

XVII European Union-Latin America Interparliamentary Conference
Lima, 14–17 June 2005

**The environmental challenges facing Europe and South America:
One solution for two extremes**

by

Alain Lipietz

Chairman of the European Parliament Delegation
for Relations with the countries of the Andean Community

The collective consciousness pictures Europe and Latin America as two extremes when it comes to human development. Europe is the richest of continents, and Latin America is a continent burdened with mass poverty. In the relationship of humankind to its environment, these continents are like the opposite ends of the spectrum.

Europe, on the one hand, is undergoing a 'crisis of plenty'. Early industrial development, from the 19th century, and the industrialisation of agriculture - which began even a little earlier - freed Europe from the shackles of need. Technological progress in the second half of the 19th century and, above all, in the 20th century, was accompanied by radical social reforms which enabled the benefits to be distributed among the majority of the population and, seemingly, put an end to hunger. Nearly all Europeans were properly housed by the end of the 20th century. Pasteur's revolution almost put an end to the spread of infectious diseases. Technological advances (cars, air travel, household appliances) were broadly available to the richest two-thirds of the population. Even the poorest strata of society in Europe enjoy living standards well above those of what pass for the middle classes in South America.

This extraordinary material advance has not, however, removed the dependency of Europeans on their environment. Excessive consumption, based on the pillaging of the planet's natural resources, has led to congestion on such levels that not only do major cities lack physical space but the ecosystems in Europe are saturated and are no longer able to recycle. As the asphalt

spreads, water courses and the atmosphere are polluted, plant ecosystems are weakened by excessive specialisation on farms, the risks increase in industrialised livestock farming and accidents such as mad cow disease happen. For many experts, the worst is yet to come: while the imprudent use of genetically modified organisms is becoming ever more widespread, accidents such as mad cow disease can recur at any time. Increasingly specific research links the exponential growth in cancers and other chronic diseases to the rise in chemical pollution and radioactivity in the environment.

At the other extreme, Latin America, having apparently caught up with European levels of development during the third quarter of the 20th century - under the auspices of CEPAL while applying the import-substitution model - underwent in the fourth quarter a complete reversal of fortune. Although large swathes of the rural population or recently urbanised communities living in shanty towns had never seen any of 'the benefits of progress', the collapse of the CEPAL growth model and the end of the welfare state plunged the middle classes back into poverty. The rural and urban poor - not to mention indigenous peoples that were not even part of the process - were faced once more with such traditional problems as shortages, hunger, exhaustion and an increased susceptibility to infectious diseases. These countless poor and impoverished people rely on the environment as the principal provider for their needs; its quality has remained the yardstick for their wealth. However, serious damage has already been inflicted on the environment by demographic growth and rural depopulation.

This wildly contrasting picture must not ignore similarities in the two experiences. Indeed, Europe has its own extremely poor 'fourth world' communities, in both the countryside and towns; they, too, depend totally on their environment. Moreover, Latin America's urban middle classes have known the same 'crises of plenty' as their European counterparts: congestion, traffic, pollution of the urban space, and all the 'ills of progress'. Lastly, Europe and Latin America, obeying the same basic tendencies, both contribute to the growing planetary ecological crisis, albeit on different levels. The difference is merely a question of degree and calendar. Just as the industrialisation of European agriculture caused a drastic reduction in the biodiversity on its territory, so Latin America is embarking upon the same path, consuming virgin forests and Andean peasant farmland at a frantic rate in order to free up create more land for intensive or livestock farming. Entire ecosystems are given over to the monoculture of genetically modified

organisms. The extremely rich biodiversity of both the Andes and the Amazon has been able to survive only because of access problems. The question of this survival poses a further important problem. How can the local inhabitants' and workers' legitimate desire to improve their lives be reconciled with the need to protect these 'biodiversity reserves'?

In the same vein, Europe's, and then Latin America's, reliance on road transport has resulted in the uncontrolled spread of motor vehicle traffic and, hence, a sharp rise in the consumption of fossil fuels. The result has been that both continents - like all other continents - have undeniably added to the intensification of the greenhouse effect and, consequently and unavoidably, to climate change.

Our continents are thus situated at opposite extremes when it comes to man's relationship with his environment. Both ultimately share the same environment, however, and the problems faced by both of them are growing more and more similar by the day. The dangers that these continents represent for the planetary ecosystem are exactly the same. The sole difference is that, in Latin America, the fight against poverty is more obviously linked to the protection of the environment. In Europe, we no longer see technical progress as a means to separate these two issues. Instead, social struggles have resurfaced with regard to access to a cleaner environment. Latin America has never managed to solve the issue of mass poverty through technological progress, and yet it has recognised the limits of this 'illusory' solution.

Similar challenges have led both continents - Europe and Latin America, or South America at least - to seek solutions through the unification of their continents. Europe, torn apart for centuries of interminable war, embarked upon a process of unification in the second half of the 20th century. The hatreds nourished by two World Wars and the Cold War have been overcome. Rich in their diversity, the countries of Europe first chose to combine their markets and economies, eventually creating a single currency. Institutions were established and common laws were adopted, the drafting of which is based less on diplomacy and more on democratic debate.

Latin America, which set off at the same time but much more slowly, was able to enact, with the Andean Community, joint legislation in some areas and, with Mercosur, a pattern for a common market. Caribbean countries have made many similar attempts, but much more sporadically.

Mexico opted for the free-trade area with North America. Nonetheless, the decision was taken in December 2004 in Cusco to create a South American Community of Nations. This undoubtedly opened a new chapter in the history of the continent.

It is here, at this meeting between Members of the European Parliament and Latin American representatives, that dialogue takes on its full meaning. Our task is to face up to this common ecological crisis that is affecting us, our environments and societies, by learning from each other and helping one another. A more precise task for us, the Members of Parliament, is to learn to adopt legislation and pursue common public policies in order to resolve these crises.

It is no coincidence that Europe's campaign to protect the environment has been one of the most successful aspects - domestically and internationally - of its first steps towards its political unification. It is a well known fact that pollution is no respecter of borders. The same economic model will produce similar adverse ecological effects in different countries. It was only natural, therefore, that the requirements for common, or at least similar, environmental legislation were felt.

Similar environmental legislation aims to respond to local ecological problems by means of fairly similar legislation and, in so doing, to avoid jeopardising the single market. For companies, respecting the environment is a cost which will be reflected in the price of a product, even if, for society, protecting the environment has its own particular value. Paradoxically, Europe was obliged to impose similar environmental rules on European companies in all the Member States so as not to distort competition.

Common legislation should, however, go further than similar legislation. A united effort must be made to combat bad practices in industry and agriculture. Although causes may often be 'local', victims are 'global', throughout Europe or even throughout the world. Good examples here are the erosion of biodiversity (the infinite multiplicity of genes is a shared resource) and the greenhouse-gas effect (destabilising the climate and jeopardising the age-old balance between our habitats, our forms of agriculture and our environment).

It seems clear that Latin America - especially South America - has to face the same problems as us, and, although the continent is at the other end of the spectrum from Europe, its legislators are confronted with precisely the same issues. As in Europe, Mercosur, or the South American Community of Nations, should consider the adoption of similar environmental protection legislation in their countries if they really intend to create a single market. Latin America, like Europe, will be taking part in the two big global conferences; the Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity.

Since we are both faced by the threat of ecological crises, cooperation between our two parliaments, as well as cooperation between our peoples and continents, might take two different forms.

First of all, by exchanging experiences and good practice.

We Europeans are certainly rich in experience with regard to the harmonisation of legislation on protection of the environment! The fundamental problem has always been sovereignty, although this issue is, of course, not the same for Latin America. In Latin America, demands for national sovereignty are coloured by the history of anti-colonialist struggles. Sovereignty signifies autonomy and the power to make ones own laws; it has a positive connotation. Harmonising legislation between countries that were once politically subjugated, and which remain so in some respects, should not pose any major problems. A general understanding should suffice that to take similar actions to resolve common problems is only natural. Similar actions are also helpful in the context of a growing economic interdependency.

All the same, the European experience demonstrates the extreme reluctance of national political powers when faced with conditions 'imposed' upon them from the outside. Since the environment is seen from the outset as a common asset, of interest to every community, it is easier to transfer sovereignty from the national level to the continental level in this area more than in others.

For Europeans, national sovereignty is firmly embedded in age-old hatred between different countries. It is in the defence of the common good that communities have most easily accepted the transfer of sovereignty to a larger political entity. One could even consider the common fight

to protect the environment as the best lesson in supranational popular sovereignty; it is a lesson in integration easier to swallow than one imposed by the power of an empire.

Where aspirations for the establishment of the common good meet entrenched national interests, members of parliaments have a role to play – especially members of supranational bodies such as the Parlatino or the European Parliament – in representing the collective interest. Professional friendships established between members and an awareness of being elected by citizens in order to undertake a common project with a continental dimension must make it easier for these parliamentarians than for national governments to adopt common rules to protect a common patrimony.

Over and above interparliamentary cooperation and the exchange of good legal practice, good technical and social practice needs to be directly developed between our continents.

Secondly, common global legislation must be promoted with a view to protecting the planet's ecosystem.

Endeavours to counter local ecological disasters and the experience gained in adopting legislation and public policy dealing with these crises rapidly need to lead to a higher level: direct cooperation on a continental scale to deal with global ecological crises. Each continent needs to help mobilise all of humanity. The best legislation and the best public policies cannot have any effect on such crises unless they are common to entire continents and are part of a planet-wide project. I will touch on only two subjects, those selected by the 1992 Rio Conference, the fight against climate change and the fight to protect biodiversity.

Unfortunately, the fight against climate change has only just begun. It is already too late to prevent temperatures on our planet from rising significantly in this century. Global warming will have a significant impact on ecosystems and farming systems; it, therefore, will also have a considerable impact on human geography and human diseases. We can at best hope to prevent the changes from reaching such a degree that the poorest continents become virtually uninhabitable, with all the geopolitical crises that that catastrophic development might entail.

It is a global battle in which Europe has an important part to play: a European produces four times the amount of greenhouse gases than can be absorbed by the earth's ecosystem. Europe takes a responsible attitude and remains particularly aware of its future interests and is fully engaged in the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol – at least on a diplomatic level.

As for South America, it is more at risk from climate change than Europe, at least in a direct sense. Europe could probably adapt to small climate changes. The countries of Latin America, however, countries much more dependent on agriculture and much poorer, are likely to suffer immediate consequences from climate change and see their societies visibly affected, while being unable to exercise any control. On the other hand, some Latin American countries, such as Mexico and Venezuela, are oil-exporting countries. Their national revenues are in part dependent on the economic and technological model that is causing climate change: the growing automobile industry. Furthermore, slash-and-burn deforestation in South America is contributing to the global greenhouse effect – although probably less than it is commonly believed. Latin America is, therefore, one of the major victims of climate change as well as being one of the contributors to it. It is from that point of view that we need to consider the recommendations of the international community of ecologists (scientists as well as NGOs) made to the South American governments.

It is very positive that Venezuela, one of the major Latin American exporters of oil, has ratified the Kyoto Protocol. It would also be encouraging to see Brazil, the most afforested country, take measures to protect its forests. But every unilateral step that South America takes to protect our planet needs to be met by solidarity from Europe, the developed continent most involved in fighting climate change. Our continents must devise as quickly as possible a common strategy to deal with the greenhouse effect, particularly now that we have reached the 'post-Kyoto' era. If South America, or, on a larger scale, Latin America, adopts the more constrictive aspects of the convention on the greenhouse effect, then Europe's show of financial and technical solidarity towards Latin America, helping them use cleaner technology, must equal these efforts, especially if Latin America is now to give up methods that developed countries have used for over two centuries to produce energy.

When it comes to biodiversity, the problem is reversed. Europe becomes the 'buyer', as do other developed countries, and South America, Latin or indigenous, is still in a position to provide solutions. In words of one syllable, biodiversity exists in the South, while pharmaceutical, chemical and agro-biology industries exist in the North. If, therefore, the global community that is mobilised to protect biodiversity calls on inter-tropical America to intensify the protection of its biodiversity, then that continent's efforts and 'service to humanity' should be compensated in kind. Abandoning, for example, logging practices, refusing biotechnology's apparent answers – at least initially – have a cost that would necessitate solidarity from those, in the North, that benefit from the protection of the world's biodiversity.

Payment for this 'environmental service' should not be calculated in a purely accounting sense, not least because it would be difficult to set a price on such an effort that is beneficial to every continent. Europe must recognise that, if biodiversity still exists throughout South America, it is only because the Latin American indigenous peoples and peasantry have not had access to industrialised agricultural methods or, for cultural reasons, have rejected them. It is important meanwhile to avoid viewing the preservation of this biodiversity in negative terms. While indigenous or peasant methods of cultivating land have protected nature's biodiversity, they have also developed a collective knowledge of biodiversity's uses. This should be acknowledged as their intellectual property, just as we recognise intellectual property in the laboratories of the North. Europe must fully support countries in the South, in particular South American countries – with their large diversities - and help acknowledge that the countries own the biodiversity on their territories and that knowledge about biodiversity is the intellectual property of the indigenous and peasant peoples.

I am very aware that this will not in any way repay Europe's debt towards South America, a debt built up during centuries of 'bio-piracy'. Nor will it redress the ills wrought of the catastrophe when South America was invaded in 1492 and a 'microbic short-circuit' was created. One cannot forget this past, nor make amends. Even so, one form of reparation could consist in recognising the right of South Americans to use generic medications, with compulsory licenses, to fight the diseases which plague their continent. Europe should engage in the negotiations within the World Trade Organisation and the World Intellectual Property Organisation to establish the conditions for a quick and easy access to these licences.

I cannot conclude before having brought up an issue that has caused much debate. I refer to the access of Latin American produce to European agricultural markets and Europe's rejection of genetically modified organisms. I must insist on the legitimacy of these refusals. Europe protects its agricultural markets so as to protect its self-sufficiency in food and its farmers' incomes. By refusing, or accepting only reluctantly the unwelcome presence of genetically modified agricultural produce, Europe is taking a necessary precaution. Mad cow disease was a sinister experience that proves the need for such precaution. However, this does not justify Europe's policy of subsidising exports to get rid of agricultural excess. I think we – Latin Americans and Europeans - can easily agree on the legitimacy of eliminating these subsidies. Much more complicated is the subject of opening up these markets.

It might be possible to come to a compromise. The steady opening of European markets to Latin American agricultural produce could become part of the global ecological and social 'new deal', which I have just touched on. This opening would not mean invasion in terms of quantity or quality. Europe will always endeavour to preserve its self-sufficiency in food and must undertake to support Latin America if it decides to do likewise. Europe will always seek to protect itself against the risks from food manipulated without caution, and must support Latin America if it undertakes to do likewise.

Opening European markets to Latin American products will not be possible unless quantitative levels and qualitative conditions are predetermined. As part of a broader compromise, opening up to Latin American agricultural produce is possible, on condition that the agreement concerns quotas and also agricultural produce presenting no biological dangers for the European environment or public health.

As regards quota arrangements, we would ask our colleagues from the Parlatino to reflect on the sorry experience of the banana conflict. When the European Union included the banana market in its Common Agricultural Policy it aimed to guarantee a reasonable price level for both the banana growers within the Union and those of the very poor countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific who had free access to the European market. Europe therefore proposed to the countries of South and Central America a limited import quota: this was the 1994 agreement.

Some of these countries then complained to the WTO, which forced the Union to give up its quota system and use the method of peak tariffs, much to the dismay of banana exporters. Would it not have been better to maintain a negotiated system of quotas, taking into account criteria such as respect for the environment and proper levels of pay for farmers (self-employed or wage earners)?

This painful experience showed that taking into account social and environmental clauses for fair trade is not an easy issue. It is probably easier to solve this issue through a quota system – using quantitative methods – than by using the rather random method of peak tariffs.

We are sure that once the nature of the problems between our continents are fully understood, we will find a solidarity-based approach in order to introduce similar measures and a common strategy to bring humanity forward, despite the past and future problems its excesses engender for its natural environment.