

“Should all major polluters be obliged to open their borders to environmental refugees?”

06

Laurenz Bub
BA MA, University of
Salzburg, Department
of Sociology

The climate crisis hits those first and worst who are the least responsible for it. Human impacts on the environment are very unequally shared on a global scale. The wealthy industrial nations of the global North are among the largest emitters of greenhouse gases. For example, there is a clear empirical correlation between wealth and the amount of greenhouse gas emissions. The richest half of the world's population is responsible for about 86% of global CO₂ emissions. For example, in 2019, the US emitted an average of 16.2 tonnes of CO₂ per capita, compared to only about 7 tonnes per capita in China. A historical perspective also shows that the responsibility for the emergence of the climate crisis lies primarily with the rich and early industrialised countries of the Global North. To summarize, human impacts on the environment are not equally distributed globally, but depend on factors such as gender, origin or social status. And the extent to which people are affected by environmental damage and climate change also depends strongly on these factors.

The ecological question is therefore also a question of social justice (climate justice). The climate crisis not only makes global inequality visible, it also reinforces it. Poor countries are particularly vulnerable to the effects of global warming. Especially since they lack the means to adapt to climate change. Some experts are even more explicit and state that the prosperity of the Global North is directly based on environmental degradation and social injustice. Taking in climate refugees is therefore a moral and civilizational obligation for those countries.

Current reports indicate that millions of people will have to leave their homes in the upcoming decades due to climate change and global warming. According to some projections, up to 700 million people will have to leave their homes by 2050. If people have to migrate for environmental reasons, it is because they are threatened by rising temperatures, droughts and extreme weather events, for example, or by wars and armed conflicts over resources. The climate crisis deprives them of the possi-

bility to live a life without misery and violence. It undermines human development and increases poverty. The poor regions of the world are the most affected. If one wants to achieve global climate justice, this means that one has to change the socio-ecological conditions in the Global North.

But there are also other aspects that need to be considered regarding this question. For example, conservative (or right-wing in particular) politicians argue that the migration movements of recent years have shown that western societies might be overburdened with the arrival of refugees, both socially and politically. The migration subject is one that is often emotionally charged and the arguments are not always based on (scientifically) verifiable facts. For example, some environmental activists argue that the environment and climate will only be further stressed if migration brings more people to the countries of the Global North with its resource- and energy-intensive lifestyles. However, there is hardly any scientific evidence for this and it is opposed by the perspective that people from poorer world regions cannot simply be excluded from development opportunities.

Furthermore, the already structurally weak regions of the global South would be further weakened by outward migration. It would then be even more difficult to implement efficient climate change adaptation measures in these countries. Effectively tackling the causes of displacement should therefore be the top priority of development policies. Instead of encouraging migration, the rich industrialised nations should provide more development assistance and on site help.

Further

QUESTIONS

- 1 *How are social justice and forms of sustainable resource use related to each other? Can equity or justice in resource use contribute to sustainable resource use?*
- 2 *Is climate change a crisis caused by collective overuse of resources and environment? Or is it rather a few regions of the world living at the cost of others?*
- 3 *Is it morally justifiable for the countries of the Global North to defend their prosperity against poorer regions of the world and, if necessary, close their borders to do so?*
- 4 *Under what political and economic conditions can a flourishing life in prosperity and security be made possible for all people on a limited planet with finite resources?*

Further reading:

- Lessenich, Stephan. Neben uns die Sintflut. Die Externalisierungsgesellschaft und ihr Preis. Hanser Berlin. München. 2016
- Brand, Ulrich. Wissen, Markus. Imperiale Lebensweise. Zur Ausbeutung von Mensch und Natur im globalen Kapitalismus. Oekom Verlag. München. 2017
- Jackson, Tim. Prosperity without Growth. Economics for a finite Planet. Earthscan. London. 2011.
- https://www.oxfam.de/system/files/oxfam_migration_und-flucht-durch-klimawandel.pdf
- <https://www.oxfam.de/system/files/oxfam-extreme-carbon-inequality-20151202-engl.pdf>
- https://www.oxfam.de/system/files/auf_der_flucht_vor_dem_klima_2013.pdf

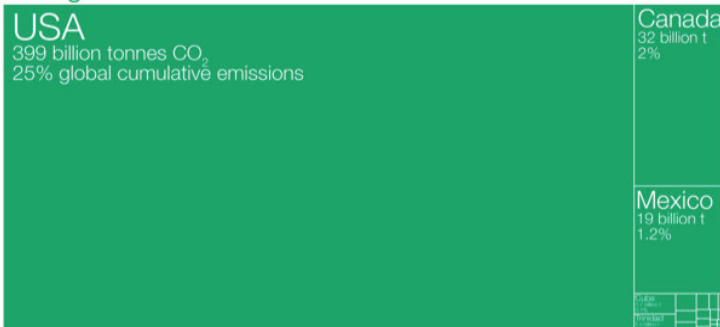
Who has contributed most to global CO₂ emissions?

Our World in Data

Cumulative carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions over the period from 1751 to 2017. Figures are based on production-based emissions which measure CO₂ produced domestically from fossil fuel combustion and cement, and do not correct for emissions embedded in trade (i.e. consumption-based). Emissions from international travel are not included.

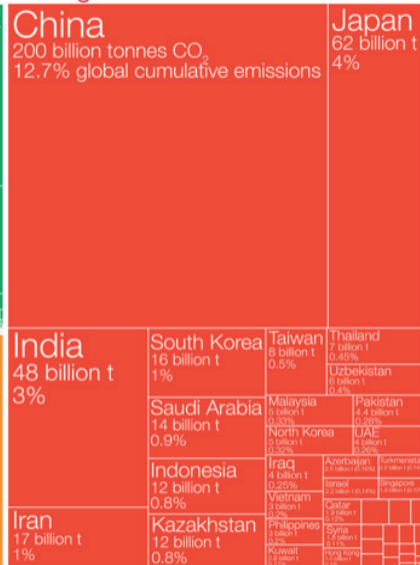
North America

457 billion tonnes CO₂
29% global cumulative emissions



Asia

457 billion tonnes CO₂
29% global cumulative emissions



EU-28

353 billion tonnes CO₂
22% global cumulative emissions



Europe

514 billion tonnes CO₂
33% global cumulative emissions



Oceania
20 billion tonnes CO₂
1.2% global emissions

Figures for the 28 countries in the European Union have been grouped as the 'EU-28' since international targets and negotiations are typically set as a collaborative target between EU countries. Values may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Data source: Calculated by Our World in Data based on data from the Global Carbon Project (GCP) and Carbon Dioxide Analysis Center (CDIAC). This is a visualization from OurWorldinData.org, where you find data and research on how the world is changing.

Licensed under CC-BY by the author Hannah Ritchie.