

Global Inequalities: Rethinking Environmental Agreements for a Sustainable World

^a Juliana Rossi. Department of International Relations, Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Abstract. Environmental issues have gained prominence in the international system, as the planet demands changes in the production and consumption model, with less polluting industries and more sustainable policies. Historically, these production models have been implemented by the Global North, and this exhaustion is mainly due to the high consumption of rich Western countries, which are now imposing sustainable policies on the countries of the Global South. These countries did not have the opportunity to enrich themselves through the production and consumption model, as this would have required more natural resources. In this way, this article aims to understand, through decolonial theory and Ecopolitics, how the Eurocentric model affects international treaties, with a focus on the European Union's treaty with Mercosur.

Keywords. South Global, Sustainable Agreements, Global Inequalities, North Global, Decolonial Theory

1. The Decolonial Theory

The geopolitical divisions that have marked the world throughout history are a reflection of the complex political, economic and social dynamics that have shaped relations between states. The countries that were colonized by the European powers have been called the Third World, underdeveloped and are currently referred to as the Global South. The search for a more appropriate term to describe these countries represents the historical trajectory of reflections on their development after the colonial period. Although often criticized, the characterization of these nations as less developed, within a linear development perspective, still serves as the basis for many of the progress strategies currently adopted [1].

Boaventura Sousa Santos [2] definition of the Global South reads as follows: "The Global South is not, therefore, a geographical concept, even though most of these populations live in countries in the southern hemisphere. The South here is, on the contrary, a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at a global level, and also a metaphor for the resistance to overcome or minimize this suffering". In other words, the concept of the Global South seeks to reduce disparities by promoting solidarity between various countries and regions that were subjugated by colonialism and today face unfavorable material conditions compared to the so-called "Global North". In addition, this concept also aims to incorporate immigrants, refugees, ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups into the "South" due to the legacies of the Global North's colonial and imperial project [2].

In contrast, the Global North would be the ideal representation of civility, achieving levels of economic development and reducing social disparities, as well as being seen as a model for other nations to follow. Therefore, considering options other than the dominant model is crucial not only for the nations of the South from a cultural point of view, but also an imperative for everyone, covering economic, social, political and environmental aspects. Examining ancestral traditions allows us to identify elements, practices and concepts that have been neglected or forbidden, but which can play a fundamental role in finding solutions to contemporary challenges.

In this way, decolonial and postcolonial studies bring a new perspective on colonization and how the colonized countries position themselves in the political and economic environment. It is a vision that goes beyond the aftermath of colonialism, i.e. the moment after the independence of the countries from their

metropolis, to a look "beyond colonialism" from a critical perspective, which seeks to understand how the experience of coloniality has left deep scars on culture and society, and that even though political independence has occurred, the colonial experience has continued to profoundly affect the lives of these peoples [3].

This inequality, which has historical roots, also has a sociological perspective. For sociologists Cardoso and Faletto [4], underdevelopment is the origin of relations between center and periphery societies, within a global context that establishes discrepant positions in the production process of the capitalist system. Not only in the mode of production, but also in the implementation of sustainable development and environmental protection policies.

The Decolonial theory not only aims to value the cultural roots of the countries of the Global South, but also to provide alternatives to the hegemonic model of the Global North in the political, economic and environmental spheres. In the environmental area, which is the focus of this article, several political scientists say that there is a need to rethink the way treaties are ratified, since there is no joint cooperation on environmental development, but rather a reinforcement of the unequal relationship between countries, in which one does not have the political and economic conditions to comply.

2. Ecopolitics of the International System

The international environment has long followed, and still follows, the sustainability logic of European and North American countries and their notions of priorities and values. For example, for the United States, the environment is essentially the protection of large natural spaces and the pollution of certain environments. In France, the environment is what causes damage and landscapes. These conceptions are reflected in the foreign policies of countries in the international environment, since it is the values and priorities of society that build national identity and make up the political game of the international system [5]. The purpose of the political game is to impose its own definition of the problem, since it implies solutions in line with the particular values and interests of each state, whether they are responsible or victims.

In this way, the place where the treaties will be discussed is extremely important, as it indirectly influences the solutions adopted by the states. For example, if the problem is linked to agricultural production, depending on the forum or convention that mediates the discussions, the solution may be guided by the idea of environmental protection or international trade. This is due to the nature of the forums: if a state goes to the World Trade Organization (WTO) to deal with a problem that originally has environmental roots, but affects trade and production, the discussion will not be about the origin of the problem, but about production and trade. The state will look for the framework of institutions in which it will have the most influence over the process [5]

In the forums, there is an unequal relationship of influence between the states, which results in the interests of the most powerful countries taking precedence over the others. This is not only observed in economic or sovereign problems, but also in environmental problems, where, due to the seriousness of the problem that affects all states globally, the predominance should be of collective interests in favor of sustainability; however, individual interests override collective interests.

The questions that the international community should prioritize in relation to the environment are mostly imposed by the Global North when it sets its agenda in international forums and institutions. The control of the agenda means that there is consequently a control of dissipated information, as most of the indices used often cover only the southern hemisphere. An example of this would be the greenhouse effect data presented by the World Resources Institute (WRI), which is biased in favor of the countries of the Global North and thus makes the countries of the Global South unfairly responsible for emissions [5, p 262]. It is in this logic of thinking that there is a need for distributive justice and a more equal relationship between the countries of the South and the North, within the framework of environmental agreements, so that there really is a progression of development. As such, this article will look at the negotiations between Mercosur and the European Union, with regard to environmental matters.

3. Mercosur and the European Union

The Southern Common Market, or as it is better known, Mercosur, is an economic bloc made up of countries from the Global South: Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela, which was later suspended

in 2016 for violating the rules established by the group. The aim of creating the bloc was to strengthen South America economically, politically and socially, generating business and investment opportunities in a competitive international environment. It created a space for the free movement of goods, services, products and people across the borders of the member countries. Mercosur emerged with the expectation of valuing not only their economies in the international system, but also the cultural varieties that exist in South America, thus projecting the power of the countries outwards.

Since its foundation in 1991, the bloc has played a significant role on the international stage. During this period, more than US\$824 billion has been invested in infrastructure projects financed by the bloc, which has also implemented 50 international cooperation projects. In addition, the bloc stands out as the largest global producer and exporter of soybeans, the main producer and the second largest exporter of beef in the world. In economic terms, the bloc boasts the title of being the fifth largest economy in the world, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$ 2.79 trillion, according to 2022 figures. These figures demonstrate the bloc's great influence in both the economic and political spheres. Recently, however, the bloc has faced significant challenges during negotiations with the European Union (EU) [6].

The European Union (EU) and Mercosur reached an agreement in 2019, after 20 years of negotiations, on a free trade pact between the two blocs. However, the agreement was stalled due to some agricultural restrictions in some European countries and, in 2023, a letter was sent by the European Union asking for some environmental obligations for Latin American countries. The content of the letter would be the insertion of a new instrument related to sustainable development impacting the agreement signed in 2019, Mercosur perceives this as a potential imposition of obligations arising from the Paris Agreement. There is a legitimate concern that these obligations could actually act as an obstacle to Mercosur's exports to the European Union, since sanctions have been imposed for any non-compliance or irregularities in the agreement [7].

In this context, we can see the logic behind the conditions imposed by the European Union: the global North is seeking stricter emissions targets, while the global South is focused on immediate economic development and believes that the burden of combating the climate crisis should fall mainly on post-industrial societies, which are primarily responsible for its origin. Latin American countries oppose the sanctions and environmental requirements proposed by the European Union, arguing that these measures could unbalance the agreement, causing damage not only to local industries, but also by not establishing equivalent penalties for European countries in the event of non-compliance with the emissions targets set by the Paris Agreement.

The unbalance in these treaties, which involve socio-environmental standards, is one of the biggest obstacles to actually reducing deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions. In view of this, the solution to this obstacle would be to bring in the element of distributive justice and understand that historical relations have a weight and must be taken into account when dealing with environmental agreements between countries in the global South and North. The environmental guarantees imposed by the European Union on commodities from Mercosur countries are valid and necessary for compliance with socio-environmental standards, but there is a need to rethink what other measures would actually be more effective in sustainable development. Technological cooperation in conjunction with investments made by European countries is necessary. This is the only way that underdeveloped countries will be able to comply with environmental requirements without damaging their internal infrastructure, with a focus on small producers who don't have the size to sustain these environmental requirements.

The political activist Maiara Folly, executive director of Plataforma Cipó, an institute that carries out research in the area of climate, governance and international relations from the perspectives of the Global South, points out that the best way forward in relation to the treaty between the two blocs would be technological cooperation, specifically in the energy transition. In the activist's view, Brazil and several other Latin American countries have a wealth of strategic minerals, essential for the manufacture of batteries and electric vehicles, among others. Meanwhile, the European Union is seeking to diversify its trade partnerships in order to guarantee access to these crucial minerals. It is imperative that Brazil establishes more equitable partnerships, in order to also benefit from the production of products with greater added value, and thus balance the relationship between the countries [8].

4. Conclusion

It is worth highlighting the criticisms made by this ecopolitical and decolonialist discourse about environmental treaties, which can be seen as idealistic for the current situation. However, for there to be a real change in emissions of polluting gases, deforestation and other environmental problems, it is first necessary to correct this structural economic, political and social imbalance between the countries of the Global South and the

Global North, so that the other countries can evolve from modes of production limited to monoculture and the release of agrochemicals and can in fact comply with environmental requirements.

The evolution of the terms used to describe historically colonized countries, now referred to as the Global South, reflects the search for a more adequate understanding of their post-colonial development. Although the characterization of these nations as "less developed" has been criticized, it still guides many progress strategies. The predominant view of the Global North, which seeks to impose its own agenda in international forums, often prevails over collective interests in the search for environmental solutions. This results in unequal relations of influence and control over the environmental agenda, often benefiting the most powerful countries.

Addressing historical inequalities and promoting distributive justice will be key to tackling environmental challenges and building a more sustainable world, balancing relations between the countries of the global South and North.

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