

# Opinion: Canada must continue cutting emissions regardless of the actions of other polluters

August 21 2024, by Richard Sandbrook

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I have, over the years, lost count of the number of times I have seen or heard people say that it doesn't matter what Canada, or the more-

developed world, does to reduce carbon emissions. [It is argued that the main global problem is that major emitters such as China, India, Russia and Brazil continue full tilt for economic growth at any carbon-cost.](#) Consequently, global emissions continue to grow, despite falling emissions in the West.

While it is true that emerging economies have a large carbon footprint, any conclusion that Canada should therefore stop reducing its emissions in response is dead wrong. We in Canada and in other richer nations must do more, both to realize the intrinsic benefits of a greener environment and to expedite international co-operation in decarbonization.

Without global co-operation, there is no hope.

## Raw figures

According to the [Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research](#), in 2022 China alone accounted for 29.2% of global [carbon emissions](#)—increasing by 285% between 1990 and 2022.

The United States and European Union, by contrast, are both succeeding in reducing their emissions with totals representing only 11.2% and 6.7% of global emissions respectively.

The EU, with 27 member states, had the best record. European emissions in 2022 were 27% lower than in 1990. India, at 7.3% of global emissions, is already a worse polluter than the EU, and it is rapidly growing its emissions. Indonesia grew its emissions by a record 10% from 2021 to 2022.

Canada has a relatively poor emissions record for a rich country. In 2022, Canada accounted for [only 1.4% of global greenhouse gas \(GHG\)](#)

[emissions](#). However, between 1990 and 2022, [Canada's GHG emissions](#) increased by 16.5% while emissions in the EU dropped.

In 2021, the [federal government committed Canada to reduce its emissions by 40%–45% below 2005 levels by 2030](#). Canadian emissions did fall by 7.1% by 2022. However, a major part of that decrease stems from the pandemic shutdown in 2020. Emissions grew in the following two years.

## **Per-capita responsibilities**

If we switch our view from country emissions to per capita emissions—and to historical contributions to [global warming](#)—the balance of responsibility shifts. Per capita emissions in Canada, for example, [are around double that of China](#).

Yet even per person emissions within countries underestimates the western responsibility for climate change. This measure [ignores emissions that are "imported" in the form of traded goods](#). For years, [rich countries](#) have relocated dirty and polluting industries to the Global South, and then imported the goods produced there. Emissions associated with the production of these imported goods should be attributed to the importing country.

[If you do this calculation and render emissions in terms of consumption rather than production](#), it reveals an even more skewed pattern. The United States, a net importer of emissions, registers an increase in per capita emissions from 14 kilotons (country emissions) to 15.5 kilotons (consumption emissions) in 2020, an increase of 10%.

The EU also was a major net emissions importer, with its per capita emissions rising from a modest 5.9 kilotons for territorial emissions to 7.2 kilotons when rendered as consumption based. Canada, as a net

exporter (owing mainly to hydrocarbon exports), falls to 13 kilotons from 14.1.

China, as the workshop of the world, fell from 7.7 kilotons to seven kilotons per capita—less than half the United States per capita level.

Historical contributions to GHG emissions also matter. A recent [study of all global GHG emissions](#) between 1851 and 2021 showed that the U.S. and the EU together accounted for 27.7% of total GHGs, and 0.45 C of global warming. The other four largest national GHG emitters—China, India, Russia and Brazil—together were responsible for 28.1% of GHG emissions and 0.46 C of warming. The U.S. and EU combined have roughly a quarter of the population of the other four big emitters.

## **Shared responsibility**

Global co-operation to reduce emissions depends on high-income countries "walking the walk" of emission abatement, as well as talking the talk. Canada and its peer nations must lead the way, or the bigger emitters will feel no pressure to co-operate.

Outside the bubble of Canada and other more affluent societies, people rightly conclude that the West got rich by burning fossil fuels for 200 years. Why, then, should former colonized countries commit to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050?

To make matters worse, five developed countries, including the U.S., U.K., Canada, Norway and Australia, are expanding their oil, gas and [coal production](#) despite the [International Energy Agency warning](#) that reaching net-zero by 2050 requires "huge declines in the use of coal, oil and gas" in the next few years.

We need global co-operation and shared responsibility to survive the

climate crisis. But global co-operation requires that the West leads the way both in more stringent decarbonization measures and in facilitating decarbonization in the Global South by means of investments via the neglected [Green Climate Fund](#) and transferring green technologies.

It won't be easy, but we don't have a realistic alternative. No global cooperation, no future.

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