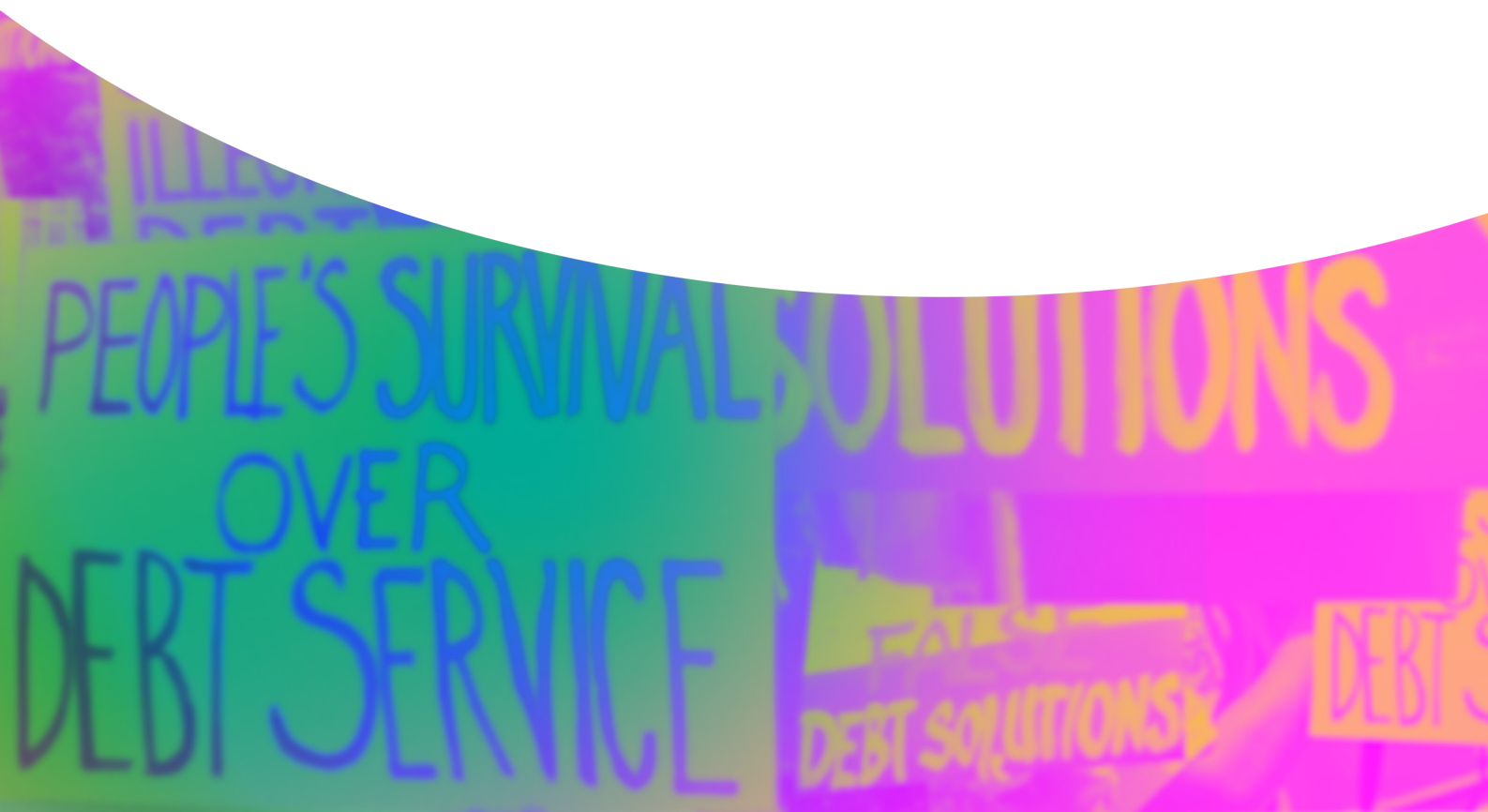




**GLOBAL WEEK OF ACTION
FOR JUSTICE AND
DEBT CANCELLATION
10-17 OCTOBER 2022**

FOOD, CLIMATE, AND DEBT



The climate emergency is fueling the accumulation of debt in countries in the global south, and vice versa, and exacerbating the multilayered, intersecting crises of food, health and livelihoods. Many countries in the Global South are struggling to keep afloat in a widening sea of unsustainable and illegitimate debt, coupled with austerity loan conditionalities that undermine public spending to address the food and climate crises, and the ability of governments to protect and fulfill basic economic and social rights of their citizens.

These countries are also facing the worst impacts of an intensifying climate crisis, despite contributing very little to it. Consequently, increasing climate threats result in more expensive borrowing costs, which debt-dependent countries accept in order to address climate change impacts in the wake of failed commitments by wealthy countries to provide climate finance.

In the middle of climate change and unsustainable debt accumulation is a worsening food crisis that is leaving millions of people in hunger and deprivation and is fast reaching the proportions of a global food crisis. Food importers among least developed countries (LDCs) are paying more for less food as shown by projections of a \$51 billion spike in food prices from 2021, of which \$49 billion reflects higher prices.

The other missing link between the food crisis, climate crisis and debt relates to austerity policies which are well known to hit the poor and vulnerable the hardest. In 2021, starvation affected an estimated [828 million people globally, with three in five women \(or 59 per cent of this figure\)](#) bearing the heaviest burdens. But even before COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, hunger and malnutrition were already on the rise globally in a context of unabated climate-intense events and rising debt accumulation. Food producers themselves, many of whom are women, and small landholders, feel the brunt of food scarcity and insecurity.

Ironically, the world is currently producing enough to feed all people. However, systemic inequality, marginalization and discrimination have bred imbalanced distribution, inequitable access, the exploitation of farmers, fishers and small food producers, and the wastage of about a third of the food that is produced. Dominant food systems are not only inequitable and form part of the structural causes of hunger; these systems are unsustainable and directly contribute to climate change.

Climate change undermines communities' ability to produce and access food in the future. We are already feeling impacts today with increasing temperatures, changing weather patterns that affect when and if the rains come, sea level rise and ocean acidification affecting our fisheries and our coastal aquifers that provide water for our crops. Many of the most visible, and dangerous impacts of climate change will be on agriculture, fisheries and forests.

In the face of these mutually reinforcing crises, it is imperative to secure and defend the right to food sovereignty – the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and people's right to define their own food and agriculture systems. We must reject false solutions to the climate crisis that exploit and threaten agricultural and forest lands of the world and traditional fishing grounds, such as agro fuels which displace agriculture for food staples, or geo-engineering schemes aimed at carbon sequestration. We must also reject false solutions to the debt problem that only encourage more unsustainable borrowing, that privilege lenders and ignore the demand for the cancellation of illegitimate debts such as those funding the expansion, concentration and industrialization of farms and food production.

Asia

In Asia, the threat of climate change is increasing rapidly. Droughts and floods affected 13.1 million hectares of croplands in the Southeast Asia region. About [20.6 million tons of crop production was lost](#) between 2015 and 2019. The same can be said of South Asia, where about 55-57 per cent of the land mass is currently being used for agriculture, a sector where almost 60 per cent of the entire population of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan are engaged.

Pakistan, which produces less than one per cent of global carbon emissions, is now drowning in both debt and floodwaters. It is a clear example of countries that are contributing the least to the climate crisis, but whose peoples suffer the extreme impacts of the multiple crises including that of climate. In the midst of the climate devastation, Pakistan is also facing a debt catastrophe. It bears a debt burden approaching US\$250 billion and mounting debt service payments. From July to December 2021 alone, the government paid [US\\$5 billion](#) in debt service to external debt creditors. The [US\\$1.1 billion](#) released by the International Monetary Fund carries austerity conditionalities such as increasing fuel levies and energy tariffs. On top of principal and interest payments, the country had to pay the IMF US\$65 million in surcharges (additional interest rates) from 2018 to 2020, and will be charged \$392 million more from 2021-2030.

Sri Lanka is another debt-stricken, climate-threatened country struggling with acute shortages of food, medicines and fuel. Food inflation in Colombo reached a record 57.4 per cent in May 2022. More than five million people are affected by food shortages and need immediate life-saving assistance. Food staples have become unaffordable for many low-income families. Up to 86 per cent of families are forced to reduce their food intake or skip meals altogether. The situation has exacerbated the vulnerability of women and particularly children, of whom 15 per cent suffer from chronic malnutrition and emaciation.

Instead of investing in food self-sufficiency, the government borrowed massively to finance large scale infrastructure projects. Up to \$8.6 billion in debt payments will be due this year, but the country has less than \$1.94 billion in its reserves. In truth, these so-called foreign reserves were almost entirely foreign loans and not national income. Furthermore, due to the debt crisis, the climate crisis is being used to further advance the financialisation of nature in Sri Lanka and other countries, as shown for one, by offers of debt-for-nature swaps. Schemes like these, as implemented in many other Global South countries, have at best provided meager relief, and at worst, legitimized dubious and harmful loans and brought in costly terms and conditionalities, as well as threatened national sovereignty and people's rights to the sustainable use of their own natural resources.

Many other countries are at risk, according to the 6th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It warns of rising sea levels, heat waves, drought, and more intense and frequent rainfall in Asia. Heavy rain events will intensify by seven per cent for each degree of global warming. Researchers have predicted a [decrease in rice production](#) throughout Southeast Asia as massive floods and droughts become recurring events and saltwater intrusion intensifies. Numerous studies in the region have suggested that both [inland and marine fishery production have started declining](#) because of climate variation and climate-induced disasters.

Latin America: Public Debt and Right to Food and Nutrition in Brazil

According to the Citizens Debt Audit and the Brazilian government, the federal government spent US\$ 377 billion on interest and amortization of public debt, which meant an increase of 42 per cent from 2020 - 2021. Thus, in the last two years, debt service payments almost doubled. In 2021 alone, more than 50 per cent of the public budget was allocated for debt service, while less than 9 per cent of the budget, amid the pandemic, went to health and social assistance.

Still, debts continued to be incurred by the government. The debt rose by US\$ 135.9 billion, having grown from US\$ 1.3 trillion to US\$ 1.46 trillion. As of 2022, the public debt now stands at US\$ 960 billion.

Human rights are deeply impacted by burdensome public debt, which often comes with austerity measures. A provision inserted in the Federal Constitution of Brazil mandates a freeze on social spending for 20 years. But it does not set limits on interest payments on domestic debt, resulting in bailing out creditors of the Brazilian State. In effect, part of the funds that could have gone to fighting inequality were transferred to banks and other financial institutions.

Austerity measures also led to scrapping social policies that had once taken Brazil off the UN's [Hunger Map](#). These included policies ensuring food and nutrition security and supply, support for agrarian reform and family farming programs. The effects of the austerity policy on the right to food and nutrition are evident in the Brazilian Union's budget. For example, the 2069 (2014-2019) and 5033 (2020-2021) Food and Nutrition Security budget program was reduced by 97% per cent between 2014 and 2021, from US\$ 998.6 million to US\$ 28.5 million. These measures have especially affected black women, family farmers and other vulnerable groups.

Latin America: the Amazon

In a situation of increasingly heavier debt burdens in the region and less financial resources to meet urgent needs, the impacts on food safety and sovereignty in Latin America have led to life-threatening situations.. Food systems are being affected by the impacts of climate change, meteorological events, land degradation and loss of biodiversity.

An example is the situation of the Amazon, the largest reservoir of carbon and biodiversity in the world that includes 7.4 million km² of South America and representing 5 per cent of the world's continental area. It is shared by nine South American countries: Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, Guyana, French Guiana, and Suriname. Historically treated as uninhabited space with abundant resources, the Amazon has long been the site of unhampered exploitation and extractivism by big corporations through large scale deforestation for monoculture and agribusiness, hydrocarbon and mining exploitation. Several governments in the region also promote these activities, including other illicit activities (informal mining, drug trafficking, sale of illegal wood, etc.), ignoring and adversely affecting indigenous communities, Afro-American populations, “quilombolas” and peasants who have inhabited the Amazon forest for more than 12,000 years and have been caring for biodiversity.

Latin America: the Amazon (continued)

In these conditions of overexploitation and destruction of primary forests, an ecocide is taking place in the Amazon. This has been deepened by the growing impacts of the climate crisis. One of its dire consequences is seen in increasingly uncontrollable forest fires that lead to the destruction of millions of hectares and ecosystems every year.

Deforestation, extractive activities and climate change are also altering the capacity of the Amazon to absorb carbon dioxide and has also resulted in the loss of soil moisture and the loss of water resources, which significantly harms food production (fruits, cocoa, coffee beans, etc.) of farmer-families who live in the region.

The Amazon and its natural functions as a whole have a very important role in regulating the world's weather. Yet, its continued degradation and climate change, along with the devastation of indigenous communities are met with false solutions such as carbon markets that still ensure profits for corporations. We denounce these as false solutions which commodify and monetize nature, and value private profit over people's lives and territories.

The impacts of climate change on the Amazon will significantly harm food production of farmer-families who provide about 70 per cent of what we consume. In Latin America, family agriculture represents more than 80 per cent of total exploitation units and these small producers are the most vulnerable to the effects of the climatic crisis.

A shared history and common struggle for food sovereignty, climate justice and the cancellation of unsustainable and illegitimate debt

These deepening multiple crises did not develop overnight. They are rooted in colonial history and in the neoliberal restructuring of the food and economic systems of Global South countries through IMF-coerced conditionalities, destructive World Bank projects and the collaboration of wealthy national elites.

Sri Lanka's food system, for instance, was effectively restructured to feed the needs of the European market. British-era plantations focused on producing cash crops including tea, coffee, and rubber, systematically destroying much of the native biodiversity and local food resilience. By the time of independence, Sri Lanka had already lost its ability to be self-reliant as its economy had grown dependent on exports of primary

commodities and imports of essential food items, including grains, pulses, milk and sugar.

The same is true for many other countries of the Global South which have become so heavily dependent on borrowings and have been unable to counteract growing trade imbalances, build public infrastructure, ensure the production of food staples and subsidise essential commodities and services for its citizens. Long before COVID-19, debt has already been playing a large role in ensuring and maintaining the net transfer of resources from the Global South to the Global North. It has significantly contributed in keeping these countries in multiple crises.

Global South countries share common struggles as well against the IMF which has imposed loan conditionalities upon us and brought us to this very point of debt dependence, food insecurity and vulnerability to climate change. In following these conditionalities, our own governments must be

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held accountable for cutting down on government spending, slashing subsidies, and replacing food subsidies with food stamps, encouraging private and foreign capital investment and abolishing price controls. The list goes on.

It is clear we have a common cause to fight for our right to food sovereignty as it faces even greater threats in the devastating nexus of the climate and debt catastrophes. With bolder and wider actions on all these fronts - and greater solidarity - we will overcome. ■