



Powered by Clickability

Rich, poor and climate change

- Story Highlights
- World's poor are disproportionately affected by climate change, analysts say
- Low-income groups have comparatively little influence on public policy
- Burden of climate change rests with wealthy individuals, some observers say

By Rachel Oliver
For CNN

The general dialogue on adapting to a world affected by climate change by definition excludes the world's poorest people. And yet it's the world's poorest who are often put forward as the ones who are likely to feel the affects of climate change the most and are likely to be able to deal with them the least.

Around half of the world's population -- slightly fewer than 3 billion people -- survives on less than \$2 a day. None of them are likely to go shopping for an automobile any time soon in a bid to reduce on their greenhouse gas emissions; and investing in photo voltaic solar panels to put on their rooftops probably won't be a priority, either.

Comparing the average annual per capita carbon footprints of the rich and poor certainly makes for unsettling reading: The average American's annual carbon footprint -- 20.4 tons -- is around 2,000 times that of someone living in the African nation of Chad. And the average Briton will emit as much carbon dioxide (CO₂) in one day as a Kenyan will in an entire year.

Overall, the United Nations estimates that the carbon footprint of the world's 1 billion poorest people (those living on less than \$1 a day) represents just 3 percent of the global total.

By contrast, if you look at the cumulative buildup of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere since the Industrial Revolution, then the responsibility for a whopping 80 percent of the world's emissions lies with just 20 percent of the inhabitants of the world's wealthiest nations (at the time this figure was calculated it only included Europe, North America and the former Soviet Union).

Developing world braced for disaster

Between 1990 and 1998, more than 94 percent of the world's biggest natural disasters (and there were 568 of them) occurred in the developing world, according to Oxfam. One of the reasons is that 75 percent of the world's poor live in rural areas, relying on the land to make a living. These people, says the World Resources Institute (WRI), are "disproportionately affected by environmental degradation."

Poverty-stricken people in the developing world face an uncertain future. Just some of their chief concerns include:

- One-sixth of the world's population will face water shortages because of retreating glaciers (World Development Movement)
- 1 billion of the poorest people on Earth will lose their livelihoods to desertification (UNEP)
- More than 200 million environmental refugees will be created by 2050, as a direct result of rising sea levels, erosion and agricultural damage (World Development Movement)
- Around 17 million Bangladeshis could find themselves without homes by 2030 due to flooding, cyclones and tornadoes (Oxfam)
- More than 60 million more Africans will be exposed to Malaria if temperatures rise by 2 degrees Celsius (the

Independent)

- 182 million sub-Saharan Africans could die of disease "directly attributable" to climate change by the end of the century (ChristianAid)
- In Asia, the homes of 94 million people could be flooded by the end of the century (UK Department for International Development)

It's people, not nations

More people are beginning to refer to this phenomenon as "environmental injustice," and it has rankled those who see climate change as a "rich nations' problem." This has led one ecological economist, professor Richard Norgaard from the University of California-Berkeley, to claim that the world's rich countries owe the world's poor \$2.3 trillion -- an amount that easily eclipses the total of Third World debt (\$1.8 trillion).

That figure represents the ecological damage caused by the consumption of goods. The UC-Berkeley researchers have called the figure "conservative," since it only accounts for greenhouse gas emissions, ozone layer depletion, agriculture, deforestation, over fishing and converting mangrove swamps. It doesn't account for damage caused by war, loss of biodiversity or freshwater withdrawals, for example.

But climate change won't just be punishing for those in the developing world: More studies are showing that if you are poor anywhere in the world, you are more at risk from the various hazards environmental degradation poses than your more affluent peers.

According to UNEP, in Los Angeles more than 71 percent of African Americans live in "highly polluted areas," compared to 24 percent of whites. Across the U.S. black children are three times more likely to have "hazardous levels of lead in their blood" as a result of living near hazardous waste sites.

There are costs involved with climate change, too -- higher fuel and food bills in particular. An independent study last year in the UK showed that the number of households being forced to decide between food and heating has almost doubled in just two years. This, over a period when electricity prices jumped by 39 percent and gas prices by 61 percent.

So is there a link between environmental injustices and the disparities in consumption levels? Does the former in fact reflect the latter to some degree? More people are beginning to believe that the burden of climate change rests with affluent individuals, not wealthy nations.

A recent study in Australia found that wealthy, tertiary-educated citizens produced more than twice as many greenhouse gas emissions -- around 58 tons per capita per year -- than that nation's low-income families, which on average produced 22 tons a year. The calculations, made by the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research, were based on consumption levels.

Authors J. Timmons Roberts and Bradley C Parks suggest the same point. In their book, "A Climate of Injustice: Global Inequality, North-South Politics, and Climate Policy," Roberts and Parks point to a 1996 study that showed that people in the U.S. who earned more than \$75,000 emitted nearly four times as much CO₂ as those who earned less than \$10,000.

Comparing disparities between nations was difficult, the authors said, but yet they made one definitive declaration:

"It can be said with confidence that the world's richest people cause emissions thousands of times greater than those of the world's poorest."

Emissions trail leads to small group of people

While previous studies have put the majority of the greenhouse gas tally on the shoulders of 20 percent of the world's richest, Stephen Pacala, the director of the Princeton Environmental Institute, said an even smaller group may be responsible.

Speaking last year, Pacala said a disproportionate responsibility could lie with as few as 7 percent of us. The world's 500 million richest people were responsible for a breathtaking 50 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions, he claimed.

He is calling for a "new rhetoric of fairness" in the fight against climate change. Put simply, if you want to tackle

emissions, Pacala says, stop targeting countries and start targeting people -- because the world's biggest emitters don't all live in one place (India is presently producing more new millionaires each year than any other country, for example and is viewed as the biggest wealth creator in the world, according to Boston Consulting Group).

"The responsibility for emissions reductions does not travel with national identity," Pacala said. "It travels with your emissions, and your emissions go hand-in-hand with your income."

The Sierra Club divides the world's population into three different classes representing different percentages of the world's population: the poor (20 percent), the middle class (60 percent) and the "consumer class" (20 percent). It squarely blames consumption for ecological destruction and points the finger at the "consumer class" for making this so.

The group's real concern, however, is what happens to the 60 percent of people that reside in the middle who want to move up into the next category.

Sources: The Independent; The Australian; The Guardian; American Association for the Advancement of Science; World Resources Institute; U.N. Statistics Division; Oxfam; ChristianAid; NetAid; International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis; "A Climate of Injustice: Global Inequality, North-South Politics, and Climate Policy"; World Development Movement; ITNewswire

All About[Global Climate Change](#) • [Economic Issues](#)

Links referenced within this article

Global Climate Change

http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Global_Climate_Change

Economic Issues

http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Economic_Issues

Find this article at:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/BUSINESS/02/17/eco.class>



Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2008 Cable News Network.