



# No Dole Outs for Women and Ecological Debt

by Magda Lanuza

*Melba in 2006.*

Photo by Giorgio Trucchi

*Melba was only 15 years old when she started working with her mother at the United Fruit Company in 1970. She brought with her coffee, juices and bread to sell to the workers, who started their day as early as 4:30 in the morning. Even in those days, Melba and her mother inhaled the pesticides that were sprayed around the plantation.*

**She** became even more exposed two years later when she was employed by the company for its packaging section. Packing the bananas into boxes that would be sent for export has been a woman's job. Although the section was isolated, Melba ventured outside to help her husband in the same banana plantation.

Her husband's task was to place the bananas inside plastic bags that were full of pesticides. Because women were paid so little with US\$40 per month, Melba's extra hands allowed her husband to work faster and receive a higher pay (Trucchi, 2006). In 1999, her husband died of an unknown illness. Now, Melba is severely sick, unable to work and living in extreme poverty. She has no money to pay even for painkillers.

The story of Melba is just one of the many stories that are somehow reflected in the film in *Bananas!*\* by Swedish filmmaker and journalist Fredrik Gertten. While Dole sued the film for "blatant intimidation" in July 2009. Yet the company has more to explain with the ecological debt it owes as it ruined the lives of poor women and entire ecosystems in the South.

## Ecological Debt: Historical Dues

Ecological debt has been defined as the debt accumulated by Northern, industrial countries towards the South. It accounts for the plunder of natural resources through overexploitation and waste deposits such as greenhouse gases (Raina, Vinod, 2003). This new dimension of indebtedness focuses on

the damage inflicted to the earth and its poorest people.

The main debtors have been transnational corporations (TNC), private banks and international financial institutions (IFI) such as the World Bank and nowadays, the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Ecological debt has become an indirect source of income for capitalistic societies which always “seek new consumers otherwise it will not survive” (Karki, Kumar Arjun and Gartoulla, Prasad Rita, 2008).

Ecological debt is further considered as “earth deficit” as the basic life systems of the planet close down due to the abuses of the air, soil, water and vegetation (CEJI, 2000).

The claim for ecological debt started in early 1990s when Southern organisations questioned the development model imposed on developing countries (Accion Ecologica,

2007). The required economic growth brought about not just the depletion and destruction of the environment, but also the impoverishment of entire communities, primarily women.

The assertion of ecological debt has been diversifying, assuming various terms such as “environmental racism,” “abuse of biosphere,” “transgression of ecological limits,” “resource extraction,” “economics for the earth,” “debt for nature swaps,” “ecological footprints,” “bio-prospecting and bio-piracy,” “biological debt,” “eco-colonialism,” and many others.

Despite the strong growing voices from the South to recognise this debt, Northern countries have yet to take action towards a different pattern. Instead they tend to accumulate more debt and this is unacceptable.

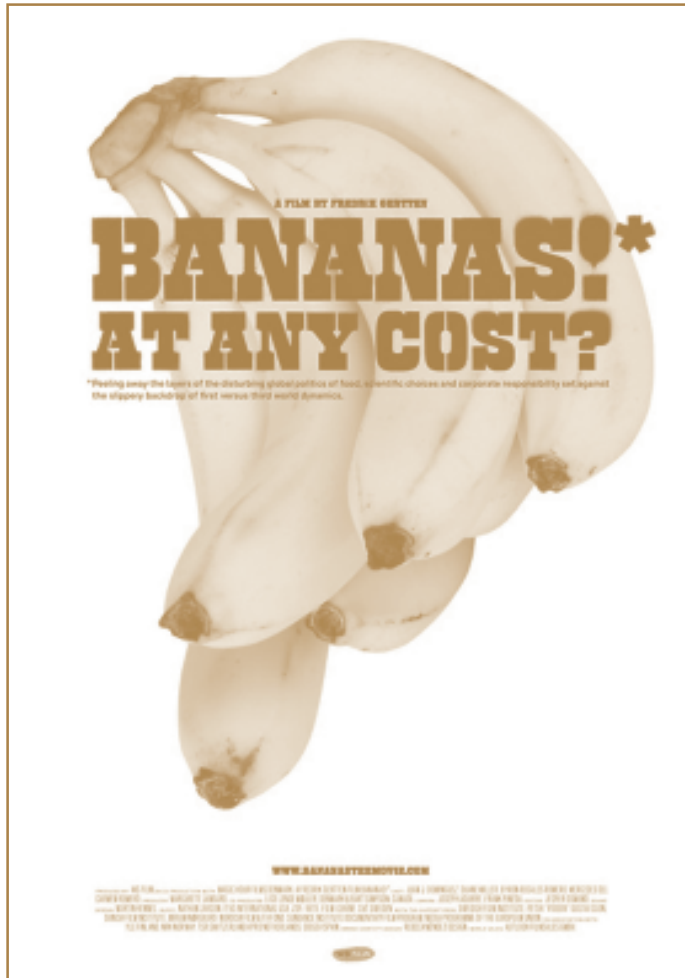
Melba and some 2,500 women who are suffering like her, are creditors of ecological debt. When she and her husband worked for United Fruit Company, they never were told of the side effects of the pesticides nor were they given protective gears to wear: They exposed their bodies for the duration of the spraying. They touched with their bare hands the plastic bags full of pesticides and had no equipment to protect them.

Dole reasons that Melba did not work for the company because she was only a “temporary worker.”

But history tells us that Nicaragua never chose to be a banana exporter. Without machinery, the workers were forced to clear the forests of Chinandega and turn them into banana plantations. Nicaragua never made the technologies behind the pesticides that killed Melba’s husband and that continues to kill thousands of other banana workers.

Dole clearly has an accumulated debt in Nicaragua. Worse, this debt is growing, not

**Bananas!\*** At Any Cost? Swedish filmmaker Fredrik Gertten documents the conflict between Dole and Nicaraguan banana workers, who have complained of the use of the pesticides, that the company knew, can cause sterility.





**Banana Republic Grower.** *The United Fruit Company has maintained its operations especially in Latin America, where it owns vast tracts of plantations, closely linked to the endurance of local elites, displacement of indigenous peoples, degradation of the environment, and the impoverishment of the rest of the population.*

Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

just because Dole refuses to compensate these women but also because it continues the same practices in Nicaragua and other countries.

### **Regional Actions on Ecological Debt**

In July 2007 different organisations from the region got together to study and present evidence of the historic plunder, looting, destruction and devastation of bio-diversity and land resources by European-based companies. The cases that were prepared spanned from the colonisation era, when the Spaniards arrived. Over four hundred years left vast areas of forests cleared especially for the extraction of metals and minerals and millions of native inhabitants exterminated. The introduction of

monocropping likewise uprooted diverse local crops and the knowledge attached to them. The strategy for accumulating wealth simply ignored any possible limits to it (Hinkelammert, 2003).

One of the cases that were highlighted was the construction of the Chixoy Dam in the early 1980s. Costing roughly 45 per cent of the Guatemalan external debt, the dam was financed through the World Bank and the Inter American Bank. While participating companies such as Escher Weis of Switzerland, Impregilo of Italy and Holchtiel of Germany earned US\$955 million, 3,600 indigenous peoples were displaced and 500 people were forcibly disappeared by the Guatemalan army that escorted the European corporations.

During the construction, entire ecosystems were destroyed, leaving local people hungry and scared, that they never came back. The damage to women—the mothers and daughters as well as young girls and infants—has not been articulated until today. But these people will never forget the cost of development to their lives.

Meanwhile in Switzerland, Italy and Germany where these companies have their headquarters, people have no idea how they had become so rich and powerful. They should be held accountable for these debts.

Unequal and unjust trade between the South and the North also accounts for ecological debt. Even after countries acquired their “independence,” the North with their companies and banks still decides where, when and how to buy raw materials from the South. Advantages are oriented towards only one part of the world. From 2001 to 2002, for instance, while entire rural populations in Central America went hungry and jobless as coffee prices spiral downwards, Nestlé of Switzerland reaped huge profits, with its sales soaring up to Euro 61 million (US\$9.4 million).



**Trial for Ecological Crimes.** *The 2008 session of the Permanent People's Tribunal litigated mining companies Majaz-Monterrico and Vale do Rio Doce, Roche and Boehringer, Shell and Repsol, Skanska, Union Fenosa, Aguas de Barcelona, Unilever, HSBC and Santander, among many others. All were found guilty.*

Source and Photo: Intercontinental Cry (19 May 2008). "European Companies Found Guilty By Permanent Tribunal." URL: <http://intercontinentalcry.org/european-companies-found-guilty-by-permanent-tribunal/>

## People's Tribunal

Ecological debt has been integrated in the social movement's struggle for social justice, environmental protection and women's human rights at various levels. Inspired by Bertrand Russell's "Tribunal against the Silenced Crimes" on the Vietnam war, the International People's Tribunal of Conscience was established in 1979. In 2002 in Brazil, Jubilee South organised an International People's Tribunal where Southern communities presented their cases of ecological debt against TNCs and IFIs. All members of the Jury declared the TNCs and IFIs guilty of plunder.

Central America held its first regional People's Tribunal where four cases from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua were presented in 2009 in Honduras. US company Del Monte extended its pineapple plantations in Costa Rica. Taking advantage of the carbon trading mechanism, the Italian Enel Green Power invested in the energy sector of El Salvador. Spanish company Union Fenosa likewise invested in the energy sector in Nicaragua. French Le Frage cement similarly contributed to environmental degradation and labour rights

violations in Honduras. Two other companies operating in Honduras were denounced for destroying natural resources and violating human rights.

The verdict found these corporations and regional banks such as the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE) as well as the European Union guilty of unfair trade relations. National governments were similarly guilty for their acquiescence, instead of protecting the environment and defending people's human rights. Although these tribunals are not legally binding, they enable communities to call for social justice and accountability.

## Gender Justice in Climate Justice

The concept of ecological debt has been brought up to the United Nations (UN). On Earth Day 2009, Bolivian President Evo Morales stated: "What we call for is full payment of the debt owed to us by developed countries for threatening the integrity of the Earth's climate system."

This was an opportunity for Northern leaders to understand the historic, social and ecological debts they have incurred. The North consumes roughly 80 per cent of the world's resources and therefore must lead a fundamental change in consumption patterns.

However, there remains a difficulty in calling attention to ecological debt especially as negotiators are oriented to talk in scientific and political terms and tend to forget the real people especially women who bear the brunt of ecological disasters.

In the last decade alone, Central America experienced three destructive hurricanes: Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Hurricane Stan in 2005, and Hurricane Felix in 2007. These disasters demonstrated their disproportionate impact on women. Women had less chances of survival as they carried their children, resulting to more limited mobility.

**Continuing Claims.** Both women and men protest Dole's refusal to accept its accountability to all its workers who have suffered from its pesticides.

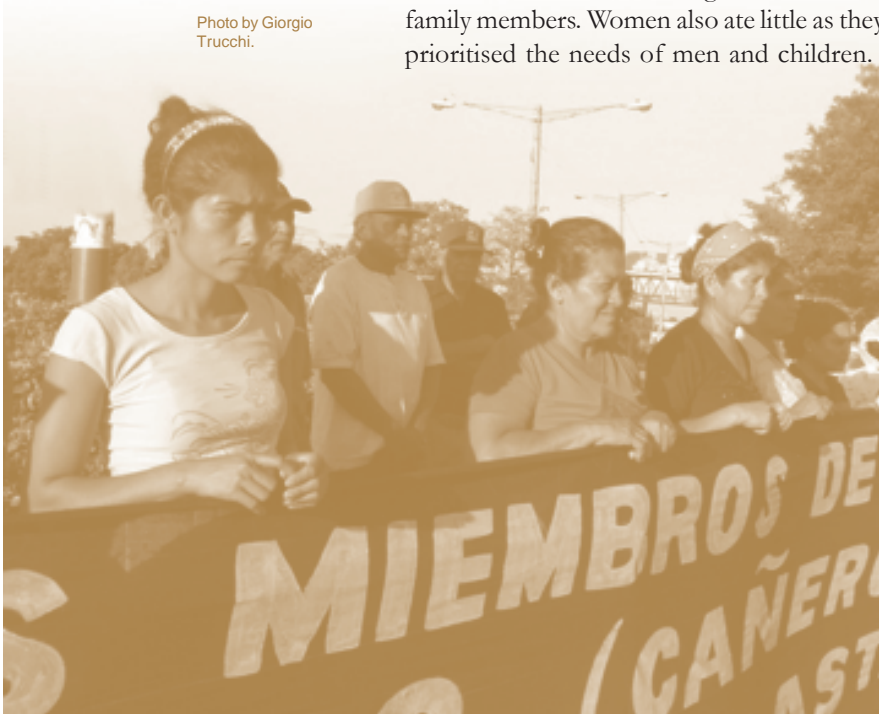
Photo by Giorgio Trucchi.

After disasters, the tasks for women and girls increased. They were responsible for cleaning their places, salvaging items and collecting food and water for entire families. Most men, on the other hand, left the household to find opportunities outside. As a result, women had less time for themselves. Young girls discontinued their schooling to take care of family members. Women also ate little as they prioritised the needs of men and children.

The gendered impacts of climate change necessarily forge the links between women and the environment. Women are thus at the core in claiming ecological debt.

The policy implications of ecological debt not only suggest a fundamental realignment of power and responsibility between nations. They necessitate a gendered approach in understanding and responding to climate change. ■

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