industries or urban centres.

The best policy is to diversify energy sources, favouring less polluting, less expensive, more accessible, less dangerous for those who work in them and less prone to accidents. And which do not pose the massive environmental problem of nuclear waste.

There are nuclear power plants in 33 countries. The United States tops the list with 99 operating plants, followed by France (58), Japan (48) and Russia (34). France is the only country that covers most of its electricity needs with nuclear energy: more than 75%. Four countries cover between 40% and just over 50% of their needs with nuclear power: Belgium, Slovenia, Hungary and Ukraine. The United States covers only 20%.²³

Those who advocate nuclear power plants as the best solution for clean energy production do not take into account three decidedly negative factors: a) the working and safety conditions in nuclear power plants; b) the frequent "incidents" and accidents in nuclear power plants; and c) the enormous accumulation of radioactive waste from nuclear power plants.

a) Working conditions and safety in nuclear power plants.

Maintenance personnel in nuclear power plants are almost always subcontracted. These teams are assigned to work where they are exposed to radiation. At least in Europe, the maximum dose of radiation a worker can receive in a given period without health risk has been determined in theory. Outsourcing this work prevents strict control of the radiation doses received by workers, who frequently move to different irradiation sites. Moreover, they can receive high radiation doses all at once in the event of so-called "incidents". To ensure that workers do not exceed the authorised dose, they are

²¹ ↪ See (https://www.ambientum.com/enciclopedia_medioambiental/energia/el_sol_fuente_basica_de_energia.asp).

²² ↪ Villa de Zaachila, Mexico, Aug 9, 2019 (IPS) - Reyna Diaz cooks beans, chicken, pork and desserts in her solar cooker, which she sets up in the open courtyard of her home in a popular neighbourhood of Vicente Guerrero in the municipality of Villa de Zaachila in the southwestern Mexican state of Oaxaca. She also checks out the cooking of marinated pork in the solar cooker in his home. The use of these cookers already allows 200 women to save fuel and stop using firewood, with environmental and health benefits.

²³ ↪ See <https://www.foronuclear.org/es/energia-nuclear/energia-nuclear-en-el-mundo/grafico-de-informacion-nuclear-por-paises>

not allowed to continue working in nuclear power plants until the amount has been reduced and they can return to work in a nuclear power plant. In the meantime, they are unemployed, but the nuclear power plant assumes no responsibility because the work contract for maintenance is concluded with a subcontractor, who can transfer them to other plants without waiting for the decontamination period. In France, maintenance work involving radiation exposure carried out by subcontractors has risen in some years from 20% to 80%, which represents a significant cost reduction for EDF (which manages nuclear power plants). This policy aims to ensure high productivity and maintain competitive production costs. This requires:

- 1) reduce the time spent on maintenance and safety checks of the installations (during which production is stopped), which subcontracting companies, unlike the permanent staff of the nuclear power plants, carry out on a seasonal basis, thus reducing the wage cost of such maintenance and checks. Some specialists consider that subcontracting may affect the quality of these maintenance and control tasks.
- 2) Subcontracting, as already mentioned, of workers' health risks and labour obligations. As can be seen, in this case, subcontracting or "outsourcing" not only affects the working conditions and health of the workers concerned but can also threaten the general population's safety.²⁴

b) The main accidents occurred in nuclear power plants between 1952 and 2011

- 1) 12 December 1952: the first major nuclear accident occurred at the Chalk River power station in Ottawa (Canada) when the reactor core partially melted down without causing any injuries. In May 1958, a fire at the plant caused a radioactive leak;
- 2) On 7 October 1957, a reactor fire at the Windscale-Sellafield nuclear power station in Liverpool (UK) caused a radioactive leak that contaminated an area of 300 square kilometres;
- 3) 30 September 1957: an explosion at the secret Cheliabinsk-40 plant, known as Mayak, in the Urals (former USSR) killed at least 200 people and contaminated 90 square kilometres with strontium. In total, 10,000 people were evacuated, and tens of thousands were exposed to radiation.
- 4) 3 January 1961: three US Navy technicians were killed at the Idaho Falls power plant in an accident involving an experimental reactor. It was the first nuclear accident in the US;
- 5) 7 August 1979: 1,000 people were contaminated by radiation from a secret power plant near Irwin, Tennessee, in the US;
- 6) 28 March 1979: A series of human and mechanical failures led to the worst nuclear accident in the US, at the Three Mile Island power plant in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Thousands of residents were evacuated because of the formed radioactive cloud covering some 30 square kilometres. The plant was shut down in 2019, 40 years after the accident;
- 7) 8 March 1981: a leak of radioactive water from the Tsuruga power plant in Japan, which was not made public until six weeks later and to which 300 people were exposed;
- 8) 26 April 1986: a reactor explosion at Chernobyl, Ukraine, caused the largest nuclear accident in history. Some 200 tonnes of fissile material were released into the atmosphere, with radioactivity equivalent to 100 to 500 Hiroshima-like atomic bombs. According to Ukrainian experts, Chernobyl cost the lives of more than 100. One hundred thousand people in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, the countries affected by the disaster;
- 9) 13 September 1987: a radioactive accident caused by the contamination of a caesium-137 capsule in the Brazilian city of Goiânia left four people dead and 240 injured;

²⁴ ↪ See; Annie Thébaud-Mony: Rationalité instrumentale et santé au travail : le cas de l'industrie nucléaire, in La Gazette Nucléaire, n° 175-176, June 1999; L'industrie nucléaire : sous-traitance et servitude, Inserm & EDK Editeurs, 2000; and Travailler peut nuire gravement à votre santé. Sous-traitance des risques, mise en danger d'autrui, atteintes à la dignité, violences physiques et morales, cancers professionnels. La Découverte, coll. "La Découverte/Poche, 2008).

- 10) 6 April 1993: The explosion of a container full of radioactive material in the city of Goiania caused four deaths and 240 injuries;
- 11) The explosion of a container full of uranium solution at the secret nuclear fuel reprocessing plant at Tomsk-7 (Siberia, Russia), located 20 kilometres from the city of Tomsk (population 500,000), contaminated some 1,000 square kilometres;
- 12) 11 March 1997: A fire in the conditioning room of the Tokaimura nuclear recycling plant (Japan) caused an explosion with radioactive leakage, affecting 37 workers. After the accident, the plant was shut down until November 2000;
- 13) 30 September 1999: a uranium leak at a JCO nuclear fuel plant in Tokaimura (Japan) killed two workers, and 438 others were affected by radiation;
- 14) 9 August 2004: five workers were killed by a steam leak in the turbine room of one of the reactors at the Mihama nuclear power plant (Japan);
- 15) 8 April 2008: At least two people are killed by a uranium leak in the reactor room of the Mihama nuclear power plant (Japan);
- 16) At least two people are killed by a gas leak at the Khushab nuclear power plant (Pakistan), where the population has been evacuated within a radius of 16 kilometres;
- 17) 23 July 2008. Radioactive substances leak from one of the reactors at the Tricastin nuclear power plant (France) during a maintenance operation, slightly contaminating a hundred employees;²⁵
- 18) 11 March 2011. - A series of explosions occurred at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Japan, whose cooling system had been severely damaged by a magnitude 9 earthquake and the tsunami that followed.

c) Radioactive waste

The term "radioactive waste" covers a range of substances characterised by their radioactivity, which may be low, intermediate or high and short or very long-lived. Most radioactive waste originates from the nuclear industry and includes very high-level, long-lived and very long-lived radioactive waste. Most modern nuclear reactors use enriched uranium, which leaves behind depleted uranium waste. The best-known nuclear fuel is uranium, which is the most commonly used in fission nuclear reactors. All nuclear reactors currently in production for electricity generation are fission reactors.²⁶

On another level, plutonium is also used as a nuclear fuel. Depleted uranium is a waste material resulting from the production of nuclear reactor fuel. The material used is uranium U-235, the isotope that can be fissioned. As this isotope is found in meagre proportions in nature, the uranium ore has to be enriched, i.e. its proportion of the isotope U-235 has to be industrially increased. This process produces a large amount of radioactive depleted uranium waste because it consists mainly of the other non-fissile isotope of uranium, U-238, and a small proportion of U-235. U-238 (depleted) uranium takes about 4.5 billion years to decay and become completely harmless. This raises the question of the fate of the growing amount of U-238-based radioactive waste.

The three countries with the largest stockpiles of depleted uranium are the United States (480,000 tonnes), Russia (460,000) and France (315,000), followed by the United Kingdom (30,000), Germany (16,000) and Japan (10,000).

²⁵ ↪ Tricastin nuclear power plant: an official denounces "covert" incidents and files a complaint. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/nucleaire-un-cadre-de-tricastin-denonce-des-incident-dissimules-et-porte-plainte-20211112>

²⁶ ↪ The transition from fission to fusion in the operation of nuclear reactors, which would almost eliminate the nuclear waste problem, is in the initial testing phase (ITER project). Its use in practice, if it ever materialises, could take decades. See <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/ITER>. https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2022/12/13/fusion-nucleaire-une-percee-scientifique-majeure-annoncee-par-un-laboratoire-americain_6154238_1650684.html

Depleted uranium is permanently stored underground, or its main holders use it in the military industry and sell it to other states that also use it in the military sector. States sell it to domestic and foreign arms companies to save money and empty their arsenals. In addition to the US, countries such as the UK, France, Canada, Russia, Greece, Turkey, Israel, the Gulf monarchies, Taiwan, South Korea, Pakistan and Japan buy or manufacture depleted uranium weapons. Depleted uranium is used to coat projectiles to increase their ability to penetrate targets significantly. They were used extensively in the first Gulf War, the war against Iraq and the Balkan War. When a depleted uranium-coated shell hits a target, most of the coating burns and oxidises, volatilising into highly toxic and radioactive micro-particles. Being so small, these particles can be ingested or inhaled after being deposited on the ground or carried for miles through the air, food chain or water. Their use in the wars mentioned above has affected - sometimes severely - military personnel on both sides and the civilian population.

Launched in May-June 2012 and completed in October 2012, a study on the long-term effects of war conducted by the WHO and the Iraqi Ministry of Health revealed an increasing number of birth defects and cancers in children. It was conducted in Baghdad, Diyala, Anbar, Sulaymaniyah, Babel, Basra, Mosul and Hi-Qar, where 18,000 households were visited. According to the British newspaper *The Independent*, the WHO report should have been published in November 2012 but was never made public.

In March 2013, a representative of the Iraqi Ministry of Health was interviewed by the BBC, stating that 'all studies published by Iraq up to that point provided evidence of an increase in congenital malformations and childhood cancers'. The hidden WHO report shows that this public health problem resulting from the use of toxic weapons by allied forces is a major scourge for future generations. The provinces of Nineveh, Anbar, Basra and Najaf are particularly affected. These are the regions where uranium munitions have been used on a large scale. Other studies, obviously rejected by the responsible states, led by the United States, France and Britain, have shown abnormally high rates of sterility, miscarriages and stillbirths.

Faced with the WHO's attitude, 58 scientists, health professionals and human rights lawyers wrote to the WHO and the Iraqi Ministry of Health requesting the immediate publication of the report. They have received no response.²⁷

Another problem with nuclear power plants is their decommissioning: it takes many years, is extremely costly and can lead to radioactive leakage.

Finally, the construction of new nuclear power plants, because - like everything else - it is also subject to capitalist cost-benefit calculations, can be a nightmare in terms of construction defects, delays and huge additional costs, as in the case of Flamanville in France: initially planned in 2006 at EUR 3 billion and four years of work, it now costs EUR 12 billion and fifteen years of work because, among other things, sections built with various construction defects had to be rebuilt. It is a cocktail of lack of expertise on the part of unqualified personnel, which cheapens the work entrusted to subcontractors, and negligence and bureaucratic management on the part of state officials. Therefore, nuclear power plants are not the best solution to produce energy without generating environmental pollution as long as the capitalist disorder persists.

²⁷ ↪ See <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/kakadoundiaye/blog/150613/uranium-appauvri-un-vrai-scandale-une-vraie-horreur>; <https://www.afrique-asie.fr/le-rapport-cache-de-loms-sur-les-crimes-us-en-irak/>

In the daily Le Monde of 7 November 2023 — On the eve of the COP28, the causes of tension are multiplying

Financing, the exit from fossil fuels, the evaluation of the Paris Agreement... Positions are hardening just a few weeks before the opening of the 28th United Nations Climate Conference, which will take place in Dubai from 30 November to 12 December... At the Sustainable Development Week opening ceremony in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on 16 January 2023... A breakthrough in climate diplomacy a year ago, a symbol of stagnation today.

Launched at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, in 2022 and hailed as a decisive mechanism to help developing countries most affected by global warming, the "loss and damage" fund is now the focus of disillusionment. On Saturday, 4 November, in Abu Dhabi, the twenty-four parties represented in its transitional committee reached a text that will be presented at COP28 in Dubai (United Arab Emirates) from 30 November to 12 December. It is a misleading result because there is still a lot of resentment. The "loss and damage" fund, obtained at COP27 to help countries affected by climate change, has not yet been fully set up.

While developing countries finally accepted, despite their misgivings, that the World Bank would temporarily host the fund, developed countries made no concessions: no immediate capitalisation, no long-term financial targets, no imposed deadlines, etc.

The inflexible Americans even deplored the fact that the text did not propose "voluntary" participation by rich countries. "This agreement is balanced and fulfils the COP27 mandate. It represents a first response to the massive destruction caused by extreme weather events," declared Agnès Pannier-Runacher, the French Minister for Energy Transition, with satisfaction.²⁸

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²⁸ ↪ (https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2023/11/07/climat-a-l-approche-de-la-cop28-les-motifs-de-crispation-se-multiplient_6198668_3244.html)

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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