

Six ways inequality holds back climate action

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Are improvements to green technologies, like better batteries and more efficient solar panels, enough on their own to tackle climate change? Unfortunately not. Our behavior and lifestyles must change too.

Rolling out the solutions to [climate change](#) ([electric vehicles](#), [solar power](#)

, [heat pumps](#)) will require confronting the enormous gulf in wealth and resources separating the richest and [poorest people](#)—both within countries and between them.

[In our recent article](#) for *Nature Climate Change*, we explain why inequality remains one of the biggest barriers to the net zero transition.

1. The very rich are very big polluters

Oxfam recently shone a spotlight on the gap in emissions between the richest and poorest people globally. According to [their latest analysis](#), the richest 1% emit as much CO₂ as the poorest 66% combined.

To limit warming to 1.5°C, each person has a yearly [carbon](#) budget of about [1 ton](#). However, the top 1% of emitters currently burn through more than one hundred times the sustainable amount, emitting on average a staggering [110 tons of carbon](#) a year each.

If we want to transition to net zero fairly and in time to avoid the worst effects of the climate crisis, we need to slash emissions from the biggest sources.

2. Political solutions are limited

The political power of the rich prevents measures that could otherwise distribute emissions and energy use more fairly. This is because [wealthy people](#) can shape government policy to suit their interests.

Billionaires who have made their fortunes through investments in the fossil fuel industry have donated to groups that campaign against [policy solutions to climate change](#), obstructing and delaying efforts to decarbonize.

With the ability to successfully lobby against climate policies, the super-wealthy have no compulsion to curb their highly polluting behavior. For example, [private jet travel remains legal](#) despite it being the most polluting transport mode of all and useful to just a tiny minority.

3. Carbon taxes could be more effective

No price attached to carbon emissions, in any country, accounts for their full damage to the Earth and to human health. This means that it is often cheaper for industries to pollute than switch to clean alternatives.

Carbon taxes are supposed to increase the price of emitting [greenhouse gases](#) and pollution so that the greenest option is also the cheapest one. For example, taxing diesel and petrol vehicles (and investing the revenue in [public transport](#)) could make it cheaper for families to travel by train and bus instead of by car. If such taxes were widely introduced, research indicates they could be effective at [reducing emissions](#).

Instead, [carbon taxes](#) tend to disproportionately affect poorer people and countries by increasing the prices of goods and services that remain highly polluting, while wealthier people can afford to keep emitting. More equal societies, without [extreme poverty](#) or wealth, could introduce carbon taxes that enable everyone to decarbonize.

4. Green options aren't in reach for all

While [carbon emissions](#) are not priced at their true cost, some lifestyle changes (such as replacing a gas boiler with a heat pump) require a hefty upfront investment. If you're one of the many people on a [low income](#) then you may not be able to afford them.

In the UK, subsidies for energy-efficiency improvements like home

insulation tend to be restricted to homeowners, leaving renters with little control over [the building they live in](#)—including its emissions. Similarly, tax breaks or grants to buy electric bikes are largely restricted to those in stable jobs which pay [above the minimum wage](#).

Ensuring that subsidy schemes specifically support those on lower incomes could allow everyone to make the changes necessary for reaching net zero.

5. People need free time to go green

Beyond wealth and income, there are also inequalities in available time to consider.

Some low-carbon options take longer or are less convenient than the polluting alternatives, such as traveling long distances by train instead of flying. Learning new skills, like how to cook plant-based recipes to cut down on your meat consumption, can take time which wealthy people can more readily afford by working part-time, retiring early or paying others to take care of cleaning and childcare.

More equality in free time, such as a [four-day working week](#), can help people make lifestyle changes that benefit the planet.

6. Public services cannot meet their potential

Providing high-quality public services to all makes low-carbon choices easier for everyone. Universally available amenities also meet basic standards of human well-being while [using less energy overall](#).

In the UK, London boasts the cheapest bus fares and the most comprehensive public transport network. Although rent and [property](#)

[prices](#) can be lower in [rural areas](#) than in cities, the deregulation and subsequent privatization of the UK bus network in the 1980s—as well as austerity since 2010—has led to [more unequal access](#) to public transport.

Fare increases and axed bus routes have put low-carbon public transport [out of reach](#) for many and made it harder to get around without a car.

The planet's dwindling resources are being squandered by a rich minority. Reining in their emissions and redistributing their power and influence would help everyone live more sustainably so that the planet can support a decent life for all.

More information: Charlotte A. Kukowski et al, Tackling inequality is essential for behaviour change for net zero, *Nature Climate Change* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41558-023-01900-4](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-023-01900-4)

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