

Sustainability without equality is impossible

The world's rich are hideously unsustainable

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Children living in poverty have only hazardous throw-aways to play with © Ashish Kothari

Over half of the ecological damage seen across the globe in the last 50 years, has been caused by USA, Europe and UK, which together contain about 15% of the world's population. According to a new report by [Jason Hickel and others](#), USA alone is responsible for 27%, followed by Europe and UK at 25%.

This in turn hides an even starker reality. Even within these culpable countries, there are enormous inequalities in the extent of ecological damage done by different sections of society. Globally, the richest 10% of people (about 630 million people, most of whom would be from the industrialised countries, but increasingly also in the Arab nations, China and India), are responsible for 52% of the cumulative carbon emissions. As an [Oxfam report](#) demonstrated, these 10% depleted the global carbon budget by nearly a third (31%) in the period 1990-2015. Conversely, the poorest 50% (c.3.1 billion people) are responsible for just 7% of cumulative emissions and used just 4% of the available carbon budget in that period. According to the [United Nations Environment Programme](#), the world's richest 1% account for more than twice the combined carbon emissions of the poorest 50%, ... and the top

10% of income earners use around 45% of all the energy consumed for land transport and around 75% of all the energy for aviation, compared with just 10% and 5% respectively for the poorest 50% of households.

The world's rich live very unsustainably. According to the [Global Footprint Network](#), the average 'ecological footprint' (or environmental impact) of each person on earth, in 2018, was 2.8 global hectares (a global hectare is "the world's annual amount of biological production for human use and human waste assimilation, per hectare of biologically productive land and fisheries"). A rough sustainable limit, according to the Network, is 1.7 global hectares, which means on average we are already exceeding the limit by about 60%. But more starkly, the richest countries (like USA, Canada, United Arab Republic) had an average footprint of over 8 in 2018 (which means the richest in these countries would have far exceeded even that excessive amount). The ecological footprint method has been criticized for many reasons (its website itself lists some), including methodological weaknesses, but its overall conclusions are borne out by study after study, and frankly, by sheer common sense. Huge mansions with private golf courses and swimming pools, frequently used private planes and yachts, and other such lifestyle elements of the very rich can simply not come anywhere near the concept of sustainability.

Knowledge of excessive consumption by elites, and the inequality or inequities of resource use, is not new. But recent studies such as those cited above, are breathtaking in revealing the global impact of these HCIs – High Consumption Individuals – and how much more than the poor their levels of consumption are. These facts become all the more relevant as we get daily, depressing and scary news about just how much the Earth is already groaning under human activity, and just how close we are to climate catastrophe (with many parts of the world already engulfed in it). And the levels of inequality in consumption and resource use become even more intolerable when one realizes that the worst impact of ecological collapse, including climate crisis, is felt by the poorest, who are not responsible for it in the first place. The ongoing heat wave in India, for instance, with [hottest March](#) in 122 years of records, is most debilitating for those who have to toil outdoors as farmers, labourers, sweepers, or in sweltering, poorly ventilated workplaces, and those (mostly the same people) who have no cooling in their homes. But India's rich, while complaining when they occasionally have to step out in the sun, have air-conditioned homes, offices and cars, all of which add to the warming. The [International Labour Office estimates](#) that by 2030, "India is in absolute terms expected to lose the equivalent of 34 million full-time jobs in 2030 as a result of heat stress", mostly in the agricultural and construction sectors. Similar disproportionate impacts are felt with the increasing cycles of floods and droughts, cyclones and storms, disruptions in rainfall and snowfall patterns, sea level rise, depletion of fishery stocks, loss of biodiversity in forests and other ecosystems, and other dimensions of the ongoing ecological collapse.

Wealth inequality is also important in that it locks up financial resources that could be vital to the investments needed for a genuine sustainability and just transition out of climate and other crises. According to a report by [prominent wealth managers](#), in the USA alone, “nearly 45 million U.S. households will transfer a total of \$68.4 trillion in wealth to heirs and charity over the course of the next 25 years.” By comparison, the Paris climate pledge by ‘developed’ countries to provide US\$100 billion to ‘developing’ countries, has still not been reached.

And I am not even talking about the other myriad social, economic, cultural and psychological impacts of inequality, both for those who are economically deprived (much worse, obviously) and for the financially rich (diseases of affluence, the tension of having to maintain costly lifestyles and live up to the expectations of their stratospheric co-travelers, and so on).

It is important to note here that it is not only consumption per se, but rather the entire production-trade-consumption complex that is at the heart of this unsustainability. Capitalist corporations like Amazon, with a global footprint that is one of the largest in the world, use various kinds of [data manipulation and doublespeak](#) to hide their real contribution to greenhouse gases. And then they greenwash themselves through initiatives like the [Climate Pledge](#), or through giving grants to big NGOs who will then conveniently keep quiet about global corporate crimes. These exercises get huge publicity and public applause, but the real story behind the greenscreen remains hidden; for instance, so far, according to Forbes, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos has given less than 1% of his fortune for such causes. Undoubtedly some of the money he gives out will help some people and the environment, but if he really meant it when he acknowledged climate change to be the world’s biggest threat and his commitment to do something about it, a much more effective way would be to fundamentally restructure the way Amazon does business. But that would cut into the company’s profits and Bezos’s earnings...

As mentioned above, the patterns of resource consumption and unsustainability that we see between the rich and poor nations, are also seen within nations. Inequality has steadily risen in most countries, and with that, the gap in ecological impact between elites and the marginalized has also widened. In India, a rough estimate we made in *Churning the Earth*, a book my co-author Aseem Shrivastava and I wrote some years back, was that the richest were consuming 17 times what the poorest were. This inequality within a country like India gets hidden when average figures of carbon emissions, or ecological footprint are presented; India has a very low average (e.g. well below the 1.7 global hectares sustainable limit of ecological footprint), but this is because hundreds of millions of low-consuming people are allowing the few tens of millions of high-consumption individuals to hide behind them.

This is not a matter of only statistics. It has enormous consequences for both ecological sustainability as also for the well-being of the economically marginalized sections. A massive amount of landgrab and ecological devastation caused by extractivist projects, dumping of wastes, and so on, is done for the powerful elite and at the cost of the poor; it is a form of [internal colonisation](#) or ‘sub-colonialism’.

Elites in the South (who are therefore seen as part of the 'global North') are sold on neo-liberal economies and hungry for ever-increasing profits and power, so much so that they simply reproduce the exploitative, accumulative patterns of the rich in the North.

At the climate COP in Glasgow last November, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi justifiably demanded a US\$1 trillion fund from rich countries to help poorer ones in their climate transition. But in his own country, he is unwilling to even take simple tax measures that would redistribute some of the enormous wealth of its richest 1% towards helping the poor adapt to the impacts of climate change. On the contrary, his government is bending over backwards to help some friendly industrialists accumulate more and more profits; under his watch as Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat and then the country's Prime Minister, the wealth of businessman Gautam Adani has jumped to US\$40 billion. [According to Forbes](#), in 2022 India has 167 billionaires with a combined worth of US\$750 billion. India is now the third wealthiest nation (after USA and China), but, [according to Oxfam](#), 77% of its wealth is owned by its richest 10%. An abysmally stark representation of this is the 27-storey private residence of Mukesh Ambani, India's richest man, in Mumbai; a house that cost US\$1 billion, in a city where over 6 million people (half its population) live in slums with poor housing, sanitation, and civic facilities. The corporations of both Adani and Ambani are involved in ecologically devastating operations in India and outside, including (in Adani's case) the world's largest coal mine on Indigenous lands adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Meanwhile, the entire National Climate Action Plan of the Indian government gets a paltry US\$4 million [in its 2022-23 national budget](#) (compared to US\$10 billion for just highway construction, which will add considerably to Indian development's climate-intensity!). In general, there is a shocking neglect of the urgent measures needed to help the poor deal with climate change impacts, or for workers in sectors like fossil fuels to transition to cleaner production sectors.

This takes us to the structures and relations of society that engender and sustain this production-trade-consumption complex, including in contemporary times capitalism and statism (domination by the nation-state), in turn propped up by older structures like patriarchy, racism, casteism. Accompanying all these is anthropocentrism, the notion that the Earth is made for humans to use and exploit as we want. The humungous military industry is very much part of these structures; and intense nation-state rivalry and hostility continue to both drive the unsustainable and inequitable production-trade-consumption-military complex, as also make it virtually impossible to come to global consensus on the emergency actions to be taken to stave off greater ecological collapse.

What can be done about this? Several suggestions for higher taxation rates on income, wealth and inheritance, or other forms of wealth redistribution, have been made for decades, rarely implemented and in several countries not at all. Thomas Piketty, whose book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* has been widely debated, suggested a global wealth tax that would considerably reduce inequality. Proposals to have a cap on salaries have not found favour by governments; in Switzerland, the

proposal was strong enough to get to a national referendum stage, but there it was [defeated by a hefty margin](#). Regulatory measures to curb consumption are certainly possible, but again, hardly find favour in an environment of neo-liberal economics for which encouraging consumption is a holy cow. One could even consider a [Sustainable Consumption Line](#) that no-one can cross, which is ensured not by government fiat but by social norms.

Ultimately, it is the root of the problem that will have to be tackled, in the structures that create or sustain inequality in the first place, mentioned above. [Fundamental transformations](#) need to take place in economic, political, and socio-cultural spheres of life. The even holier cow of private property, for instance, has to be challenged head-on; the Earth and all its elements are a commons, here for the benefit of all humanity and all non-human life, not to be privatized for the profit and pleasure of a few people. Ownership of the means of production and reproduction has to shift to workers and producers; the invisibilised role of women and other marginalized sections has to be recognized and rewarded in appropriate ways. All economic activity has to be contained within ecological limits, and instead of GDP growth rates, various kinds of well-being (including of the non-human) have to become the indicators of progress. The economy needs to become, as it has been in many community economies for millenia, a space for caring and sharing, rather than for selfish exploitation. It is difficult to see national governments and UN agencies moving towards such measures. But there are thousands of examples of such economies and politics across the world, including those working towards a [Radical Ecological Democracy](#). The only hope for tackling the inextricably linked problems of inequality, inequity and unsustainability, is the [coming together of such initiatives](#) into larger and larger mass people's movements of resistance, reclaiming economic and political spaces, asserting regenerative ways of living and working, [weaving together radical alternatives](#) across the world, and reviving a mutually respectful relationship with the rest of nature.

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[Ashish Kothari](#)

Founder-member of Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh, Ashish taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan process, was on Greenpeace International & India Boards, and helps coordinate Vikalp Sangam and Global Tapestry of Alternatives.

[Author profile](#)



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