Affluence is killing the planet, warn scientists
24 June 2020, by Thomas Wiedmann, Julia K. Steinberger and Manfred Lenzen

The most affluent are most responsible
The facts are clear: the wealthiest 0.54%, about 40 million people, are responsible for 14% of lifestyle-related greenhouse gas emissions, while the bottom 50% of income earners, almost 4 billion people, only emit around 10%. The world's top 10% income earners are responsible for at least 25% and up to 43% of our environmental impact.

Most people living in developed countries would fit into this category, meaning you don't have to consider yourself rich in order to be globally affluent. Even many poorer people in wealthy countries have a disproportionately large and unsustainable resource footprint compared to the global average.

It is less clear, however, how to address the problems that come with affluence. Progressive mainstream policymakers talk about "greening consumption" or "sustainable growth" to "decouple" affluence from climate breakdown, biodiversity loss and other planetary-scale destruction.

Yet our research confirms that, in reality, there is no evidence that this decoupling is actually happening. While technological improvements have helped to reduce emissions and other environmental impacts, the worldwide growth in affluence has consistently outpaced these gains, driving all the impacts back up.

And it appears highly unlikely that this relationship will change in the future. Even the cleanest technologies have their limitations and still require specific resources to function, while efficiency savings often simply lead to more consumption.

If technology alone is not enough, it is therefore imperative to reduce the consumption of the affluent, resulting in sufficiency-oriented lifestyles: "better but less". This is all easier said than done though, for there is a problem.
The super-affluent shape the world they live in
desirable.

The development has seen a massive drop in
corporate and air pollutant emissions was merely
cidental to the development, not a deliberate part of
it, and will not last.

So how can we reduce consumption as much as
necessary in a socially-sustainable way, while still
safeguarding human needs and social security?
Here it turns out the main stumbling block is not
technological limits or economics itself, but the
economic imperative to grow the economy, spurred
by overconsumption and the political power of the
super-affluent.

Affluent, powerful people and their governments
have a vested interest in deliberately promoting
high consumption and hampering sufficiency-
oriented lifestyles. Since consumption decisions by
individuals are strongly influenced by information
and by others, this can lock in high-consumption
lifestyles.

"Positional consumption" is another key
mechanism, where people increasingly consume
status goods once their basic needs are satisfied.
This creates a growth spiral, driven by the affluent,
with everyone striving to be "superior" relative to
their peers while the overall consumption level
rises. What appears average or normal in a
developed country then rapidly becomes a top
contribution at the global level.

So, how can we get out of this dilemma?

We reviewed a variety of different approaches that
may have the solution. They range from reformist to
radical ideas, and include post-development,
degrowth, eco-feminism, eco-socialism and eco-
anarchism. All these approaches have in common
that they focus on positive environmental and social
outcomes and not on economic growth.
Interestingly, there seems to be quite some
strategic overlap between them, at least in the short
term. Most agree on the necessity to "prefigure"
bottom-up as much as possible of the new, less
affluent, economy in the old, while still
demonstrating sufficiency-oriented lifestyles to be
Grassroots initiatives such as Transition Initiatives
and eco-villages can be examples of this, leading to
cultural and consciousness change. Eventually,
however, far-reaching policy reforms are needed,
including maximum and minimum incomes, eco-
taxes, collective firm ownership and more.
Examples of policies that start to incorporate some
of these mechanisms are the Green New Deals in
the US, UK and Europe or the New Zealand
Wellbeing Budget 2019.

Social movements will play a crucial role in pushing
for these reforms. They can challenge the notion
that riches and economic growth are inherently
good and bring forward "social tipping points".
Ultimately, the goal is to establish economies and
societies that protect the climate and ecosystems
and enrich people with more wellbeing, health and
happiness instead of more money.

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