



Inequality, globalisation and environmental damage

Who pollutes? And why?

National polluters

Globalisation has not only increased our knowledge of other societies, it has also offered us new insights into how, collectively, we are impacting on the world's resources. National levels of damaging production of greenhouse gases have been a recent focus for global bodies. Countries such as China and India are often negatively highlighted (see Figure 1). They may complain that much of the damage to the Earth's climate atmosphere occurred in the past when Western societies were busy industrialising. So, why should these newly developing nations today be told to act differently during the period of their own industrial and post-industrial growth? It is a good question.

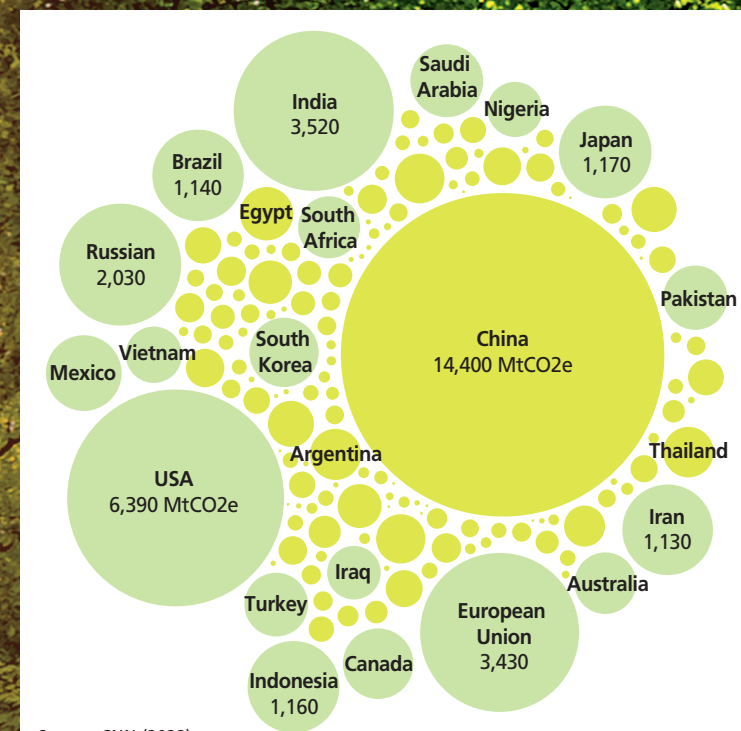
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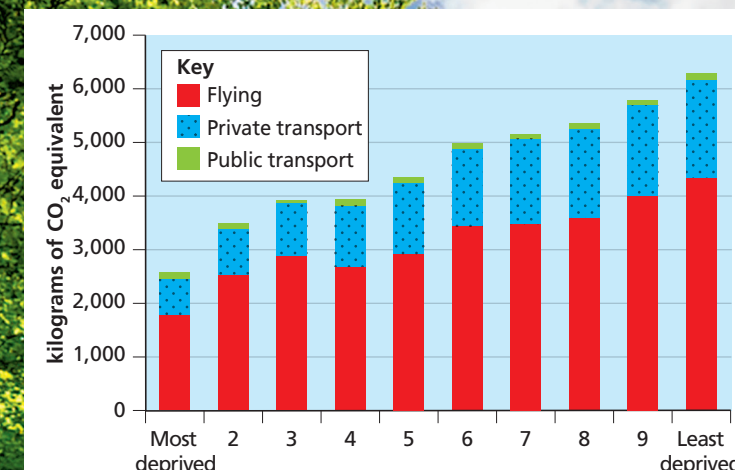
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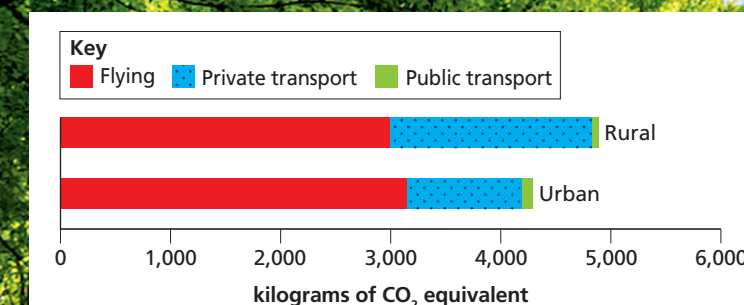
Source: CNN (2022)

Figure 1 Total greenhouse gas emissions in 2022



Source: adapted from *Guardian* (2024)

Figure 2 Transport emissions by deprivation decile



Source: adapted from *Guardian* (2024)

Figure 3 Transport emissions by geography

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Rural polluters

People who live in rural, rather than urban, areas also tend to produce higher levels of emissions, because of their greater reliance on private transport — the car (see Figure 3). Not unreasonably, these people often complain about the lack of public transport provision for those living outside of main urban zones. Which makes the very good sociological point, of course, that the choices we make in life are very often shaped by structural features defined by the kind of societies and places in which we live. Restricting people who want to buy SUVs, or improving public transport systems for rural folk are political decisions, but they are ones that increasingly have key environmental consequences.

Rich polluters

Most of us living in developed or developing societies have some responsibility for global warming. But if we do some basic sociological analysis at home, we can also see how certain social groups are implicated in different ways in contributing to damaging emissions and climate change. Research by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and the International Energy Agency (IEA), for example, suggests that sales of SUV cars in the West alone accounted for a global rise of carbon emissions of 20% in 2023. The IEA argues that if SUVs were a country they would be in the top five global emitters. The main buyers of SUVs, and the more frequent flyers among us, tend to be richer white men, so it is no surprise to see that transport emissions are usually connected to gender and ethnicity, but also to levels of deprivation (see Figure 2). The most well off, the most privileged, are causing the most climate damage.

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