

All who can should pay, even for their basic greenhouse gas emissions, says political scientist

February 7 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

We have a moral right to produce greenhouse gases (GHGs) to secure our basic needs, but this also entails obligations. Since GHG emissions

are having a negative impact on the climate, all who can pay for their emissions should do so. This has been shown in a new study from the University of Gothenburg.

The work is published in the *British Journal of Political Science*.

Because GHG emissions are causing harmful [climate change](#), scientists and philosophers have been wrestling with who has the right to produce [greenhouse gases](#) at all, and to what extent.

Ever since this debate began in the 1990s, most people have been in agreement that while it is both fair and reasonable for people to refrain from inessential consumption, you cannot require people to stop producing what scientists call subsistence emissions—in other words, emissions necessary for securing the basic right to subsistence, such as access to food.

The climate change situation has not improved over the years however, and more needs to be done to keep [global warming](#) below two degrees Celsius.

"We find ourselves in a situation where the environmental consequences of subsistence emissions alone may be catastrophic. In the 1990s, this fear was not relevant. The question that I have studied is whether even the right to produce subsistence emissions now needs to be qualified in various ways," says political scientist Göran Duus-Otterström.

Göran Duus-Otterström is a professor of political science who specializes in normative political theory. One of his areas of research is climate justice. In this article, he analyzed various arguments about how the right to produce GHG emissions relates to the fact that these emissions are sometimes essential for securing basic subsistence.

"An important insight in my study is that we must distinguish between two statements: whether GHG emissions are morally permissible and whether those who produce them should be exempt from responsibility for what their emissions cause. There are those who believe that these things are interrelated and that we cannot be held responsible for actions that we are permitted to do."

Göran Duus-Otterström argues that this idea is based on a mistake.

"For example, if I have to steal your bicycle to rush to the emergency department due to a life-threatening condition, we can all agree that this would be morally permissible, but that does not mean that I don't owe you anything. Even though I didn't do anything wrong, I should compensate you for stealing your bicycle and for any damage inflicted when I rushed to the [emergency department](#) on your bicycle."

According to Göran Duus-Otterström, in essence, distinguishing between moral permissibility and exemption from responsibility when it comes to subsistence emissions means that people are morally permitted to produce subsistence emissions and that they should compensate for these emissions if they can.

For example, the rich part of the world should pay for their subsistence emissions, either through emissions offset schemes or by paying for climate adaptations in low-income countries. The tension between subsistence emissions and climate change is therefore not as great as one might think.

"It is a mistake to think that we are not responsible for our emissions just because we have to produce them. We have a duty to offset even our subsistence emissions if we can do so without jeopardizing our [basic needs](#). It would be best if emissions compensation could be managed through our final tax bill each year, but in the meantime individuals

should try to offset their emissions in the private market. And of course try to reduce their luxury [emissions](#)," adds Göran Duus-Otterström.

More information: Göran Duus-Otterström, Subsistence Emissions and Climate Justice, *British Journal of Political Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1017/S0007123422000485](#)

Provided by University of Gothenburg

Citation: All who can should pay, even for their basic greenhouse gas emissions, says political scientist (2023, February 7) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-pay-basic-greenhouse-gas-emissions.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.