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History of the CADTM's anti-debt Policies

Part 2: The First Testing Grounds for the CADTM's Methods to Counter Illegitimate Debt: the examples of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo

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This interview presents the genealogy of the anti-debt struggle, the campaigns for debt cancellation, the empirical foundation, the political battles and the concepts of the “illegitimate,” “illegal” or “odious” nature of public debt. In other words, how it is necessary for the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM) – formerly known as the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt – to ally with opposition forces and social movements, where the concepts and the people involved can challenge and overpower debt and its “system” once the government hears their voice. Yet, for CADTM the outright priority is to fortify the activities described below rather than lobbying. This second part of the interview deals with the experience acquired by the CADTM in Rwanda and in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the 1990s and early 2000s.

This is an interview of Eric Toussaint, spokesperson and co-founder of the international network of the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM) by Benjamin Lemoine. We are publishing this interview in five parts. Part 1 is [here](#), Part 3 is [here](#), Part 4 is [here](#), Part 5 is [here](#).

Debt audits: an abortive precedent

What were the first testing grounds of the CADTM method for countering illegitimate debt?

That should be put in the context of the convergence between the CADTM and various movements active in France and elsewhere. The CADTM was very much involved, for example, in solidarity with the neo-Zapatista movement, which appeared publicly on 1 January, 1994 in Chiapas (Mexico), and we travelled to Mexico several times. The CADTM also participated as a co-organiser of the big mobilisation of October 1994 in Spain against the meeting the World Bank and the IMF held to celebrate their half-century of existence. That action was part of the worldwide “Fifty years, it’s enough” campaign. As for the contacts in France, I mentioned the LCR, the “*Ca suffat comme ci*” campaign of 1989, and the “Other Voices of the Planet” collective, created in 1996 to organise the counter-G7; to those we need to add AITEC [1] and the CEDETIM [2], led by Gus Massiah [3]. There is also the Survie (Survival) movement, led at that time by François-Xavier Verschave [4], which struggled against France’s domination of Africa and well understood the importance of the issue of debt. Survie had close ties with the CADTM, in part because Survie, like the CADTM, was very active in denouncing the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and “Operation Turquoise,” organized by Mitterrand. In 1995, a delegation from the CADTM went to Rwanda and an international CADTM assembly was held in Brussels with the question of the genocide and the responsibilities of creditors at the core of the program. And, starting in 1996, the CADTM launched the audit of Rwanda’s debt with, at that time, the new regime in Kigali headed by Paul Kagamé still in power. Kagamé wanted to achieve clarity about the debt, and a team of two people who worked closely with the CADTM was set up. Michel Chossudovsky, a Canadian, a university professor in Ottawa who often wrote for *Le Monde diplomatique*, and Pierre Galand, then Secretary of Oxfam in Belgium, went to Kigali and conducted the investigation in close liaison with the CADTM. I talked extensively with them and wrote an article entitled “The Financiers of the Genocide,” which attracted a certain amount of attention [5].

Did that inspire the CADTM’s methodology regarding debt audits?

Yes, even if the experience ended up being frustrating. Not many people know that one of the missions of Operation Turquoise was to get hold of all the documentation of Rwanda’s central bank in Kigali and transfer it all in a container to Goma in the DRC, to prevent the new authorities from getting access to written evidence revealing how strong

France's support for the genocidal regime of Juvénal Habyarimana had been. When Laurent-Désiré Kabila launched his offensive against Mobutu in 1996 from eastern Congo, Kagamé was able to get that container and bring it back to Kigali, and opened the archives, which Michel Chossudovsky and Pierre Galand worked on [6].

In other words, they found the “black box”...

Absolutely, and the French banks' involvement in financing General Habyarimana's weapons purchases was clear. Egypt and China were also implicated because they supplied a lot of the machetes, but the French provided the more sophisticated equipment to the genocidal Rwandan army. So originally – and this is an element that reappears in our later experiences – internationalist movements made contact with a head of State, Paul Kagamé, who wanted transparency and who made documentation that usually remains secret available to the experts. Kagamé, with that resource in hand, threatened the USA, France, the World Bank, and the IMF with publicizing the financing of the genocide. Washington and Paris, along with the World Bank and the IMF, all said, in essence: “*Don't spill the beans! In exchange for your silence, we'll reduce Rwanda's debt by opening a maximum line of credit at the World Bank and the IMF. We'll reduce the amount of the repayment, and we'll pre-finance it with new loans.*” And Kagamé played along. It was a very frustrating experience, not only in terms of energy and ethics, but also because of the precedent it would have set. Because before the Habyarimana regime, the level of Rwanda's debt was very low; the entire debt repayment being demanded of Rwanda was debt contracted by a despotic regime, and so was a typical example of the doctrine of odious debt, somewhat like the debt the DRC faced.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, after the overthrow of the dictator Mobutu in 1996-1997, Pierre Galand and I worked in collaboration with the new authorities in Kinshasa (Pierre Galand was the one who maintained the actual contacts) and above all with the social movements. Several Congolese members and sympathisers of the CADTM who had spent 20 years in exile in Belgium had returned to their country after Mobutu's fall and held posts in Kinshasa [7]. We also had long-standing contact with Jean-Baptiste Sondji, a Congolese former Maoist militant who had become Minister of Health in the Kabila government.

In these cases, what support or alliances do you look for?

Personally I made an outright priority of relations with social movements (trade unions, small farmers' organisations, student organizations, etc.) I didn't have a great deal of trust in the new DRC government, except to some degree Jean Baptiste Sondji as an individual. The issue was to challenge the repayment of the debt that was being demanded of the DRC by regimes and institutions that had supported Mobutu and enabled him to remain in power for over 30 years. Laurent-Désiré Kabila had set up an *Office des biens mal acquis* (“Office of illicitly acquired property”) and there was a clear link between personal enrichment related to corruption and the country's indebtedness. And in fact in that also turned out to be a disappointment, because Kabila negotiated a deal with the Swiss bankers at a time when there was the possibility that the DRC could get the Swiss courts to force Swiss bankers who were complicit in Mobutu's misappropriations to return the money he'd deposited with them. But scandalously, Kabila agreed to a secret transaction with the Swiss bankers and abandoned the legal action that was under way.

I went to Kinshasa during the summer of 2000 to work with the Congolese social movements and NGOs on the issue of the odious debt the DRC was being required to repay. My book *Your Money Or Your Life* was very successful in the academic community and among the Congolese Left [8]. In Belgium, the former colonial power, the CADTM had developed a strong campaign for cancellation of the DRC's odious debt and freezing of the Mobutu clan's assets in Belgium [9]. We had helped author a brochure common to all NGOs and North/South solidarity organisations active in Belgium demanding cancellation of the DRC's debts [10]. Along with these activities conducted by the CADTM, organisations in the DRC became members of the international CADTM network (in Kinshasa, the Bakongo area, Lubumbashi and Mbuji-Mayi).

The lesson to be learned from these attempts to denounce odious debt in Rwanda and in the DRC is that the governments can't be trusted. Absolute priority has to be given to working with the grass-roots citizens' organisations, with the social movements and with individuals who are determined not to give up until clarity is achieved and action is taken by the governments.

[1] Association Internationale de Techniciens, Experts et Chercheurs (International Association of Technicians, Experts, and Researchers), <http://aitec.reseau-ipam.org/spip.php?article130>

[2] Centre d'études et d'initiatives de solidarité internationale (Centre for research and action for international solidarity), http://www.reseau-ipam.org/spip.php?page=rubrique&id_rubrique=47/ (in French)

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustave_Massiah

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran%C3%A7ois-Xavier_Verschave

[5] <http://www.cadtm.org/Rwanda-the-financiers-of-the> Article published in 1997: Eric Toussaint, "Rwanda: the Financiers of the Genocide", 5 p., in *Politique*, La Revue, Paris, April 1997 (French version).

[6] See Chossudovsky, Michel and Galand, Pierre, *The Use of Rwanda's External Debt (1990-1994). The Responsibility of Donors and Creditors. Preliminary Report*. Ottawa and Brussels, November 1996. <http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/CHO403E.html> (English version of French original) See also: Chossudovsky, Michel et al. 1995. "Rwanda, Somalie, ex Yougoslavie : conflits armés, génocide économique et responsabilités des institutions de Bretton Woods" ("Rwanda, Somalia, ex-Yugoslavia: armed conflicts, economic genocide and responsibilities of the Bretton Woods institutions"), 12 p., in *Banque, FMI, OMC : ça suffit !*, CADTM, Brussels, 1995, 182 p. (in French) and Chossudovsky, Michel, "IMF-World Bank policies and the Rwandan holocaust" <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/35/033.html>

[7] These included Genero Ollela of the Lumumbist FLNC, who upon his return to Kinshasa held a position at the Office des biens mal acquis (OBMA). A year later he was put in prison for completely unjust reasons and the CADTM worked toward his release.

[8] See <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1998/09/CASSEN/4039> (in French) and http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?page=imprimer&id_article=1663

[9] See in particular <http://www.cadtm.org/La-Republique-democratique-du> (in French) and <http://www.cadtm.org/FG-Hemisphere-vulture-fund-s>

[10] CNCD-OPERATION 11.11.11 (Centre national de coopération au développement), *Pour une annulation des créances belges sur le République Démocratique du Congo* (Toward Cancellation of Belgian-held debt claims over the Democratic Republic of Congo), Brussels, 2002, 34 p.