



## The Coin

*Ethiopia*

An old teacher sat under the branches of an enormous baobab tree and looked out at the faces of the children in front of him. He gently stroked his white beard and then he spoke.

‘Children,’ he said. ‘Look around you. The sky is blue. The sun shines daily, but our earth is parched. See how it cracks open in thirst.’ The children did not need to look around for they already knew. The old man reached down to his feet and picked up a tiny seedling that he had planted in the hard shell of a small gourd. ‘This tiny tree will grow and one day it will give us everything that we need. We must take care of this little seedling. We must help it grow. It is a good thing to plant trees so let us go to our tree planting ceremony and grow a forest.’ The children listened keenly, eager to please their teacher and with excited chatter they ran off to join the tree planting.

However, there was a boy, a kind boy whose life was not as easy as some of his peers. He had lost his parents and so every morning, alone, he pushed off the cardboard box that kept him safe at night and endeavoured to find food to eat. There was a small kiosk nearby and his nose told him that they had just finished preparing a batch of fresh bread. He headed over to the kiosk and hung around in the hope that somebody might take pity on him and offer him a small loaf.

But his ragged clothes and unwashed odour infuriated the kiosk owner and she chased him away, fearful that he may cost her business. The boy sat at the roadside and considered his options. His belly rumbled continuously and so his eye kept turning towards those fresh loaves of

bread. At that moment, the old teacher happened to be walking down the street and he noticed the boy. The boy noticed him too.

‘You didn’t come to school today ... or yesterday ... or even the day before.’

The boy looked down at the ground.

‘I’d like you to come back,’ the old man said.

The boy said nothing.

The old man smiled knowingly, reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin.

‘I see you’re in need of bread,’ he said.

The boy nodded.

The old man paused, ‘I’ll give you this coin, but it is good for you to be part of this community and therefore I have a request. Will you join us first and help us plant trees?’ The boy nodded.

The old man handed him the coin. The boy smiled, took it and placed it in his pocket, then he stood and followed the old man to where their work was waiting. There was already a bustling crowd. Children and adults working together, some digging holes, some planting tiny seedlings and others watering them. There was a feeling of togetherness and joy. The boy noticed that hardly anybody paid any attention to his unpleasant odour or torn clothes. In fact they smiled at him and he smiled back as they worked alongside each other. It felt good.

Throughout the work the old man reminded them of their mission.

‘Take care of these little ones, for they’ll grow and in the future they’ll take care of us.

Nurture them, love them and they’ll nurture and love us.’

They worked for a few hours until there were no more seedlings left to plant and before them stretched a huge field filled with tiny trees just a few centimetres tall. They were proud of their efforts, happy knowing of what their hands had created. After thanks had been given and everyone returned to their daily duties, the young boy’s belly reminded him of his

hunger. He raced back to the village and straight to the kiosk. He stood in front of the loaves of bread, his eyes wide.

The woman looked him up and down and glared. He reached into his pocket to pull out the coin, but to his horror, it was no longer there. His eyes filled with tears as his hands frantically searched his clothing, but to no avail. Where could it be? There was only one place. He raced back to the field and his eyes scanned the surface. There was no glint, no shine, no indication of any coin at all, and so the boy dropped to his knees. He began to dig up the saplings, desperately trying to find that coin. He searched row after row, digging deep into the earth, pulling out seedling after seedling. Suddenly his fingers stumbled on something hard, something round, something smooth. He pulled it up and it was his coin. His face beamed as he held it up triumphantly and it sparkled in the sunlight as around him lay hundreds of tiny dying seedlings, uprooted, scattered here and there to wither in the hot sun.

Not far away under an enormous baobab tree, an old teacher spoke words of wisdom.

‘Take care of the little ones, for they’ll grow and in the future, they’ll take care of us.’ □

Adapted by Mara Menzies (2022).

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## Comments

This story was adapted by Mara Menzies and generously offered to The Earth Stories Collection. It is, with all the sadness and bitterness it evokes, a masterful metaphor for the huge social and ecological injustice on which we should reflect, especially if we are inhabitants of the rich countries of the Global North.

Research by the Department of Sociology at the State University of New York examined, in 2008, the determinants of deforestation between 1990 and 2005 for a sample of 62 poor countries. This was in relation to the debt owed by these countries to rich countries and the structural

adjustments required of them and the conclusion was that ‘both debt service and structural adjustment significantly increase forest loss’ (Shandra, Shor, Maynard and London, 2008, p. 16).

This is one of the many pieces of evidence that explain why we cannot talk about social justice, on the one hand, and the defence of nature on the other, as if they were two separate issues which have nothing to do with each other. This explains why, in recent years, the term ‘social and ecological justice’ has become more and more accepted in the sense that we cannot address one problem if we do not address the other at the same time. It is difficult to tell people living in poor countries not to destroy their environment when unjust international economic relations between rich and poor countries plunge these populations into poverty. Furthermore, when the daily priority for these people is to eat and feed their children, regardless of whether this means damage to their own immediate surroundings.

Meanwhile, this situation is now entering a catastrophic dynamic of apocalyptic proportions for the poor countries of the Global South. This is due to climate change, a global disruption that, on top of this, is mainly caused by the rich countries of the Global North. It is worth noting that 71% of global industrial emissions that cause climate change are generated by just 100 large multinationals in the Global North (Riley, 2017).

According to the World Bank, more than half of the poorest countries are on the verge of defaulting on their ‘contracted’ debt to rich countries, or are getting dangerously close to it. At the same time, studies indicate that these countries will bear the heaviest burden of the climate disaster brought on by their creditors. In fact, these countries spend five times more on debt repayments than they spend on preparing for climate change. This is leading to a vicious cycle from which very few will be able to escape (Rawnsley, 2022).

This has led many climate and social justice groups to denounce the diplomacy of the debt-trap that rich countries impose on the countries of the Global South. In addition, they demand the cancellation of these debts, many of which are totally unjust, so that poor countries have the means to face the challenges that climate change is already imposing on them.



The Debt for Climate platform, which brings together thousands of activists from the Global North and South worldwide – a platform in which Avalon Project, the organisation that manages The Earth Stories Collection, is integrated – highlights, in this way, the enormous social and ecological injustice that is being perpetrated:

Developed countries of the Global North owe an ecological debt to the countries of the Global South. In addition to being responsible for the highest historical emissions of greenhouse gases, their exploitation and colonization of most of the Global South still continues today through their multinational corporations with the systematic plundering of natural resources. (...) A large part of these emissions are a consequence of the exploitation of the South, fueling a system of unsustainable consumption and waste in privileged classes of rich countries at the cost of the growing destruction and sacrifice of populations in countries of the Global South. (DebtforClimate, 2022)

This is why they are demanding debt cancellation for poor countries in exchange for leaving fossil fuels in the ground, fuels that rich countries continue to extract from the Global South. In this way, two problems are being tackled simultaneously.

If the boy, who longed for a loaf of bread, had had enough coins to eat, he would never have uprooted the tree saplings which he and others had planted together a few hours earlier.

## Sources

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 10b: Enhance the intellectual, financial, technical, and social resources of developing nations, and relieve them of onerous international debt.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.

Principle 4a: Recognise that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations.

Principle 5c: Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.

Principle 8a: Support international scientific and technical cooperation on sustainability, with special attention to the needs of developing nations.

Principle 9: Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.

Principle 9b: Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.

Principle 9c: Recognise the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 14a: Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.

