



BLOG POST December 9th 2020

Ecological transition and inequality, a democratic Challenge. Part one : Economic and ecological inequality, two sides of the same coin

Authors

Laura Brimont

Former Coordinator at IDDRI, Lifestyles in transition

Mathieu Saujot

Director, Lifestyles in transition

 Reading time: 7 min



The latest report from the Oxfam/Stockholm Environment Institute on the difference between the carbon footprints of the richest populations and those of the poorest brought the question of ecological inequality

and climate justice up again in the public debate. This approach, based on advocacy against inequality, tends to reduce the question of ecological transition to a scale of personal responsibility. In this blog post, we propose to integrate this approach into a broader consideration on the restructuring of social contract.

On September 21, the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) published, in partnership with the NGO Oxfam, a [research project](#) on the distribution of consumption-related emissions in 117 countries between 1990 and 2005. This work stands on the notion of individual carbon footprints, which makes it possible to reconstitute the impact of individual consumption in terms of carbon emissions. This notion, developed through numerous studies,¹ makes it possible to divide up carbon emissions according to income, with however some limitations that we will not address here in detail.² The principle [message](#) in the Oxfam/SEI report is to point out the responsibility of the richest populations in global warming: between 1990 and 2015, the richest 10% of the world's population was responsible for 52% of the cumulated CO2 emissions, while 1% of the richest populations were responsible for twice the amount of emissions as the poorest half of mankind.³ Building on this assessment, the NGO calls notably for the implementation of additional taxation mechanisms on the highest revenues, like the French wealth tax (ISF) or a carbon tax on luxury products and services. The policy response is therefore part of the agenda to reduce economic inequality,⁴ the richest populations' high carbon footprint being considered as an additional argument to act against economic injustice.

If this approach is useful within the framework of the advocacy against inequality, it presents limitations in projecting towards the ecological transition, and in particular the transition towards more sustainable lifestyles ([Perrissin-Fabert, 2020](#)). First of all, the climatic footprint reasons on an “average”, ignoring the broad heterogeneities of emissions within each income group (according to place of residence, household characteristics, family or work situation, etc.) that are of great importance when implementing transitional public policies in concrete terms (e.g., carbon tax⁵). Second, using a tool of measure on an individual scale induces a representation of the climatic issue as being an individual responsibility ([Pottier et al., 2020](#)): the aim here is to identify the most “responsible” actors in global warming, in this case the most well-off. Even if, of course, certain behaviours are particularly emitting, such as the use of a private plane ([Gössling, 2019](#)), a large part of the carbon footprint—that of the rich as well as that of the poor—is conditioned by the socio-technical infrastructure in which the individuals evolve, and upon which they have little control⁶: social norms—such as the valorisation of travel or the consumption of meat in Western countries for example—; energy-production infrastructures—more or less emitting greenhouse gases depending on the country—; transport infrastructures, etc. In relation to all of these aspects, individuals have limited means to act at their level. So, pointing the finger at individual responsibility—in this case the richest populations—may lead to an underestimation of the eminently collective and thus political dimension of the climate issue, and render the question of climate solely an issue of individual behaviour.⁷

Due to our lifestyles being conditioned by a “polluting” socio-technical infrastructure, the reduction of inequality alone would not lower emissions. Thus, in the Oxfam/SEI study, each euro spent, regardless of the income group, leads to the same quantity of emissions.⁸ As pointed out by Perrissin-Fabert, a reduction of inequality that would consist of redistributing a portion of the richest populations' income to populations with lower incomes would not reduce emissions. With higher incomes, these populations would have access to more “polluting” lifestyles, either on a worldwide scale by means of a propagation of the Western way of life (foods rich in products of animal origin, mobility based on individual vehicles, consumption of goods and service, etc.) or within Western societies (purchase of a larger home, a bigger car, multiplication of travel, etc.). Otherwise said, this framework may induce the wrongful impression that the objective of the transition is to give middle and working classes the right to pollute more when the ultimate goal is to reduce economic inequality and to decarbonise society as a whole.

The notion of a climate footprint thus appears to be a different manner of representing economic inequality: in a world organised around and by lifestyles that degrade the environment, the richest populations,⁹ who push the logic and necessity of our resource-hungry lifestyles, are responsible for the biggest environmental footprint. If this has the merit of showing that the lifestyles and consumption levels of these populations (but also those of less well-off Western social classes) are not compatible with the biophysical limits of our planet and that each person should do their part in this effort, and in particular the wealthy, this framework must not lead us to a simplistic conclusion consisting of saying that “eliminating the rich” would suffice in resolving the issue of climate change. If the reduction of economic inequality is fundamentally one of the elements of the transition towards a more sustainable society, this project must be associated with a more global restructuring of our society’s model, meaning our economic, political, social, and cultural institutions, in such a way that our individual and collective aspirations would no longer be mostly guided by the search for an ever-growing access to goods and services that have a strong incidence on the viability of our environment. In the quest for this new model of a more moderated development for all,¹⁰ the question of inequality must be considered as the social context in which the new model must be implemented. This implies a better understanding of the obstacles related to fractured societies.

[Blog post](#)

[December 9th 2020](#)

[Read also](#)

[Ecological transition and inequality, a democratic challenge. Part two: Conducting the transition in a society of distrust](#)

[Authors:](#)

- [Laura Brimont,](#)
- [Mathieu Saujot](#)

[Blog post](#)

[December 9th 2020](#)

[Read also](#)

[Ecological transition and inequalities, a democratic challenge. Part three: Rebuilding trust on the path to transition: a first set of propositions](#)

[Authors:](#)

- [Laura Brimont,](#)
- [Mathieu Saujot](#)

¹ For an inventory of recent work according to the different methodologies: Pottier et al. (2020). Who produces CO2? Panorama criticises ecological inequality in France, Working Paper FAERE ; ADEME, Paul Malliet, Ruben Haalebos, Emeric Nicolas (2019). La fiscalité carbone aux frontières : ses impacts redistributifs sur le revenu des ménages français ; Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Aalto University, and D-mat Ltd. (2019). 1.5-Degree Lifestyles: Targets and Options for Reducing Lifestyle Carbon Footprints. Technical Report. Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Hayama, Japan.

² According to Pottier et al. (2020), a methodological limit to this exercise is not taking into account the quality effect on the consumer goods consumed by the richest populations. Indeed, these methods lead to associating a certain quantity of greenhouse gas emissions for €1 spent per type of product (e.g. buying a vehicle). However, a car that is twice as expensive due to its sophistication, for example, probably did not necessitate twice the emissions during manufacturing.

³ This heterogeneity/inequality in the individual distribution of emissions has been pointed out by researchers for the last several years. See Chancel et Piketty (2015) ; Oswald et al. (2020) ; Ivanova and Wood (2020).

4 The last ten years have given way to a significant scientific production on the topic (see in particular the works of T. Piketty, E. Saez or G. Zuckman), which notably revealed the deleterious social and political impacts of the increase of inequality.

5 One way to make the tax more fair is to offer a compensation check to the 50% of the least well-off households, for example. But, due to this heterogeneity in household carbon emissions, an “average” check is less efficient in reinforcing equity. Some will be “over” refunded and others “not enough” (on this topic, see Saujot et al. 2019).

6 For a description of the different determinants and behaviours and their articulation between the collective and the individual sphere, see Martin, S. et Gaspard, A. (2016).

7 This tendency to reduce environmental issues to behavioural stakes in the political sphere is described in different works. See for example Bergeron et al. (2018) et Akenji (2014).

8 We are talking about an elasticity of 1 between emissions and income.

9 See this report from the High Council on Climate for a description of the mechanisms of collective structuring of consumption practices, in particular page 34. As a reminder, it is not necessarily the lifestyles of the well-off that influence most people, but that of the people around us, or just above us, because we live in middle-class societies <https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/billet-de-blog/redefinir-la-consommation-premiere-partie-elements-de>

10 For an overview of the concept of sobriety, see Cézard, F. and Mourad, M. (2019). Panorama sur la notion de sobriété, Ademe.

MODES DE VIE**INÉGALITÉS****ENJEUX SOCIAUX**