

Leonardo Boff: Enact a law of socio-environmental responsibility

Rich Heffern | Mar. 1, 2011 Eco Catholic

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There is already a law of fiscal responsibility. A government cannot spend more than it takes in as income gathered by taxes. This has significantly improved public management.

The accumulation of ecological disasters that has occurred recently, with the collapse of hillsides, devastating floods and hundreds of fatalities, plus the destruction of whole landscapes, forces us to think of enacting a national law of socio-environmental responsibility, with severe punishment for those who fail to respect it.

A step in that direction has been taken with the awareness by the enterprises of social responsibility. They cannot consider only themselves and the benefits for their stockholders. They must assume clear social responsibility, because they do not live in a world apart: they are part of a specific society, in a State that creates laws, they are located in a specific ecosystem, and they are being pressured by a citizenry that is aware and that constantly makes greater demands for the right to a good quality of life.

Let's be clear that social responsibility is not the same as the social obligation provided by the law relating to the payment of taxes, assignments and salaries; nor should it be confused with social response, that is, the capacity of enterprises to adjust to changes in the social, economic and technical spheres. Social responsibility is the obligation that enterprises assume of seeking goals that, in the medium and long range, are good for them and also for the society as a whole in which they are located.

It is not about doing for society what could be called philanthropy, but acting with society, getting involved in projects designed jointly with the municipalities, NGOs and other entities.

But let's be realists: in a neoliberal regime, such as ours, when businesses are not profitable, social responsibility decreases and even disappears. The main enemy of social responsibility is speculative capital. Its objective is to maximize the benefits of the stocks and portfolios it controls. It does not recognize any other responsibility than to guarantee profits.

But social responsibility is not enough, because it does not include the environment. Few are those who have noticed the relationship between the social and the environmental. It is an intrinsic relation.

All enterprises, and each of us, lives on the Earth, not in the clouds: we breathe, eat, drink, walk the grounds, are exposed to climate changes, are immersed in nature, with her biodiversity, inhabited by thousands of millions of bacteria and other micro organisms. That is, we are within and part of nature. Nature can live without us, as she did for thousands of millions of years, but we cannot live without nature. Consequently, the social without the environmental is not real. The two always come to us together.

This may seem obvious, but it is not obvious to the majority of the people. Why do we exclude nature? Because we all are anthropocentric, this is, we only think in terms of ourselves. Nature is something external, for our use.

We are irresponsible with nature, when we cut down the trees, when we spread thousands of millions of litters of pesticides on the soil, when we annually expel some 21 thousand million tons of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, when we contaminate the waters and destroy the river bank vegetation. We do not respect the slope of the mountainside that could erode and kill people, nor do we observe the course of the rivers that, if they expand, can demolish everything in their path.

We do not internalize the data biologists and astrophysicists provide us: We all have the same basic genetic alphabet, this is why we all are cousins and brothers and sisters, and thus we form the community of life. Each being possesses intrinsic value and because of that has rights. Our democracy cannot include only human beings. Without the other members of the community of life we are nothing. They have value as new citizens that must be included in our concept of democracy, which thereby becomes a socio-environmental democracy. Nature and things give us signs. They call our attention to the ultimate risks that could be avoided.

Social responsibility is not enough, it has to be socio environmental. It is urgent that legislative bodies enact a law of socio-environmental responsibility, to be respected by all managers of public affairs. Only in that way will we avoid tragedies and death.

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